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The Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Education

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The Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Education

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERISTY

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Thesis Approval Form



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Abstract

Colleges and universities aim to support students with marginalized identities. However, for students who hold multiple marginalized identities, those efforts are often lost on them because they are overshadowed by majority minorities. For Queer Black Women, they are often left to build community and navigate college on their own. Furthermore, Queer Black Women are likely to encounter racism, sexism, and homophobia among peers and in academic spaces which sometimes positions them to defend and educate others on their core identities. The participants in this study were undergraduate and graduate students at a predominantly white institution in the Midwest. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, and from that data, themes emerged that identify how Queer Black Women engage with peers, the institution, and support centers that are designed to provide additional support to marginalized communities. Through this study, I aimed to identify how Queer Black Women currently find support from higher education institutions, how they form community and what gaps need to be addressed to better support these students as they persist to degrees. From there, recommendations are offered for best practices to reduce feelings of isolation and invisibility among Queer Black Women and implications for future research that can further highlight gaps in supporting students with intersecting marginalized identities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the popular stories of social movements in the United States and the broader African diaspora, the Black feminist and Queer liberation movements, which intersect and diverge, are often rendered invisible.

—Charlene A. Carruthers, *Unapologetic*

Colleges and universities have tried to incorporate inclusive practices in their policies and programming; however, they have fallen short in their attempts when it comes to creating inclusive space for students who have marginalized identities, more specifically students who have intersecting marginalized identities. Over the years, the attempts that have been made to create and nurture diverse student populations have culminated in services that come in the forms of multicultural offices, LGBT+ support services and women centers to embrace students that hold marginalized identities. Yet, in these student support services, there are gaps that still exist in how colleges and universities support students that would benefit from these services. For students who identify as black and a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, coming into spaces in university settings present challenges where they feel they need to leave part of their identity at the door (Jackson, 2019; Lorde, 2007). Jackson (2019) expressed that “the Academy represented a place where liberatory politics and messiness of intersecting identities were often sidelined, making it difficult for Black scholars, especially those at the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality to fully enter these spaces” (p.196). Furthermore, the focus of higher educational institutions is often misguided by attempts to reach quotas and the “commodification” of diversity and inclusion to the point that minority populations are left underserved and vulnerable to the agendas and policies that do not even serve the interest of the students that need them most (Jackson, 2019; Slaughter & Rhodes, 2000).

I started this chapter with a quote from the book *Unapologetic* by Charlene A. Carruthers. This quote was included to set the tone and to also highlight how individuals who are a part of social justice movements can still find themselves invisible in structures whose policies are entrenched in white heteronormative views that reinforce patriarchy and misogyny. This begs the question of where this leave students with marginalized identities who fall subject to services that do not benefit them? For students of color who also identify as LGBTQIA+ they can face both heterosexist and racist campus environments (Duran, 2019; Blockett, 2017; Garvey, Mobley, Summerville, & Moore, 2019). Queer Black students are under supported and forced to create their own community in these higher educational spaces that maintain racism and heterosexism on campus (Duran, 2019). More attention has been placed on Queer students of color and the body of literature has expanded when it comes to helping Queer Black students navigate higher ed; however, there are issues that still have to be addressed. This study explores how Queer Black Women navigate and experience college. What I initially found is that the research that currently existed centered on the experiences of Queer Black Men in higher ed (Blockett, 2017; Duran, 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). Queer Black Women find themselves uniquely positioned where they are facing discrimination based on their race, gender, and sexuality (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Greene & Boyd-Franklin, 1996). Queer Black Women who face this trifecta of discrimination are essentially a group who is indeed rendered invisible in all spaces that affirm their identities individually but not as a collective whole.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to highlight the gaps in student support when it comes to Black Women who also hold identities in the LGBTQIA+ community. Black Women are already under supported in higher educational institutions because they persist to degrees despite the lack of

support (Thomas & Jackson, 2007). Queer students of color are also under resourced and left to form community on their own (Blockett, 2017). Furthermore, in centers on campus that affirm marginalized identities often serve the majority within the minority. For students that hold multiple marginalized identities, this leaves them invisible and left to navigate college without support. This study aims to find better ways to support Queer Black Women as they navigate college and what they need as students to find a sense of belonging among their peers where all of their intersecting identities are welcomed.

Scope

Campus climate plays a big part in the overall experience that Queer Black students have while attending post-secondary institutions (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Therefore, when students are facing discrimination on the basis of their held identities, it is a direct impact to the way students navigate through their time in college (Patton & Simmons, 2008). For Black Women who also identify as LGBTQIA+, this adds another layer of oppression where they face discrimination based on their race, gender and sexuality (Patton & Simmons 2008), these students are essentially faced with oppression on top of oppression on top of oppression. Queer Black Women face difficulty when it comes to finding community on campus that accepts all their held identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Loicano, 1989). Yet, these students do not have anyone to advocate for them because they are again minoritized within already minoritized groups (White Women, Black Men, gay men) (Jones, Herron, Mindrup, & Patterson, 2019). Jones et al. (2019) explained this as Gendered Racism, this would be the meeting of racism and sexism within one experience of discrimination. Gendered racism is unique to women of color because of intersecting multiple marginalized identities (Jones et al., 2019, Essed, 1991).

There is also something to be said for the visible invisibility that Black Women find themselves overshadowed by. Black Women have both been a visible group and at the same time been rendered invisible through the “depersonalization of racism” (Patton & Simmons, 2008, p. 198; Lorde, 1984). Black Women have also been a visible and invisible group because they have been expected to come to the defense of everyone else except their own (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Lorde, 1984). To compound on that, for Black Women with Queer identities, they also face an invisible existence and often have to face an “either or” dilemma where they have to choose between their marginalized identities to find acceptance and visibility among their peers (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Lastly, it should be noted how Black Women excel academically among their Black male peers despite not having support (Bonner, 2001; Cross & Slater, 2000; Thomas & Jackson, 2007; Washington & Newman, 1991). This gender gap has launched initiatives to increase recruitment of Black Men, yet the lower numbers among Black Men should not overshadow the needs of Black Women and the challenges they face and sometimes “silent suffering” they endure while in college (Patton, Haynes, & Croom, 2017; Thomas & Jackson, 2007). For higher education professionals there is a responsibility to create supportive environments for all students. Jackson (2019) states that it is the responsibility of those of us within the Academy, with greater privilege and proximity to power, to leverage our positions toward the liberation of all people (p. 196).

Research Questions

Black Women face multiple forms of oppression through their race, gender and sexuality (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Yet, as stated in the previous section, despite facing discrimination towards each of their held identities, Black Women as a whole persist to degrees, even in higher rates than their male counterparts (Patton & Simmons, 2008). While it is great that Black

Women are outpacing their peers in degree attainment, that does not negate the fact that Queer Black Women are facing neglect and gendered racism in college settings. The following research questions look to observe how Queer Black Women navigate college. Answering these questions can also give insight to how higher education professionals can better serve Queer Black Women and increase retention among this demographic.

1. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college while experiencing gendered racism?
2. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college social settings?
3. What post-secondary supports are in place for Queer Black Women?

Significance

This research is significant because there is a demographic of students who are left to support themselves through college. Black Women lack the advocacy they need from higher educational institutions. The gaps in support are greatly impacting Queer Black Women because of the Hyperinvisibility that currently exists in practices among higher education institutions. Consequences of minimal to no support can include student failure, challenges with managing emotions, and retreat from dealing with personal holistic development among these students (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Because of the impactful consequences of invisibility, efforts should be increased to minimize these impacts to Queer Black Women and increase support and numbers when it comes to retention and degree attainment.

Definitions and Terminology

Disclosure Politics – The process of selectively becoming public with your sexual orientation or gender identity (Duran, 2019).

Gendered Racism – The convergence of both racism and sexism into a singular experience of discrimination unique to women of color (Jones et al., 2019; Essed, 1991).

Hyperinvisibility – The erasure of students because of intersecting identities (race, gender, sexuality) Marginalization occurs through the erasure of Queer People of Color in institutional structures (Duran, 2019).

Intersectionality – A person’s lived experience with holding multiple minoritized identities and how oppressive systems impact people based on those identities (Duran & Jones, 2020).

LGBTQIA – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersexed, Asexual.

Marginalized – When individuals are negatively impacted due to a held identity. “Lack of initiatives that are attentive to students’ intersecting racial and sexual minority identities marginalizes Queer Collegians of Color and renders their needs invisible” (Duran, 2019, p. 2).

Queer Woman – Any individual that identifies as a woman and sexual minority. “There is no one kind of lesbian, no one kind of lesbian behavior, and no one kind of lesbian relationship” (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Clarke, 1995).

