

DISSERTATION

UNDERSTANDING MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENT VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### UNDERSTANDING MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENT VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of social media in the lives of Multiracial college students as they build and maintain community. A phenomenological approach enabled answering the research question: How do Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community? Informed by critical multiracial theory and virtual kinship frameworks, the study included elicitation interviews with 10 Multiracial students as they shared self-selected examples from their social media. Three themes emerged from the data: seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. Based on this study's findings, practitioners and scholars are encouraged to adopt a critical approach to Multiracial policy and practice and facilitate the development of virtual Multiracial affinity spaces.

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In 2014, fellow members of the ACPA Multiracial Network (MRN) gave me a superlative award entitled, “most likely to have a memoir written in #hashtags and @tweets.” Although this dissertation is a bit longer than a few tweets and it is not a memoir, it represents who I am as a #MultiracialScholar and my contribution to making a difference for the Multiracial community. This project truly was a collective endeavor, and I am deeply grateful for those who helped make it possible.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I have the right... Not to justify my existence in this world.

...To have loyalties and identification with more than one group of people.

...To freely choose whom I befriend and love.

—*The Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage*, Maria P. P. Root, 1996

The sentiments of this Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage address the unique and complex behaviors and values within Multiracial communities, such as how mixed people validate each other's diverse existences and experiences (see Appendix A for the entire Bill of Rights). As a Multiracial person, I remember the first time I read the Bill of Rights and how I felt empowered in a way I had not before. As I wrote this dissertation, I had a copy posted in my workspace as a reminder to stay connected with my purpose, which was honoring Multiracial identities and communities while expanding our collective knowledge. The research question for this dissertation was: How do Multiracial college students use social media to build and maintain community? Through this scholarly inquiry, I acknowledge and affirm the sentiments of this Bill of Rights by exploring how Multiracial students in the digital age use social media to create opportunities to connect to exist, identify, befriend, and love themselves and each other.

### **Background**

Two distinct topical threads provided a foundation for this research inquiry: Multiracial students and social media. Both topics represent growing trends in the United States, yet few scholars have explored their intersection. Because the Multiracial population in the United States grew by 276% in the 2020 U.S. Census, it should be of particular interest to higher education scholars as younger generations are increasingly Multiracial (Foster-Frau et al., 2021). Social media are truly ubiquitous, with seven in 10 U.S. adults using social media, the majority visiting platforms such as YouTube, Snapchat, and Facebook daily (Pew Research

Center, 2021). With more applications created and downloaded daily, there are important impacts on college students' lives (Junco, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016).

### **U.S. Census Data and Multiracial People**

The U.S. Census only started allowing respondents to indicate more than one race in 2000, and the Department of Education has only tracked students with two or more races since 2010 (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997). Since these milestones, Multiracial figures have increased for both the overall national population and collegiate student body (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Multiracial people are among the fastest-growing demographic in the United States (Foster-Frau et al., 2021), especially among younger populations. The 2020 Census showed substantial growth (276%) in Multiracial residents between 2010 and 2020, from nine million to 33.8 million (Jones et al., 2021). The of “two or more races” population grew by more than 2.2 million for those under age 18, the greatest growth of any racial category in that age group in both quantity and percentage (from 5.6% in 2010 to 15.1% in 2020; Frey, 2021; Jones et al., 2021). The Multiracial adult population also increased from 2.1% in 2010 to 8.8% in 2020 (Jones et al., 2021). Census officials attribute these changes to both demographic shifts and improvements in the race question design and coding processes, which enabled more accurate capture of people’s racial self-identifications.

### **Multiracial College Students**

In Fall 2019 (the most recent term with complete data available), there were approximately 756,000 Multiracial students enrolled in higher education institutions, representing 4.1% of all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education predicts a slight increase in the population of Multiracial students enrolled in higher education through 2028 (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This projection is particularly relevant for staff and faculty, indicating that Multiracial students are not only already on college campuses but will be joining in larger numbers in years to come.

With the growing numbers of Multiracial students on college campuses, it is necessary to ask whether college campuses are ready to support them. Today's campuses might not be fully equipped to meet Multiracial students' social and psychological needs (Harris, 2017b, 2017c; Johnston-Guerrero & Wijeyesinghe, 2021; Museus et al., 2016). Amid their racial and psychosocial development, Multiracial students experience challenges navigating campus environments (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; King, 2008; Museus et al., 2015), reporting Multiracial stereotypes (Harris, 2017b), microaggressions (Harris, 2017c), and barriers to sense of belonging (Chaudhari, 2022). Low numbers of fellow Multiracial students could be a contributing factor on some campuses, particularly in some parts of the country. Other salient barriers to Multiracial student growth and development are structural and political, such as the inability to check more than one racial designation on forms and racial erasure on university websites (Ford et al., 2021). These and other manifestations of Multiracial microaggressions can alienate Multiracial students and negatively impact their higher education experiences.

### **Social Media**

Social media use is ever-present among U.S. adults, especially those of traditional college ages. According to Pew Research Center (Auxier & Anderson, 2021), 72% of American adults use some kind of social media, and 76% of college students say they use social media (Pew Research Center, 2021). YouTube and Facebook are the most popular platforms by far. Globally, Facebook has more than 2.91 billion monthly active users (Meta, 2022), and YouTube has more than two billion monthly logged-in users (YouTube, 2022). However, there are notable variations based on age in popularity of certain applications. Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat are particularly popular with younger U.S. adults. Nearly two thirds (71%) of 18- to 29-year-olds report using Instagram and approximately one half (48%) of this age group say they use TikTok (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). Snapchat has 90% penetration for 13- to 24-year-olds in the U.S. market and reaches 75% of 13- to 34-year-olds (Snapchat, 2022); in comparison, just 2% of U.S. adults over 65 report using Snapchat (Auxier & Anderson, 2021).

College students use social media for fun and recreation, such as posting cute videos and silly photos. Students also use these media as purposeful tools for civic engagement (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016), community connections (Tynes et al., 2011), and self-exploration (Chan, 2017; Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017). The virtual world also comes with hazards. Although the internet can be a place of community, there is also a potential for prejudice and discrimination, especially for students with minoritized identities who are susceptible to online racism, sexism, and other hostilities (Armstrong et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013).

### **Significance and Statement of Problem**

Despite the emerging trends regarding the popularity of social media and rising Multiracial populations, few researchers have studied the impact of digital technologies on Multiracial students. This study is significant because it addressed that gap. Most current research on social media in higher education has either lacked an identity-conscious lens or, when race is a consideration, has a monoracial paradigm (e.g., Tynes et al., 2013). In this study, I used a critical multiracial theory (MultiCrit) framework (Harris, 2016) to center Multiraciality.

This study was also significant in combatting monoracism by centering Multiracial students and their experiences. Monoracism is “a social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories” (Johnston & Nadal, 2010, p. 125). Higher education institutions often reflect and perpetuate monoracism at micro and macro levels, impacting Multiracial students’ sense of belonging (Chaudhari, 2022). Many campus structures are designed to serve monoracial students, such as multicultural centers with single-race affinity spaces, leaving Multiracial students to create their own spaces. When not afforded physical spaces, Multiracial students can find community in the virtual world. This study was a means to understand the digital sphere

and Multiracial students' behaviors and attitudes regarding how they use social media in building and maintaining community. The findings will contribute to the ongoing conversation and better understanding of Multiracial peoples' online experiences. Implications from this study include informing higher education policy and digital best practices for cultivating positive online spaces for Multiracial students.

### **Research Purpose and Question**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the role of social media in the lives of Multiracial college students in the United States. Through semistructured interviews and social media elicitations, I explored students' perspectives, motivations, and stories about their online behaviors as Multiracial people. The central research question for this study was: How do Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community?

### **Key Terms**

*Multiracial* is a racial identity for people of two or more races. Some members of this community identify themselves as Biracial, mixed race, multi-ethnic, or other similar identifiers. They might have personal vocabulary to describe their racial makeup. For this study, I used Multiracial unless directly quoting a participant or other source. Because “capitalization matters and denotes power and legitimacy” (Stewart et al., 2017, para. 5), I chose to capitalize Multiracial as a form of linguistic and grammatical empowerment for this racial identity (Pérez Huber, 2010; Sanchez et al., 2020).

Social media are “computer-mediated communication tools that enable users to consume and produce content through varied modalities (e.g., text, image, video)” (Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016, p. 7). These digital technologies include mobile applications, internet websites, and computer software, among others.

