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**Social Connectedness as Experienced by Black Christian Women at a Predominantly
White University**

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Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of Black women attending a predominantly white Christian university and explores how they navigate social connection and belonging in this context, highlighting identity relevant experiences and intersectionality in layered identities. Literature demonstrates, social connection and belonging is an important aspect of well-being. This study serves to advance or extend theories relating to social connection and belonging by examining in particular the role that identity plays in belonging, specifically considering intersectionality and layered identities. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with three Black women who were currently enrolled in the university. The data were analyzed thematically, with four themes being constructed from the analysis: (1) Experiencing racial isolation and disordered visibility, (2) Negotiating the prototypical and lived experience of identity as a hindrance to social connection, (3) Navigating dissonance in faith communities as a source of both safety and threat, and (4) Finding connection in predominantly white spaces and in communities intentionally created for Black students. Considering the ubiquitous and covert narratives that shape Black women's expectations pertaining to how they experience social connection in predominantly white spaces may provide greater insight into how to promote belonging and social well-being for this population.

Key Words: social connection, belonging, qualitative methods, interpretative phenomenological analysis, Black women, Christians, identity

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Introduction

I would say is a place where I can show up, I don't have to put in any extra work, I don't have to um act a certain way. I can just show up. And that's enough. Um, I don't have to do anything that profound for them to acknowledge my existence. I don't have to do anything that is just out of this world for them to accept me or want to be around me or want to be my friend. It was just a place to have people, have friends, have meaningful relationships. Um, yeah. It was just a space to just belong. (Tina)

Tina (pseudonym), a Black student attending a predominantly white faith-based university, describes an environment where she can experience social connection and belonging. In the general university environment, Tina felt pressure to be “profound” to be accepted. Yet, in describing a space that fostered social connections because Tina felt accepted by just being her authentic self, free of expectations, she was able to build meaningful relationships because it was “just a space to belong.” Broader literature suggests that belonging is a vital aspect of wellbeing, and that the belonging needs of minority students often go unmet (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Suejung, 2018.) In this study, social connection is considered one aspect of belonging, and is defined by feelings of acceptance and relationship within a community (Rovai, 2002). Belonging is also considered to be deeply related to and influenced by identity conceptualization (Cohen & Garcia 2008). In this study, I unpack the experience of social connection for Black Christian women attending a predominantly white Christian university by using interpretative phenomenological analysis, an in-depth qualitative research method, to provide a better understanding of this their experience and give direction in how to support the well-being and social needs of Black women in predominantly white environments. In examining the nuances of finding belonging while holding layered identities, I aim to produce novel insights pertaining to

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the role intersectionality plays in social connection, particularly for minority students in predominantly white contexts. Diving into the stories of Black Christian women specifically will elucidate the narrative of how this population experiences belonging, particularly in a religious space, and how the belonging needs of Black women in higher education are met or unmet.

Social Connection Among Minoritized Individuals

I construct an understanding of social connection and belonging in relation to identity based on relevant psychological literature. Theoretical perspectives pertaining to belonging as a need, elements of social connection, and previous studies considering the experience of minority individuals within predominantly white spaces informed the construction of the guiding research questions for this study. As an inductive investigation, this literature assisted in the development of my guiding research question and process of study design, not to generate a testable hypothesis but to provide deeper understanding. My position as a researcher was informed by a deeper understanding of belonging, social connection and identity through the entire research process.

Belonging, Social Connection, and Identity

I began with constructing a theoretical framework to elicit a full understanding of the concepts of belonging, social connection, and identity as relevant to the proposed study. Beginning with foundational literature pertaining to belonging and social connection, the belonging hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), asserts that humans have a “pervasive drive to perform and maintain” positive social relationships (p. 497). The maintenance of positive social relationships requires “frequent, nonaversive interactions within an ongoing relational bond” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 500) Thus, people act based on the core motivation to obtain and sustain belonging through relationships that occur in a stable and consistent manner. Further,

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they contend that belongingness is not simply a want but a need. The understanding of belonging as a need indicated to me the vitality of research about belonging with social connection being one aspect of belonging.

Within the features that make up the holistic sense of belonging, social connectedness is one factor. Through social connectedness, people find that their identity is accepted, fostering feelings of belonging. According to Rovai (2002), connectedness is the feeling of belonging and acceptance and the creation of bonding relationships. In constructing a framework for community, Rovai asserts that community is based on connectedness, feelings of friendship and satisfaction. Specifically within belonging, connectedness “denotes recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and satisfaction that develop” (Rovai, 2002, p. 322). Walton and Cohen (2012) constructed a framework of social connection based on four experiments examining the effect of achievement motivation on mere belonging. Mere belonging is defined as “an entryway to a social relationship—a small cue of social connection to another person or group in a performance domain. (Walter and Cohen, 2012, p. 514). Beginning by citing Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) work, Walton and Cohen (2012) question how social relationships affect people’s personal interests and motivated behavior, considering interests and qualities as an important basis of people’s self-identity. They assert that social belonging is a sense of ‘relatedness’ that may arise from the lasting interpersonal relationships described by Baumeister and Leary. Additionally, they suggest that social belonging is conflated with characteristics such as shared experience, social norms and social feedback. Based on previous literature pertaining to social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Aron, Norman, Aron, McKenna, & Heyman, 2000; Carr & Walton, 2011), Walter and Cohen (2012) reason that social connection and motivation are linked. In four experiments examining the effect of achievement

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motivation on mere belonging, through producing a minimal social connection in a performance domain, the Walter and Cohen (2012) study finds that “even minimal cues of social connectedness affect important aspects of self” (p. 513).

The connection between identity and social belonging is further elucidated by Cohen and Garcia (2008) through the assertion that “one's family, racial or ethnic group, and religious affiliation can be important sources of social identity and social belongingness and so provide powerful motives for achievement” (p. 365). Thus there is an element of identity in belonging through feeling that one's personhood is congruent with the standard set by their community. Motivation and belonging are again theorized to be linked, possibly indicating a connection between belonging and success. Cohen and Garcia, building toward the social connection framework established by Walter and Cohen (2012), assert that social identities can affect one's motivation to achieve through the interaction between social identity and sense of belonging (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365). Acceptance of one's identity by a group is then confirmed through the stable and consistent relationships described by the belonging hypothesis. These stable and consistent relationships are what constitute social connectedness, and it is through that social connectedness that identities are confirmed, and belonging is fulfilled.

Belonging uncertainty is defined by Cohen and Garcia (2008) as “doubt as to whether one will be accepted or rejected by key figures in the social environment” (p. 365). Cohen and Garcia (2008) examined prior literature that suggests the consequences of poor social connection include negative impacts to self-regulation and a drop in IQ performance (Baumeister et al., 2002). Additionally, feeling lonely predicted early death with a similar significance as highly risky behavior, such as smoking (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008).

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In summary, as the literature demonstrates, social connection and belonging is an important aspect of well-being. Thus, studying social connections for Black women may help to promote well-being among this population. This study serves to advance or extend theories relating to social connection and belonging by examining in particular the role that identity plays in belonging, specifically considering intersectionality and layered identities.

Social Connectedness Among Minority Students

We transition to examining foundational literature relating to social connection as social connectedness is a vital element in maintaining and sustaining belonging. Prior literature demonstrates that having a strong social support system is essential for maintaining mental health and well-being and coping with stress. However, minority students often face added pressures on top of the typical stressors experienced by all college students (Suejung, 2018). Minority stress is “psychosocial stress arising from having a minority status” and this type of stress has been shown to undermine racial or ethnic minority students’ academic achievement and psychosocial adaptation to college. The stresses that minority students face are believed to arise from four sources: stereotype threat, limited access to resources, racism, and cultural misfit or invalidation (Suejung, 2018, p. 108). Minority stress has tangible consequences, specifically in stereotype threats. Stereotype threat is “a fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365). Stereotype threat can undermine performance by raising stress and increasing mental load (Schmader & Johns, 2003). The negative consequences of minority stress can be mitigated through healthy social connectedness, with specific outcomes in stress reactions, psychological well-being, and psychological distress (Kawachi & Berkman, 2002).

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For minority students, the environment of PWIs (predominantly white institutions) may exacerbate feelings of isolation, creating difficulties in forming social connections, and necessitating diverse communities within the larger majority-white settings. Greer and Chwalisz (2007) aimed to measure and compare the stress and coping experiences of Black students at a PWI and a HBCU (historically black college or university). The study utilized the Coping Orientations to Problems Experienced Inventory (COPE) to determine how Black graduate students from both a PWI and a HBCU cope with stressors. The Minority Status Stress Scale was used to assess how the participants dealt with stress associated with minority status and the Perceived Stress Scale was used to measure the extent to which individuals perceive their life as stressful. Based on a path analysis, Greer and Chwalisz (2007) determined that students attending a PWI experienced “significantly higher levels of environmental, interpersonal, and intragroup stressors than did their counterparts at the HBCU” (p. 399). Ultimately the students at the HBCU reported few experiences of minority status stress, suggesting that “predominant racial composition of a college setting holds some implications for the daily emotional life of African American students” (Greer & Chwalisz, 2007, p. 400). Further research suggests that there is a self-fulfilling cycle for minority students, in that students who feel less prepared in their studies and feel less successful relative to their peers, end up publishing less (Fisher et al., 2019).

Within the context of a university, feelings of belonging in the classroom can also have numerous positive effects on the learning outcomes and well-being of students. Walton and Cohen (2012) point to longitudinal education research that suggests that “students who feel socially connected to peers and teachers are more motivated in school, even months and years later” (Walton & Cohen, 2012, p. 515). Classroom community is a feeling of belonging among

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members of a defined learning group in which members feel that they “matter to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to each other and the school, and that they possess shared expectations . . . that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared learning goals” (Rovai, 2002, p. 322).