Organization of the Study

This concludes chapter one. This chapter provided an overview of the thesis and purpose of the study. Chapter two will cover relevant literature and provide a theoretical framework that will carry the study. Chapter three will outline the study and participants who were interviewed. Chapter Four will cover the findings, demographics information and review. Chapter five will conclude the thesis with a summary, discussion, conclusion and recommendations for future studies.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There have been many studies and extensive research on Black students in higher education. Unfortunately, these studies view Black students in silos and do not consider their varied backgrounds such as race, gender, and class (Patton & Croom, 2017; Winkle-Wagner, Kelly, Luedke et al., 2019). Because of this, many individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities are often overlooked or not considered when developing solutions to better assist Black students in higher education.

Examples of student groups who are often overlooked are Black Women, Black students who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ community, and in this case, Queer Black Women (Patton & Simmons, 2008). In studies that focus on Black students and Queer students of color, the emphasis leans in on or exclusively centers around men, Queer men of color or Queer Black Men and how they persist, adapt, form community, and integrate in higher education (Blockett, 2017; Squire & Mobley, 2015; Means, 2017). While it is important that higher education professionals work to better understand issues surrounding Black Men and Queer Black Men and how they find their sense of belonging as they matriculate in higher educational settings and persists to degrees, it should be acknowledged that women of color often persist in higher numbers compared to their male counterparts when attaining degrees and overall success in higher education while being under resourced (Apugo, 2019; Chavous & Cogburn, 2007; Cohen & Nee, 2000; Cross & Slater, 2000). Unfortunately, the success of Black Women tends to be overlooked or ignored as their success is recorded based on their male counterparts or in the context of the gender gap (Chavous & Cogburn, 2007).

There has been some research that focuses on Black Women in higher education; however, there has been minimal work that focuses on the intersectionality of Queer Black

Women and how they navigate spaces, develop relationships, juggle family while overcoming expectations and persisting to a degree. There also has been exclusive research on Queer Black Women and the difficulty they face finding community that celebrates all their held marginalized identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008); however, this literature review will further explore the experiences of Queer Black Women in higher education, the expectations that are placed on them, how they juggle relationships, and dealing with intersectional challenges of being invisible in two invisible populations.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

Using intersectionality as a framework provides context to the multiple held identities of Black Women and how they find visibility in systems that render them invisible. Intersectionality was a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Patton, 2019). This theory discusses identity politics and how Black Women were positioned between feminism that centered White Women and antiracist dialogue that centered Black Men, which left Black Women erased from conversations addressing individuals who hold multiple marginalized identities (Harris & Patton, 2019). Crenshaw's intention behind intersectionality centered the experiences of women of color while breaking down identity politics and the need for social justice and addressing oppression (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality frames this literature review because this study looks to examine how Queer Black Women navigate higher education inside and outside of the classroom. Queer Black Women have to navigate spaces in higher education institutions that do not provide supportive environments to Queer students of color. (Duran, 2019; Patton & Simmons, 2008). For Queer students of color, they have to “contend with the oppression present in identity spaces that focus exclusively on race or sexuality” (Duran, 2019, p. 2; Harris, 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2008;

Strayhorn, 2013, 2014). Research has shown that supportive environments are still flawed when it comes to being safe spaces for Queer students of color as racism is entrenched in Queer spaces and homophobia is present in spaces that support students of color (Duran, 2019; Strayhorn, 2013). When discussing intersectionality, the structure of higher education reinforces systemic oppression on people of color also has to be examined because it plays a significant part in the experiences that Queer students of color have in college. (Duran, 2019; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Duran (2019) states that “any discussion of intersectionality without due consideration given to the implications and effects of systemic power misses the proverbial mark” (pg. 3). This study looks to examine the experiences of Queer women of color and how they can better find support in higher education institutions. Higher Educational institutions often leave these students overshadowed by their overlapping oppressed identities, reinforce identity politics, perception and stereotypes, and hold spaces that miss the mark in supporting Queer Black Women.

Black Women in Higher Education

In order to understand the experiences of Queer Black Women in higher education, there has to be an understanding of the barriers that they face as they enter higher educational institutions. Holding multiple marginalized identities, Queer Black Women can experience “triple jeopardy” because they hold multiple oppressed identities being a woman, being Black, and being a part of the LGBTQIA+ community (Patton & Simmons, 2008, p. 198). The marginalization of these identities poses barriers that make it difficult for Black Women to persist to a degree (Patton & Croom, 2017; Winkel-Wagner et al., 2019).

Black Women who face discrimination against one or more of their marginalized identities can experience high levels of stress because these experiences are psychologically taxing (Apugo, 2019; Bentley-Edwards & Chapman-Hilliard, 2015; Henry, Butler, & West,

2011; Hooks, 1989; Winkle-Wagner, 2009). Black Women are often faced with race or culturally based stereotypes (Apugo, 2019; Cohen, 2000; Logel, Walton, Spencer, Peach, & Mark, 2012; Steele, 2011). These stereotypes can include labels such dominant, welfare queens and sexually promiscuous. These stereotypical traits of Black Women have been exploited through negative imagery in social media and television. Black Women are also labeled as strong and hardworking. The strong Black Woman trope removes Black Women's ability to be vulnerable and presents them as immune to unwelcoming environments in educational settings (Apugo, 2019; West, Donovan, & Daniel, 2016). White Women on the other hand are presented as good, ladylike, and proper through the same media channels (Collins, 1990; Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Lewis et al., 2012) this puts Black Women at a disadvantage because whenever they advocate for themselves, they are seen as "bitchy" or "whiney" (Apugo, 2019).

In an article by Danielle Apugo (2019), she suggests that facing cultural and race-based stereotypes can lead Black Women to be affixed to labels such as the "model minority" which can lead to "shifting" behaviors, code-switching and hypervigilance (p. 53). Code-switching, which is a coping mechanism which is used to mask, alter, or soften one's racial or ethnic identity to accommodate or adapt to the dominant culture of a particular environment (Apugo, 2019, p. 54). Hypervigilance is another coping mechanism that can lead to Black Women anticipating negative race-related encounters or actions and experience isolation to avoid such negative experiences (p. 54). Another form of oppression that is unique to Queer Women of color is gendered racism where they have a distinct experience from Black Men and White Women (Jones, Herron, Mindrup & Patterson, 2019). For example, when issues surrounding marginalized identities are addressed, Black Women are often linked to other "majority minorities" where they are then presented as monoliths and all experience the same level of

oppression. When it comes to feminism, Black Women can find themselves linked to White Women; however, the conversation stops at racism and at the other end of the spectrum. When racism is discussed, the conversation stops before patriarchy is explored when it comes to racism (Crenshaw, 1991; Harris & Patton, 2018). This leaves Black Women positioned where they are overshadowed, left out of the conversation or rendered invisible (Harris & Patton, 2018). This form of discrimination can also be seen in oppressive systems such as housing and the justice system, in addition to academics (Jones et al., 2019). In educational settings, it is imperative that higher education professionals are aware of the multiple identities that Queer Black Women hold. Institutions should know that as students, Queer Black Women can experience discrimination at each level of their identity which can impact their progression towards a degree and overall student development. By increasing the awareness around Queer Black Women and the oppressions that they can face, colleges and universities can better address systemic oppression towards Queer Black Women and increase visibility to their needs.

Living Up to Whose Expectations?

To compound the difficulty of surpassing stereotypes of being Black and being a woman, there is an expectation that is placed on Black Women when it comes to how they navigate higher educational spaces. As stated in the previous section, one of the stereotypes affixed to Black Women is this concept of being strong and dominant. This stereotype places a superwoman imagery on Black Women because despite facing obstacles, they still manage to attain a degree; often outnumbering their male counterparts and deeming Black Women as “highly successful” (Griffin, Mwangi & Patterson, 2017; Patton and Croom, 2017; Winkle-Wagner 2015; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019, p. 410). This superwoman persona that is placed upon Black Women paints a narrative that they are strong and selfless, sometimes to their

demise, and are not an at-risk population (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). The superwoman persona is quickly placing Black Women into the “model minority” trope. Model minorities are viewed as individuals who rise from extreme oppressive political, social, educational and economic circumstances to “White-approved success” (Apugo, 2019; Hartlep, 2014; Kaba, 2008). The idea of the model minority is harmful because success is measured by Whiteness, coming from a place of oppression, and this would suggest that individuals can achieve success despite oppression and those that do not have failed (Apugo, 2019).