Virtual community is bound neither by geographical spaces nor transactional behaviors. In 1993, as cyber social spaces were emerging, Rheingold described virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public

discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). Parks (2011) offered common elements of virtual communities, including the ability to engage in collective action, shared rituals, linked relationships, sense of belonging, and group identification. Although these descriptions are instructive, I did not want them to be restrictive. In this study, I also allowed space for participants to describe and interpret virtual community for themselves because exploring students’ understanding of this concept was part of the research inquiry.

### **Assumptions**

This study had two assumptions. Most currently available data on social media use are in a monoracial paradigm (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2021), a gap this study addressed. Some data suggest that people of color use certain social media platforms at slightly higher rates than white people (Pew Research Center, 2021). However, no researchers have disaggregated analysis for Multiracial people. The first assumption was that Multiracial people use social media, but the contexts in which they use these technologies are unknown. The second assumption was that Multiracial students use social media for specific purposes, such as connecting with others and finding common identity, and that these purposes can be related to their Multiraciality. This study was a means to explore these purposes.

### **Delimitations**

To ensure this study was feasible while honoring as much of the studied community as possible, I enacted delimitations, particularly regarding participant sample and sampling. First, this study focused on U.S. college students who self-identify as Multiracial. In the *Bill of Rights* (Root, 1996), I support the statement, “I have the right... To identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify” (p. 7). It is not my personal philosophy to ascribe a racial identity to others, in this case, potential participants. Scholars and data scientists have historically struggled to capture accurate quantitative information about Multiracial people. Woo et al. (2011) found the construct of Multiraciality inconsistently researched using one or more of

the factors (a) mixed genealogical ancestry, (b) self-reported racial-ethnic identification, and (c) socially assigned multiracial status by a third party. Further complications are the current racial and ethnic categories used by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, which coordinates the decennial census and other federally mandated data collection procedures. The language of the categories and questions impacts the means of counting Multiracial people in the census. Analysts attribute some of the significant increase in Multiracial population data (from 2.9% of the population in 2010 to 10.2% in 2020) to improvements in how the race and ethnicity questions were designed and coded (Jones et al., 2021). Census questions are systems-level examples of racialization and socialization structures that can inform how people choose to identify. Charmaraman et al. (2014) recommended assessing multiple dimensions of racial identity and attending to the developmental maturity of the intended population to determine the appropriate sampling methods. To be as congruent as possible to the tenets of the *Bill of Rights* and to create space for people to speak their truths, I invited participants who self-identified as Multiracial currently or at some point during their college careers.

The call for participants was geographically broad and not limited to any one institution. Using social media's vast reach, I attempted to understand the overall phenomenon of Multiracial virtual communities. I took explicit care to gather informed consent from participants so they understood privacy expectations and how the collected data might or might not differ from the use of data on the internet (Beninger et al., 2014). Best practices for ethical internet research were informed by human subjects and professional organizations, such as the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

### **Limitations**

This research centered on Multiracial students, an inherently complex population. The two recognized limitations were diversity in the Multiracial community and continual change and development in technology.



## **Diversity in the Multiracial Community**

The U.S. Multiracial community is extremely diverse, with many combinations of racial heritages and backgrounds (Parker et al., 2015). Thus, there is no single way for a person to be of mixed race. Although there may be some common experiences between individuals, there was also much variation, so the transferability of findings is a limitation. It was not my goal to homogenize the Multiracial community. One of the hallmarks of the Multiracial community is its complexity. I sought to honor the diversity by centering and amplifying the voices of Multiracial students by allowing them to tell their stories.

## **Constant Technological Change and Development**

Digital technology evolves rapidly; thus, it was imperative to conduct this study swiftly for the data to be timely, accurate, and relevant. This fast development is apparent in Pew Research Center's annual social media use survey and how it reflects emerging trends (Auxier & Anderson, 2021). The video-sharing app TikTok launched in 2016, becoming increasingly popular and hitting one billion users in just 5 years (TikTok, 2021). Because the Pew Research Center annual social media survey began incorporating TikTok in 2021, the app's meteoric rise might not be apparent in the data without additional context. This example shows the difficulty in capturing dynamic behaviors related to technology. No one can predict which apps will be popular or will have crashed in 2023 or 2024. Nevertheless, even if the specific apps or technological modalities are outmoded now that my research is complete, the lessons learned from the findings and implications are still useful for future practice.

## **Conclusion**

Multiracial populations in the United States are growing exponentially, especially among younger generations. At the same time, social media continues to grow in popularity, with the vast majority of U.S. adults and college students using social media. However, there is limited literature on the role of digital technologies in the lives of Multiracial students, a gap this study

addressed. This phenomenological study was a means to answer the research question: How do Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community?

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Social media and the internet did not exist in 1967, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Loving v. Virginia* to legalize interracial marriage, paving the way for the U.S. Multiracial population currently growing faster than the single-race population (Foster-Frau et al., 2021). One can only imagine what hashtags and posts might have gone viral in 1967. Perhaps #ThisIsLoving, #MixedMarriages, or #MultiracialLove accompanied by photos of smiling couples and happy families could have been trending nationally. Mildred and Richard Loving might have been internet celebrities, as reporters snapped photos from the courthouse steps and geotagged them on Instagram. Many people would have changed their Facebook profile photo frames to show support in celebration of the ruling. These descriptions might sound facetious in an anachronistic context, but they are not hyperbole in today's ever-connected, social media-obsessed world.

Although scholars have explored the identities and racialized experiences of Multiracial college students (e.g., Renn, 2004; Root, 1990; Wijeyesinghe, 2012), few authors have entered the digital environment with this population. The idea that the virtual world is somehow less "real life" than the physical world is obsolete in the 21st century as technology is more and more embedded in students' daily lives. Social media, in particular, is ubiquitous and impacts students' identities and well-being (Junco, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016). Analysis of the literature shows that for students with minoritized identities, social media has the potential to be a conduit for both community-building (Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017; Tynes et al., 2011) and discrimination and racism (Armstrong et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013).

My research interest was examining the interaction between social media and Multiracial college students. The research question was: How do Multiracial college students use social media to build and maintain community? To address this question, I situated the discussion

within two bodies of literature: (a) the identities and experiences of Multiracial college students and (b) how college students use and experience social media, especially students who hold minoritized identities. To begin the search for this review, I consulted with mentors and subject matter experts in the two topical areas. These consultations helped me determine the initial keywords used to search academic databases for peer-reviewed journal articles, including *Multiracial, biracial, mixed race, social media, digital, social network, higher education, and college students*, used in various combinations. I quickly noticed that these are two (currently) disparate topics, so I conducted two lines of inquiry: (a) Multiracial-related materials and (b) information related to social media. The literature review appears in these categories with a concluding call to action encouraging research and practice to explore the intersection of these concepts.

### **Conceptual Framework: Critical Multiracial Theory**

The conceptual framework for this study was MultiCrit (Harris, 2016). Grounded in critical race theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano et al., 2000), MultiCrit signals a shift in viewing race and racism that disrupts the monoracial paradigm to more adequately account for Multiracial students' racialized experiences. Introduced in the mid-1970s, CRT has proven a useful analytical tool for critiquing institutionalized racism and systemic oppression. Noticing limitations based on a Black/white binary, scholars began to introduce variations, including Latina/o CRT (LatCrit; Delgado Bernal, 2002), tribal CRT (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2006), and Asian CRT (AsianCrit; Museus & Iftikar, 2013). These new theories enabled more nuanced applications of CRT tenets and the acknowledgment of factors such as immigration status and colonization. However, these supplemental schools of thought were still based on monoracial paradigms. With MultiCrit, Harris (2016) sought to acknowledge Multiracial students' realities.

Harris (2016) proposed grounding MultiCrit in four CRT tenets and then adding four tenets to better represent the Multiracial experience. The CRT tenets are challenge to ahistoricism, interest convergence, experiential knowledge, and challenge to dominant ideology,

which Harris adapted slightly to the Multiracial context. The first tenet, challenge to ahistoricism, indicates the need analyze historical context to fully understand the experiences of Multiracial students, such as the addition of the “check all that apply” option for race on the U.S. Census and college admission applications. Second, interest convergence applies to Multiracial students as they are tokenized and objectified for their diversity and to serve the interests of the white institution. The third and fourth tenets work in conjunction, as experiential knowledge gives credence and power to the stories of Multiracial people with the aim of exposing and dismantling dominant ideologies. Harris noted, “Multiracial students’ experiential knowledge forms a counterstory that refutes dominant ideologies, specifically that multiracial students are transcendent of race and racism and that the U.S. has entered a post-racial society” (p. 803).