In continuing to explore elements that promote Black student achievement in higher education spaces Hypolite (2020), in their study on Black cultural centers, found that such organizations can help students “reflect on their identities as Black individuals as they determine their personal identity and where they fit in a larger community” (p. 244) thus fostering the aforementioned sense of community. Black cultural centers and minority safe spaces allow a place for students to continue the development of their racial identity during the critical college age. The Black cultural centers supported students in their personal racial identity, diversity that exists across Blackness and the common experiences that exist across shared racial identity (Hypolite, 2020, p. 244). I wonder how environments similar to the Black cultural centers addressed in this study have impacted the experience of the population I am studying, especially in considering religiosity as a potential element of a “cultural center.”

Social connection is a significant element of belonging, which we understand as necessary for well-being. Social connection is also an identity relevant phenomenon as connection is often founded or hindered based on identification with certain gender, ethnic, religious or social groups. For minority students, it can be difficult to have belonging needs be fully met, due to the burden of minority status stress. In turn the relative success of minority students may suffer. By examining previous studies pertaining to the experiences of Black Women in higher education, I may find valuable insights and gaps in the literature relating to Black Christian Women’s experiences of social connection at a predominantly white faith-based

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university. Particularly examining minority stress points to the significance of studying social connection for minoritized individuals, as social connection may mitigate the harmful effects of minority stress.

Background Literature: Black Women in Higher Education Contexts

In considering overall higher education experiences, minority students often contend with isolation, alienation, and stereotyping on campuses where they are not the majority (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In examining previous literature pertaining to campus racial climates, Harper and Hurtado (2007) highlighted that minority students experienced marginalization and discomfort with their status as a tokenized individual. Suejung et al., (2018) found that the experience of cultural misfit, or not having cultural norms that fit into the dominant white culture, was a major source of marginalization in particular. In looking at just one field within academia, Black women in the field of STEM academics reported more negative affect and uncertainty about persisting than white women (Leath & Chavous, 2018). The findings of this study supported prior research in that Black women reported experiencing a more hostile racial climate than white women and reported less-positive intergroup association norms and more racial tension (Leath & Chavous, 2018).

Leath (2022) explored how friendship can be a tool to help mitigate bias or discrimination as Black female friends can help process and cope with experiences of *misogynoir*, that is, is racism and sexism. Black female friendships can help minority women navigate the professional environment and other social aspects of college life (Leath, 2022). Leath pointed to work done by Davis (2018) in defining communicative resistance among Black women, in education, workplace settings and in personal relationships. Davis builds upon the premise that “institutional arrangements establish some voices as central and others as marginal,

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creating vastly different perspectives of social reality for both groups” (Davis, 2018, p. 302). In having communication with other Black women, Davis states that students can “subtly redefine” their position of inferiority within the classroom and develop resiliency (Davis, 2018, pg. 305). Therefore, having communal spaces that allow for communicative resistance for Black women may have positive learning outcomes. Davis & Afifi (2019) further assert that “communication behaviors enable Black women to collectively promote solidarity and pride within the group and to confront oppressive forces” in their development of the Strong Black Women Collective theory (p. 16). Davis and Afifi interpret Tajfel and Turner’s social identity theory assertion that “discrimination of an outgroup serves to achieve a positive social identity” for in-group members, especially when outsiders have a higher social status and threaten the identity of the in-group as “belittling outsiders is a way to enhance members’ feelings about their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, p. 19; Davis, 2019, p. 8). Thus, Davis and Afifi (2019) assert that the specific microaggressions that Black women face may strengthen relationships and their social identity within social communities.

The importance of studying belonging, and social connection is underscored by the fact that the adverse effects of lack of belonging are not wholly deterministic. Feelings of belonging, and minoritized experiences in PWI settings can be improved. Brady (2020) explored the potential of a social belonging intervention in mitigating negative outcomes for Black college students: “this belonging uncertainty may fester in the face of common everyday adversities in college and ultimately undermine important outcomes in college” (p. 2) In this study, a one-hour social belonging intervention was employed to help students make sense of common stressors that occur with the transition to college. Black students who participated in their study found that

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they were more confident in their belonging, and were happier, and healthier than students in the control group (Brady et al., 2020).

Cultural competence training can be a useful tool in helping university faculty support and foster belonging among minority students. (Suejung Han et al., 2018). Ultimately, finding a strong social support system in an environment where you are a minority can be difficult. Particularly for Black women at a predominantly white religiously affiliated Christian university, an intersectionality of marginalization may occur, causing feelings of belonging or structures that support social connection to be lacking. The religious element, both on an institutional and personal level, adds another dimension of identity and depth of connection to be explored. In their study on *layered identities*, Harvey et al. (2018) explored the challenges often faced by Black women and gay men in the traditional Black church when engaging in multicultural dialogue. The study argued that invoking an intersectional lens when considering a person's identity "recognizes the complexity of the social world" (p. 207). The researchers recognized spirituality and religion as a source of "social support, personal affirmation, and promotion of emotional and psychological well-being" (Harvey et al., 2018, p 210). Previous studies mentioned do not provide in-depth analysis pertaining to intersectionality in racial, gender and religious identity in relation to belonging, connection and fostering community.

As Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggested, belonging is a need and an inability to fulfill this need may have adverse effects. Walter and Cohen (2011) contribute to understanding social connection as an element of belonging and Cohen and Garcia (2008) demonstrate the connection between social connection and identity. Previous studies provide insight into the difficulties faced by minority students in higher education, and the ways that belonging needs of minority students are unmet due to unsatisfactory social connection. Considering the importance of

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belonging to well-being and the specific difficulties minority students face in finding belonging in PWI higher education settings, I believe it is important to study ways in which Black Christian women have found social connection and experiences where social connection is structurally lacking, within a religiously affiliated predominantly white higher education environment in particular. While Leath (2022) acknowledges previous findings that indicate it is “especially meaningful (and rare) to find other Black women who shared certain significant social identities,” the study specifically notes that there are “few studies on the religious identity experiences among non-Christian, Black populations” (Leath, 2022, 846).

My study aims to explore the extent in which social connection through relationships and through community can mitigate the previously mentioned effect of minority stress on well-being. Through affirming self-image and honoring intersectional experiences in belonging communities, institutions can promote positive social identity development.

Examining the lived experiences pertaining to social connectedness of Black women at a predominantly white university may help to elucidate how the belonging needs of minority students can be supported. Examining Black Christian women specifically, within a faith context, provides a unique perspective into the complex consequences of how layered identities impact feelings of belonging. This study may also provide needed insight into how different types of identities are expressed and interact in an individual’s self-conceptualization and in relation to the communities to which they belong. I want to give voice to students who lack social connectedness and learn more from students who have been able to fulfill their belonging needs as a minority in a Christian PWI environment.

Research Questions and Methodology

I developed this investigation to answer the following research questions:

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RQ1: How do Black Christian women students experience social connection in the context of a predominantly white faith-based institution?

RQ2: How do Black Christian women students form relationships amid their experiences of marginalization?

I used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to answer these questions. IPA is a qualitative research methodology that allows researchers to examine in-depth the lived experiences that were elicited from each participant in an interview, identify patterns of convergence or divergence across a study, and establish themes of lived experience that dialogue with psychological literature. According to Smith et al. (2022), IPA is primarily concerned with “the detailed examination of human lived experience” allowing for “that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems” (p. 26). Using an IPA approach, I aim to “give voice” to participants by analyzing their own words (Larkin, 2006, p. 113). According to Larkin (2006), a successful IPA study both gives voice to participants and makes sense of their experience. In this study, I give voice to participants by capturing and reflecting upon their primary claims and concerns. I make sense of their accounts through an intentional process of interpreting what is claimed by the participants. In an interview-based IPA study, such as this one, quotations from a research interview transcript serve as the data, with the analysis remaining grounded in the participant interview transcript (Larkin et al., 2006). Smith et al., (2022) described the IPA researcher “standing alongside” the participant in interpretation, being both empathetic and questioning to understand or illuminate the participant’s experience of a phenomenon (p. 30). To ensure successful interpretation, analysis remains grounded in the interview text. Within this empathic and questioning process of interpretation, Huff notes that “IPA investigators are active in reflective dialogue regarding their

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own presuppositions of the study, as a way to maximize their self-awareness of interpretive processes” (Huff, 2020, p. 5). Accordingly, IPA calls for reflective processing on the part of the researcher throughout the entire process, from study ideation to compiling findings.

The nature of IPA is idiographic. While many psychological studies are nomothetic, claiming to make claims at the group or population level, thereby establishing, “general laws of human behavior,” IPA is concerned with the particular (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Thus, a driving goal of the study was to give voice to Black Christian women students in particular and to make sense of how they experience social connectedness at a Christian PWI. IPA’s commitment to the particular is displayed in the depth of analysis, through thorough and consistent consideration of data, and in considering how specific phenomenon “have been understood from the perspective of a particular people, in a particular context (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Because ethnic or racial groups are not monolithic, there is much to be learned from recognizing individual experiences and constructing emergent themes that connect and provide insight into the lived experiences of individuals. Due to the highly individualized and personal nature by which people experience social connection and belonging, and the specificity of Black Christian women in a PWI setting as a people group, IPA as a methodological framework was most conducive to answering the research questions.

Researcher Positionality

According to Secures et al. (2021), “positionality captures the dynamic ways an individual is defined by socially significant identity dimensions” (p. 20). In order to allow space for reflexivity, I acknowledge my identity as a Black Christian woman studying Black Christian women. Due to my positionality as a Black Christian woman, I have personal experiences pertaining to social connection and belonging within a predominantly white faith-based

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institution. I worked closely on this project with my thesis advisor, Dr. James Huff who is an expert in conducting qualitative research interviews, through his IPA work on identity and shame in engineering education and practice spaces (Huff et al., 2016; Huff et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2021) In the sampling process Dr. Huff provided significant insight in determining which participants would be chosen for an interview. Additionally, Dr. Huff played a major role in the interviewing process, with me as a co-interviewer. As a white male interviewing Black women students, Dr. Huff remained aware of the dynamic in the interview space and drawing on his extensive experience was able to help create a safe and open interview environment for the participants. I conducted the subsequent iterations of analysis from an individual case and cross case level to the development of four core themes presented in the findings, with continued guidance from Dr. Huff.