Black Women are also expected to comply with gender and racial normativity which can leave them voiceless and passive (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). The expectations of conformity, performance, and superwoman personas that are placed on Black Women leave them vulnerable to experience college without assistance and the resources that they really need (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). These projected identities can also lead to depression, negative coping strategies and lack of effective self-care (Apugo, 2019; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Microaggressions

Microaggressions are forms of discrimination that are subtle or unconscious. They communicate hostile and derogatory messages to marginalized populations (Nadal, Whitman, Davis, Erazo et al., 2016). Microaggressions can be experienced by Black Women on campus, in housing units, and classrooms and they can be expressed by peers, administration and faculty. The intersecting identities that Queer Black Women hold can lead them to face microaggressions at varying levels. As stated earlier, Black Women have to maneuver around certain stereotypes that are placed on them because it is the cultural perception, common stereotypes that exist are dominance, being loud, angry, or intimidating (Morales, 2014; Collins, 2005; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). These stereotypes are all associated with some aggressive behavior which is the opposite

of what imagery is placed upon their White counterparts. This position fuels the idea that Blacks are the aggressor. Black Women have also been positioned as hypersexual or promiscuous which ties back to slavery when Black Women were viewed as seductive jezebels (Morales, 2014; Collins, 2005, St. Jean & Feagin, 1998; Wingfield, 2007). Viewing Black Women through this lens could lead to microaggressive experiences where they are sexualized and vulnerable to unwanted sexual advances or attacks. Another stereotype that Black Women can face is the label of being cultural carriers where they are expected to maintain cultural practices and traditions (Morales, 2014; Espiritu, 2001; Reagan, 1982). This could lead to Black Women feeling pressured to be an informant for their entire race. In the classroom, non-Blacks would expect Black Women to educate on Black culture which is a form of commodification (Morales, 2014; hooks, 2006). The idea of Black Women being a cultural carrier positions all Blacks as a monolith and having the same experience regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, or class.

Being a Woman, Black, and Queer

Queer students of color are an invisible community within an already marginalized and overlooked population. For Queer Black Women, entering into post-secondary institutions while holding multiple oppressed identities presents a challenge while seeking community. Oftentimes, Queer Black students have difficulty finding space where they can actualize their identity as a Black individual and a Queer individual (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008, 2009; Duran, 2019; W. G. Harris, 2003; Miller & Vaccaro, 2016; Nauri, 2011a, 2011b; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013, 2014a; Strayhorn et al., 2010; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). In spaces where they can resonate with their racial identity, Queer Black students find that they have no connection to their Queer identities. Queer Black students have even faced harassment and discrimination in the spaces where they have found commonality among their Black peers (Duran, 2019).

Additionally, in Queer spaces on campus, Queer Black students find that their racial identities are not recognized (Duran, 2019). Many Queer spaces on campus cater to their White counterparts when it comes to programming and activities (Duran, 2019), and because these dichotomic identities are hard to synchronize, Queer Black students are often forced to resonate with one identity over the other, either their gender identity or racial identity (Duran, 2019; Patton & Simmons, 2008). In the article written by Patton & Simmons (2008), they found that although Black students had an overall better experience at HBCU than Predominantly White Institutions, there are still some gaps surrounding LGBTQIA+ students who attend these institutions. Many HBCUs do not have safe-zones or support centers for LGBTQIA+ students (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Evans, 2002; Ritchie & Banning, 2001; Sanlo, 2000). With the lack of support at HBCUs Black students who identify as LGBTQIA+ can find the campus climate more challenging to navigate (Patton, Blockett, & McGowan, 2020; Patton & Simmons, 2008). With a more challenging campus climate Queer Black Women might not face racial based microaggressions but may face microaggressive behavior based off of their sexual and gender identities on campus (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Queer Black Women are positioned where they have been accepted into institutions and have little to no academic support (Glover, 2017). They are placed in situations where they are faced with racism, misogyny and homophobic peers, particularly those who attend Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) and in more conservative regions or schools that hold more conservative values.

Disclosure Politics

In situations where students hold multiple oppressed identities, they find that they have a difficult time finding acceptance of each of their identities within one community (Patton & Simmons, 2008; Duran, 2019). In many cases, Queer Black students will choose their racial

identity over their Queer identity because it is the most prevalent identity or they just do not feel the need to disclose their sexuality (Duran, 2019). This leaves their Queer identities hidden and hinders Queer Black students from exploring and developing their Queer identities while in college.

Black Women who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community are faced with being placed in an invisible community (Black, Queer, and a Woman) within an invisible community (Black and Queer). Their intersecting identities are layered with oppression and stereotypes and are often under resourced. Queer Black Women have found themselves feeling isolated, marginalized, angered, fearful and lonely while trying to navigate and show up in classrooms and higher educational spaces (Bailey & Miller, 2015). While they do persist, they still desire a sense of belonging in higher education.

Students find that they have to decipher the levels at which they will disclose their gender identity and or sexual preference based on the level of acceptance within their current support systems. Some students have supportive families that would be accepting of all their held identities, while others would find their support stopping when they disclose their gender and or sexual identities to their friends, family, and support systems (Patton & Simmons, 2008). In the article by Patton & Simmons (2008), they detail levels of disclosure and juggling multiple oppressed identities.

Black students may find it more difficult to come out to their families or support systems because their communities may hold anti-gay beliefs where same-sex relationships are simply tolerated as long as they are not too public (Patton & Simmons, 2008). One level of disclosure of a student's identity that was brought up in the article by Patton & Simmons (2008) was the concept of *Coming In* where there is a dichotomy for students where they would be able to

express their identities in its entirety in one social setting while they may be closeted in another. For example, a student would be able to express themselves comfortably at school, but at home they would have to adapt to a more heteronormative role and present as cisgendered (Patton & Simmons, 2008). However, this method of coping can create tensions for the student where they maneuver between identities that represent who they are versus who they are not (Patton & Simmons, 2008). In the same study (2008), they also discussed *Triple Consciousness*, this is where individuals are aware of their oppressed identities and how these identities do not necessarily indicate a conflict within oneself. These identities can also be experienced separately or a combination of any or all held identities (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Individuals who also experience triple consciousness are also aware of the difference between how they see themselves versus how others may perceive them. The last tenant that was mentioned in the Patton & Simmons article (2008) was *Sister/Outsider* this concept looks at how the student's racial identity may be accepted on campus but their gender and or sexual identity may not be accepted which would be the outsider identity. As mentioned earlier, Queer Black students are often challenged with finding communities that accept each of their held intersecting identities; however, as their racial identity is usually more prominent, they will resonate more with their racial identity while limiting or hiding their gender and or sexual identity (Duran, 2019; Means et al., 2017; Patton et al., 2020).

Student Development

Identity development can be difficult as well because Queer Black Women are placed in environments that are challenging to their intersecting identities. Abes and Kasch (2007) coupled student developmental theories to better understand the experiences of lesbian college students. Theoretical borderlands, a concept where multiple theories are perceived as truths to the

perspectives of students as they develop as college students (Abes, 2012). Constructivism was used to analyze the meaning making of how lesbian students understand their social identities and Queer theory to address the oppressive constructs of sexuality and gender (Abes, 2012; Abes & Kasch, 2007). Furthermore, adding in intersectionality as a framework, it works to bring the constructivism theory and Queer theory together to address the lived experiences of these students (Abes, 2012; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Valentine, 2007).

Queer Black Women have to navigate classroom space that can be oppressive. As stated earlier, Black students can be faced with microaggressive behavior, at PWIs, they can find themselves in situations where they are the only Black student and person of color in the classroom. The presented curriculum can lead to discussions surrounding race and as a Black Woman, they can be labeled with the problematic term of being an “angry Black Woman” when they oppose views that are seen as racially discriminative or an individual that always makes things about race (Glover, 2017, p. 164). This label can also be placed on Queer Black Women from their intellectual critique, skin color, and the volume and tone of her voice (Glover, 2017). Queer Black Women can also find it hard to actualize their gender identity because they have to advocate for their race to a point where they are not able to concentrate on developing their Queer identity. Glover (2017) states that she moved to live as an out individual at her institution; however, her Queer identity was “extinguished” due to racism and cultural appropriation by her Queer White peers (p.163). Also, she lacked social spaces for Queer people of color, and this was in a city that was one of the country’s most affirming places for LGBT individuals. If Queer Black Women are not in spaces that support their intersecting identities, it can be hard to make connections and develop their full identities.

Building Relationships

Queer Black Women seek to build community on campus as they may not get support from their families when it comes to their sexual identity. Families of Queer women can look at their identity as just a phase or choice until they actually find a serious partner to bring home (Nadal et al., 2016). There are also some cases where family members may be aware of an individual's gender identity, but there could be an unspoken "don't ask, don't tell" approach (Hughes, 2019). The relationships that Queer Black Women have with their families can be complex; these spaces can be affirming, repressive or a combination of both for an individual (Hughes, 2019). Therefore, until they find common ground with their family, seeking friendships and relationships that are more supportive of their gender identity can be beneficial for Queer Black Women and their development. However, forming and maintaining these relationships does not come without challenges.

Developing healthy relationships can help build healthy racial and sexual identity development (Hughes, 2019). Queer Black Women who develop friendships can also share experiences and be buffers for one another when experiencing negative experiences or discrimination. These friendships can also be a source of reassurance, encouragement to explore sexual identity (Hughes, 2019). While creating friendships can be great for Queer Black Women, building community among peers and mentors in higher education can be more complicated for Queer Black Women who have not disclosed their gender identity or are not "out". In the article by Howard (2012), the author bonded with a mentor and this mentor was a cisgender Black woman, who was also religious. She was outed by one of her peers and she feared the loss of her relationship with her mentor. To her benefit, her mentor did not change the nature of their relationship, but Queer Black Women face the possibility of severed relationships because a

colleague or friend could disagree with their gender identity. Being in the closet can increase feelings of anxiety among closeted students.