The first new tenet calls for looking past the Black/white binary to critique the monoracial paradigm of race (Harris, 2016). Monoracial structures that force Multiracial people to assign themselves or be assigned a category that might not be their identity lead to invalidation and erasure. Next, MultiCrit accounts for students’ endemic experiences with not just racism but also monoracism and colorism. Multiracial students can experience the compounding and intertwining impacts of racism, monoracism, and colorism (discrimination based on skin color). The third tenet attends to the timing of differential racialization. As Harris (2016) explained, “Applying this tenet to the experiences of Multiracial students exposes the ways in which they are longitudinally differently racialized within higher education to serve the needs of the majority” (p. 808). The final new tenet acknowledges the intersections of not only multiple social identities but intersections of racial identities (Harris, 2016). MultiCrit was an appropriate framework for this review to center Multiracial experiences and disrupt systemic oppression.

### **Historical Context of Multiracial People in the United States**

Because one of the MultiCrit tenets challenges ahistoricism, it is important to situate this research within the historical and sociopolitical context of Multiracial people in the United States. A meaningful discussion about Multiracial college students in contemporary society first requires

understanding how these circumstances came to be and how they have shaped the current landscape. Although a comprehensive history of Multiracial people in the United States is beyond the scope of this paper (see Nagai, 2016; Root, 1992, 1996), this section presents themes and a few key events pertinent to this research inquiry.

Themes of monoracial normativity, or “the centrality of monoracial identity” (Ford et al., 2021, p. 252) and the MultiCrit tenet of interest convergence appear throughout U.S. history. For example, hypodescent is “a social system that maintains the fiction of monoracial identification of individuals by assigning a racial mixed person to the racial group in their heritage that has the least social status” (Root, 1996, p. x). For Multiracial people, especially those with some Black heritage, hypodescent took the form of the one-drop rule, with people with a single drop of Black blood considered Black. In contrast, the concept of blood quantum applied to people of some Native or Indigenous ancestry required them to demonstrate sufficient quantifications of Native blood (e.g., one fourth) for government recognition as Native (Root, 1992). The one-drop rule and blood quantum were institutional strategies to wield racial power and uphold white supremacy.

Multiracial people and interracial relations existed on this land centuries before the United States’ formation (Nagai, 2016). Yet, there were anti-miscegenation laws in multiple states until 1967, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck them down with its unanimous ruling in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). The “biracial baby boom” (Root, 1996, p. 17) followed this court decision, with Multiracial children born at higher rates than monoracial children for the first time. Recent census data (Foster-Frau et al., 2021) suggests the country is experiencing yet another biracial baby boom, as Multiracial populations are rapidly rising.

The Office of Management and Budget’s Directive 15 determines how people are categorized and counted by race and ethnicity in the United States. When established in 1977, the Directive 15 categories and format were rooted in monoracial normativity, and respondents could select (or be ascribed) only one answer. In 1997, due largely to advocacy from Multiracial

community organizations, Directive 15 underwent review and amendment to allow the selection of “two or more races,” beginning with the 2000 census (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997). Since then, Multiracial people should be officially acknowledged and enumerated in government data sets.

### **Identities and Experiences of Multiracial College Students**

MultiCrit tenets call for exploring the experiential knowledge of Multiracial students and foregrounding their experiences in research. To do this effectively, scholars must first understand Multiracial identity development and patterns. An additional MultiCrit tenet accounts for Multiracial students’ encounters with racism, specifically the forms of racial oppression in monoracism and Multiracial microaggressions.

### **Models of Multiracial Identity**

Scholarship around Multiracial identity is no longer considered nascent. Now, multiple theoretical frameworks can inform the understanding of Multiracial identity in the U.S. college student population. Drawing from various perspectives, including psychological, ecological, and sociological, the conversation around Multiracial identity is multifaceted. Initial models of a healthy identity resolution for biracial and Multiracial peoples were grounded in counseling and applied developmental lenses. As the pioneers in this area, Poston (1990) and Root (1990) challenged previously held deficit notions of biracial people with the creation of their identity development models.

Poston (1990) offered a “new and positive model” (p. 153) that affirmed the unique and positive experiences of biracial people. Although Poston rejected the applicability of other minority identity development models to the biracial population, the model was a similar linear, five-stage progression: (a) personal identity (young children not aware of their race), (b) choice of group categorization (one is pushed to choose an identity based on a variety of factors), (c) enmeshment/denial (confusion and guilt from having to choose an identity that does not reflect all of one’s heritage), (d) appreciation (learning about all aspects of their background), and (e)

integration (experiencing wholeness in all ethnic identities). Poston's model was limited, as its structure did not account for the context of societal racism and did not allow for multiple healthy resolutions of biracial identity, which has since emerged as an important component of this community.

Root (1990) focused on positive resolutions for Multiracial identity, offering four potential affirming resolutions for biracial identity. The first resolution is acceptance of the identity society assigns (identifying with the group into which most others assume the person belongs, usually a minority group, and usually with acceptance and familial support). The second is identification with both racial groups (identifying with both or all groups, depending on support and ability to maintain despite any resistance). Biracial people can also identify with a single racial group (choosing one group independent of social pressure). The final resolution is identification as a new racial group (the person might move fluidly among racial groups but identifies most with other biracial people). Among the contributions of these affirming resolutions is the introduction and acknowledgment that Multiracial identity can be fluid (Root, 1990).

Moving away from a developmental stage-based model, Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1993) created ecological systems theory to describe how identity development is influenced by interactions between individuals and various levels of their environmental systems. Bronfenbrenner used a person-process-context-time model to account for the influences of and responses to people's environments and particular sociocultural settings. Applying ecology theory, Renn (2004, 2008) examined the influence of postsecondary ecology on the identity development of Multiracial college students. In a grounded theory study with 56 mixed race students, Renn (2004) identified five patterns of identity within Multiracial college students: (a) monoracial identity (choosing one of a person's racial backgrounds), (b) multiple monoracial identities (shifting depending on the time or place), (c) Multiracial identity (a distinct racial identity equivalent to monoracial identities), (d) extraracial identity (deconstructing or opting out



of racial categorization), and (e) situational identity (a person's racial identity is stable and some elements are more salient in certain situations).

Also using ecological perspectives, other scholars attempted to determine factors influencing Multiracial identity formation (e.g., Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Common factors included physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer influence. Wijeyesinghe (2012) built upon these factor theories and others to offer the intersectional model of Multiracial identity. Wijeyesinghe used a galaxy metaphor to acknowledge the fluidity and complexity of Multiracial identity and the intersections of other social identities. Much like galaxies can expand and contract, knowledge and environmental factors influence Multiracial people in various ways throughout their lifetimes. Material constantly spirals in and around galaxies, just as identities could be more or less salient for Multiracial people.

Although there are myriad factors identified as influential for Multiracial people, technology has not yet undergone exploration as a factor in impacting identity development or as an influence on the environment of Multiracial people. Navarro and Tudge (2022) offered a "technologized" adaptation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) model for the digital age that acknowledges the existence of a virtual microsystem along with the physical microsystem. According to Navarro and Tudge, developing individuals can exist in both the virtual and physical microsystems simultaneously, and the virtual system has unique features, such as public and permanent nature. Missing from current scholarly conversations is an explicit interrogation of technology's potential impact on Multiracial identity for college students. Technology, such as social media, is so ingrained in the lives of today's students that it is essential to understand its influence on their development. Researchers need to acquaint themselves with the digital conversation.

### **Racial Oppression for Multiracial People**

Multiracial people experience particular kinds of racism and microaggressions. Instead of using generic lenses of racism and microaggressions in this review, I will use particular

perspectives of monoracism and Multiracial microaggressions to uphold the MultiCrit tenets by centering Multiracial experiences. Monoracism is “a social system of psychological inequality where individuals who do not fit monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories” (Johnston & Nadal, 2010, p. 125). Johnston and Nadal (2010) offered a taxonomy of microaggressions specifically based on Multiracial status, with the following categories and descriptions:

1. *Exclusion or isolation* occurs when a Multiracial person is made to feel excluded or isolated based on their Multiracial status.
2. *Exoticization and objectification* occurs when a Multiracial person is dehumanized or treated like an object.
3. *Assumption of monoracial or mistaken identity* occurs when Multiracial people are assumed or mistaken to be monoracial (or a member of a group they do not identify with).
4. *Denial of Multiracial identity* occurs when a Multiracial person is not allowed to choose their own racial identity.
5. *Pathologizing of identity and experiences* occurs when Multiracial people’s identities or experiences are viewed as psychologically abnormal. (p. 133)

Further studies (Harris, 2017b; Nadal et al., 2011) have extended the understanding of Multiracial microaggressions and how these acts of oppression can manifest. As this framework indicates, the race-based experiences Multiracial people face are wholly unique from their monoracial peers; therefore, the experiences are worth acknowledging and naming. It is not sufficient to say Multiracial people face discrimination or racism generically.