Institutional Context

Participants were recruited from a teaching-focused faith-based university (TFBU) in the Southern United States that is religiously affiliated with a protestant Christian denomination. As a Christian-affiliated institution, participation in religious activity is central to the student experience. TFBU is a PWI with over 80% of the student body being white.

Sampling

After obtaining IRB approval by submitting a full research plan, potential participants were asked to complete a study interest form in the format of a web-based questionnaire. The form included information about the participants' religious affiliation and racial identity. The first question gathered information about the participants' religious affiliation at the denominational level. The next two questions were open ended in form and allowed the participants to state their gender and ethnicity. The last question asked participants to share their

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expected graduation date. The emails of the potential participants were then collected from the study interest form, along with providing the participants information about the \$30 compensation they would receive for participating in the study. In line with the best practices of IPA, based on those chosen from the study interest questionnaire, the data sample consisted of a small, purposefully selected group of three participants (Smith et al., 2022). The sampling criteria involved having the participants be Black, Christian, and women, and have substantial lived experience as a student at TFBU, in order to answer the research questions. Three participants were chosen based on their self-identification as being Black, female, and Christian as well as having been students at TFBU for at least five semesters. This ensured they had accrued adequate experiences to speak to their entire process of finding and maintaining social connectedness in a college environment. The participants each used the word “female” in response to being asked to state their gender. For the purposes of this study, we will use the term “women” in reference to the gender identities of the participants, in line with the actual verbiage used by the participants in the interviews. Additionally all of the participants identified as Christian, with two of the participants claiming the specific Christian denomination affiliated with TFBU, and one claiming a different Christian denomination. Once the participants were chosen, a meeting time was coordinated with the selected participants. The participants were sent and asked to review an informed consent form that was further reviewed and explained at the beginning of the interview time.

Data Collection

We conducted the interviews in person at the participants’ institution. We chose a space that was in an office setting but had comfortable seating, enabling the interviews to occur in a quiet and private place but also in a casual environment that was convenient for the participants.

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Each interview took place in the evening so as to not conflict with participants' class schedules. The data collection process for this IPA study involved interviewing each participant for 82 minutes for one interview, 97 minutes for two of the interviews, an extensive duration to allow each participant to fully expand upon her experience. The participants were given the opportunity to choose the pseudonym that would represent their interview in the study, resulting in the pseudonyms of Destiny, Tina, and Jordan.

We used an unstructured interview format for data collection. As Smith et al., (2022) describes, the qualitative IPA interviews conducted had the cadence of a "conversation with a purpose," and aimed to "facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories," in detail, using their own words (p. 54). In line with Mann's (2016) definition of an unstructured interview, the interview involved "few open-ended questions where interviewees are encouraged to talk at length about what seems significant or prominent for them." Additionally, the interviews conducted were "in-depth" in that the interviews "aim[ed] to elicit a full picture of the participant's perspective on the research focus. The role of the interviewer is to engage with participants by asking questions in a neutral manner" (Mann, 2016, p. 100). Close listening was practiced within the interview space to formulate appropriate probes, clarifications, and follow-up questions, allowing for the interviews to be in-depth (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012). The interview tone was conversational to create an environment that is comfortable and welcoming to whatever the participant is willing to share. Following the interview guidance outlined by Huff (2020), as interviewers, we were "committed to maintaining a deep sense of presence with the interview participant, adapting questions to the responses of the participant" (p. 5). There were specific research goals that guided the interview along the topic of the

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participant's experience of social connection and belonging in the TFBU environment. We organized our interview around five goals for data elicitation:

Goal 1: Elicit general descriptions of how the participant understands their identity.

Goal 2: Elicit accounts of how the participant has experienced social connection.

Goal 3: Elicit descriptions of how the participant experiences of race in regard social connection.

Goal 4: Elicit descriptions of how the participant experiences of faith regarding social connection.

Goal 5: Elicit response to study objectives. (Understanding the experience of social connection among Black women at a predominantly white Christian university.)

Rather than having a script to follow, as interviewers we were guided by overarching goals related to social connection and identity, generally following the lead of the interviewee. Thus, the interview structure focused on the participant's experience of their social connectedness.

We began each interview with the question: If you were to think about your life as a novel, how would you walk through the chapters of that novel leading up to this point? This question, adapted from the Life Story Interview Protocol II (McAdams, 2007), created context for the later experiences that the participants would describe and set the tone in allowing the participant to lead the interview process, allowing the data to truly represent their experience. Once the participant constructed a narrative of their life experiences, we asked questions focusing on experiences relating to belonging and racial identity. We would ask the participant to describe an event in more detail, for example, by asking what was happening in their "inner world" when that event was occurring. Following the participant's constructed narrative we also explicitly asked questions specifically pertaining to their experience of social connection in

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college, to probe in-depth accounts related to their experiences of social connection and disconnection. Using the last question of the interview, we explained the purpose of the study, to understand the experience of social connection among Black Christian women at TFBU and gave the participant an opportunity to speak directly to the research topic. We informed the participant of the process of de-identification and provided the opportunity to choose the pseudonym that would be used for her case. After each interview I would make an entry in my reflective researcher log, to record details about the interview, even where each person in the interview space was sitting. I also recorded my initial thoughts about the interview, so going into the analysis process, my interpretation would not be clouded by first impression.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed and de-identified, the interview transcripts were shared with the participants, allowing them an opportunity to provide feedback if wanted. After being sent the transcripts, none of the three participants provided additional feedback or shared concerns about the interview data. I began my analytical process for each of the three cases by reading through each transcript, one at a time, and conducting a thorough de-identification. The de-identification process for the interview transcript involved removing any proper nouns or indicative information from the interview transcript, in order to protect the participants confidentiality. The transcript was also edited to ensure an authentic capture of the audio file, including cues for pauses, vocal fluctuations or laughter. Alase (2017) advises an IPA process where researchers initially familiarize themselves with the interview data through re-reading the transcripts, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's lived experiences, and state of mind during those lived experiences (p. 16).

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After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I analyzed the three interviews at an individual level. This first involved reviewing the interview transcripts and making exploratory commentary at a descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual level (Smith et al., 2020; Huff et al., 2014). In this analysis process, I considered the meaning of the participants' words, tone of voice, and internal processes described in the interview. From the exploratory comments, I drafted experiential statements related to the interview data, that thematically represented the participant's experiences and how they understood that experience. I then thematically mapped experiential statements to show patterns and points of tension within the story of each participant. Then, experiential themes were extrapolated from the analysis that summarize major patterns and significant points from the data. The experiential themes were categorized and mapped to show interrelation between themes. At each stage of the analysis process I used my research log to record personal thoughts and observations. This included making note of ideas that I found interesting but were not relevant to the study, so I would not get distracted. I also wrote about difficulties or areas of confusion in the analysis process that I could later discuss with Dr. Huff.

After extensive analysis of each transcript, I generated themes and sub-themes within an individual case analysis file. The individual case analyses were used to conduct analysis at the cross-case level, comparing and contrasting the participants' experiences, identifying major themes and points of tension. Looking at both the investigator interpretation present from the levels of individual analysis and thematic mapping, as well as the raw interview data, four emergent themes were constructed as representative of the participants' experience, and relevant to the guiding research questions. The themes were informed and supported by quotations from

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all three interviews that represent a coherent and detailed picture of the Black Christian women's identity and relevant experience of social connection at TFBU.

Limitations

One challenge to this study was sharing an insider perspective with the participants of the phenomenon. Throughout the research process I aimed to interpret the participants' experiences, rather than project my own experience into the interpretation. Two advisors, Dr. James Huff at Harding University and Dr. Amy Brooks from Oregon State University, who are well practiced in IPA, reviewed the analysis at each step. As advisors they offered feedback to ensure that the interpretive element of the analysis was grounded in the interview data and justly represents the understanding and experiences of the participants. An investigator research log was kept during the interview analysis stage of the research process, in order to record initial perceptions and to acknowledge potential bias. In the analysis process, I stayed within the framework of IPA as a primarily idiographic methodology, allowing my study to provide contextually specific insights, rather than making knowledge claims about nomothetic human experience.

Findings

I organize the findings to demonstrate a continuum of experiences communicated by the participants, from social disconnection to social connection (refer to Table 1). Theme 1 illustrates participants' external obstacles which created an environment of disconnection. Theme 2 details participants' self-conceptualizations and external perceptions of identity, often in the face of stereotypes, in ways that often hindered the participant's ability to express their identity authentically and resulted in social disconnection. Theme 3 focuses on religiosity as a layered identity that adds nuance to how the participants experienced social connection, both in

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negative and positive ways. Lastly, Theme 4 highlights the ways in which the participants were able to find social connection as students at TFBU.

Theme 1: Experiencing racial isolation and invisibility

Subtheme 1.a: Encountering being targeted by disordered visibility and microaggressions on an institutional and individual level

Subtheme 1.b: Being made aware of Blackness through hypervisibility a way that is not positive, causing feelings of invisibility

Subtheme 1.c: Individual at the receiving end of the microaggression feeling the responsibility to educate the other party

Theme 2: Negotiating the prototypical and lived experience of identity as a hindrance to social connection

Subtheme 2.a: Encountering internalized and expected racial stereotypes

Subtheme 2.b: Inability to express identity authentically in spaces where social connection was lacking

Subtheme 2.c: Expression of self-love in rebutting expectations and allowing for multi-dimensionality within the self.