Being closeted can also create complications in romantic relationships. Queer Black students may feel the need to hide their relationships in order to preserve relationships that may not be connected to their Queer identities. Bailey & Miller (2015) stated one student chose to hide her relationship to not come out to her peers. This put a strain on her relationship with her partner and they eventually broke up. While each individual reserves the right to disclose their sexual identity or not to, closeted individuals do run the risk of their relationship deteriorating if their romantic partner prefers to be more open. Having to choose between identities is extremely stressful and can put a student under more duress which could cause feelings of depression, isolation and trouble maintaining relationships. This is why it is important to create resources for Queer students to embrace their multiple identities.

Recommendations to Consider

Higher education institutions have a lot more work to do when it comes to supporting Black Women and Queer students of color. The narrative that all Black students are the same is only making the issue of invisibility greater among Black students. Higher education professionals have to work to break down stereotypes and preconceived ideas about Black students and understand that the superwoman persona placed on Black Women is only crippling them and that all students should have access to resources and assistance while navigating college. I recommend that higher education institutions be proactive in creating supportive environments for students of color. Institutions also need to be mindful of providing personalized resources to individuals based on their needs and not base offers of assistance on race or gender. Furthermore, institutions need to create space where Queer Black students can actualize their

identities of being Black and Queer simultaneously. The fact that Queer Black students feel the need to hide their gender identity or feel forced to choose between their race or gender identity is oppressive and causing more anxiety among these students. If higher education institutions work to create more inclusive spaces and be more supportive, all students, more specifically, Queer Black Women could excel in higher education and have the opportunity to develop fully embracing their intersecting identities instead of fighting oppressive systems.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Study Design

This study aimed to explore how Queer Black Women navigate college while they hold multiple marginalized identities that are under supported and under resourced in higher educational institutions. The study also looked to answer what these students are seeking from social justice centers and institutions that primarily focus on one of their held identities, and what colleges and universities can do to better support students who hold these marginalized identities on a campus wide level. The framework that guided this study is intersectionality, this framework was chosen because this theory recognizes individuals with multiple minoritized identities who experience overlapping oppressive systems that have varying degrees of impact based on one's social location (Duran & Jones, 2020). Although post-secondary institutions provide supportive spaces for students with marginalized identities, they fail to support students with multiple intersecting identities (Duran, 2019, Harris, 2003; Patton & Simmons, 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). Furthermore, while there has been increasing support for minoritized students, support centers will cater towards the majority within the minoritized group (Duran & Jones, 2019, p. 282; Mitchell & Means, 2014). Students who hold multiple minoritized identities then feel as if they have to choose one identity in order to find community (Patton & Simmons, 2008). Additionally, having to maneuver post-secondary institutions that are founded in patriarchal ideals that only support one part of their identity only reinforces heteronormative, racist and misogynistic campus environments that further complicates Queer Black Women's ability to fully develop all their held identities (Duran & Jones, 2020).

This study was designed by exploratory qualitative research where I could capture the authentic lived experiences of Queer Black Women as students and gain better insight in how

higher educational professionals could better improve support and campus climate for these students. To get to those answers the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college while experiencing gendered racism?
2. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college social settings?
3. What post-secondary supports are in place for Queer Black Women?

Through the lens of intersectionality, this study engaged undergraduate Black Women with Queer identities to share their stories through semi-structured interviews to shed light into their personal experiences as students who face oppression at each of their held marginalized identities.

Positionality

My positionality led me to take on this topic to research further into the experiences of Queer Black Women. While I understood that the experiences of the participants were unique to them, I did share similar experiences to the participants. First, I am a Black gay male who was studying in the College Student Affairs Leadership program at Grand Valley State University. My work was in social justice and equity to improve the campus climate in higher educational institutions and I addressed issues that directly impacted communities of color through my position in the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Through my role I advocated for Black students and Queer students of color on campus. Furthermore, I also attended Grand Valley State University, a predominantly white institution, for my undergraduate degree. While there, I experienced feelings of isolation as a Queer Black student. I felt that all of my held identities were not fully supported. I had to find community by my own efforts. I chose this study because I want to bring attention to those who may be rendered invisible through all of their held

identities. Although my focus for this research was on Queer Black Women, I felt that my experience as a Black gay man provided a unique lens in sharing the personal experiences of Queer Black Women who navigated higher educational institutions with limited support.

Participants

To recruit students, typical and snowball sampling (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019) was used for this study. This study aimed to recruit four women who identified as Black and also held Queer identities. The participants in this study consisted of students who are enrolled in a 4-year college or university. For this study, the focus centered on Queer Black Women who attend Predominantly White Institutions; therefore, students were recruited from Grand Valley State University. The students that participated in the study were either an undergraduate or graduate student. In order to participate in the study, the students also had to: (1) Identify as a woman; (2) Identify as Black, this included students who are biracial and multiracial (Duran & Jones, 2020); (3) Identify as Queer, which is used as an umbrella term for LGBTQIA+ identities (Duran & Jones, 2020). To find participants for this study, there was an email that was extended to gatekeepers. These gatekeepers consisted of directors and assistant directors who directly served undergraduate students who held at least one of the marginalized identities that was required of the targeted demographic (Duran, 2019). Students who participated in the study were also asked to recommend peers who they believed will be a good fit for the study. The recipients of this email were fully informed of the details regarding how the interviews were structured and the nature of the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected through individual one-on-one, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews. There was one interview per student. All of the interviews took place online through

zoom meetings. The interviews were recorded through the zoom application and during that time, the participants were asked a series of questions aimed at better understanding their personal experiences as a Queer Black woman attending Grand Valley State University. The interview questions were direct; however, the structure of the interview provided an opportunity to ask the participants follow-up questions, if needed.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data that was obtained through this study, I used coding for each interview that was fully completed. The process of coding tied similarities and overlapping data in which themes were derived from the rich information that came out of the interviews. This data provided insight into gaps in supporting Queer Black Women in higher ed.

Summary

This study conducted one-on-one interviews that were semi-structured with undergraduate and graduate students who self-identify as a Woman, Black, and Queer. The student participants were enrolled in a 4-year post-secondary Predominantly White Institution (Grand Valley State University). The interviews were conducted through Zoom meetings and were recorded for reference and to collect all dialogue that came from the interviews. From there, the interviews were transcribed and coded in which themes were drawn from the data. From this data the findings are discussed in the fourth chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The information detailed in this chapter will cover the data gathered from the interviews outlined from chapter three. The testimonies that were collected and presented in this chapter were in context to the study questions that were presented from chapters one and three of this thesis. Furthermore, the findings provided an analytic review of the participants' responses of their experiences as a Queer Black Woman attending a Predominantly White Institution.

Context

The participants in this study were recruited through an email blast that was distributed to a concentrated list from the Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. Both of these offices are social justice centers that provide support to students who either identify as a student of color or as LGBTQIA+.

The final participants in the study consisted of four individuals who identified as Queer, Black and a woman. Each participant is a student at Grand Valley State University. Three of the students who volunteered were second year undergraduate students, and the fourth participant just recently completed her undergraduate degree at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) and just begun her master's program at the same institution. (See Table 1: Participant Profile)

Table 1:

Participant Profile

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Class Standing</u>	<u>Sexual Identity</u>	<u>Level of Outness</u>
Mya	Black	Undergrad	Queer	Completely Out
Raven	Black	Undergrad	Bisexual	Out
Rose	Black/Latina	Graduate	Bisexual	Out
Theresa	Black	Undergrad	Queer	Partially Out

The participants in the study were recruited from the email blast that was sent out from the Office of Multicultural Affairs. The students are all active to some degree in the Black Excellence 365 program. The Black Excellence 365 program is a cohort that is offered for any student to opt into who personally identifies as Black. Black Excellence 365 is in place to provide students a sense of belonging on campus. The program begins with a three-day orientation to get students acclimated to campus and build community amongst themselves. From the orientation, the students are then opted into Black Excellence 365 where they are paired with peer mentors, and offered programming that provides academic support, tools for success, and engaging social events.

Two of the participants are peer mentors for incoming students who opt into the Black Excellence Program. One of the participants is enrolled and active in programming that is offered to students in Black Excellence, the last participant enrolled later in her college career but utilizes the academic support and advising that comes from the program. Black Excellence 365 is important to the participants because most of the students engaged with Black Excellence 365 resonate with their race as their primary identity because they are seen as Black students before their other identities are recognized by their peers, faculty and staff on campus.

Frequently, when Black students are in classrooms, they are often the only Black student and sometimes only student of color present. This can cause feelings of solitude; however, Black Excellence 365 offers opportunities for students to reconnect with students that look like them.