Naming these phenomena is a necessary but insufficient step in combating Multiracial oppression, as Johnston-Guerrero et al. (2020) showed. In a qualitative study of 16 Multiracial college students, Johnston-Guerrero et al. sought to understand how racial oppression affected

Multiracial students' identities and the ties to racism, monoracism, or both. By analyzing data from demographic questionnaires, exploratory interviews, and responses to the Multiracial Challenges and Resiliences Scale (Salahuddin & O'Brien, 2011), the researchers noted racial oppression as influential. Still, they found students struggled to identify oppression specifically targeting Multiracial people. Some participants described experiences aligned with the Multiracial microaggression framework; however, they had difficulty connecting those experiences to oppression. The researchers "argue[d] that the fact that students are not able to identify monoracism as a form of oppression affecting multiracial people is in itself a manifestation of monoracism. Perhaps this is an example of how multiracial students have internalized monoracism" (Johnston-Guerrero et al., 2020, p. 29).

Several recent qualitative scholars have explored the experiences of Multiracial prejudice and discrimination on college campuses (Harris, 2017a, 2017c; Museus et al., 2016). The findings supported the tenets of MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) and the taxonomy of Multiracial microaggressions (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). These studies provided narratives and qualitative support for the critical theories and frameworks grounded in paradigms that acknowledge monoracism.

In a two-phase study, Museus et al. (2016) investigated Multiracial students' experiences with prejudice and discrimination. The researchers conducted focus groups with 12 Multiracial college students and graduates and then used a taxonomy developed from that phase to inform interviews with 22 Multiracial college students. Museus et al. found Multiracial students experienced eight types of Multiracial prejudice and discrimination: racial essentialization, invalidation of racial identities, external imposition of racial identities, racial exclusion and marginalization, challenges to racial authenticity, suspicion of chameleons, exoticization, and pathologizing of Multiracial individuals. Many of these themes can fit into categories from Johnston and Nadal's (2010) Multiracial microaggression framework. For example, Museus et al. and Johnston and Nadal identified the exoticization and pathologizing of Multiracial people.

Additionally, Museus et al.'s description of external imposition of racial identities was similar to Johnston and Nadal's category of denial of Multiracial identity.

Harris (2017c) conducted a critical narrative inquiry with 10 Multiracial undergraduate women at a historically white institution. The findings showed the participants encountered Multiracial stereotypes, monoracial stereotypes (due to assumptions of being monoracial), and the threat of monoracial stereotypes. Applying a critical race theory analytical lens to these findings, Harris (2017a) noted that the Multiracial participants lived within a monoracial paradigm and often internalized and perpetuated racial stereotypes themselves. In another study, Harris (2017a) interviewed 24 student affairs professionals who identified as Multiracial about their experiences with Multiracial microaggressions in higher education. The semistructured interviews were with individuals employed at 19 four-year institutions across the United States with tenures in the field from 1 to 30 years. Although the participants were not specifically students, the findings are still relevant to the guiding question for this review because they were Multiracial people situated within the same higher education system as students. For example, one of the themes in Harris's (2017a) study was the denial of a Multiracial identity. The interviewees found this microaggression represented by an oppressive institutional system in Human Resources. Multiracial students can face similar systemic issues when completing institutional forms, such as admissions applications. The categories of participants' experiences became the themes of "assumption of a monoracial identity" and "not monoracial enough," which are also not unique to an individual's professional status.

### **Racial Interactions and Relationships**

Multiracial students have racialized interactions and critical experiences with others in educational settings, particularly on college and school campuses. However, most current research is limited to the interactions in physical campus environments and has not extended into the virtual world.

### ***Campus Racial Climate***

Multiraciality is largely missing from most campus racial climate discussions. As part of a greater study on race discourse, Johnston-Guerrero and Chaudhari (2016) examined students' perspectives on Multiraciality. The study found that although students had complex understandings of race, most either did not mention Multiraciality at all or considered Multiraciality a novel concept. Although "colorblind" ideologies, or "worldviews that suggest that race and racism do not significantly influence people's experiences" (Museus et al., 2011, p. 21) could be well-intentioned, they are more harmful than helpful, particularly for Multiracial students (Museus et al., 2011). Museus et al. (2011) recommended making racial dialogues the norm and including Multiracial issues. King (2008) centered on Multiracial student perspectives in a study of college females who identify as Multiracial/Biracial and Bisexual/Pansexual. Analyzing data collected through a series of phenomenological interviews with six participants, King found students in this population had challenges navigating campus spaces and that environments often lacked inclusive social spaces. King recommended the creation of "racial homes" (p. 39) for Multiracial students. These findings and recommendations are important because these "homes" are rare on physical campuses for several reasons (e.g., structural barriers, low Multiracial census, etc.).

### ***Navigation and Critical Incidents***

Given the potentially discriminatory or exclusionary climates, Multiracial people must find strategies to navigate the collegiate environment. Individuals might hold racialized (or gendered) identities that do not quite fit into neat social categories, a situation Caridad Ralston et al. (2017) described as "betwixt and between" the borderlands of higher education. Chang (2014) also focused on Multiracial students existing in these borderlands as she studied students' identity production and agency. Using primarily ethnographic interviewing, Chang explored the experiences of 25 undergraduate students of color and how they produced a Multiracial identity. Chang described how Multiracial students became *racial atravesados/as* in navigating and

negotiating their racial identities. Among the concept's many connotations, Chang described racial *atravesados/as* as "occupy[ing] spaces and language that are meant to be silenced and unarticulated yet the *atravesado/a* feels an urgency to speak his/her truth" (p. 27). The racial *atravesados/as* in Chang's study navigated the monoracial world, often experienced personal feelings of tension, and determined what actions they wanted to take about their own racial identities.

As Multiracial students navigate campus spaces, they often experience "critical incidents" regarding their understanding of race and their own racial identities (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012). Kellogg and Liddell (2012) conducted an interpretivist phenomenological study with 14 students, seven from each of two predominantly white higher education institutions in the Midwest (one public and one private). By collecting data through interviews, focus groups, diaries, and material artifacts, the researchers found four categories of critical incidents: (a) confronting race and racism, (b) responding to external definitions, (c) defending legitimacy, and (d) affirming racial identity. These critical incidents had negative and positive impacts on student engagement and psychological well-being. Some students started a Multiracial student organization, whereas others stopped attending multicultural student organization meetings after being challenged for not being "minority enough" (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012, p. 537). By identifying these critical incidents, student affairs educators can mitigate harmful situations and promote learning opportunities for Multiracial students.

Critical incidents are not limited to physical campus spaces. In the current digital age, campus culture extends online, and researchers have found online culture often racialized (Armstrong et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013). Online spaces can be prime opportunities for cultivating Multiracial identity and community as well as opportunities for discrimination or prejudice, thus meriting attention.

## **Future Directions for Multiracial Scholarship**

Most extant literature about Multiracial students has been about identity development; contemporary findings spark new questions that require a change. Museus et al. (2016) called for “shifting the focus to examine the processes of racialization, campus racial climates, and institutional agents’ (e.g., faculty, staff, and peers) engagement in acts of prejudice and discrimination toward mixed race students” (p. 693). This section’s review leads to complex and nuanced questions, including, What aspects of campuses can affirm racial *atravesados/as* while also catalyzing critical incidents for Multiracial students? How could Multiracial students feel connected with diverse friend networks but not engaged within them? A possible explanation lies in the campus climate discussion. Multiracial students could experience Multiracial microaggressions, as described by Johnston and Nadal (2010), and not feel truly included when the physical campus lacks explicit “racial homes” (King, 2008) for those who live “betwixt and between” (Caridad Ralston et al., 2017). Although online spaces could provide the homes and social connections sought by these Multiracial students, social media is not an inherently perfect solution. The following section presents an overview of the promise and pitfalls of social media, especially for college students who hold minoritized identities.