Theme 3: Navigating dissonance in faith communities as a source of both safety and threat

Subtheme 3.a: Facing exclusion in lack of representation and misalignment of values in faith communities

Subtheme 3.b: Designating faith communities as a safe space and an environment to express identity authentically and experience belonging

Subtheme 3.c: Common belief as the impetus for social connection

Theme 4: Finding connection in predominantly white spaces and in communities intentionally created for Black students

Subtheme 4a: Finding social connection in the oasis of diverse community

Subtheme 4. b: The participants experience social connection as an environment that allows them to be true to themselves, free from expectation/stereotypes.

Subtheme 4.c: Bittersweetness casting a shadow on the experience of finding social connection balancing gratitude for relationships and reality of microaggressions

Table 1: Themes that characterize social connectedness as experienced by Black Christian women at a predominantly white faith-based institution

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Theme 1: Experiencing racial isolation and disordered visibility

Participants encountered threats to their ability to form social connections as they navigated the predominately white environment of TFBU. They faced a disordered visibility in that they felt hypervisible due to their Blackness yet invisible as elements of their identity were not fully seen or acknowledged. The source of the threat to social connection was often one-on-one interpersonal interactions, which occurred in ways that indicated larger systemic issues of marginalization. At times the participants categorized these interactions as “microaggressions.” We use this term to characterize actions or words delivered casually that caused harm to the participants and contributed to a culture of disordered visibility. The burden of the microaggressions and targeted hypervisibility compounded in causing both internal feelings of invisibility and actual invisibility among the participants. The invisibility that participants experienced was not conducive to creating or sustaining social connection. Amid this burden of dealing with microaggressions in a place of disconnection, participants felt responsible to educate those around them and internalized pressure that absolved the other party, who delivered the microaggression, of accountability.

Subtheme 1.a: Encountering being targeted by disordered visibility and microaggressions on an institutional and individual level

Participants encountered difficulties forming social connections due to their Blackness causing increased visibility, making them a target for microaggressions. For example, a major narrative that shaped Destiny’s college experience and her perception of TFBU was facing harsh online backlash after speaking out in a public setting on the topic of allyship and acknowledging the presence of racism. The incident incited a form of hypervisibility for Destiny, being on the receiving end of racially charged and anonymous comments. The social and emotional toll this

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placed on Destiny was significant, and the negative effects on her social well-being was all encompassing and difficult to overcome:

Just . . . not wanting to be around that energy and the hateful people and the negativity. Cause I could, I could feel it like, I don't know. I feel, I feel energy. I'm one of those people that can just feel when, you know, something's off or, you know, um, yeah, the tension between people. And I just really didn't wanna deal with that. So I just kind of took that day off just to kind of reflect and kind of clear my mind, um, and not stress myself out about everything that happened. (Destiny)

It is important to note the extent of her distress in impacting her education, as she was unable to attend classes following the incident. The hypervisibility Destiny faced was literal and salient, directly impacting her ability to connect with those around her:

And I think even after . . . I could just feel the eyes on me. Like it was so weird. You could feel the tension in the air and it's just like, I don't know. I just really didn't expect for that to happen. And so that was definitely, definitely a point where I felt disconnected from the people around me (Destiny)

Destiny encountered hypervisibility in the classroom also in a literal sense. In multiple instances within the classroom, Destiny was made the center of attention and an object for discussion due to her race. Despite reflecting on the instance as not “a bad thing,” Destiny questioned why she was the focus of class, and why she encountered situations such as these at TFBU specifically:

Um, and then like he [a professor] asked another class when he was just like, he was like, um, he said something about like, um, “do you, do you, do you think that her, her hair, uh, is worth it? Eight hours that she took on it,” or some, something like that. It was like

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something along those lines. I just like, why are we, why is my hair like the main focus right now? And um, I've dealt with that like with other professors too. And even though it's not like a, I wouldn't say it's a bad thing, it's just kind of like a thing that's just, I don't know. I just haven't experienced because everywhere, everywhere else I've been like, people understand that like, you know, Black women, you know, tend to do different things with their hair. (Destiny)

Destiny's case acts as one vignette of the larger experience of social disconnection that all of the participants felt due to hypervisibility. Tina also explains how in a specific group activity, she felt pressured to prove herself. This pressure was continual for Tina as "it's like I was still proving myself every single day." Thus, Tina experienced hypervisibility as her skills and ability were continually monitored, so that she felt like she had to prove herself. The following theme expands upon the experience of hypervisibility for the other participants, and how that contributed to disordered visibility in multiple forms.

Subtheme 1.b: Being made aware of Blackness through hypervisibility a way that is not positive, causing feelings of invisibility

The experience of hypervisibility was also coupled with the feeling of invisibility, as the participants did not feel represented or like they fit into the predominantly white environment. Tina described the experience of having an unexpected sort of racial awareness and feeling isolated by being different from everyone else:

So when I got to [TFBU], um I've always been . . . one of the only Black kids, let alone like people of color in my color in my schools and in my groups and things, so that wasn't anything I was worried about. But it's like, when I came to [TFBU], I was made

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very very very very very aware of my Blackness and how it was it very different from everyone else. (Tina)

This account demonstrates the internal impact of hypervisibility, as Tina was made aware of her Blackness in a way that was new to her, causing a more acute and conscious recognition of how she is different from others. In moments of salient disconnection, hypervisibility, and invisibility were present. The disordered visibility Tina encountered occurred on both an internal and external level. Tina described how on the first day of school in a class she felt isolated by other students not sitting by her or talking to her.

I sat down and like the middle so I could see and everyone— I was the only Black person in my class on the first day. Everyone sat around me . . . It was just like— it’s like I have this repellent. It’s like people were like, “Oooh I don’t want to sit next to you.” And it was just kinda odd because I was like, I don’t know any of ya’ll, and ya’ll don’t know me, and it didn’t seem like it didn’t really know each other— because they were getting to know, they were asking, hey what’s your name, you know that kind of thing. I was just kinda listening and just watching (Tina)

In Tina feeling that she had a repellent, just because of racial differences, the hypervisibility is clear. Yet, within the actual interactions between students Tina is invisible as she sits on the periphery “just kinda listening and just watching” other students make social connections. In remaining detached instead of being involved in the social environment, Tina felt invisible. Tina acknowledged the oddness of this occurrence, pointing to a possible incongruence between her expectations and experience of being Black in a predominantly white environment. Ultimately Tina felt “singled out I guess, for a lot of things,” with this singling out taking the form of both invisibility and hypervisibility. Jordan elaborated upon the experience of

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invisibility, as racial stereotypes suppressed her individuality. Rather than being a whole individual person, Jordan faced the assumption by others that “[Black people] can all relate because we look the same.” Being held up to the standard of being “Black enough” or “not really Black,” caused Jordan to experience a sort of invisibility, and the collapse of her unique and individual being, into a stereotype. This pattern of disordered visibility showcases how issues of invisibility and hypervisibility, specifically related to microaggressions, are directly tied to identity, both internally and externally perceived.

Subtheme 1.c: Individual at the receiving end of the microaggression feeling the responsibility to educate the other party

Within the microaggressions faced by each participant, there was a sense of responsibility for resolving the incident through an effort to re-establish the social order or to have the incident be an educational opportunity. Yet, the responsibility most often fell on the person at the receiving end of the microaggressions rather than the perpetrator. Where the participants were keenly aware and could fully see the microaggression that took place, the offensive nature of the words or actions made by others often went unseen by the person being offensive or other surrounding individuals. Jordan demonstrated this pattern of feeling responsibility to educate others by taking the blame in a situation where a professor made a racially charged comment described as “hurtful and offensive.” Jordan was upset both by the comment that was made, and that she did not confront the situation in the moment:

And, um, I just, I don't remember exactly what was said, but I just know that I think it was just my way of trying to like protect myself from what it was going on. So it could have been like something that could have been like, um, explained or, um, just kind of, um, understood in a better way had I asked more questions. And I think that's where I've

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kind of grown in, um, listening and asking questions, follow up questions. If something doesn't sit right with me. Um, but I think in that instance, I was just back in middle school in, you know, a classroom setting, um, trying to like, just protect myself from being like embarrassed or, um, feel bad about what's being said, I guess. (Jordan)

Jordan reflects that she could have “understood in a better way, had I asked more questions” or if the comment was better explained. Rather than allowing the accountability to fall on the professor in the commentary made during class, Jordan internalized responsibility for calling out the microaggression at that moment. The weight of this responsibility reflected a regression, where she finds herself “back in middle school,” trying to protect herself rather than engage in her education.

In facing the experience of a person saying that they “don't see color,” Jordan expressed both frustration and understanding. Her frustration stemmed from a sense of invisibility, noting that her peers did not see Jordan as a Black woman, so they were not seeing Jordan fully. The form of invisibility that comment created for Jordan was harmful, as a core part of her identity was not acknowledged. Amid her frustration at this microaggression, Jordan makes a specific effort to contextualize this offense by pointing out how people may have been raised:

And also if you grow up in an environment where it's like, you know, don't see color, you know, you shouldn't see color and that type of thing. It's just like, well, no, I need you to understand that I am Black. It shouldn't make you like, like me more or less. But I think that there are some things definitely that you should understand . . . So, um, I think that conversation just really didn't happen because I didn't really know how to say like, you know, we're people and, and, um, to just kind of put us all in a box, it kind of defeats the whole point (Jordan)

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Furthermore, Jordan states that the reason a productive conversation didn't happen with her friends regarding how “color blindness” can be problematic was because she didn't know how to express that putting people in a box is unhelpful. Despite having expectations for her friends to understand her racial identity, Jordan still feels responsibility to lead conversations that facilitate understanding. Jordan refers to how her peers grew up as a way to contextualize their harmful behavior, which ultimately limited accountability in that moment. Thus in facing invisibility due to hypervisibility, Jordan bore the weight of educating others. Tina expands upon the responsibility and weight that Black women often bear in the face of a microaggression by being talked to condescendingly, saying that “I was made to be the villain in that situation when I was the one who was, you know being talked to like an animal but, you know. Things like that are stuff that I feel like Black people just have to adjust to and be the bigger person. In situations like that.” More than just facing microaggressions, having to “be the bigger person” and take the responsibility to educate others ultimately contributed to the disconnection that the participants felt within the predominantly white environment.

