Facebook's Many Faces:

Exploring HBCU Culture and Digital Identities

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Abstract

This paper explores how African American students at an HBCU negotiate their online identities. Because this is a new area of study, this paper is exploratory and will work as a pilot study for future research. Through informal participant observation, focus group interviews, and profile analyses, I explore how the students negotiate their identities on Facebook. Although all of the students are African American, their identity choices are not homogenous. By examining the emerging themes of usage, identity, and employers, I report that although they exhibit a wide range of cultural diversity, all of the students must either combat or avoid negative, Black stereotypes. Offline my informants are allowed to be just students, instead of *Black* students (Willie, 2003). However, once they enter into the Facebook world, they realize they once again are the minority.

Keywords: African Americans, Facebook, identity

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If we accept that society plays a role in creating identities (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), the next step is to understand how these identities are maintained and affective. Identities are not only derived from the qualities of individuals; identities are formed by the way in which people ascribe themselves to different, created groups. Belonging to a group involves maintaining the normal behaviors of that group (Goffman, 1959). Often, however, groups themselves are not completely in control of how they are viewed from the outside. Instead, many groups are defined by inaccurate stereotypes and negative representations.

It is no secret that the media play a significant role in creating and maintaining these negative stereotypes. Indeed, some scholars have identified the media as aiding in defining race and racial issues. Hall (2003) argued that when there is an issue in society, the media will try to imply that Blacks are the problem. Jhally and Lewis (1992) argued that media messages may imply that African Americans have themselves to blame when they cannot reach acceptable levels of success.

The interactive and personalizable qualities of the Internet, and in particular social media, provide a space that, unlike traditional media, allows users to negotiate their own identities; however, group affiliation still plays an important role. The act of a user describing herself as African American in her Facebook profile or the posting of pictures that indicate her race, inevitably convey assumptions and stereotypes to her profile's viewers.

Studies (e.g., Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Lee, 2012) have recognized that as a cultural subgroup African Americans act differently on social media than the cultural majority. These studies often imply that individual members of the African American subgroup are

homogenous in their identity negotiation choices. Clearly a social medium such as Facebook provides a space for users to attempt to combat stereotypes by negotiating identity.

Race refers to a person's biological heritage, but contemporary perceptions of race typically also involve links to cultural stereotypes. A parochial belief is that biological similarity within a minority subgroup implies cultural similarity. This is not so for the majority group: whites are not looked at as fitting into one homogeneous cultural group.

This paper explores how emerging adults construct online identities through Facebook. I explore a minority subgroup without the *cultural* lens, i.e. without assuming cultural homogeneity among the individual students. However, race was an inevitable topic; it is an issue about which minority students are acutely aware. Because this is an under-studied topic, this paper is intended to be exploratory. The scope is meant to capture as many aspects of identity negotiation on Facebook as possible.

This study investigates, in particular, how race is negotiated in this process of identity formation: Do individuals feel compelled by their racial identities to make certain decisions on social media? How does race more generally intersect with users' online experiences? What other factors, identity or otherwise, might prove significant to the process of online identity formation?

Identity and Media Representations

Identity

For the purposes of this study, I understand "identity" as a constant process of identification. People, like actors, create and maintain different images for themselves just as stage actors fulfill their roles. The contexts in which humans find themselves everyday are like stages for performing different identities (Goffman, 1959). Often, this performativity is the only

reason why certain norms exist. We are stuck in a cyclical process of reifying customs that we believe to be intrinsic or natural. For example, what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine" is culturally-created, reified through performativity, and thus accepted as "normal." However, the binary description is not natural and forces people into shallow, essentialized categories (Butler, 2006). Similarly, hegemonic racial norms are unconsciously acted out in the hopes of seeming "authentic" or "real." In reality, "biological" characteristics are conflated with culture thus leading others to expect people who look the same to act similarly. Racial minorities are generalized to shallow understandings (Hall, 1996), and these racial stereotypes are violent— they force a person into a macro version of the self that rejects other identifications (Perinbanayagam, 2000).

Indeed, identifications are affected by visible identities; we learn how to interact with people through their physical features. Although we may be able to transcend differences of the psyche, it is hard or impossible to transcend a category like race. For example, while attempting to subvert hegemonic gender norms a man could choose to wear a dress or a woman could shave her head. An African American bleaching her skin, however, is obviously ludicrous. Some may define race as a biological difference, but it has actually become a social difference—the physical are used to define "natural" differences, promoting ways of looking as "better" or "worse" (Alcoff, 2006).

Equality online?