### **Social Media Use Among College Students**

Social media are tools neither inherently good nor bad for students. What matters more is how students use and engage with the tools. In a multinational literature review regarding the impact of social media on college mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, Haddad et al. (2021) described college student social media use as “ubiquitous at baseline” (p. 69). They found that rates of social media use intensified during the pandemic, having mixed impacts on mental health. Haddad et al.’s finding shows the importance of social media in college students’ lives. Social media usage has shown many positive psychosocial outcomes, including enhanced student engagement, civic activism, sense of belonging, and smooth transition (Junco, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016; Strayhorn, 2012). Students who engage on social media are able to

develop social ties and acquire social capital with their peers. Potential complications also exist. Rowan-Kenyon et al. (2016) warned of emerging challenges, including anonymity, cyberbullying, racial hostility, and issues with relationships and dating.

### **Virtual Kinship**

People come together in community through, among other aspects, common interests, information sharing, and shared rituals (Parks, 2010). Social media affords these networked opportunities without physical boundaries and allows users to interact virtually across time and space. Social media can connect people who are like-minded or share similar experiences, offering the potential for community and positive outcomes. These connections are particularly important for students with minoritized identities.

In a survey of 755 first-year students, Strayhorn (2012) found that students of color used social networking sites more often than white students, women used social media more often than men, and first-generation students used social media more often than non-first-generation students. Strayhorn identified the frequency of social networking site use as one of the significant predictors contributing to sense of belonging. Tynes et al. (2011) analyzed culturally related groups on popular social networking sites. The researchers thematically analyzed data from 48 randomly selected racially themed online group pages from Facebook and MySpace, both among the most popular social networking sites at the time. Tynes et al. found these online communities formed for a variety of purposes, including heritage/identity exploration and expression, establishing racial safe havens and solidarity, advocacy and organizing, and education. In these spaces, group participants engaged in practices related to their racial identities, such as categorizing themselves or others, sharing information, and taking anti-racist political action or organizing (Tynes et al., 2011).

Nicolazzo (2017) found trans\* students created and maintained “virtual kinship networks” (p. 128) in online spaces. Using a critical collaborative ethnographic approach, Nicolazzo worked with nine undergraduate trans\* students to understand how they confronted, navigated,



and resisted cultural gender norms and made sense of resilience. Students in this study described the importance of their internet-based activities for connecting with other trans\* people and learning about their and others' gender identities in safe spaces, especially when physical spaces for community were lacking or insufficient. Nicolazzo et al. (2017) used a constructivist qualitative design to interview 18 trans\* participants to understand their kinship networks and how these contributed to success in college. Among their findings was the importance of virtual domains, particularly social media platforms, for students to develop kinship networks and connections. Nicolazzo et al. noted that participants found virtual spaces especially authentic, debunking myths about the digital world as fake or invalid.

### **Digital Identity**

Dalton and Crosby (2013) defined digital identity as “the composite of images that individuals present, share, and promote for themselves in the digital domain” (p. 1). Qualman (2015) referred to what one chooses to post online about themselves as their “digital footprint” (p. 85). Scholars have affirmed the importance of these digital self-presentation processes and explored opportunities for students' learning through these actions. However, these discussions of digital identity have mostly focused on the presentation of self in online contexts without specific regard to social identities (Junco, 2014; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2016). For students who hold minoritized identities, social media can also impact how they make meaning of these identities.

In a qualitative study, Chan (2017) interviewed 10 undergraduate students of color to explore the influence of social media on how they make meaning of their racial identity and how this understanding impacts their engagement on social media. The findings showed that engaging on social media seemed to facilitate students' understanding of their racial identities in relation to themselves as members of racial groups and as individuals. Chan also found students were intentional about curating their social media presence to ensure positive expressions of their racial identity online.

Miller (2017) determined that social media can serve similar roles for students who hold minoritized identities other than race, specifically in regard to sexual orientation and disability. Miller conducted a qualitative study interviewing 25 participants who identified as both LGBTQ and disabled, including undergraduate and graduate students, at a large, predominantly white research institution. The students reported engaging with social media to various degrees, from passively browsing sites to actively writing blogs. Participants in this study found validation of their identities in online spaces and were sometimes able to come out as queer or disabled more easily than in person.

### **Social Media and Minoritized Students**

The potential impacts of social media can be greater for students who hold minoritized identities. Applying an identity-conscious analysis shows there are differential experiences and effects for college students who hold minoritized identities when using and experiencing social media. This section presents research focused on students who hold one or more minoritized identities and how they use or experience social media.

### ***Online Discrimination***

Online and social media contexts are ripe for particular types of discrimination. One relevant publication is Qualman's (2015) book, *What Happens on Campus Stays on YouTube*. When so many students have access to smartphones and Wi-Fi, anything that happens at a college can be uploaded to the internet instantly, where it can go viral with a few clicks before becoming permanently posted online. Discriminatory acts can be disseminated easily and repeated often, which can amplify messages of hate and further harm communities (Tynes et al., 2013). Researchers have noted that the anonymous nature of certain social media platforms, such as the now-defunct Yik Yak and Juicy Campus, is an opportunity for racialized hostility (Armstrong et al., 2017; Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013). Online racial discrimination tends to be more overt in racist content via text, images, and videos than in subtle racial microaggressions in person (Tynes et al., 2013).

A few scholars have examined instances of online discrimination and especially the impacts on students of color (Gin et al., 2017; Museus & Truong, 2013; Tynes et al., 2013). In a phenomenological study with 15 participants, students reported prominent instances of racialized hostility in social media forums, especially anti-Black sentiments (Gin et al., 2017). This hostility contributed to racial battle fatigue among students of color, including feelings of anger, disgust, fear, and paranoia. In a quantitative study of online interactions and campus racial experiences, Tynes et al. (2013) surveyed 217 college students to determine their experiences of online racial discrimination. Black students reported experiencing higher rates of online racial discrimination and online stress and having more negative perceptions of campus racial climate. However, Tynes et al.'s findings were from only Black and white participant data. Museus and Truong (2013) studied stereotypes of Asian American women and men in cyberspace and found pervasive racism and sexism impacting these communities. Over multiple years, the researchers analyzed hundreds of discussion board posts from Facebook and the anonymous posting site Juicy Campus to illuminate representations of explicit and implicit stereotypes about Asian American women and men. With this intersectional approach looking at both race and sex, Museus and Truong found themes of objectification of Asian American women and emasculation of Asian American men, as well as internalized racism and sexism in cyberspace. All researchers cited in this section also called for additional examination of the consequences of online behaviors in connection to campus culture or climate.

### ***Multiracial Students and Social Media***

There is limited research centered on the online experiences of Multiracial students specifically. Consistent with previous patterns, most scholars have historically focused on the physical campus environment or paid minimal attention to the digital sphere. For example, in a survey about Biracial students' interactions with others at college, Ingram et al. (2014) included just one question about the virtual environment. In response to that query, a majority of

participants (64.4%,  $n = 123$ ) said they “sometimes” or “often/always” connect with other “multicultural individuals” through social media.

Emerging research (e.g., Betancourt, 2018; Patterson, 2017; Verlezza, 2020) has contributed to a collective understanding of Multiracial behaviors and experiences in virtual microsystems (Navarro & Tudge, 2022). Patterson (2017) adopted symbolic interactionist methodology and critical discourse analysis to explore how Biracial people used YouTube to express their identities. Through a review of 46 videos from 39 users, Patterson found participants created a sense of community with their imagined audiences and considered the offline world distinct from the online world. When participants encountered problems such as discrimination, they imposed these issues on others instead of internalizing them.

In a qualitative study, Betancourt (2018) interviewed seven community college students to understand how their Facebook activity influenced their Multiracial identity development. Students said they used Facebook to maintain relationships with family and friends and enhance their educational experience, such as joining a student organization’s group page. Participants in this study encountered content in their social network feeds that affirmed and challenged their Multiracial identities. In particular, students felt comparisons to their monoracial peers and their racial identity expressions or political content. By observing others’ reactions to race-related content in their News Feeds, Multiracial students used social media as a racial barometer to assess perceptions and reactions towards Multiraciality. Some students expressed feelings of racial inadequacy and took steps to strategically curate their social media to encounter less negativity, such as unfriending or including culturally specific content.

Employing narrative inquiry, Verlezza (2020) sought to understand the stories told about how social media impacts emerging adults’ racial identity development. The four Multiracial participants in the larger participant pool shared feelings of racial inadequacy and “not being enough” (p. 98). Multiracial students also said they felt pressured by others to make choices

regarding their racial identity based on their physical appearances. This finding is instructive given the highly visual nature of the most-popular social media platforms, such as Instagram.