All of the participants have also had contact with most of the social justice centers that are at GVSU. The social justice centers consist of Disability Support Resources, Gail R. Davis Center for Women and Gender Equity, Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs. The center that each of the participants mostly engage with is the Office of Multicultural Affairs, followed by the Center for Women and Gender Equity as these centers connect with their most salient identities. The centers that are least utilized by the participants in the study is are the Disability Support Resources Center and the LGBT Resource Center. While each of the participants resonate with their Queer identities, they find little to no connection with the center, which will be explored later in the findings.

The participants in the study all have varying degrees of outness as a Queer individual. Mya, who for this study I will describe as completely out as she has indicated that she is completely out to peers and has no difficulty in fully disclosing or expressing sexual/gender identity. Raven and Rose, who for this study I will identify as out because each indicated that they have disclosed their sexual/gender identity. Mostly to close friends, family, and acquaintances. Lastly, Theresa I will describe as partially out because she indicated that she has disclosed her sexual/gender identity to select individuals but not out to family.

To ensure the privacy of the students, protect their identity, and allow for full disclosure and transparency, each student provided a pseudonym to be identified by throughout the remainder of this study. The participants, Mya, Raven, Rose, and Theresa each participated in one 30-minute to 60-minute semi-structured interview. During that time, they responded to a

series of questions and engaged in dialogue to detail their realities as a Queer Black Woman who attends Grand Valley State University, a liberal arts college, that is also a Predominantly White Institution.

Findings

The findings from this study were a result of the responses from the participants in the study. Mya, Raven, Rose, and Theresa shared their realities as a student at GVSU and how they engage in academic spaces, with the institution, and with their peers. From that data emerged three major categories that are presented in the following order: 1) Engagement and community building among peers as a Queer Black Woman, 2) Institutional and Academic Support for Queer Black Women, and 3) Access to and Knowledge of Support Systems for Queer Black Women.

Engagement and Community Building Among Peers as a Queer Black Woman

Each of the students participated in discussion about their experiences as a Queer Black Woman and how they engage and form community among their peers on campus. Mya, a second year at GVSU, found that she was most engaged on campus while participating in the Black Excellence 365 Program. The program provided community for her as a Black student on campus. She found that most of her peers and friends were comfortable with her identity as a Queer Black Woman and believed that connecting with her peers that are heterosexual to be no issue for her. Unfortunately, Mya realized that it was harder to make connections with other Queer Black Women on campus. She was able to make a connection with one of her peers during her first year at Grand Valley. This student also identified as Queer and was someone that Mya could connect to as another Queer student on campus. Mya's friend left GVSU before the

next academic year, which reduced Mya's circle of friends who share similar identities to her as a Queer Black Woman. Mya expressed that:

On campus, I really haven't seen many [Queer Black Women]. We had that one thing in common because I felt, in a sense, like I was the only one and I did not see anyone that I could connect with on that level.

When asked why she thought it was more difficult to find connections to other Queer Black Women at Grand Valley Mya replied:

There is not a lot of diversity, so I don't see a lot of Black people alone, and to add on being a part of the community... it really gets narrowed down to this many people... so sometimes it feels like I'm the only one.

Raven, who was engaged in a number of student organizations, including student senate, had found engaging with peers presented some challenges. While overall her experience of engaging with heterosexual peers had mostly been positive, she found that it was more difficult to talk with her heterosexual peers when it came to disclosing her identity as bisexual. Raven stated about her heterosexual female peers that, "I feel like they wouldn't really understand. You make a comment sometimes and they kinda brush it off." With her heterosexual male peers, she avoided bringing up her sexual identity because they "tend to hypersexualize everything" and label her a "freak." These reactions to her sexual identity had left Raven feeling "unseen" among her peers. Additionally, the interactions with her heterosexual peers caused Raven to at times pull back from engaging fully with them. Furthermore, her interaction with her male heterosexual peers highlighted how Queer Black Women can face homophobia and sexism at the same time. These microaggressive encounters can lead to high levels of discomfort for Queer Black Women. She had been in conversations where her heterosexual peers talked negatively

about the LGBT+ community while they are not aware of her sexual identity. She expressed that, “I don’t really talk to them anymore because of the comments that they make... and when I would correct them, they would get mad.” Raven did find commonality with her roommate. Her roommate also had similar identities as her being Black, a Woman and Queer. Raven expressed that, “I can talk to her about different things, and she understands where I’m coming from.” Raven had also bonded with other Queer students who she works with, who identify as White; however, similar to Mya, connections to other Queer Black Women seemed to be difficult to form on campus.

Rose had completed undergrad and began her master’s program at GVSU. Reflecting on her undergrad involvement. She is bi-racial and identified as Black and Latina. Rose was initially a part of the Laker Familia program, which similar to Black Excellence, is a program that serves the Latino/a student population with supportive programming and resources throughout the academic year. She initially attended the orientation that is offered by Laker Familia; however, her engagement sharply declined with the program following the orientation. Unfortunately, she found making connections to her peers and LGBT community to not be easy. Rose had discovered that creating community off campus to be easier. Part of that was because school was more of a priority for her when she was on campus. However, when trying to connect with peers Rose stated that:

It definitely always feels like the guessing game of when I let this part of me out... feels like you’re walking on eggshells when meeting new people on campus and not knowing how they will react, it’s kinda rough.

Similar to Raven, Rose mentioned how her heterosexual peers would make derogatory comments about the LGBT community when they were not aware of her sexual identity and it

then created an internal battle for Rose. For Rose, and the other participants in the study who experienced these encounters, unfortunately they were then burdened with the decision of taking on the responsibility to educate their peers or to endure verbal microaggressions in silence. However, if she took on the task to enlighten her peers, she might have involuntarily outed herself in the process of educating and speaking to inclusiveness for members of the LGBT+ community. Additionally, this could cause feelings of unease as this may result in potential backlash if her peers were not receptive to her correction, and if outed, accepting of her Queer identity. The student then has to become hypervigilant in her interaction with her peers which could lead to increased feelings of isolation from an established community and support system.

Theresa had found community amongst her peers by participating in the Black Excellence 365 group and other student organizations on campus. For Theresa, she had not fully disclosed her sexual identity to many of her peers. Similar to Raven, Theresa had found support of her Queer identity through her roommate, which also was her main connection to the LGBT+ community. Another big part of her circle was her connections outside of campus. Theresa had maintained her relationships with her peers from high school who she considered a big part of her support system. Theresa has found that her friends were supportive of her multiple identities and her being her authentic self, but she personally was not ready to take that step in “coming out”. When it comes to connecting to other Queer Black Women on campus Theresa stated that, “I think it’s kind of difficult because everyone is not open, and I’m not completely open, so it’s difficult.”

Finding Community The participants all stressed how it was difficult in connecting with other Queer Black Women on campus. Each of them had little to no engagement with the LGBT+ community on campus besides a roommate for some and off campus connections for

others. Going back to the literature on how Queer Black Women find support on campus, having connections to other Queer Black Women provides a sense of belonging for students because they find commonality and others they can relate to (Hughes, 2019). Furthermore, these established connections with other Queer Black Women can provide a safeguard when they experience oppressive incidents (Hughes, 2019).

Engagement with Peers. Another substantial finding when it comes to community and engaging with peers is that Queer Black Women have difficulty in social settings with their heterosexual peers. In the case of the participants, when their peers were not aware of their sexual identity, they had unfortunately encountered microaggressive situations. Each participant detailed at least one event where their peers used oppressive and discriminatory language directed at the LGBT+ community. This positioned these women in conflicting situations where they were unwillingly forced to endure homophobic comments that are indirectly pointed at them, or they risked entering an adverse encounter with their peers by addressing the offense. This stressed the importance of fostering space where Queer Black Women can form community amongst themselves and create a larger support system. Furthermore, it highlights the significance in creating opportunities for education among all students to gain a deeper understanding of marginalized and intersectional identities.

Institutional and Academic Support for Queer Black Women

Institutional Support. For the participants in this study, institutional support was a very important factor to their experiences as students who identify as Queer Black Women. Part of the interview covered their realities in finding support from the institution itself and what they would like to see in terms of creating space for Queer Black students. This next section of findings

centered around the participants engagement with Grand Valley State University and how they felt that the college supports them as Queer Black Women.

Mya expressed how she felt wavering support from the institution. She expressed when it comes to LGBT+ students as a whole, there was effort in saying the right things where the institution appeared supportive through emails and displays; however, the school did not reinforce their words with action. When asked about support for Black LGBT students, Mya stated, “it doesn’t feel that they are committed to supporting their LGBT students.” There was a desire for her to see more events that support students of color that also identify as LGBT+. It is already hard to make connections. If the institution could put more effort in fostering space for Queer Black students, it could decrease feelings of isolation.

Raven expressed similar sentiments as Mya when it came to Grand Valley supporting LGBT students, more specifically Black LGBT students. Raven mentioned how the institution made a lot of statements but there was no action to reinforce their supportive stance of the community. One of Raven’s concerns was the lack of acknowledging issues that directly impacted communities of color. She mentioned how there was silence when Black trans women were being harassed, beaten and killed.