Theme 2: Negotiating the prototypical and lived experience of identity as a hindrance to social connection

The participants' experience of social connection or disconnection was directly related to their identity, both in how others perceived their identity and in how the experience of social connection impacted their identity. The identity of the participants is defined by the racial, gender, religious or other relevant social groups in which they claim membership or affiliation. Identity played a major role in how the participants actually experienced and perceived their experience of social connection. The previously mentioned phenomenon of hypervisibility created a unique awareness of racial identity among both the participants and others that they

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interacted with at TFBU. The conceptualization of identity formed for the participants at TFBU centered around racial differences. Thus, stereotypes, or blanket assumptions about the participant's racial group, cast by their peers' created barriers that prevented participants from interacting socially as "true to themselves" among their white peers.

Subtheme 2.a: Encountering internalized and expected racial stereotypes

Participants encountered defined and assumed expectations of who they were supposed to be based on their visible identities as Black women. Inability to fit into projected expectations was a source of frustration for the participants that was deeply connected to the ways in which they were unable to find social connection. Because the assumptions were inaccurate, the participants were unable to live up to these subtle or expressed expectations placed on them.

Jordan in particular felt burdened by stereotypes that were present in moments of trying to connect with a classmate or friend. In casual moments of conversation, assumptions made about Jordan that were untrue created a dissonance between her peers' perception of Jordan's identity and Jordan's actual lived experience. Jordan expressed the social consequences of not fitting into stereotypes as "being out of the loop." As she stated:

I think even though people know that, you know, not all Black people are related or not all Black people know each other. Um, it's still like this: "but you should know." You know, you should know who I'm talking about. You should know what reference I'm making. Um, and, um, and I just, I just think sometimes, you know, I feel kind of out of the loop a little bit, especially if I'm like not really into TikTok or I'm not really into what they're talking about. And then sometimes it's like, but you should be because you're Black, so you should know everything about this particular thing. So, yeah. (Jordan)

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This being “out of the loop” was experienced by Jordan as disconnection. Jordan described this type of attribution of characteristics or knowledge to Black individuals that is inaccurate, as “very unhealthy.” Rather than being a person to connect with or a friend to get to know better, Jordan saw herself as being “used as this like alert in comparison to other people, uh, based on your skin rather than on you and who you are.” In this, we see that Jordan’s true identity, as she experienced it, was not recognized by her peers. “Who she is” was not honored but rather placed in comparison to some stereotype that she could not fulfill. Jordan saw the origination of these stereotypes as stemming from one-dimensional understandings of how media represented Black individuals and the Black community.

Um, and so like if being like— comparing like Black culture or trying to, um, identify or define what it is, sometimes it's, um, untrue or it can be offensive or hurtful, just because, you know, it's your perspective on what you believe Black culture is. Or, um, I guess what, um, Black people are like capable of or what our home life is like. I guess, like making it what you see on TV or in the media, and that's kind of, um, it's not true for everyone. (Jordan)

Tina also faced the burden of media stereotypes as a hindrance for forming social connections. She described that based on both her racial and gender identity “being a Black woman specifically, I was expected to always be the stereotypical, um loud, the kinda like comic relief kinda person. Like in the movies.” Because of the stereotypes, Tina was “never, you know really allowed to be smart or like helpful in academics or um intelligent or just you know calm.” In constantly being held to that stereotype, Tina experienced social or emotional exhaustion. She describes wanting “some time to breathe, some time to decompress,” but not being given the social space to do so. Both Tina and Jordan’s accounts demonstrate the relation between

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stereotypes and difficulty forming connections, and the nuance in how those stereotypes were conveyed by others, in subtle and overt manners.

Subtheme 2b: Inability to express identity authentically in spaces where social connection was lacking

All of the participants found it difficult to be authentic in spaces where they did not find social connection, suggesting a relation between authenticity and social connection. Looking in depth at Tina's experience, Tina expounded upon the burden that stereotypes played in her experience of disconnection. In social scenarios, her experience of invisibility and being unable to fulfill stereotypes left her unable to be "true to herself." Both the exhaustion from proving herself and the invisibility described in Theme 1 created internal dissonance in how Tina expressed her identity. Tina grappled with limitations, as the stereotype of being loud or the comic relief hindered her ability to act according to her self-identified personality. In combating stereotypes, social connection was further hindered. The lack of authenticity in how Tina portrayed herself in a predominantly white environment at TFBU was discouraging for her.

Like even though I was a very outgoing person I feel like I receded into this shell.

Because I didn't feel like I was being- I guess received when I would put myself out there. Like no one really like, um- I don't know what's the word I'm looking for. Like no one um- hmm (Tina pauses) I didn't feel like anyone was like "Oh yeah, I like you, I want to be your friend." . . . Like I didn't feel like there were any like friendship connections, you know from anything... (Tina)

The culmination of difficulties faced by Tina resulted in a form of inauthenticity that hindered social connection. Jordan, too, struggled with wanting to be "true to herself" in social scenarios. Yet an unspoken measure of Blackness furthered feelings of disconnection. Jordan described

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grappling with not being “Black enough.” She faced the assumption that “when something bad happens [Black people] can all relate because we look the same.” If Jordan held an opinion that was unexpected or did not understand a particular reference, the messaging that she received from her surrounding community was, “You’re not that Black.” Similarly, in reflecting upon stereotypes and being put into a box, Destiny conveyed a desire for space to express her multidimensionality. Destiny explains that “Like, no, I can be all things at once, at different times. Like I don’t know how to explain it . . . I don’t see myself just like being one thing.” However, despite desires expressed by multiple participants to be multidimensional, the participants are seen as one-dimensional or lacking individuality in conflating the person with stereotypes about the Black community. In Destiny’s desire for multidimensional in how she expressed herself, Jordan grappling with the unspoken measure of Blackness, and Tina receding “into a shell” despite being self-described as outgoing, all of the participants demonstrated the cost of dealing with disordered visibility and stereotypes and limiting to authenticity in navigating social scenarios.

Subtheme 2.c: Expression of self-love in rebutting expectations and allowing for multidimensionality within the self.

Despite feeling limited by the surrounding environment by not being given space to be authentic when making social connections, the participant’s expressed self-love that created space for authenticity and full recognition of their identity. Tina in particular, directly and specifically named her love for being a black woman by saying, “I would never ask to be born any other way. I don’t know—I love being a woman and I love being Black. And just both of them at once, I hit the jackpot.” Here, Tina demonstrated the role that intersectionality can play in identity conceptualization. Due to her love for being Black and being a women, Tina

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recognized and advocated for the multidimensionality of Black women, specifically pertaining to the expectations that they are held to.

Black women deserve to be respected. They deserve to be able to be vulnerable. Be soft in any setting. They don't have to be strong. They don't have to be hard all the time because I feel like that's a thing that Black women are often expected to be. Um, so I feel like being a Black woman it just (sighs) it just makes things better. I don't know. I just really enjoy it. (Tina)

Tina acknowledged intersectionality in identity, as she identified that Black women especially often lack respect and should not have to "be hard all the time." She credits this expectation not to being Black or being a woman as separate identities, but something expected of Black women specifically. Practicing self-love in a way that allows for multidimensionality was a factor in how the participants found and experienced social connection. Though both Destiny and Tina acknowledged the role of intersectionality in their identity, Destiny's expression of self-love differed from Tina's. Whereas Tina focused on loving herself and the communities forged by her racial identities, Destiny considered herself as undefined by those identities. In reflecting upon how she experienced social connection as a Black Christian woman, Destiny stated, "I feel like I'm more than just Black, Christian and woman. Yes. Like I feel like there's just like a lot of, yeah. Other things that are like wrapped around, that you know." While she held love for those identities, Destiny experienced social connection as something that transcended those identities in saying, "I have a lot of different things that I'm interested in and like passions and so I've, I've never wanted to be the type of person that just has labels or like it's just like put in one box." Both Destiny's desire to not be put into a box, and Tina's notable self-

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love for the intersection of her racial and gender identity points towards the necessity of allowing Black women to express their multidimensionality in order to foster social connection.

Theme 3: Navigating dissonance in faith communities as a source of both safety and threat

The participants shared a wide variety of experiences within faith communities, both part of the institution of TFBU and through their affiliations with students and professors at TFBU. Some experiences were discouraging, as participants were excluded or not represented in spaces where they engaged in the intimate and identity relevant experience of Christian worship. Yet, in other cases, shared beliefs were the foundation for the creation of their social connection with others.

Subtheme 3.a: Facing exclusion in lack of representation and misalignment of values in faith communities

In several of the religious experiences described by the participants, they felt both a physical lack of representation and an acute sensation that their personal values did not align with that of the larger faith community. These experiences threatened the participants' formation of social connection. Destiny spoke directly to the issues of lack of representation and misalignment of values within religious spaces experienced by the Black women at TFBU. In Destiny's Christian faith tradition that was a different denomination than represented at TFBU, women had a visible role within the church, and the place and value of women were made known. In describing her religious background, Destiny stated that women "pretty much did the same things . . . they made it known that women were needed in the church and that their presence was appreciated . . . together that we were as equal." The welcoming of women is in contrast to the "weird" denominational tradition of TFBU where "women never led." TFBU was affiliated with a complementarian religious tradition which maintained specific and limited roles

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that women could play within worship and spiritual practice. In trying to participate in the religious community Destiny experienced “culture shock” due to the lack of representation of women within public spiritual spaces.