Two studies regarding the social media experiences of Multiracial people, though not focused on college students specifically, are also relevant for this research inquiry to contextualize the environments in which students are using and experiencing social media applications. Gay et al. (2022) investigated Black-Asian Reddit communities using qualitative content analysis methodologies. The researchers obtained data from Reddit searches of top activity and visibility forums related to key terms such as “Blasian,” “Black and Asian,” and “Hapa” over two months in 2021. In their examination of more than 300 comments from 15 subreddit forums, Gay et al. found evidence confirming six existing Multiracial microaggression categories: (a) exclusion and isolation, (b) exoticification and objectification, (c) assumption of monoracial or mistaken identity, (d) denial of Multiracial identity, (e) pathologizing of identity and experiences, and (f) microaggressions based on racial stereotypes (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). They also found a seventh, emerging microaggression category—white-mixed superiority—especially as directed from white-mixed Multiracial populations toward other Multiracial people with multiple marginalized identities.

In another study, King-O’Riain (2022) explored the #Wasian (white + Asian) and #WasianCheck trends on TikTok and how these impacted young people’s racial expressions. These trends are examples of ways Multiracial white and Asian people represent or reveal their racial identities through videos on social media. The researcher used content analysis on a sample of TikTok posts from a one-year period spanning late 2019 to late 2020 and the top 10 compilation YouTube videos from the #WasianCheck and #Wasian trends and related sounds. King-O’Riain found posters utilized audio and visual responses to bring their private lives into the public sphere, evoking emotional reactions from other platform users. The researcher also found a global virtual Wasian community on TikTok, with mixed race users contributing supportive content from many countries.

### ***Monoracial Limitations***

Most existing scholarship about social media and minoritized students has a monoracial paradigm. Multiracial participants are considered statistically insignificant in most data sets (e.g., Tynes et al., 2013), a Multiracial identity is not examined as a unique racial identity (e.g., Miller, 2017), or Multiracial issues are not discussed at all. In a rare discussion of Multiraciality and digital topics over a decade ago, Shea Gasser (2008) started asking questions about “being Multiracial in a wired society,” such as, “Is one’s racial identity relevant in cyberspace?” (p. 63). The answer then was yes, and it has become even more resounding as social media has exploded and become an even stronger influence on the lives of college students. Shea Gasser named social networking sites, blogs, and wikis among the technology trends to monitor in this wired society, and for the most part, the predictions have come to fruition as platforms have increased in popularity. As shown in this review, many questions remain unasked and unanswered for Multiracial students in this wired, and increasingly wireless, society.

### **Conclusion**

This study was an exploration of the experiences of Multiracial college students and social media. To facilitate this study, I conducted a literature review examining the intersection of these bodies of scholarship. The literature on Multiracial students shows they have healthy patterns of identity development wherein they can identify in a multitude of ways in relation to their racial heritage. No singular path or pattern is ascribed or preferred, and acceptance of self-authorship and fluidity is a hallmark of Multiracial identity models. However, Multiracial students also experience particular forms of racialized oppression based in monoracism and manifested in Multiracial microaggressions. Multiracial students can be excluded, exoticized, pathologized, and questioned in their racial authenticity. These racial climates and experiences occur not only face-to-face but in various ways in the virtual world. For today’s college students, the distinction between online and “IRL” (in real life) is blurry, if not nonexistent. Social media as a tool has the potential to bring communities together but also to perpetuate discrimination and racism.

Scholars have also found that students with minoritized identities experience online discrimination and stress. However, there is a gap, as most researchers used a monoracial paradigm with mostly monoracial populations. This literature review was a means to address that gap and draw connections between Multiracial and social media scholarship. The goal of this study was to better understand how Multiracial students experience online communities, how they use digital technologies, and how this impacts their community building.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The guiding research question was: How do Multiracial college students use social media to build and maintain community? Multiracial scholar Root (1992) asserted that qualitative methodologies lend themselves to studying Multiracial people. Qualitative methodologies allow for flexibility and are helpful in understanding groups of Multiracial people. Therefore, I used a qualitative paradigm to approach this study and applied phenomenological methods to explore the research question. I employed participant-generated visual methods (PGVM) and elicitation interviews to gain insight into students' digital world and center their voices.

### **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is a research approach to capture the essence of a phenomenon or participants' lived experiences (Jones et al., 2014). I sought to understand an often-ubiquitous phenomenon of social media. Phenomenology is a means to ascertain a better and "deeper understanding" of "everyday experiences" (van Manen, 1990, p. 9) and is "well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 28). Therefore, phenomenology was an appropriate approach for a study focused on the phenomenon of online communities built by and for Multiracial students.

### **Frameworks Revisited**

Two frameworks guided this study, MultiCrit and virtual kinship. MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) centered on the unique experiences and needs of Multiracial people. The concept of virtual kinship (Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2017) guided the discussions of the online world.

### **Critical Multiracial Theory (MultiCrit)**

Building upon CRT, Harris (2016) developed MultiCrit to account for the unique experiences of Multiracial students. As discussed in Chapter 2, Harris grounded MultiCrit in four original CRT tenets and then added four new tenets to better address and acknowledge the



particular racial dynamics and needs of Multiracial people. The MultiCrit tenets closely connected to original CRT tenets challenged ahistoricism, exposed interest convergence, honored experiential knowledge, and challenged dominant ideology. The four new MultiCrit tenets acknowledged monoracism and colorism, disrupted the monoracial paradigm, named the timing of differential micro-racialization, and accounted for intersections of racial identities. Given these tenets, MultiCrit is an appropriate framework to elicit the stories of Multiracial participants and validate and contextualize their experiences within the wider body of higher education scholarship.

### **Virtual Kinship**

Nicolazzo (2017) observed that trans\* students developed “virtual kinship networks” (p. 128) as they found support, connection, and information about gender identities online. Trans\* student participants in Nicolazzo et al.’s (2017) study also discussed the importance of various social media platforms, especially when lacking opportunities to connect through physical spaces. Similarly, Multiracial students can develop virtual networks through their social media and online platforms. This study was a means to understand the significance of virtual domains for Multiracial students.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants in this study must have self-identified as Multiracial or with two or more racial groups. They might also have used related terms for their racial identification, such as mixed, biracial, or other personal vocabulary. Using this self-identification criterion of Multiracial identity instead of imposing my own definition accounts for the diversity of various Multiracial identity patterns (Renn, 2004, 2008). This strategy is also informed by MultiCrit tenets of disrupting monoracial paradigms and accounting for differential micro-racialization faced by Multiracial students (Harris, 2016). Additional inclusion criteria were that the participants’ identity must have been held at some point during their college experience because Multiracial identity might not be static and be situational for some people (Renn, 2004, 2008). Participants must

have been active on social media during their time as college students, creating or consuming content in various ways, including posting or responding to others. A key criterion was that participants have some Multiracial-themed content in their online presence, as this was the salient topic of the research inquiry. Therefore, the criteria for inclusion in this study included college students who

- Self-identified at some point during their college experience as Multiracial, or with two or more racial groups;
- Were active on one or more social media platforms during college and engaged with some Multiracial-related content; and
- Were currently enrolled undergraduate students at a U.S. higher education institution and over the age of 18.

As the central phenomenon was online community, there was no physical site for this study, and students did not need to attend a specific institution of higher education. The research site was cyberspace, and data collection occurred virtually through social media platforms and video conferencing tools.

### **Sampling and Recruitment**

I obtained the sample for this phenomenological study using purposeful sampling (see Dukes, 1984). Researchers use purposeful sampling to generate an intentional sample of participants whose life experiences would be most relevant and aid in answering the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposeful sampling aids in the development of thick description, which promotes the transferability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I put out a national call for participants with intentional outreach strategies. Because I studied participants' social media behavior, I recruited them by reaching out on social platforms I expected they might frequent, per suggestions from Beninger et al. (2014). I disseminated the call for participants to Multiracial-themed student organizations at colleges and universities by sharing posts and direct messaging on social media apps (see Appendix B for social media flier). I also

asked networks of professionals known to work with and advise Multiracial students, such as multicultural affairs, student affairs, and social justice educators, to share the call for participants and recommend students I could contact by posting messages on relevant email listservs and social media platforms (see recruitment messages in Appendix C). In the call for participants, I invited interested people to complete a brief survey via an online form to determine if they met the participation criteria (see Appendix D for the eligibility survey). Then, I followed up with eligible participants via email to share study details (see Appendix E for participant project information sheet) and had them electronically sign the informed consent form (see Appendix F). At the beginning of each interview, I verbally reviewed the informed consent and offered opportunities for questions before proceeding.