The fact that African Americans are stereotyped in the media is well established (see for example: Cashmore, 2006; Dines, 2003; Flory, 2006; Jhally & Lewis, 1992; Jones, 2005; Patterson, 2011; Saine, 2005; Wlodarz, 2004), and a full analysis of all of these stereotypes is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, this work is critical for and understanding of the

foundations of media-created perceptions of Blacks; however, the perception of African Americans in social media is an understudied topic.

Initial writings regarding the now-prolific medium of the Internet discussed race relations in an optimistic manner. Scholars commented on the disembodying and anonymous features the web provided (i.e., Turkle, 1995). However, it has become clear that this new digital space does not always present itself as an *equal* space (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2012). A reason for this inequality is that the Internet has lost its anonymity (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Social networking sites not only require users to prove that they are real people by asking for personal information, social pressures push users to become active on more than one site and to frequently post personal updates. Current trends are pointing toward singular identities, created by collecting information from visited sites and intertwining users' online experiences.

Before sites like Twitter and Facebook were prevalent, African Americans established a presence on other social media. Some Blacks would choose to make their race evident through their screen names or through discourse (Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004). With the increased interactivity of sites, which allowed users to create profiles and post pictures, racial affiliations continued to be made evident. African Americans are generally more likely to concentrate on defining themselves culturally than white users. In a 2009 study (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009) all African Americans surveyed reported that they included music that they liked in their profiles as a way of adding to their identities, while less than half of the white respondents reported this kind of identity maintenance. Additionally, all Black students reported defining themselves through narratives and through quoting famous Black artists or authors; about half of the white respondents reporting using narratives or quotes in their About Me sections. However, with the media playing such a large role in creating negative stereotypes of

Blacks, it should not be shocking that they are more likely to perform racial identity, especially since white privilege allows whites to not have to think about racial identity at all.

A reason for this inequality is that the Internet is straying from anonymity and toward "nonymity" (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Social networking sites not only require users to prove that they are real people by asking for personal information, social pressures push users to become active on more than one site and to frequently post personal updates. In particular, Facebook's anti-anonymous nature—its pushing of users to create profiles that contain real names, real email addresses, visible networks of people known offline, and multiple pictures— makes exploring online identities even more complicated. (Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Goh, Lee, & Chua, 2011). While in the past Blacks could define their race online through their own terms, Facebook's anti-anonymous features does the revealing for them. In fact, Facebook does not even provide a space for users to articulate their race or ethnicity, a nod to the importance put on visual identifications.

The salience of race is made especially clear when whites admit to leaving stereotypically Black communities online much like whites flee Black communities in the offline world. MySpace has been referred to as the "ghetto" social networking site and has caused white and affluent teens to move to Facebook. Much like ghetto communities offline, MySpace was described as less safe while Facebook was described as cleaner. Teens' reports of social networking sites have suggested that the mere choice of a preferred social medium is a way to identify people as good/bad, clean/dirty, and safe/dangerous (boyd, 2012).

Nakamura (2002) argued that the Internet is an arena for *cybertyping* (p. 3). Stereotypes still exist, but the Internet has begun to create its own ideas of race and ethnicity (Nakamura, 2002). Even though African Americans make up a large presence online (Lee, 2012), websites

are created and sustained based on hegemonic ideals (Nakamura, 2002). Images of race are just

as salient online as offline (Martin, Trego, & Nakayama, 2010; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield,

2004), thus creating a space where Blacks still have to work hard to combat racism by strongly

defining their culture (Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009). Even when African Americans can

choose their race or ethnicity from a dropdown box, they may be left with no space to elaborate

(Nakamura, 2002), easily falling into a stereotypical pit.

Current Trends

Popular social media sites, such as Facebook, do not necessarily create new relationships,

but maintain relationships that were established offline (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Subrahmanyam,

Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Users are defining themselves and defining others by

reading and commenting on wall posts. Users are more likely to define themselves with pictures

than with religious affiliations (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Zhao, Grasmuck, &

Martin, 2008).

Results of studies centered on Facebook have revealed that users, particularly teens and

college students, are interested in Facebook so that they can reconnect, learn about others, and

present themselves (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Users also report staying active on

Facebook so that they can appear to be popular (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). A recent

study (Lee, 2012) of Black students at an HBCU reported that 98% of the students surveyed had

a Facebook account that they visited for about two hours a day. The average friend count was

around 583.

It is clear that African Americans are using social media but it is also clear that they have

to work harder than their white counterparts to define themselves. Because the media create

caricatures of the Black race, it is not a surprise that Black social media users work hard to

define the perception that they wish to create of themselves. Although early comments regarding the Internet and online interaction were positive and discussed anonymity, the "nonymity" makes race an important player in the formation of identity on Facebook.