So coming here and seeing how women were treated in the church and how some of the men thought of women, it was kind of, I don't know, it, it was kind of saddening, and it was just a culture shock, honestly. Um, and I don't know. I think those, I think those two aspects were just like the hardest things to like overcome being at [TFBU] as well as like kind of feeling a little pressured to be a certain way here because of, um, how much like religion is like pushed on you. (Destiny)

The treatment of women within TFBU as a religious institution did not align with Destiny’s beliefs in relation to her gender identity. Additionally, the hurt felt by facing microaggressions in the TFBU environment at large, created internal disconnection between Destiny and her peers. After the public incident in which Destiny was the victim of online hateful comments (Theme 1), a message of love was shared in a mandatory university worship gathering. The perceived dissonance in values between Destiny and her surrounding environment was distressing.

And I remember, I remember going to [a worship service], um, the following week and they were singing “God is love” in [a worship service]. And I remember sitting there thinking, and I was like, how could y'all sit here and sing so freely, but like say such hateful things to other people, like there is no way that this could happen, not even two or three days ago. And then we're all in [a worship service] the next day I can't act like nothing happened. Singing, you know, like everything is all good and all golly and, you

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know, we should just forget everything that happened, you know, that really, that really messed with me. (Destiny)

The tension between the proclamation of love with hateful behavior “messed with” Destiny. The communal commitment to love that was expressed in worship was more divisive and disconnecting to Destiny, due to the lack of acknowledgement or reckoning with racially charged hateful speech within that same community.

Tina also expressed disappointment and dissonance within TFBU affiliated faith communities. When she first came to TFBU and attended a local congregation with peers, subtle and overt excluding social behaviors by the other church members caused Tina to “just [feel] so out of place... like I wasn’t wanted.” Not only did she feel disconnected, but her own spirituality, and Christianity as a facet of her identity suffered as a result of not feeling wanted. The lack of welcome from her peers and other church members “kinda made [Tina] not want to go at all, so [she] didn’t go to church for like [her] first, um probably three weeks.” Although Tina had attended Sunday morning worship services since her childhood, facing social disconnection within the religious environment as a student at TFBU disrupted her spiritual practices.

Tina’s early religious experiences at TFBU surprised her. She reflected on the unexpected disconnection by saying, “This is you know, weird that I’m at this Christian school but I’m not getting um that spiritual growth, that plug in anywhere.” Even greater than not finding spiritual growth, Tina felt as if spiritual growth or connection was some experience that was not available to her because of her being a Black woman. As she stated, “It felt almost like you don’t deserve to be here. You don’t really deserve to have like this experience that the majority of the student body here does.” Similar to Destiny, Tina ultimately felt that due the

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unwelcoming environment in religious spaces based on her identity, her values did not align with the culture at TFBU. Regarding the culture of TFBU religious spaces, Tina “felt like it was the complete opposite of what it should’ve been.”

Subtheme 3.b: Designating faith communities as a safe space and an environment to express identity authentically and experience belonging

Despite the misalignment of values and lack of representation in larger TFBU affiliated religious institutions, faith communities often served as a safe space for participants. The safety of being around peers and leaders who shared common beliefs allowed the participants to be “true to themselves” in religious spaces as a social setting. Both Jordan and Tina utilized language alluding to their ability to act authentically in faith environments, leading to feelings of belonging.

First, Jordan describes how a small group Bible study, referred to as a devotional or devo, was a safe space. The small group met in a university faculty member’s home and was a welcome space for Black students. Additionally, a student-led group referred to as the Multicultural Student Group, hosted religious devotionals, as an intentional space for students of color to meet for spiritual growth and worship.

It was just like in a home, you know, they're both in a home and just people welcoming you in, um, feeding you. Uh, you're just, you know, and that is like just a safe place to be. And then, um, with the [multicultural student group], um, devos, uh, we go to like [a local church] last semester and, um, you know, people just taking time and being there and, um, and sometimes it was like student led and so just being able to be there and worship God together, I just, I felt safe there as well. Very safe. (Jordan)

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The characteristics of both spaces that made them safe for Jordan was that they were specifically welcoming to Black students, involved intentional community, and that those attending had the shared purpose of worshipping God.

Tina also found a religious community that served as a safe space. The safety that she experienced within religious communities was connected to her ability to behave authentically, in accordance with her identity relevant self-conceptualization. Because diverse religious spaces were accepting of the participants identity, the participants felt they had freedom to express their identity authentically. Tina specified that the church community that she best connected to was a gathering that was more racially diverse than other local churches.

I felt like this was a place where I could come as I am, um not have to act a certain way, not have to change anything about myself. Be able to worship and have community around me. I felt like the people that were there, the members, the other college students that were there, they wanted to know me. (Tina)

In not having to act a specific way, or face expectations that others had about her, Tina felt that her presence was desired. Tina elaborated upon the opportunity for authenticity in safe religious spaces in a smaller religious gathering Tina notes that she did not have to “put on any type of mask or any type of face for anyone. It was just authenticity just oozing out of that house.” Being wanted was a significant aspect of the narrative created by Tina in relation to her experience finding a church where she felt like she belonged. In describing her and other Black student’s relationship to the local church members, Tina fondly reflected that “they wanted us to be part of their family. They wanted to make sure we had anything that we needed that we were feeling good coming to church. Like church was a happy place for us to go.” While Tina expresses gratitude that she was able to find a safe space where she could feel belonging, she

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also acknowledges her frustration of being excluded from that experience “knowing that there’s so many churches in [town].” Tina describes her frustration because “you shouldn’t have to go somewhere where people look like you to feel accepted and feel like they want you to know God.” Though faith communities did serve as a safe space, the social disconnection in the predominantly white faith communities remained a threat to belonging.

Subtheme 3.c: Common belief as the impetus for social connection

Faith communities designed to be a safe space served as an environment for creating rich social connections. The participants experienced social connection due to the intimate and identity-relevant commonality of sharing beliefs and religious traditions with peers. Jordan in particular was able to find social connection in an environment that might otherwise be difficult because the environment was religiously affiliated. Jordan described how attending a large devotional allowed her to meet new people.

I didn't really enjoy that– I didn't really like, you know, I didn't like going to be in just a large group of people. And so, um, going to it more and just sitting by people and introducing myself and talking to them, um, and having something in common. Or just being able to relate to something, um, you know, not wanting to do that. And, um, but, but then doing it and then having a great time and just, you know, smiling and just like thanking God that this opportunity came my way, and I took it. Um, that's been like some of the best, um, times. Just to pick me up when I've been like low (Jordan)

Despite Jordan’s considering that “being in a large group of people” was something that she did not prefer, having “something in common” with others and being able to relate to her peers over shared faith allowed her to have a “great time.” Jordan attributed this opportunity for her to have a great time meeting friends in a large group as an opportunity from God. This

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experience had a significantly positive impact on Jordan, reflected in her considering those devotional gatherings the “best of times” and picking her up “when I’ve been like low.” Jordan also found community to be intrinsic to her experience of her Christian faith. In the same way that she thanked God for the opportunity to find social connection, she viewed God as a major factor in bringing people together.

And um, and I think that when you're around people who want to grow, uh, their faith in, in the Lord, um, you're gonna push each other, you're going to pray for each other. You're gonna help each other, um, become better and to grow, but you have to want to do that. And so I feel like when you can see like God and people, and see God working through people, um, it just kind of pulls you in. And you try to pull away or you can try to, you know, you don't wanna be around them because you may disagree on some things, but I mean, just God is so much bigger than all of that disagreement and hurt and pain. And so allowing him to work in your life that way, um, it's just gonna bring people together and people who never thought you would want to be around. (Jordan)

Jordan attributed the connection found within religious community not just due to shared personal attributes, but to the power of God, finding hope in meaning beyond her own experiences. Despite the hurt that she faced as a Black women due to disconnection from stereotypes and microaggressions, “God is so much bigger than all of that disagreement and hurt and pain.”

Tina also reflected upon the unique nature of social connections formed due to commonality in religious beliefs. In recounting her time spent in a small group that specifically included women of color, she notes that “there’s a bond there that can be created, that just doesn’t happen a lot of other places.” Jordan’s and Tina’s accounts show that religious spaces

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and faith communities proved to be a space that began and maintained powerful social connection for the participants. In relating to their peers over shared faith, Jordan and Tina found that commonality in the religious element of their layered identities was a strong connector.

Theme 4: Finding connection in predominantly white spaces and in communities intentionally created for Black students

Despite the difficulties the participants faced, largely relating to the disordered visibility in Theme 1 and stereotypes discussed in Theme 2, the participants did experience social connection and feelings of belonging while students at TFBU. Environments that allowed for the participants to behave authentically and foster social connections between individuals or in a group contributed to a sense of belonging felt by the participants while they were students at TFBU. The participants found spaces where there was congruence in the self-conceptualization of their identity and the way their peers perceived their identities, leading to deeper social connections. In several cases, the environment where the participants did feel the most socially connected were in social communities intentionally created for Black Christian students.

Subtheme 4a: Finding social connection in the oasis of diverse community

All three participants shared significant instances where they felt belonging and social connection. The participant's experiences of belonging occurred among Black peers, and within the TFBU environment at large. Tina focused on the connection and belonging that she felt within the Multicultural Student Group. Specifically highlighting that not just Black people participated in group activities, Tina describes the overwhelming positive impact that the student group had on her TFBU experience.

A nice group of people to be around. And it wasn't just because it was Black people.