They [Grand Valley State University] talk about inclusion and equity, so you have to talk about all the marginalized communities, especially in the Black community. You want black retention. I think that’s the way to do it. I definitely kind of felt invisible, I’m like, do you really care about the Queer Black community at all? Because I haven’t seen them talk about anything like that at all.

Raven stressed similar points to Mya where they would desire the institution to concentrate more effort in supporting their Queer students of color in providing space where community can be developed, for Raven, more specifically Queer Black Women.

For Rose, there was also a desire to have the institution put effort in fostering space for Queer Black students. She would have appreciated being exposed to peers who shared similar identities. Rose shared that she would have found comfort in knowing that there are more Queer black people out on campus. “The lack of representation makes it hard to feel inclusiveness.”

Theresa explained that she felt as if “Grand Valley does not care about their students”, again, she shared the same thoughts that the institution did not put effort and action behind the statements they made to show solidarity with their marginalized students. When asked about the support of LGBT+ students, she believed that GVSU supported their LGBT+ students, but that stopped short of their Black LGBT+ students. With recent events impacting the Black community, Theresa believed that Grand Valley fell short in their support and could have put more effort into uplifting the Black Community during Black History Month and highlighting Queer Black Figures that have made significant impact on history.

For all of these participants what we could draw from their responses was that they did not feel there was honest efforts from the institution when it came to showing support for students who identify as Queer and Black. Furthermore, this brought attention to how services that are in place for LGBT+ students often stop short of being inclusive to students of color who also identify as LGBT+.

Academic Support. Increased feelings of invisibility emerged when it came to academic support for the participants in the study. Feelings of isolation showed up both inside and outside the classroom and it was important to acknowledge how that impacted the engagement of Queer

Black Women in these settings. In these spaces, their identities of being Black and a woman played a role in how they were perceived in the classroom.

Raven discussed how code-switching was often a tool she used while in in class. She stated that, “if I don’t code switch in class, people think I’m uneducated.” She explained how one of her peers, who was also a Black woman, did not code switch and her contributions in class were often dismissed.

Rose, who studies were in the STEM field, explained that she really had to fight to be seen in the classroom. There were instances where she had to communicate multiple times for her instructors to be responsive to her needs in the classrooms. These instances were impactful to her overall success in her courses because she could not access her professor to get the help that she needed.

Mya recalled times where she was the only Black student in her classroom. This caused feelings of discomfort and she felt pressured to go above and beyond to appear that she could keep up with her peers in the classroom.

Unseen and Unheard. The information that each participant provided about their experiences in classrooms tied back to how Black Women can encounter gendered racism in spaces where their race and gender meet oppression. To have to fight just to be seen or acknowledged by peers or instructors is an added stressor for these students, on top of having to show up every class to be an active participant in the classroom. These feelings can be increased when students hold other marginalized identities in addition to being a person of color and a woman. As mentioned earlier, Mya stated how she was the only Black student in class, and to add to that, she was sometimes the only Black student who identified as Queer as well which led to increased feelings of discomfort. Mya added how her situation impacted her overall

engagement. She said that she “would not talk much [in class] because she did not feel comfortable”, which could have had significant impacts if the instructor used active participation as a factor in grading. Through the transparency of these students, we could draw some conclusions on best practices on improving the engagement and social development of Queer Black Women in higher ed which will be discussed in the final chapter of this study.

Access to and Knowledge of Support Systems for Queer Black Women

The last finding of this study examined the engagement between students and support centers on campus. Additionally, if they were aware of all services available to them that met their marginalized identities. As mentioned earlier, all the students were participants in the Black Excellence 365 program. They were also engaged in other campus activities and organizations. However, there was still a disconnect in utilizing services that also support their identities as Queer students.

When asked, each participant mentioned they had little to no connection with the Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center on campus. Their feelings of being completely engaged with the campus was mainly channeled through their participation with the Office of Multicultural Affairs. All of the participants were aware of the LGBT Resource Center, yet they felt that there was little push from the LGBT Resource Center to make an effort to connect with Queer Black students on campus. Two of the four participants were also unaware of the Colors of Pride program, which is designed to support Queer students of color on campus. This is not to say that the LGBT Resource Center was not making efforts in reaching all students who identified as LGBT+; however, from this research, a decent fraction of Queer Black students were not finding the center to be a resource they could utilize.

When asked about ideal support as a Queer Black woman on campus, Raven mentioned how she would have appreciated more outreach from the LGBT Resource Center, “I’m not aware of anyone that reached out to the black students on campus to say, hey, we’re here.” To add, Raven desired an opportunity for black students, who identified as LGBT+ to have a mixer where they could meet one another and build community. Additionally, she did not know about the Colors of Pride group as an additional form of support for Queer students of color.

Similar to Raven, Theresa has not made use of the LGBT Resource Center but would have appreciated an opportunity to connect with other Queer Black students to build community and support for her sexual identity. Theresa’s main concern was the lack of representation in the office. She expressed that “I don’t see a lot of Black people in there [LGBT Resource Center] that is why I don’t go in there.” She further went on to express how if she saw more students and staff that looked like her in the office, she would have been more inclined to visit the office more and take advantage of their services.

Mya, on the other hand, had visited the office and participated in Colors of Pride; however, she observed that there was not a lot of participation among peers that looked like her as a Queer Black woman, as a result, she stopped going and began to meet peers through other events on campus. Like her peers who participated in this study, she also desired an opportunity to connect with other Queer Black students on campus and to create community among one another.

Lastly, Rose, who felt she was not that engaged on campus did not feel comfortable in speaking on the needs of Queer Black students, but she did reflect on her experiences in undergrad. She mentioned how she missed opportunities to get engaged because she felt there were minimal efforts in outreach and people were not drawing her in to participate. “I didn’t feel

seen.” Furthermore, efforts in trying to connect to the Queer community was difficult for Rose because of time constraints and she honestly did not know where to start.

Representation. The overarching theme among the participants is that they did not see themselves reflected in the LGBT Center on campus. Again, this is not to minimize the efforts of the LGBT Resource Center at GVSU; however, students were looking to see themselves represented in the center to feel as though they are welcomed and had a sense of belonging. Moreover, they wanted to find services that are more tailored to their needs as Black students. Although Colors of Pride did exist, there was still a disconnect for Queer Black students as they either did not want to continue as a member of groups tailored to their identities that come from the LGBT Resource Center, or they just were not aware of its existence at all.

Summary of Findings

In summary, the findings presented provided rich data about the experiences of Queer Black Women who attend a Predominantly White Institution. The data that was gathered pulled major themes about the gaps in place when it comes to how they engage with their peers, the institution, academic spaces and centers that are designed to support their held marginalized identities. Although, they were specific in their observations about the lack of support coming from Grand Valley, this is not to say they always feel the school is not supportive of them as students as a whole. However, what they observed and experienced is glaring enough to realize that their specific needs as students who also identify as Queer Black Women are not fully being met by the institution and there is room for improvement. Chapter 5 will detail more about the findings, its importance along with discussion and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusion

Introduction

This study examined how Queer Black Women navigate higher education, more specifically Predominantly White Institutions. In academic settings Queer Black Women are often left in the gaps when it comes to student support in higher education because they often fall in the shadows of majority minorities (Crenshaw, 1991; Harris & Patton, 2018). They can face oppression at their intersecting identities of being Black, a woman and identifying within the LGBTQIA+ community. Due to this reality for Queer Black Women in college, this study aimed to answer the following research questions to identify how these students navigate higher ed while facing oppressive environments and how they find community and support:

1. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college while experiencing gendered racism?
2. How do Queer Black Women currently navigate college social settings?
3. What post-secondary supports are in place for Queer Black Women?

This qualitative study was conducted where four students who identified as Black, a woman, and a part of the LGBTQIA+ Community participated in a semi-structured interview to share their experiences as a Queer Black Woman who attended a Predominantly White Institution (Grand Valley State University). The findings of this study were presented in Chapter 4; however, in this chapter the findings will be further analyzed and recommendations for best practices will be provided.

Discussion and Recommendations

Navigating College. For Queer Black Women, maneuvering college can be challenging as they persist to degrees. They can experience discrimination at each of their held identities of

being Black, a woman, and Queer, also known as “triple jeopardy” (Patton & Croom, 2008). Another form of discrimination that is unique to Queer Black Women is Gendered Racism, where a student would encounter racism and sexism within one experience (Jones et al., 2019; Essed, 1991). After conducting the interviews with the four participants, each one of them had experienced some form of discrimination that centered around one of their held identities as a Queer Black Woman. Most of these incidents either occurred in classroom settings or while engaging with their peers. While engaging with other students, the participants were often interacting in heteronormative spaces that were not inclusive to their personal experiences as a Queer Black Woman. To navigate oppressive occurrences with peers, the participants found it easier to either refrain from disclosing their sexual identity or avoid engagement all together with peers to minimize potential conflict or outing oneself. Moreover, in classroom settings, students found they had to either code-switch or go over and beyond to present themselves as equal to their White peers as they were being measured against White success (Apugo, 2019; Hartlep, 2014; Kaba, 2008).