Methods

I decided to conduct focus group interviews and Facebook profile analyses to better understand how African American college students use Facebook to negotiate their digital identities. It is beneficial to explore college students, or emerging adults, when trying to understand social media usage. A recent study conducted by the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (Rainie, Lenhart, & Smith, 2012) found that 87% of the 18-29 year-olds surveyed used at least one social networking site. Of all adult users, 87% used Facebook.

Scholars have shown that understanding minority group usage of social media is important because it is different than white usage (e.g., Grasmuck, Martin, & Zhao, 2009; Lee, 2012). The 2012 *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (Rainie, Lenhart, & Smith, 2012) found that white users of social media were more likely than Black users to report experiencing overall kindness while online. Blacks were almost twice as likely as whites to report frequently experiencing offensive messages while on social media. However, *how* minority groups, in particular African Americans, may use the site differently is under-studied. It would be naïve to assume that because minority groups are using social media differently, they are also using it in a homogenous manner.

As a white professor at an HBCU, it is clear that there are potential data-collecting issues. The students in this study were students from within the same department in which I teach – Mass Communications at Bley University (a pseudonym). More specifically, I recruited my informants through the department's media center and media production courses. The professors

of the media production courses offered extra credit to those students who chose to participate. My informants were from an academically tight-knit group. All of the students in this study are ones that I have had in class at one time. Additionally, I had spent time with them in the media center, both working on production projects and speaking about college life in general. Therefore, although this study formally consists of focus groups, subsequent follow-up interviews, and profile analyses, I have informally been collecting participant observation data since I began working in the department.

It is unclear how much information the students were willing to impart about their college identities. Since they already viewed me as a professor, some students may have had issues with sharing aspects about their online identities. Also, because I newly introduced myself as a researcher, they may also have felt uncomfortable revealing aspects about both their online and offline racial identities.

Clearly, I may have obtained different data if I were Black or if the students had never met me. However, I have had discussions regarding race and culture with many of the students in this study previous to my formal data collection and it seemed that we had created a space for mature discussion. In her book *Acting Black*, Willie (2003) noted that students from HBCUs accepted and respected white professors. This was due to the simple fact that the professors agreed to work at an HBCU, thus implying to the general student body that the white professors cared about educating African Americans and, more generally, were not prejudiced.

Three focus-group interviews were conducted with 14 participants ranging in age from 21 to 23. All of the students identified themselves as African American. Three students reported coming from a working class family, one from an upper-middle class family, and the rest from a middle class family. Because this is a fairly unexplored area of research, focus groups is a

pertinent method to employ. As outlined in Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011), focus groups help researchers to understand themes that are relevant to the larger issue being studied. They provide breadth and depth of information because participants not only answer the researcher's questions, they also are continuously responding to each other (p. 166). Focus groups allow researchers to understand the attitudes and actions that their informants would normally not talk about because they are second-nature. That is, focus groups allow researchers to pull out hidden assumptions and normalized behaviors.

Following the rules set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), which had previously approved the study, I explained the nature of the study and asked the students to sign consent forms giving me permission to interview, record, and quote them. Their signing of the consent form also gave me permission to request their friendship on Facebook through a profile I had created for the sole purposes of IRB-approved research.

In the focus groups, I guided my informants through a discussion of their views of Facebook and identity. I asked them, for instance, to reflect on why they use Facebook and how they negotiate their identities on the site. Although I did employ an interview guide (see Appendix A for list of questions), I tried to keep the interviews conversational in nature and topics not included on the interview guide were occasionally explored if deemed relevant. For example, questions regarding race and culture were not a part of the original interview guide, but each focus group brought the issue up at some point. I digitally recorded and transcribed my informants' comments. To protect informants' anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym on the transcript. I then qualitatively analyzed the transcripts of the interviews. A first reading aimed at identifying themes. Additional readings aimed at refining these themes and identifying cases in the data that illustrated these themes. Negative cases were also considered.

After I initially reviewed the transcripts, I emailed some of the participants to ask them further questions. Some questions were triggered by something an informant had said in a focus group that I hoped she would further explain. Other questions arose when one focus group discussed a topic more thoroughly than another focus group and I became interested in what the other informants could add to the topic.

Out of the 14 students, eight accepted my friend requests on Facebook. I analyzed their profile pages and paid particular attention to comparing their answers regarding their online identity to my perception of their online identity. This method was employed not to cast doubt on focus group and interview answers, but to instead highlight any dichotomies that arose between how online identities are perceived from a personal perspective and from an outside perspective. My complete process consisting of informal participant observation, focus groups, interviews, and profile analysis provided for a type of triangulation that resulted in more valid results.