Because it wasn't just Black people. It was anybody who wanted to be there. And that

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just made me feel good because there were some white people that would come. And it was just like, they didn't look at me a certain way because I was Black. It was just like, oh you're another person. So, that's that. So, that just made me feel happy. It was good. Everything was going smoothly. It was just almost like an oasis, an escape from wherever else I had been that day. From like the general, I guess population of campus, it was, different. (Tina)

In thinking of the student group as “a nice group of people to be around,” Tina highlights the powerful simplicity of the impact that diversity can have on creating social connection within a community. Though Tina expressed self-love for her identity as a Black individual, she also displayed gratitude that she wasn't seen a certain way because of her Blackness, she was considered just “another person.” This gratitude occurs not as a distancing from her identity of Blackness, but recognition that within diverse spaces Tina was able to find social connections that transcended racial boundaries. Tina further expounds upon the role of diverse communities as an “oasis,” within the “desert” of the population of campus.

It just gives me something to look forward to. Something to um- like a reason to want to stay here. Because I know that I'm not the only person that thinks of it as an oasis. It's not just mine, it's anyone's. Um, and I feel like if I were to leave, I would be doing a disservice. I wouldn't be contributing to making things better. I would just be running away. You know? So I feel like knowing that the desert has an oasis, that can make the desert seem better than if it didn't. (Tina)

The oasis is a dynamic space, requiring both giving and receiving. Tina recognizes how having an intentionally created diverse space benefits her yet also requires her to contribute rather than run away. While she sees the overarching predominantly white environment as a

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desert, she also chooses to adopt a hopeful view, believing that the desert can actually be improved. Tina's attitude towards the oasis is not possessive but outpouring, stating, "[The oasis is] not just mine, it's anyone's." Here, the nature of belonging is reciprocal, as Tina both gives and receives belonging in order to sustain community. Other participants also describe the deep relationships found within diverse communities. Destiny described the genuine people that she encountered in the Multicultural Student Group as "my family away from home" and "a very comforting group of people." Destiny notes that there were several instances while at TFBU where she considered dropping out. She ultimately attributed her choosing to stay at TFBU after her first year to the genuine people found in the student group. The social connection and sense of belonging Destiny developed in the Multicultural Student Group helped to "[push her] to [her] full potential," and gave her the "ability to succeed and graduate." Thus, the impact of the oasis diverse community on Destiny was directly related to her success as a student.

Subtheme 4b: The participants experience social connection as an environment that allows them to be true to themselves, free from expectation/stereotypes.

The ability to be true to themselves was a major element of the environments in which the participants experienced social connection. Within TFBU at large, the participants were held to unspoken measures of Blackness or had expectations placed upon them based on stereotypes. But in environments where they did find social connection, they were able to act authentically. Jordan describes a Multicultural student group activity where she felt free to be herself, surrounded by a diverse group of her peers.

Um, and so I didn't even have to think about that or, um, kind of just, I guess now that I think about it, I guess maybe that's why I was so excited. Um, just because I didn't feel like I had to hold anything back or just like walk on eggshells. Some things that could

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happen, you can just like understand it without speaking, but you just know it within yourself. (Jordan)

In using phrases such as not having to “hold anything back” or “walk on eggshells,” Jordan painted a picture of how space for authenticity occurred in welcoming social environments.

While Jordan noted that the space for authenticity was intuitive, in that “you can just like understand it without speaking this,” contextualizing this experience as occurring within diverse community provided deeper understanding into the role that diverse communities can have in predominately white spaces. Jordan elaborated upon the limitations of stereotypes, and the freedom from expectations that occurred within that same student gathering.

I felt like, um, I didn't have to like reserve myself. Like I'm already like quiet and, uh, but I felt like I could just have fun. I felt like I could run as fast as I wanted to, or, um, you know, kick the ball as hard as I wanted to, without some reference being made or, um, or just kind of being put in a box. And then you have people who are athletic, and you have people who aren't very athletic, but we're just having a good time. And so it's not oh you or like doing this because you're Black. Or you're, um, you're good to be here, you know, on the field, but you could never be like a leader cuz you just don't have that capability. (Jordan, page 21)

In not having to reserve herself, Jordan was free from the burden of worrying about how she measured up to stereotypes. The social connection in this instance was clear as she described the students “just having a good time.” Additionally, Jordan did not limit herself either by being quieter or not participating fully in the game but allowed herself to “just have fun.” Tina defined this type of space that Jordan experiences authenticity in social connection as a “space to just be.” To Tina a space to just be is “a place where I can show up, I don't have to put in any extra

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work, I don't have to (pauses) um act a certain way. I can just show up. And that's enough." In being herself, and that being enough, Tina designated the diverse spaces where she could just be as "just a space to just belong." Both Tina and Jordan demonstrated the importance of authenticity in building relationships and the role that the surrounding environment plays in building those authentic social connections. The diverse communities, spaces to just be, an oasis in the desert, allowed to participants to feel like they belonged.

Subtheme 4.c: Bittersweetness casting a shadow on the experience of finding social connection—Balancing gratitude for relationships and reality of microaggressions

In considering the whole of their college experience, the participants provided a bittersweet account. While the participants share a positive outlook on their time at TFBU and provided a narrative that included instances of rich social connection, the microaggressions, disconnection, and exclusion they face on an institutional level tarnished their perspective of the positive experiences. Destiny specifically uses the language of her time at TFBU being "bittersweet," with the genuine relationships she has formed causing the sweetness.

Like now that I'm about to graduate, um, it all just feels kind of bittersweet and um, all the people I've met, like I've never been around so many genuine— I've never had so many genuine friends in my life until I came to [TFBU], like real friends that, you know, I felt comfortable telling my story to, you know, being open with. Um, and not being judged for it. I've never had friends that prayed for me or, um, I don't know, like such selfless people. I really do feel like [TFBU] attracts some of the most genuine and kind people to ever exist. And I don't think I would've got, gotten this same experience at, um, a state university at all. Um, even though [TFBU] does, has— does have its flaws. Um, I don't, um, I'm, I'm grateful for the experience. (Destiny)

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Even in acknowledging the flaws that TFBU has, Destiny expresses deep gratitude for her college experience. Despite the difficulties that she faced; Destiny reflected on the relationships that she formed while at TFBU. The strength of the connections that Destiny made was related to her spirituality, as she described having friends that would pray for her, and that she could be vulnerable with. Destiny suggests that there is something intrinsic to TFBU that “attracts some of the most genuine and kind people to ever exist,” demonstrating an ultimately high view of the institution. In thinking about her overall experience at TFBU, Destiny described it as “a little rocky,” yet her gratitude for genuine friendships overshadows the rockiness.

Looking deeper at the experience of forming social connections for Black Christian women at TFBU, Jordan also provided an account of bittersweetness. In examining the ways in which she connected with her Black peers, Jordan discussed how negative experiences often served as the impetus for connection, adding another perspective to how her college experience was bittersweet. Jordan described being in a student gathering where her peers also described the struggles that they faced and microaggressions they dealt with being a student of color on a predominantly white campus.

And then whenever we have like our [multicultural student group] meetings and we would just be in there and just talk about the things that we've heard or the things that, um, we feel people aren't necessarily understanding or, um, they don't realize what's going on. Um, I think that was just, it was a sad way to connect with each, but it was also like, um, you're able to connect with someone in that moment. (Jordan)

The connecting moment that Jordan experienced was sad, but a connecting moment, nonetheless. She describes hearing about the struggles that others faced as “scary”, to hear about the hurt that occurred, but a “relief,” to not be alone in that hurt. However, Jordan made a

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specific effort to mention that she didn't just "find connection in just like the bad things or the sad things that's happened," and that many times spent among her diverse peer group weren't "brought together by sadness." Jordan demonstrated the tension that all the participants felt, in having positive experiences at TFBU, while still grappling with the reality of the struggle it can be to be Black in a predominately white environment.

Discussion

The findings provide several tangible and conceptual insights that inform how inclusivity can be promoted in higher education spaces for Black Christian women. They also guide a better understanding of the role of layered identities in social spaces. The claims that can be drawn from analysis of the data and findings is that first, the findings demonstrate that participants' experiences align with previous literature pertaining to the difficulties that minority students face in predominantly white environments. Second, however, the findings provide nuanced insight into the role intersectionality can play in finding social connection, specifically considering religion as a layered identity. Third, authenticity and intentionally created diverse spaces played a major role in how the participants were able to find social connection.

Facing difficulties as a minority student at a PWI

As demonstrated in Theme 1, due to hypervisibility resulting from various forms of microaggressions, the participants faced added burden and stress being among a minority population at TFBU. The experiences of the participants align with previous literature suggesting that minority students often contend with isolation, alienation, and stereotypes on campuses where they are not the majority (Harper, 2007, p. 12). The participants provided poignant accounts of encountering stereotype threat, in their descriptive vocalization of the fear that they

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may confirm a stereotype about their racial group. As Schmader and Johns (2003) suggested, stereotype threat can undermine performance by raising stress and increasing mental load. As noted in Theme 2, participants experienced stereotype threat as a burden, in both social and academic settings.

Cohen and Garcia (2008) note the additional burden minority students face in the classroom, stating “they also face the extra burden of knowing that their skills, and those of others in their group, could be viewed through the lens of a stereotype that questions their group's intellectual and academic abilities” (p. 366). They note that stereotype concern may occur “regardless of the actual level of prejudice” (p. 366). In this study, participants pointed to instances of stereotype threat as a hindrance to social connection. For example, Jordan described stereotype threat in finding that “who she is” is not being honored, causing her to feel “out of the loop.” As participants faced difficulties related to being minority students at a PWI, Greer & Chwalisz claim remained correct in that “predominant racial composition of a college setting holds some implications for the daily emotional life of African American students” (2007).