Phenomenological studies tend to have smaller samples, but they must be sufficient to capture an accurate sense of the phenomenon and obtain data saturation (Dukes, 1984). Patton (2002) stated, "Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244). In recruitment and sampling, I made an effort to reach saturation or redundancy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated, "If the purpose is to maximize information, then the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from newly sampled units; thus *redundancy* is the primary criterion" (p. 202). The criterion of saturation informed the sample size and allowed me to determine when data collection was complete. I reached saturation with a sample of 10 students.

### **Data Generation**

In a meta-analysis of 109 studies using visual methods, Pain (2012) found researchers chose PGVM primarily to enrich data collection or presentation and enhance the relationship between participants and researchers. Kortegast et al. (2019) suggested using PGVM could potentially expand knowledge production in higher education research. Additionally, they found PGVM challenged "what meaning we make of the social world" (p. 506). The potential positive

outcomes made PGVM useful for this study as I sought to understand the social world of Multiracial students in digital environments. PGVM, specifically social media elicitation and elicitation interviews, was appropriate to generate rich, authentic data. These methods are helpful for disrupting power dynamics between participants and researcher, with students empowered to share what they find most salient by selecting which artifacts are the elicitation guiding the interviews instead of the researcher making these decisions (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Kortegast et al., 2019; Pain, 2012).

### **Social Media Elicitations**

The type of PGVM identified for this study was social media elicitation, inspired by photo elicitation, with participants asked to contribute their own artifacts for review and discussion. Participant-submitted examples from their social media accounts were the basis of discussion during interviews, which I recorded and transcribed. Harper (2002) explained, “Most elicitation studies use photographs, but there is no reason studies cannot be done with...virtually any visual image” (p. 13). As the focus of the inquiry was social media, I solicited social media posts from the participants. Social media are dynamic and can include videos, text-based posts, and other interactions depending on the platform or application. Participant-generated contributions disrupt traditional power dynamics between researchers and participants as participants have ownership in selecting what they wish to share and discuss rather than the researcher having sole control.

Digital artifacts “exist in the human mind as well as in the digital environment” (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015, p. 1891). Digital artifacts, such as internet memes, can provide information about social and cultural systems. According to Harper (2002), visual data have tripartite roles in elicitation research. First, they act as inventories of objects, people, and artifacts. Next, they document events and experiences, either from the individual’s life or the collective era. Finally, they represent intimate dimensions of the social, including family, social groups, and body. Although Harper described these purposes in the context of photographs, they were applicable

to the social media elicitation in this study. Instead of relying on recall of past behaviors or hypothetical verbal prompts, photo “elicitation mines deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002, p. 23).

Drawing upon social media elicitation, I invited participants to share five to 10 examples of their social media postings (e.g., pictures, videos, tweets, blogs, etc.) that were meaningful to them in relation to their Multiracial community and identity (see Appendix F for participant project information sheet). The postings must have been from their time as current college students. All participants submitted at least five artifacts, and some included more. I collected more than 70 artifacts for this study, including screenshots, videos, and recordings. Social media platforms represented in the artifacts included Discord, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter. To facilitate the social media elicitation, I created a private online folder for each participant, accessible by only the participant and myself for uploading social media elicitation files. To protect privacy, I removed or obscured any potentially identifying information, such as usernames and faces of all people appearing in images. This security strategy was sufficient due to the public nature of internet forums. It was not feasible for the participants or me to collect photo release documents or verify the identities of all parties appearing in digital artifacts. All files associated with participants were stored on a password-protected cloud drive and accessed using a password-protected computer and will be destroyed no more than 3 years after the conclusion of this study, per Colorado State University research data management policies.

### **Elicitation Interviews**

After participants chose their social media artifacts, we engaged in elicitation interviews to discuss their selections and online behaviors. The elicitation interview method is an effective means of both collecting data and validating participants’ contributions. Clark-Ibáñez (2004) explained, “The PEI [photo elicitation interview] can be a powerful tool to simultaneously gather data and empower the interviewee” (p. 1513). This strategy supports the aim of phenomenology

to capture the full essence of a phenomenon, as “the PEI empowers the interviewees to teach the researcher about aspects of their social world otherwise ignored or taken for granted” (p. 1524). The process of selecting images for PGVM creates opportunities for participants to engage in what Kortegast et al. (2019) referred to as “reflective consciousness” (p. 497), wherein individuals can make meaning of their thoughts, memories, and experiences. Giving Multiracial participants opportunities to use their voices and critically reflect on their experiences aligns with MultiCrit tenets (Harris, 2016), as participants can develop their own counterstories to dominant ideologies.

I created an interview protocol informed by the theoretical frameworks of MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) and virtual kinship (Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2017), as well as inspiration from elicitation methods (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004; Harper, 2002). I invited participants to dialogue with me about their social media examples. The interview protocol strategy was inspired by photo elicitation, with the PHOTO format modified for social media elicitations (Graziano, 2004; Hussey, 2006):

- Describe your **P**icture/**P**ost.
- What is **H**appening in your picture/post?
- Why did you take a picture **O**f/post this?
- What does this **T**ell us about your life? *Your life as a Multiracial person?* [emphasis added]
- How might this picture/post provide **O**pportunities for us to *build and maintain communities for Multiracial students?* [emphasis added]

I posed additional interview questions to encourage discussion about participants’ online activities, motivations, and experiences as Multiracial people. Appendix G includes the full interview protocol.

Interviews were semistructured to allow conversations to flow as needed depending on each participant's examples and stories. Interviews occurred virtually over video chat software and were audio and video recorded, with informed consent (see Appendix E) provided by participants. To ensure confidentiality, I invited each participant to select a pseudonym and use this identifier throughout the project; however, only two participants did so. To respect the heritages of the other participants and provide identify fitting pseudonyms, I searched common names for their races or ethnicities and selected from those lists. I shared the pseudonyms during member checking, at which time participants could change the pseudonym if they wished. The average interview duration was 82 minutes. I transcribed the interviews using automatic software and manually verified the transcripts for accuracy.

Participants were to commit to one interview for this study, with a possibility of a second interview for any follow-up questions after initial data analysis; however, no follow-up interviews were necessary. A pilot study with two participants helped me assess the effectiveness of the interview protocol. I used pilot study participants' data in the dissertation.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Internet research has unique ethical considerations, particularly regarding informed consent and privacy, because people have differing expectations for the protection of their information when they post online (Beninger et al., 2014). To ensure ethical practice, I used multiple ethical frameworks to inform my research design, following the recommendations of Taylor and Pagliari (2018). I incorporated principles from documents such as the Association of Internet Researchers guidelines (franzke et al., 2020) and considerations concerning internet research from the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Human Research Protections (2013). In alignment with principles from these guidelines, I incorporated strategies to mitigate concerns about expectations of privacy on the internet, identifiable private online information, and data security vulnerabilities. I provided a written informed consent document and verbally reviewed the informed consent at the beginning of the interview to offer multiple opportunities for

comprehension and questions. To protect privacy, I removed or obscured all usernames, faces, and other potentially identifying information during data collection and analysis. Files, folders, and transcripts had pseudonyms for participants.

### **Data Analysis**

I used thematic analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA; Brock, 2018) to gain a holistic understanding of the data corpus I generated in response to my research inquiry. Thematic analysis is beneficial in identifying aspects of cultures, focusing on patterns, and revealing underlying complexities (Glesne, 2016), which supports thematic analysis as an appropriate strategy for this study. Thematic analysis also aligns with the phenomenological approach (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).

To complement the thematic analysis and ensure attention to the critical and technological aspects of the research inquiry, I adopted a secondary lens for data analysis. Brock (2018) offered CTDA as a multimodal investigative strategy for internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture. Using a CTDA lens, researchers incorporate critical theory and technocultural concepts to interrogate sociocultural norms and avoid deficit models of historically underserved populations. CTDA is a means to explore online dimensions and actions. Brock (2018) noted, "A CTDA analysis examines how actors shape technologies and themselves in response to the technologies they use; these technologies, in turn, are shaped by those who design and market them" (p. 1019). CTDA was an appropriate analytical method for this study as it combines a relevant critical perspective with a technological context. Using CTDA allowed me to analyze the interviews along with the artifacts to gain a holistic perspective on participants' thoughts, attitudes, and online behaviors regarding Multiracial virtual community.

I analyzed data according to Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phases of thematic analysis while also incorporating a CTDA perspective. Following is an explanation of how I progressed



through these phases and how this strategy aligned with my selected methodology and conceptual frameworks.