Understanding Identity Negotiation Online

Although many themes emerged regarding my informants' use of Facebook and social media in general, the scope of this paper cannot cover all of them. I instead selected the themes that I thought most represented how the students used Facebook to build their online identity. I have broken down the themes into the categories of usage, identity, and employers. However, smaller themes also exist within these larger narratives.

Usage

Signing up and building a fan base. To understand identity negotiations on Facebook, I first needed to know why the students signed up. Some students noted that they signed up before leaving for college, noting that it was the "college thing" to do. As one student put it, "It was, like, talked about as something that college kids usually used, so I was like, I'm going to college

next year, so I guess I should sign up for Facebook . . ." Some students noted that they felt

pressure to sign up once they realized that so many of their friends and peers had already been

using the site:

>*I was kinda forced to because . . . someone would say "Facebook me" or "look*
>
>*me up on Facebook" so that was my initiative . . .*
>
>*I found out there was a Facebook and . . . that's how everyone knew each other*
>
>*and I didn't know anyone so . . .*
>
>*I actually heard from one of my friends who went on a college tour that it's this*
>
>*new like kinda MySpace thing for college students, so as a freshman in high school, I*
>
>*wanted to be like cool and just know what college students were doing . . .*

As the last quote alludes to, seeming "cool" plays a large role in how the students use Facebook.

Students initially reported using the site to display a type of social status by collecting as many

friends as possible. My informants had friend counts ranging from about 1000 to almost 3000.

All students agreed that their friend lists are made up of an eclectic blend of high school friends,

college friends, and family. However, some informants noted that they just wanted to increase

their friend count which meant adding people they may have never met:

>*If I'm being honest, I would just add friends because I wanted a lot of friends . . .*
>
>*if you didn't have friends then that means your Facebook was considered wack in a*
>
>*sense . . .*
>
>*There's times I am like I don't know you but okay I want my friend number to*
>
>*increase so I'll accept you . . . it just seems like okay, if you have a lot of friends, it was*
>
>*like some type of social status . . . If you had 1000 friends you were like, you were decent,*
>
>*if you had 2000 friends you were like famous . . .*

> *It's like competition between my friends and just to look cool . . . the more friends*
>
> *you have . . . you look more important*

The students explained that now that they have sufficient friend counts they are more concerned with collecting other things on the site, such as likes and comments on wall postings:

> *More people writing on your wall, more people commenting on your photos, just*
>
> *makes your Facebook look liv-er*
>
> *If I seen a bunch of likes on somebody's page . . . on their statuses and stuff and*
>
> *on their posts, I'll think oh well they must be popular . . .*
>
> *Early on, like when I first started Facebook, I wanted to get as many friends as*
>
> *possible, but now . . . that turned into likes . . .*

The students enjoy the ability to create online personae that allow them to be both "producers and stars" (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009, p. 237). This fascination is aligned with current theories of celebrity culture. Rowlands (2008) argued that America's obsession with celebrities goes beyond objective justifications. Americans subscribe to individuals whose talent is purely the ability to gain supporters and become famous. This degeneration of talent leads to many people believing that they too can be famous. Social media provide the perfect platform for users to become their own paparazzi by posting comments about their lives and taking pictures of themselves throughout the day. Identity online, in this context, can be defined as centered on gaining as much validation from as many friends/fans/followers as possible (Cirucci, 2013).

It seems that my informants had realized a type of *fame formula*. First they collected as many friends as they could. Then, they were sure to keep up their fan base by staying active enough on the site so that they could collect a sufficient number of likes and comments. Some

students recognized this feature more than others in that they use the site to propel offline

positions such as SGA members and radio show hosts.

When the students do post, they almost all agreed that they get excited waiting for

potential comments and likes. They also noted that when they post a new status or photograph,

they anticipate responses. As one student put it, "If it's something I think should be liked, I'm

expecting likes and comments . . . like in my status I just put up, I said, ' I'm really about to be a

senior next year.' I think people should like that, my accomplishments." A few students admitted

to feeling jealous if a status update that they think is lesser than their own got more likes and

comments than their updates, "I do [get jealous], I'm not gonna lie . . . because the stuff they post

be stupid . . . not to be like mine is better, but mine will be motivational . . . and they put some

dumb stuff up there . . ."