Experiencing the intersectionality of layered identities

This study is uniquely positioned in considering religious affiliation as a layered identity among a marginalized group. Themes 2 and 3 points towards social connection as an identity relevant phenomenon and the role that institutional religious affiliation played in the participants' lived experience. Participants demonstrated the importance of recognizing intersectionality, particularly in relation to religious identity. Elements of the participants' identities did not always remain separate, but they experienced their social world as Black women, Christian women, Black Christians, and Black Christian women specifically. The findings show how religious activity was a source for social connection, as commonality among shared beliefs provided a

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strong basis for building relationships. For example, Theme 3 demonstrates how Jordan's reflection represented the connecting power of religious similarity as an impetus for forming relationships, despite demonstrated difficulties in navigating predominantly white environments with marginalized identities.

However, dissonance within or isolation from religious communities was a salient source of disconnection. When the participants determined their values as contrary to the character displayed by the religious institution, either as a church or in TFBU affiliated activity, the disconnection was amplified. This is demonstrated by Destiny's disillusionment in a TFBU religious space where the group is singing "God is love," but she sees the group's actions as unloving. The religious expression of the group, despite shared beliefs, is ultimately isolating and disconnecting from Destiny, due to misalignment in values. Thus, this study provides a unique narrative about how religious identity and religious groups as social communities are experienced by Black individuals within predominantly white spaces.

The participants also faced an intersectionality of marginalization due to the multiple minority identities they held. Destiny experienced disillusionment in religious spaces, both from the lack of representation of women in worship services, and in incongruence between a proclaimed message of love and hurt or ambivalence projected towards Black students. Destiny's woman-ness and Christian-ness compounded in her unique overall experience as a Black woman in a religious space, demonstrating intersectionality. Though being a Christian was not a stigmatized identity within TFBU, having the layered identities of being a Black Christian woman created an intersectional, stigmatized concealable identity for the participants (Rekena et al., 2020). Destiny's reflection points to this nuanced intersection, as she holds quiet disagreement and hurt within the practices of the larger TFBU faith community due to her

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Blackness and women-ness, but her contempt remains concealed. Among the insights that Rekena et al., (2020) provide about the experience of concealable stigmatized identities, they suggest that having multiple concealable stigmatized identities leads to a lesser quality of life.

The findings of this study point to the complex and often difficult experience of navigating having multiple stigmatized identities in a higher education space. However, where Beal (2008) refers to the unique stigmas faced by individuals who are both Black and a woman as a double jeopardy, Tina finds that being a Black woman is like she “hit the jackpot.” Although holding multiple marginalized identities can result in a compounding of distress or discrimination, Tina shows that by participating in intentionally formed communities that allow space for authenticity and acceptance that leads to belonging, self- love for layered identities can be expressed.

Cultivating social connection in the “oasis” of diverse community

Theme 4 points to the significant finding that the positive outcomes from the participant’s involvement in the “oasis” may serve as an example of both successfully mitigating consequences of being isolated and fostering a lasting social connection for other Black women in similar settings. The reflection that the participants provided about their experiences in intentionally created diverse communities aligns with previous literature pertaining to Black cultural centers. Just as Black cultural centers can help students “reflect on their identities as Black individuals as they determine their personal identity and where they fit in a larger community,” the multicultural student group affirmed the participant’s identity and experiences as Black Students and provided an “oasis” for the students to have a sense of belonging within the larger community of TFBU (Hypolite, 2020, p. 244). However the Multicultural Student Group differs from the Black Cultural centers the Hypolite describes, in that some group

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activities reinforced the participant's faith, aligning with multiple elements of their identity, religious and racial. Tina describes elements and experiences of the oasis in depth, pointing towards both individuals within the oasis, and the oasis itself as a “place to just be.” Intrinsic to the oasis was both treatment of authenticity and expectations. Tina’s description of the Multicultural Student Group as a place where she “can just show up and that’s enough” indicates relief from the burden of expectation and pressure to be inauthentic by conforming to others’ expectations that the participants faced at TFBU at large. In using language like “receded into a shell,” “walking on eggshells,” or “put on any type of mask,” participants highlighted the social difficulties inherent in not being able to behave authentically or express themselves genuinely, in a way that is congruent with their identity. Yet in a diverse community, the participants found a form of authenticity and acceptance of that authenticity that allowed them to build and sustain deep social connections. In a reciprocal phenomenon, the participants felt they could be more authentic when they felt socially connected and in turn that authenticity fostered greater social connections.

Implications

In line with the belonging hypothesis (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the participants experienced distress when their belonging needs were not met. The distress was expressed in a variety of ways, such as Tina “receding to a shell.” However, participants powerfully described moments where belonging needs were met. In describing “just a safe space to be,” being welcomed into community as “part of their family,” or as space where one does not “have to, act a certain way... just show up, and that’s enough,” the participants alluded to a sense of belonging that they felt while being students at TFBU. We can see in instances where belonging was found due to social connections formed, inclusivity and authenticity were major factors. Having

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university faculty and administrators at predominantly white institutions foster classrooms or social groups with inclusivity and authenticity in mind may deepen minority student's sense of belonging. As overt messaging of racial inclusion was present in the spaces where the participants felt safe to be authentic, intentionally signaling racial inclusion in the classroom can help foster safe spaces for authenticity. As Greer and Chwalisz (2007) suggested, I echo that "administrative entities on college campuses, particularly at [PWIs], should engage in efforts to actively address such cultural misunderstandings and racial and ethnic conflicts on their campuses." Actively engaging cultural misunderstandings in order to create an inclusive space occurs through intentional and well-informed action. By reducing cultural misunderstandings in the classroom, students can have more freedom to express their identity authentically. Providing funding to intentionally inclusive student groups and encouraging students to participate can help sustain these authentic spaces.

Disordered visibility was a significant phenomenon demonstrated through the participant's description of their experiences. Within their social and academic spaces, both hypervisibility and feelings of invisibility placed added stress and pressure onto the participants, directly in relation to their identity. They faced being spotlighted due to being aware that they were in the minority of Black students while attending a predominantly white university. Due to microaggressions, as described by Tina, the participants became "very very very very very aware of [their] blackness." The participants described instances of unwanted hypervisibility in the classroom, such as when a professor initiated a classroom discussion about Destiny's hair. In this instance, trying to address the microaggression that resulted from that misunderstanding, or taking efforts to avoid cultural misunderstanding through self-education would lessen the disconnection the participants endured. The participants also faced invisibility as their full

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layered identity wasn't recognized or acknowledged. In the inability of the participants to express their multidimensionality, their full identity remained invisible.

This study indicates several vital steps that university faculty and administration can take in order to improve the belonging experiences and wellbeing of students. First, hiring faculty of color may be an important step and creating a classroom culture that cultivates authenticity and acceptance of diversity. By hiring multiple faculty of color, as to not create a new sense of minoritization among faculty, there can be greater insights on how to avoid disordered visibility in the classroom. Diverse faculty can serve as a resource by providing voice and experiences that speak to the needs of people of color within academia. By allowing faculty to have diverse peers through hiring more faculty of color, there is greater potential for conversation and action that results in an authentic classroom environment. According to Kayes (2006), goals of professional development on diverse hiring should include:

To assist [faculty] in moving out of the defense and minimization stages of intercultural sensitivity and into acceptance and adaptation; to support them in developing into pseudo-independent and autonomous stages of racial consciousness; to increase their intercultural awareness and understanding; to build their knowledge and skills in intercultural competence; and to enable them to identify and address their cultural biases in the search and hiring process addressing institutional. (p. 66)

Implementing professional development pertaining to diverse faculty hiring helps to identify institutional cultural biases, outline how diverse faculty benefits students, the institution, and the community and increases resources pertaining to maintaining an environment where students of color feel like they belong (Kayes, 2006, p. 67). Thus, universities should not just commit to diverse hires, but also to creating a culture where diverse hires and diverse students can thrive.

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Particularly in a faith-based setting, representation in institutional religious environments is necessary, such as the campus wide worship services at TFBU. Destiny noted that previous religious institutions she participated in “made it known that women were needed in the church,” however TFBU did not. Communicating that groups such as women or Black people are wanted and needed within religious spaces may allow for individuals within that group to feel like they belong. Furthermore, having more representation and diversity in religious activities may also increase feelings of belonging for minoritized groups in those spaces. Although participants found belonging in diverse spaces, Tina lamented that within the TFBU “you shouldn’t have to go somewhere where people look like you to feel accepted and feel like they want you to know God.” Thus, to improve feelings of belonging and social connection in a religious community more than one space is needed that is welcoming, but people in minoritized groups should have the freedom to feel like they belong in a variety of worship spaces. Tina’s frustration indicates a desire for and a belief in the truth expressed by Jordan, that sharing in religious identity through common beliefs and worship practices is “just gonna bring people together and people who never thought you would want to be around.” In taking intentional action to make sure that women and minority students feel accepted through increased representation, both within overtly religious spaces and in primarily social or academic spheres, the distress level of students such as the participants may be lowered. This action may include allowing women and minoritized individuals to speak or have roles of leadership within religious spaces. Additionally, recognizing major events within diverse communities may decrease feelings of invisibility. This could include giving space for students to recognize holidays such as Juneteenth or acknowledging and praying for tragedies that occur within diverse communities to the same extent that other events are recognized.

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Future research can in greater depth define and expand upon the relationship between social connection and authenticity. While the participants expressed that feeling welcome to be authentic was present in moments of deep social connection, and absent in moments of disconnection, more detail about their consideration of and how they experience authenticity would provide needed nuance. Additionally, an IPA study centering around the social connection experiences of Black Christian women at a non-religious affiliated institution may highlight differences in how social disconnection is handled when others don't share an element of one's layered identity, namely religious identity. Changing elements of the layered identities being studied would allow for greater insight into the mechanisms and expression of intersectionality. Lastly, a future study could examine the phenomenon of social connection through a master narrative lens. Considering the ubiquitous and covert narratives that shape Black women's expectations pertaining to how they experience social connection in predominantly white spaces may provide greater insight into how to promote belonging and social well-being for this population.

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