While these tactics may help students to maneuver these occurrences, these mechanisms of coping with microaggressions and discrimination (Apugo, 2019) did not address the issues at hand. Furthermore, by not addressing the issues, colleges are putting the burden of navigating these situations on Queer Black Women to handle alone. A recommendation for student affairs practice is to first increase training for diversity among faculty and staff to be better informed on how to create more inclusive spaces for students who hold multiple marginalized identities in their classrooms and academic spaces. Another recommendation for creating inclusive spaces is to offer students more opportunities to take courses that center around multiple marginalized identities. While students do have a choice in the courses they enroll in, providing more

structured learning environments could increase knowledge among the student body and lead to increased awareness around marginalized identities. These approaches take the onus off of Queer Black Women to endure oppressive environments and back on the institution to take the lead in educating the institution while creating opportunity to expand on inclusive spaces on campus.

Social Settings. The participants in the study indicated that they were engaged in several student organizations; however, there was still a disconnect between them and their peers. As stated earlier, the participants have been in situations where they have encountered microaggressions from their peers who were not necessarily cognizant of their sexuality, which I recommended more educational opportunities for students to participate in a more structured environment. However, these students also indicated how they often felt isolated due to their intersecting identities as Queer Black Women.

When seeking social opportunities, the participants found it complicated to meet other Queer Black Women and peers on campus. The first barrier is that diversity on campus is minimal which reduces engagement among peers who share similar racial backgrounds. The options then get narrowed again when seeking students who identify as Queer and Black. Finally, when seeking students who share the identity of being a Queer Black Woman, the participants find that they have a very small pool of peers to find alliance. This increases feelings of loneliness among the participants and impacts overall engagement on campus.

This challenge can become more convoluted when students are not out because it makes it that much more difficult to find community. This is impactful in two different ways. When students do not feel comfortable in disclosing their sexual identity, they may not seek resources that are in place to directly help students who identify as LGBT+. Alternatively, when more students are closeted, it significantly cuts down opportunities to expand the Queer Black

community on campus for “out” students to find safe havens that support their multiple marginalized identities.

While the challenge of building supportive communities for Queer Black students may be impacted by the varying levels of outness among Black students, there should still be efforts in creating more opportunities for activities that are geared towards unifying Queer Black students on campus. Often activities that are initiated by LGBT Centers are tailored more towards white students and their interests (Duran, 2019). There should be a more concentrated effort to bring in more speakers that are of color, mixers that center around the interests of Black students and fosters opportunity for community building and support. Increased opportunities for Queer Black students can create feelings of inclusiveness, a sense of belonging and safe havens for students who desire to increase their social network of Queer Black students on campus.

Institutional Support. Lastly, the support from the institution is crucial to the success of students. Unfortunately, Queer Black Women are often overshadowed by their peers and are left to support themselves while continuing through college. There is a double layer of support that is missing. The first layer is support from the institution itself. The second layer of support comes from support centers that target marginalized identities.

When conversing with each of the participants they indicated that they felt a lack of support from the institution. The students felt that the support for Queer Black students was more performative and lacked true effort in making them feel welcomed and establishing a true sense of belonging on campus. The first recommendation is for the institution to make more concentrated efforts in supporting and initiating programming that will highlight Queer students of color. In addition, the institution should make more efforts in addressing issues that directly impact Queer Black students. In the findings, the participants expressed their disappointment in

Grand Valley for not addressing the murders of Black Trans Women. By not recognizing the impact of these tragic incidents, this made Queer Black students feel invisible and that the institution simply did not care. While this may not be the intention of Grand Valley, the impact of their silence was felt among its Queer Black student population. For institutions like GVSU, whose ideology is student centered, students need to see more than performative gestures which are essentially band aids to cover issues that require more attention. The lack of effort by the institution leaves the participants in this study feel neglected and invisible. Institutions need to be more direct about the actual steps they will take to support their students, and actually follow through. Missing the mark creates distrust between students and the institution and impacts overall engagement and retention among students with multiple marginalized identities.

The second layer of support that was missing among Queer Black Women is visibility in the LGBT Resource Center and the lack of awareness about the services provided. In the findings, one of the participants explained that she did not see anyone that looked like her in the center and that's why she did not go. Another participant engaged in the Colors of Pride program but did not see committed participation from her peers and decided to discontinue attending the Colors of Pride meetings. While the other two participants explained that they did not feel effort coming from the LGBT Resource Center as a whole to make themselves known to Queer Black students.

While there are certainly efforts in reaching all students that identify as LGBT+, one recommendation is to try to increase representation in the office. Students want to see themselves represented in spaces to feel welcomed. While it may be difficult to and take time to increase staff in the office, the Center can reach out to faculty, staff, and counselors that identify as Black and Queer and offer sit in hours where select staff can be accessible to students who want to see

representation. Another recommendation is for the LGBT Resource Center to create more exposure for their office in spaces where Black students frequent. This would include more collaboration with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and showing up at events that target Black students. The more that the LGBT Resource Center increases exposure among Black Students the more familiar students will become with the staff in the center. This would also take efforts from the Office of Multicultural Affairs in offering opportunities for the LGBT Resource Center to partner on activities and events. Lastly, there can be increased efforts in highlighting the Colors of Pride program to Queer Black Women. Increased knowledge of the program could foster community and inclusivity to Queer Black Women who are looking to connect with other queer students, particularly Queer students of color. The participants expressed their willingness to attend Colors of Pride if they were knowledgeable of the support service. By increasing outreach, Queer Black Women can better utilize services that are more tailored to their intersecting identities.

Further Research

While the data from this research has provided great insight into the experiences of Queer Black Women in higher education settings, the sample size was very small and only provided a narrow scope of a larger problem to the invisibility of Queer Black Women. Furthermore, there should be research that also focuses on the psychological impacts of being hyperinvisible as a Queer Black Woman at a Predominantly White Institution.

Another implication for further research is exploring the knowledge of resources and support centers among Queer Black students. Most of the participants in the study indicated that they were not connected with the LGBT Resource Center on campus. While some of the disconnect is lack of representation, each of the participants indicated that they would, at

minimum, attend the group designed for Queer students of color if they knew about it. This indicates that there is also a disconnect in awareness of resources for Queer Black students. Knowledge of available resources could assist in building community among these students.

Conclusion

Overall, this research study confirmed previous research about the experiences of Queer Black Women in higher ed and how they often fall in the gaps of their peers. Furthermore, it highlighted that when it comes to institutional support impact is greater than intent. Higher education must do better in supporting all students, but especially those who fall through the gaps. Recommendations for future research and future practice for student affair practitioners and institutions have been provided. We know that Queer Black Women persist despite facing oppression and minimal support. Now it is time to put earnest effort behind these students. We talk about black retention. I think that's the way to do it.

Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Email Letter

Date: _____

Dear _____

This letter is a request your assistance with a research project that I am conducting as a part of my Master's degree in College Student Affairs Leadership (CSAL) here at Grand Valley State University, under the supervision of Dr. Reginald Blockett (blocketr@gvsu.edu). The title of my research project is The Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Ed. I would like to provide you with more information about this project that explores how Queer Black Women are rendered invisible in higher ed through practice.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the gaps in support for Queer Black Women in higher ed. Their identity as a woman, being Black, and a part of the LGBTQIA+ community often positions them where they are minorities within marginalized groups and are often overshadowed by majority minorities. This thesis will analyze where Queer Black Women currently find support from higher education institutions, how they form community and what gaps need to be addressed to better support these students as they persist to degrees. Knowledge and information generated from this study may help other higher education professionals improve practice and increase support to Queer Black Women.

It is my hope to connect with students that you serve who are currently enrolled at Grand Valley State University. More specifically students who identify as Black, a woman and a part of the LGBTQIA+ community. I believe that these students will have full understanding and experiences that can contribute to this study. I will conduct two 30 to 60-minute interviews with each participant to gather information relevant to the study. The interviews will be video recorded using Zoom. At the end of the research the publication of this study will share findings from the research.

To respect the privacy and rights of the students who participate, quotations and excerpts from the stories will be used labelled with pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants and the names of participants will not appear in the thesis or reports resulting from this study. All data collected will be saved on an encrypted USB flash drive that will be stored in a locked file cabinet and wiped clean once the study is finalized; no more than 90 days after the study is complete.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Each participant will make their own independent decision as to whether or not they would like to be involved. All participants will be informed and reminded of their rights to participate or withdraw before any interview, or at any time in the study. Each participant will also be provided with a consent form before participating.