Facebook as a tent pole. Almost every student included that they are constantly signed

into Facebook on their mobile device. Some of my informants even noted that when they sit

down at a computer it had become a habit to immediately open up a browser and log into

Facebook. However, even though they are so connected to the site, my informants included that

they believe themselves to use other social networking sites more, in particular Twitter. All of

the informants had a Twitter account, but were sure to keep their Twitter lives separate from

their Facebook lives. This seems to be the reason why they felt like they use Twitter more often:

> *Twitter is so that you can constantly update, that's what it's for, where Facebook*
>
> *you are flooding my timeline, all I see is your name update, update, update . . . it gets*
>
> *annoying . . . Twitter you can see it as anything, like a blog, or if you like poetry . . . you*
>
> *can write absolutely anything on your Twitter and no one is gonna look like, "oh, why*
>
> *she put that?"*

Facebook is more personal, where Twitter is more broad. If I send you a notification it's coming up on your wall, where if I send it on Twitter that means everyone can see . . .

Twitter is just like for talking about anything. You can be talking about nothing, you could be talking about a topic, it's just that . . . someone's always got something on their mind, instead of just saying it right here, they put it on Twitter . . .

Almost all of the students agreed that Twitter is less restrictive than Facebook and a place where constant updating is accepted. On Facebook, a constant flooding of status updates is thought of as annoying and an absolute faux pas. As one student put it, it is just an "unwritten law."

While my informants noted that they felt that they used other social media like Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram more than Facebook, they also noted that they would not deactivate their Facebook accounts. In so many words, the students admitted to relying on Facebook to still provide them with connections and with updates about other's lives. One student noted that if she found a quote that she had posted to be particularly popular on Twitter, she would add that to her Facebook profile. Many of my informants also discussed using Facebook to get more information about people whose Twitter or Tumblr update they had just read.

It seems that Facebook has become a kind of *tent pole* social medium. While students do not see themselves as being as active on the site, they rely on the site to connect with other users and to support other popular social networking sites. Facebook aids in this continued immersion by constantly updating its features. This is in stark contrast to a site like MySpace, which the students described as old, dead, and extinct. Some students included that while Facebook was

great at proactively evolving and adapting, MySpace did too little too late to keep up with new

social media trends.

Identity

The profile page. In their profiles, many students reported including their birthdates,

genders, and religions. Few students reported including political affiliation, although some would

write something such as, "my president is Black" in the free-form description space. In the about

me section, some of my informants reported writing short bios that usually included information

about school- and personality-related topics:

> *Mine says what I do on campus . . . little stuff . . . it's pretty much all superficial,*
>
> *nothing really detailed . . . it might include that I am the news director or that I'm in the*
>
> *marching band . . . it's not a real biography, it's just random stuff I decided to put on*
>
> *there . . .*
>
> *It's personality-based, "imma nice guy, down to Earth, cool to know, love sports,*
>
> *football," just little personality things . . .*
>
> *[My profile] is just like, ". . . my favorite colors are purple and pink and I'm in*
>
> *love with life and I can't get enough of it, I currently attend [Bley]" . . .*

To further build their identities, my informants noted that they used quotes from a variety

of sources and regarding a variety of topics in their profiles. The students used quotes that talked

about love, that were inspirational, and that were just fun, "gimmicky rap quotes." They quoted

people such as Kanye West, Maya Angelou, Langston Hughes, Muhammad Ali, Shakespeare,

Dr. Seuss, and Marilyn Monroe. They mostly agreed that they added quotes to their profile pages

as something happened in their life or to relay a mood they were in at that moment.

Along with the general demographic questions, the About Me section, and the quotes section, students explained that they were more likely to use the "like" option to define themselves through the profile page instead of typing a long bio. They liked books such as *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, *The Pact, The Polar Express, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Catcher in the Rye,* and *The Bible.* They liked television shows such as *Entourage, The Wire, Boardwalk Empire, Sports Nation, The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air, 90210,* and *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*. They also liked movies such as *The Five Heartbeats, The Hangover, Akeelah and the Bee, Finding Nemo, Love and Basketball, Friday,* and *Boys in the Hood.* Finally they included likes for artists such as Lady Gaga, Leona Lewis, Big Sean, J. Cole, Bob Marley, Beyonce, and Erykah Badu. These selections lend some insight into just how eclectic even a small group of HBCU students are.

Even though many students may have long lists of likes in their profiles, it does not always mean that they sought those likes on their own. Often the topic would pop up on their page as a kind of prompt. Additionally, just because the students "like" something does not mean they actively participate in it.

> *It may be a reminder, like I probably see a Fresh Prince of Bel-Air like, and I'm like, yea I like that show . . .*

> *I could like salsa dancing . . . [but] I can't dance . . . to save my life . . .*

In fact, there are even some things that the students like offline that they choose to not "like" online because of the accruing of multiple ads or notifications:

> *I can love Wal-mart, but I won't push that like because I'm not trying to get those coupon alerts every time I go on my Facebook . . .*

I normally don't like organizations . . . because they'll constantly send you things

on your wall and you'll constantly get notifications . . .

The students would like things that were presented to them of which they had a past or

present memory. However, if liking the topic had any effect on their profile or interrupted their

general use of Facebook, they would not like it. This is a similar process to posting quotes; the

students would have a moment of certain emotion, and think of or find a quote that matched how

they were feeling. With these parameters in mind, it is clear that the general profile-building

process (i.e., writing bios, adding quotes, liking topics) is not static and is not one that the

students take too seriously as a way of identifying themselves. Therefore, I think it is safe to say

that the profile is not necessarily a way to entirely pin identities of users in general.

Posts. The contents of the students' wall posts were more in the forefront of their minds

than their profile contents. While some students had to think back to when and how they altered

their About Me and quotes sections, it was easier for them to comment on when they posted,

what they posted, and why they posted status updates. Status updates often consisted of

important life moments such as excitement about graduation or an internship. They posted links

to news stories that they thought were relevant or interesting. The following are recent status

updates that I copied straight from my informants' walls:

Officially a SENIOR in college(still feels unreal when I say that) On my way to

Miami and then cruising the seas Saturday

Good News - My birthday weekend went so well. Wake up Monday morning to go

to a interview and got the internship at Clear Channel.

When they say the apple must not fall far from the tree... That really relates to me

and my family because my dad is a successful entrepreneur. Im a self published author.

And my 16 year old brother has his own detailing business!!! So proud of him, got

business cards and fliers lol

The students would also use status updates to link to and to comment on current events. For

example, during the time of our focus groups, the Trayvon Martin case was still developing. This

was a topic that many of my informants noted that they linked to, wrote about, and joined related

groups.

"Imitation is suicide." While talking about their own profiles, almost all of the students

discussed the fear of being fake on Facebook. As one student put it, "imitation is suicide."

Although all of the students felt that their profiles accurately portray at least one side of them,

they used others' profiles to describe inauthenticity:

If you portray yourself one way on Facebook, you have pictures of guns, you have

pictures of bandanas, you gang bang, it someone sees you in real life, and that doesn't

reflect what you see on Facebook . . . then someone is going to believe that you are a fake

or fraud . . .

People wanna paint this picture trying to prove something to everybody, cause

that's the way that it's gonna get out there . . . whatever you wish *you were doing*

[People are] posing with cars and this person posing in a picture inside their car

and it's all fancy, and then the next day I park beside their car and I'm like, this your

car?! My car look better than this, you got little rust spots . . .

Students described how although authentic, their own profiles may only represent one side of

their offline selves. One student in particular noted that he realized he has created an impeccable

Facebook identity, "I ain't gonna front, I look kinda perfect on Facebook . . . like the perfect

school guy who is always, you know, speaking to people." This student added that although he does like to let loose sometimes and "get crazy," he was taught to keep those activities private.

Another student noted that if he was having a bad day, he would not let his Facebook network know. Instead, he would post that he was extremely happy:

> *I don't want people to know what I am thinking about at that time, you know, people can use that against you, "oh he's having the worst day of his life, it's gonna be easy for me to . . . have the upper hand" . . .*

Other students agreed and told similar stories of representing themselves in a particular manner on Facebook. As Goffman (1959) explained, this can be understood as the students separating their backstage and frontstage identities. Just because Facebook has become a type of online biography it does not mean that users are broadcasting their backstage selves. Instead, just as in any social context, the students built one of their many frontstage identities and constantly maintained those identities.

Through this building of an online, frontstage identity, some of my informants included that they tried to make their profiles seem as eclectic as possible:

> *You want to have that picture with . . . The Rolling Stones along with that picture with Lil Wayne, you want to have that picture with "Rabbi Jones' as well as with "Reverend Fazine" . . . to show . . . some type of versatility . . .*

> *You can see me as the girl who likes to go out and have a good time, and you see me also as like the family girl . . .*

The ability to make themselves seem diverse not only helps my informants to get to know new groups of people, it also acts as a way to disprove any stereotypes regarding a one-sided, Black culture.