I would like to thank you in advance for extending this information to your students. If you students who would like to participate or if you have any questions or concerns regarding the study please feel free to email me at brownjef@mail.gvsu.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Best Regards,
Jeffery Brown

Appendix B: Informed Consent



You are invited to participate in a research study on the Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Ed. You were selected as a possible subject because you fit the criteria required to participate in the study. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Dr. Reginald Blockett, Assistant Professor in Higher Education at Grand Valley State University and Principal Investigator of this study, and Jeffery Brown Co-Investigator, will be conducting the study.

1. **TITLE** Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Ed
2. **RESEARCHERS** Dr. Reginald Blockett (Principal Investigator), Jeffery Brown (Co-Investigator)
3. **PURPOSE** The purpose of this study is to highlight the gaps in support for Queer Black Women in higher ed. Their identity as a woman, being Black, and a part of the LGBTQIA+ community often positions them where they are minorities within marginalized groups and are often overshadowed by majority minorities. This thesis will analyze where Queer Black Women currently find support from higher education institutions, how they form community and what gaps need to be addressed to better support these students as they persist to degrees.
4. **PROCEDURES** If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following things:

Participate in two semi-structured individual interviews with the researcher to learn more about your experience as a Queer Black Woman who is a student at Grand Valley State University. You will be asked about your experiences in forming community, engaging with your peers and receiving support from the institution. The interviews will take place through Zoom meetings at a mutually agreed upon day and time. The interviews will be video and audio recorded.

5. **RISKS** While on the study, the risks are minimal. There may be a risk of feeling uncomfortable having private discussions recorded for research purposes. Also, while measures will be taken to protect participant confidentiality, there is a risk of possible loss of confidentiality.
6. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO YOU** Although there are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study, the knowledge gained from this study may

benefit students who also identify as Queer Black Women.

7. **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SOCIETY** Potential benefits to society is that this study can help inform higher education professionals ways in improving best practices when supporting Queer Black Women in Higher Ed.
8. **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION** Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate. You may quit at any time without any penalty to you.
9. **PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY** Efforts will be made to keep your personal information confidential. We cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. All information collected from you or about you is for the sole purpose of this research study and will be kept confidential to the fullest extent allowed by law. Your identity will be held in confidence reports in which the study may be published and databases in which results may be stored. Video recordings of interviews will only be transcribed by the investigators and will be stored on an encrypted USB flash drive. The flash drive will be locked in a secure location. Recordings will only be accessible to investigators and destroyed within 90 days after the completion of the study.

In very rare circumstances specially authorized university or government officials may be given access to our research records for purposes of protecting your rights and welfare.

10. **PERSONAL DATA** Personal data to be collected in this study includes: name, email address, race, and sexual orientation. Your personal identifiable information (such as name or email address), demographic data, racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic/biometric data, health data, and data concerning your sex life or sexual orientation. Sensitive personal data will be handled and processed only by researchers conducting this study, or by specially authorized university or government officials to make sure the research was done properly.
11. **DATA TRANSFER** If you provide data to the researchers of this study while you are physically located outside of the United States, your data will be transmitted to a Grand Valley State University campus in the United States for processing.
12. **DATA SECURITY** GVSU is committed to keeping your data secure. We have put in reasonable physical, technical, and administrative data protection measures for this research. If you suspect a data breach has occurred, please contact the Vice Provost for Research Administration at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: rci@gvsu.edu.
13. **DATA RETENTION** Personal data will be retained for 90 days following the

completion of this research.

14. **WITHDRAWING CONSENT** You have the right to withdraw your consent to the collection and processing of personal sensitive data at any time. If you would like to withdraw from participating in this study, please contact the lead researcher: Dr. Reginald Blockett at blocketr@gvsu.edu. If you would like to request that your personal data be removed from this study, please contact the Vice Provost for Research Administration at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: rci@gvsu.edu.
15. **AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE** In studies enrolling adult participants only, state By participating in the interview you are agreeing to the following:
- The details of this research study have been explained to me, including what I am being asked to do and the anticipated risks and benefits;
 - I have had an opportunity to have my questions answered;
 - I am voluntarily agreeing to participate in the research as described on this form;
 - I am voluntarily agreeing to have my personal data used for this study and agree the data can be transferred to the United States if originally collected outside of the United States;
 - I may ask more questions or quit participating at any time without penalty.
16. **CONTACT INFORMATION** If you have any questions about the study you may contact

NAME: Reginald Blockett

PHONE: 616-331-6667

E-MAIL: blocketr@gvsu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the **Office of Research Compliance & Integrity** at Grand Valley State University, 1 Campus Drive, Allendale, MI. Phone: 616-331-3197. E-mail: rci@gvsu.edu.

This study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at Grand Valley State University (Protocol #21-189-H).

If you have any questions about how to use this consent template, please contact the Office of Research Compliance and Integrity at (616) 331-3197 or rci@gvsu.edu. The office observes all

university holidays. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with our office.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol – Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Ed

Introduction: [Recorder On] *Hi, (student's name) thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. To introduce myself again, my name is Jay Brown I am conducting a study on the Hyperinvisibility of Queer Black Women in Higher Ed. The focus is on Queer Black Women who attend a PWI. This is the first of a two-part semi-structured interview. The first interview is designed to gain insight into the current experiences of Queer Black Women at Grand Valley and how they engage with their peers and find community on campus. The second interview is designed to understand how Queer Black Women at Grand Valley currently find academic support, a sense of belonging, inclusive environments and opportunities to form connections to the institution and your peers. Furthermore, what, if any, needs are possibly not being met through campus support centers such as the LGBT Resource center, Office of Multicultural Affairs and student serving spaces and classroom environments. If at any time you need to stop or feel overwhelmed, we can stop immediately. I want to reassure you that any information that is given is confidential and you will be referenced by your pseudonym in the findings. Can you please identify a pseudonym that we will now use for the purpose of the study? [Allow student to select pseudonym] This zoom meeting will be recorded for the purposes of the research, is that okay? [Let participant answer]. Again, thank you for your participation.*

Lead-Off:

Tell me how this semester going for you? Have you made some solid connections with your peers, make friends or been active in clubs or programming?

Can you tell me about a time where you have felt really engaged as a student here at GVSU?

Possible Follow-Up Questions:

I am really interested in your experiences interacting with your peers and finding community. Tell me about your experience as a Queer Black Woman making connections and support. Support could mean making friends, individuals you consider more like family, and individuals you feel that you can be your authentic self around. The connections can be either here on campus or outside of campus.

Possible Follow Up:

- What has your experience been like engaging with your heterosexual peers here at GVSU?
- What has your experience been like making connections with other Black students here at GVSU?
- What has your experience been like engaging with or trying to make connections with other Queer Black Women at GVSU?

One impactful finding that has come out of my research so far is that mentoring is very impactful to student success. Do you currently have a mentor?

- If yes, what is that relationship like? How has a mentoring relationship impacted your experience here on campus?
- If no, how would a mentor impact your experience here at GVSU? What would an ideal mentor look like to you?

Identifying as Queer, Black, and a Woman, have you ever felt that you identify with one of those identities more than the others?

Possible Follow Up Questions:

- Does this change depending on who you engage with?
- Do you find it easier to make connections on campus or off campus (surrounding community, Grand Rapids, nurture connections back home)?

What would the ideal experience look like to you for Queer Black Women here at GVSU? What does that look like connecting with your peers?

In this next part of the interview I want to focus on how you feel as a student in academic spaces at Grand Valley. This would be experiences in classrooms, centers that support marginalized identities, LGBT Resource Center, Office of Multicultural Affairs, Center for Women and Gender Equity, etc., and your overall experience of the campus and feeling supported as a Queer Black Woman.

What would your ideal vision of support look like from GVSU?

Possible Follow-Up Questions:

Can you share an example of when you really felt supported?

Last year Grand Valley was named best in Michigan for LGBT Students. Do you find that GVSU has been doing well for their LGBT students? What about Black LGBT students?

Have you ever felt invisible on campus? If yes, can you tell me about a time when you felt that way?

Possible Follow Up Questions:

- Has the feeling of invisibility impacted how you connect with your peers?
- Has the feeling of invisibility impacted you academically?

Can you tell me about a positive/negative experience that you have had at GVSU as a Queer Black Woman?

We have several support centers that are in place to support students with marginalized identities. I would like to talk with you about that. Have you ever visited the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center or the Gayle Davis Center for Women and Gender Equity? What has your experience been like with these centers?

Possible Follow Up Questions:

- Have you visited other centers that made you feel supported?
- Have there been centers where you did not feel supported?
- What spaces do you feel that you can be your authentic self? Can you tell me about an experience where you felt that you could be your authentic self on campus?

How would you advise a future GVSU students who also identifies as Queer Black Women?

Possible Follow-Up Questions:

- What spaces would you recommend for this future student?
- What connections would you recommend?

Closing: *This has really been a great experience communicating with you and getting your point of view of what it is like to be a Queer Black Woman here at Grand Valley. I value what you have shared and am excited to include this information in the study. Thank you for your time and participation. Have an excellent day and I wish you a successful semester!*

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