Race, culture, and "ghetto." Although it is clear that my informants are culturally multi-faceted, they are all African American. Therefore, it was inevitable that, when talking about identity, race would come up in our conversations. The thoughts on performing race varied among my informants. Many students combined thoughts of race with thoughts of African culture. When asked if he felt the need to represent his race on Facebook one male informant replied:

> *No, I don't. I just post . . . statuses that mean something. I don't express my culture or religion . . . I don't go on there posting like the African flag and like Black power. I think that's a little over extreme . . .*

However, other students disagreed:

> *I think it's very important . . . only because it's who you are, what you're described as, what you're seen as. So, I feel like . . . if I can bring a different light towards African Americans . . . in that studious manner, being as though I'm in college, being a representative of my community, where I come from, where my parents come from, I just feel like . . . however you portray yourself if a representation of your culture, not only your culture but your parents, your community, everything . . .*

> *I'll be on [Facebook] giving Black motivational statuses and things like that, just to bring something different to the table, instead of always complaining and basically portraying the stereotype that people already place is that we're not going to be anything, we are out here having babies out of wedlock . . .*

> *I feel like people need to know . . . I post history, facts, I'm just so, I dunno, I'm pro Black . . .*

You go on your newsfeed and you read . . . the Trayvon Martin case and you see

people cursing and people downing each other . . . and you just wanna be that shining

light in the darkness, you just wanna bring light to the situation . . .

It is clear that some students feel very strongly about fighting stereotypical views of their race and culture. This makes sense because media have, for a long time, portrayed Blacks in a negative light. Now that emerging adults have an interactive tool like Facebook to potentially change these stereotypes, some are taking full advantage.

One focus group got into a deep discussion about what it means to be ghetto. The students could not agree on a definition for the word, and some were confused about how they themselves thought of the term after giving it some thought. At first the students defined ghetto as when a Black person followed the stereotypical norms that society had created. But then, when commenting on a white person's posting of questionable content, one informant called him ghetto:

MALE INFORMANT 1: Cause the white person can be just as ghetto as a Black

person

INTERVIEWER: Ok, so ghetto doesn't necessarily have to mean that you're

actually Black?

MALE INFORMANT 1: [It's] the way you act . . . (long pause) . . . I think it's

looked at differently though . . .

MALE INFORMANT 2: I dunno . . . I just don't affiliate white people with ghetto

FEMALE INFORMANT 1: Wouldn't you just say that they act Black?

MALE INFORMANT 2: I would say they act Black . . .

From the students' confusion, it is clear how affective media stereotypes are, even on the race that they are negatively portraying. The students quoted above are confused about what it means to be ghetto. They associated it with a negative connotation, but at the same time they did not know how to place it. They realized that when they used it to describe a white person, they were trying to say that that person was acting Black. However, they also realized that making that connection gave acting Black a negative connotation also.

However they described it, certain negative portrayals of the Black race on Facebook were discussed thoroughly in all of my focus groups. The students used other people's Facebook profiles to describe their distaste for proliferating negative, African American stereotypes:

People tend to like everything they see, they probably would like weave . . .

If I'm from the projects, I'm not going to like a group saying "Mercy Allen Projects" . . . I may be from the projects but it's like I'm trying to move out that situation.

There are certain people that . . . will sit there and their statuses will be about getting money . . . and being a boss and they have a . . . $1,500 balance at [Bley], no car, they have like no books for class, and it's just like are you serious right now?

Everybody's Facebook statuses is the same thing, "oh, it's a boy," "oh, it's a girl." Everybody's pregnant; everybody's cussing out their boyfriends, stuff like that . . . falling into the norm . . .

As discussed earlier, just being a part of the African American subgroup automatically lends certain judgments to the students. However, the people with whom they decide to associate online also play a big role in how others perceive them. My informants had realized this, on some level, and many of them noted that they would go as far as unfriending someone or not

accepting a friend request at all if the other users represented characteristics with which my informants did not agree:

> *If you are 22 and you are calling yourself "Queen Vixen" and your bio says "yea, imma bad B, you can't see me in these streets, I'm ratched" you gotta do better . . .*

> *For me it's kinda the same as . . . having a personal relationship, I'm not going to associate myself with someone who says stuff like that so why would I add you as a friend on Facebook? If you are talking about guns, hood, drugs, all of that, I wouldn't talk to you anyway . . .*

Since many of the students were already fed up with stereotypical media portrayals of Blackness, they were quick to judge others for acting in a negative way on Facebook and did not want to be associated with it.

Employers

A running theme throughout every discussion was the fear of future employers viewing profiles and using content against applicants. Students took actions such as not posting certain topics, not cursing, not posting certain pictures, and being sure to not friend questionable or unknown people, "I starting dropping people . . . now that I am having internships and stuff, I don't want . . . people that I'm not friends with." Students also started to look at their profiles differently:

> *I think as you get older you begin to see the value of [Facebook] and you begin to see how it can hurt you as well . . . I think that you can use it to create your identity in a positive manner . . .*

Some students made it clear that their fear derived from what professors and presentations on campus had warned them about:

> *If you have ever been to any type of like business forum . . . they inform you that*
>
> *people and their representatives for that business . . . though it's not legally proper for*
>
> *someone to look at your info on Facebook, employees do do that . . . so . . . if you like*
>
> *have 10,000 friends odds are that one of those guys are gonna . . . take a picture with a*
>
> *case of Budlight, five guns and those red cups . . .*
>
> *Even though it's wrong and people shouldn't be liable to . . . to scrutinize your*
>
> *potential of getting a job because of your Facebook . . . or your personal biography . . .*
>
> *they do use that as a means to justify whether they want to employ you or not . . .*
>
> *The one thing that concerns me now which really has . . . stopped me from putting*
>
> *a lot of stuff up there is that fact that potential employers . . . you know how a lot of*
>
> *people say well yea they check Facebook now too, they look and see what pictures you*
>
> *put up and check your statuses . . .*

Some students believed that it is wrong or even illegal for companies to view their profiles and use their Facebook information to decide if they get hired. It seemed like my informants had not yet realized that they were putting their information onto a global site; it is now open to any viewer, whether they are a potential employer or not. Some students were very upset by the idea that employers would break into a space that they believed was a place to create a personal biography. Other students went as far as describing their Facebook profiles as their resumes.

My informants were worried about getting internships and jobs just as all other emerging adults are. However, my informants have to also fight Black stereotypes. By many of them being proactive and creating certain personae on Facebook, they are trying to create an identity that employers will accept. The students were fully aware of the issues facing African Americans and

employment in the US, such as the Black unemployment rate being almost double that of the white (Economic news release, 2012).

<div align="center">**Discussion**</div>

Interviewing students at an HBCU and analyzing their Facebook profiles resulted in three main emerging themes: usage, identity, and employers. From those three themes, smaller themes also emerged. In general, this study has proven beneficial for two reasons. First, I have presented a new look at how emerging adults are using Facebook and in particular how they are using it to negotiate their online identities. Second, I have shown that although all of my informants were African American and issues of racial stereotypes were often driving their decisions, they were *not* homogenous in their cultural backgrounds and personal interests.

Future Research

Because this was an exploratory study, my scope was quite large. There are many themes that I have not included in this paper that deal with issues such as gender and class and also with how my informants use Facebook to investigate or "stalk" others. Although I covered a breadth of topics, I could not explore specific topics as deeply as I would have liked. Future research will explore how the architecture of sites plays a role in the ways in which users create and maintain identities. Like all environments and their structures, social networking sites grant their users certain affordances (Gibson, 1979), and these resources are invariably couched in political and economic powers (Winner, 1980).

Conclusion

Speaking with emerging adults at an HBCU, I explored how they negotiated their online identities, particularly through the popular social network, Facebook. Instead of only trying to understand how they are different from white users, I tried to understand how they all used the

site differently. Many students signed up for Facebook because it was the "college thing to do" and because they felt out of the loop when their friends were signing up. Students paralleled current discussions of celebrity culture by creating a type of fame equation; they first wanted to collect a lot of friends, and once their numbers were into the thousands, they then wanted to collect a lot of likes and comments on posts and pictures.

My informants described different ways in which they defined themselves online through the About Me section, the quotes section, likes, wall posts, and status updates. Their interests were far from homogenous. Although some of the students were more focused than others on presenting an identity that fought against Black stereotypes, all of my informants were aware of racial prejudices. They included that they did not wish to associate with people who acted in a way that fit into negative, Black portrayals. A large part of the student's discretion on Facebook was due to their fear of future employers using what the students had posted against them.

This study has shown that emerging, African American adults are not all using Facebook in the same manner or with the same intentions. However, they are all aware of the racial stereotypes that media have created for them. As Willie (2003) explored, my informants may have been more comfortable with just being themselves because they were a part of an HBCU where they were allowed to just be students, instead of *Black* students. However, once negotiating their online identities through Facebook, they realized that they once again had to be aware that they are a part of a minority group. This paper has outlined that identity negotiation struggle.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Interview guide

1. When did you first sign up for Facebook?

2. How often do you go on Facebook?

3. How many friends to you have on Facebook?

4. How would you describe your Facebook friends? Are they mostly people you know offline, family members, acquaintances?

5. How much information do you have on your Facebook profile?

6. How do you choose to include or not include information?

7. Are there particular things you consciously choose to omit and why?

8. What kind of information do you most frequently share with your Facebook friends by posting on your wall or commenting on others' posts?

9. Do you feel that your Facebook profile is an accurate representation of who you are offline?

10. How do you feel about the way the site displays the information?

11. Are there times when you feel that you don't fit in any of Facebook's preset categories when updating your profile or information?

12. What is your favorite thing about Facebook?

13. What is your least favorite thing?