1. *Familiarizing yourself with the data.* Using automatic transcription software, I transcribed the raw data from the recorded interviews. I verified and edited the transcriptions as needed while reviewing the files and digital artifacts to become even more familiar with the data.
2. *Generating the initial codes.* Following suggestions from Saldaña and Omasta (2017), I used open coding to condense the data for further analysis. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described a process of “unitizing” (p. 344) data, identifying and labeling relevant chunks of raw data with key words or codes. After generating the initial codes, I reviewed the data and digital artifacts a second and third time for analytical coding with interpretation and reflection to generate any additional codes. I used MultiCrit tenets and CTDA components as frameworks while rereading transcripts and viewing artifacts, looking for connections and patterns related to both Multiraciality and technologies.
3. *Searching for themes.* I maintained an ongoing list of codes generated while reviewing data and created a codebook. The codebook included more than 50 initial codes and their associated definitions, examples, and locations found throughout the data corpus. Then, I reviewed the codes, seeking emergent patterns, categories, and themes within the data (see Saldaña & Omasta, 2017).
4. *Reviewing potential themes.* According to Saldaña and Omasta (2017), “Themes capture the essence and essentials of an experience” (p. 263). In this study, I sought to understand the essence and essential experience of Multiracial students and how they engage with each other in the virtual world.
5. *Defining and naming themes.* In this phase, I interpreted and analyzed to make sense of the data and synthesize the themes. According to Glesne (2016), “The goal of thematic analysis is to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of some social phenomenon

through understanding the processes that tend to involve that phenomenon as well as the perceptions, values, and beliefs of people toward it” (p. 184). The primary themes were seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. There were also several subthemes.

6. *Producing the report.* Writing up the thematic analysis and CTDA findings and producing a report focused on the experiences of Multiracial students aligns with MultiCrit tenets, as this centers the experiential knowledge of Multiracial populations and challenges dominant ideology (Harris, 2016). Using a MultiCrit lens, I aimed to present findings toward the creation of a counternarrative to combat dominant ideologies. Multiracial students’ lived experiences are centered in these counterstories and affirmed as evidence of monoracism and racial injustice.

As suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), throughout each phase, I periodically engaged in personal reflection to check for bias based on my positionality as a researcher. I wrote memos detailing the research process and researcher reflections. I documented observations about how the interviews were progressing, logged interactions between the participants and me, and chronicled my thoughts when I read texts for this study.

The following excerpt from Kero’s interview shows the coding and data analysis process. This example was illustrative of how thematic analysis and CTDA were complementary. Here Kero, who identifies as African American and Asian, explained her decision-making process in composing her social media Bio page:

I have not put my flags in my Bio yet, but I probably should. I think for the longest time, though, I haven’t because I don’t know if I have the right to claim those. I’m still kind of wrestling with that. My sister does, though. She puts all her flags in hers, and she also puts that she’s Native. But I generally just have my profile picture, which is a little drawing that my friend makes maybe like three or four times a year. ...And so hopefully, I guess that communicates my racial identity, but if not, it’s just cute.

Table 1 presents a summary of the process used to code and analyze this interview excerpt using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis framework.

*Table 1*

*Data Analysis Process*

Analysis phase	Process notes	Codes and themes applied during the phase
Familiarizing yourself with the data	I first reviewed the video and audio recordings, used an automatic service to transcribe interviews, and reviewed and edited the transcript for accuracy.	
Generating the initial codes	During the initial coding phase, I used open coding to apply multiple codes to this excerpt.	Feelings of cultural belonging, use of flags, family discussions, and bio feature
Searching for themes	I conducted a secondary analysis of transcripts and initial codes, this time intentionally using MultiCrit and CTDA lenses to seek themes addressing the research question.	
Reviewing potential themes	Within these few sentences, I noted Kero discussed how she uses this aspect of social media for her cultural purposes (technology as belief) and how this was a manifestation of her experiences with monoracism (feelings of racial inadequacy).	Technology as belief and feelings of racial inadequacy
Defining and naming themes	In the final stages of data analysis, this quote informed the development of two themes.	Cultivating an online persona and engaging in multiracial discourse; subtheme: racial (in)authenticity
Producing the report	I incorporated direct quotes and highlighted participant-submitted social media artifacts to support the themes and arguments for finding. These strategies also align with MultiCrit tenets, which call for centering Multiracial students' lived experiences.	

## Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is attainable through credibility (Saldaña & Omasta, 2017). Credibility is “the audience’s belief that the way a researcher conducted the study and the analytic processes and outcomes of the work have generated findings that make sense and persuade readers that an effective or trustworthy job was done” (p. 272). I used multiple strategies to enhance the study’s trustworthiness, specifically member checks and thick description.

Member checks are “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314), providing opportunities for stakeholders to react to researchers’ interpretations of the data. I provided opportunities for member checking by sharing a draft of Chapter Four, which included the research findings and discussion. I invited participants to respond to the preliminary report with their feedback regarding the extent to which they felt authentically represented and the accuracy of the initial analysis. Five participants responded, and all confirmed and affirmed the information conveyed about them; the remaining five participants did not respond. Incorporating member checks is a means to promote validity and credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Initially applied to ethnography by Geertz (1973, 1983), thick description is now known as “a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and, in particular, the findings of a study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). Thick description can allow for the interpretation of cultural meaning-making (Glesne, 2016). Providing relevant details through thick description allows readers to determine transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I maintained thick description, directly quoting participants’ words from interviews and summarizing key aspects of our conversations. In alignment with CTDA, I also included many of the participant-submitted visual digital artifacts so readers could see exact references to the social media activity. I aimed to provide robust context for the study through thick description, such that readers can notice any similarities or differences to their own contexts and assess any applicability of my findings to their lives.

## Researcher Positionality

Root (1992) urged the importance of Multiracial people leading research about Multiracial people, as this “allows the researcher to ask questions from a position of knowing... [and] interpretations of results are then more likely to be placed in a social ecology relevant to the multiracial experience” (p. 188). Like many mixed folks, I regularly face the inquiry, “What are you?” as others try to make sense of my racial background. If I respond, I am prepared with a photo of my parents saved on my phone as proof of my heritage in case people are unsatisfied with my answer. But much of the time, responding to this Multiracial microaggression is exhausting and dehumanizing. I am proud of my Multiracial heritage, but the countless inquiries are exhausting. I honor my multifaceted and nuanced ancestry, but not everyone is entitled to my and my family’s story, and certainly not without any benevolence or attempts to understand better.

I live close to where I grew up, which is in one of the most racially and ethnically diverse counties in the United States, according to data from the past two censuses (Jensen et al., 2021). My city was in the top 10 highest percentages of Multiracial populations in 2010 (Jones & Bullock, 2012). However, there were no Multiracial student organizations during my K–12 or undergraduate experiences. I did not feel included in the monoracial student centers, nor did I see people with my story reflected in history classes or American cultures curricula. Although surrounded by compositional diversity, I lacked a specific Multiracial community. In graduate school, I found a professional organization focused on Multiracial topics: the American College Personnel Association’s Multiracial Network (MRN). I joined MRN as the organization’s first Social Media Coordinator, establishing the Twitter account and inaugural social media strategy. More importantly, I met other Multiracial colleagues and allies in higher education. Because these new friends were located throughout the country and internationally, I struggled to stay in touch when not at periodic in-person gatherings. Social media and other technologies kept us connected. We were able to ask each other questions, discuss current events, and share life

updates online and through various apps. To this day, I remain close to many of those people and consider MRN my professional home.

My education and training with media began when I joined the school newspaper during my first year in high school. Since then, I have been interested in the potential impacts of media on individuals and groups. I was enthralled with the power of people's stories and could imagine the reach of a publication connecting disparate populations and reporters shining a light on injustice. I earned my undergraduate degree in mass communications and worked briefly in the newspaper industry before transitioning to a career in higher education, but I never lost my spark for communications and digital technologies. I keep abreast of current trends and scholarship related to media, especially social media and educational technology. I present and write regularly about technology, accessibility, and making our digital communities more inclusive.

In conducting this study, I called upon another of Root's (2004) writings, the *Multiracial Oath of Social Responsibility*. This document begins with the simple yet powerful statement: "I want to make a difference in this world" (para. 1). Among the commitments in this oath are, "I recognize the people who have made it possible for me to affirm my multiracial identity" (para. 3) and "I must fight all forms of oppression as the oppression of one is the oppression of all" (para. 4). As a Multiracial, queer person in this world and the field of higher education, I am trying to make a difference for Multiracial students, staff, faculty, and anyone else who participates in the system and needs to be seen and heard. I have been fortunate to find spaces and people who have affirmed my identities, listened to my stories, and taught me to fight against oppression in the ways I am able. I hope this dissertation is another way I can honor those who came before me. I can continue to fight that fight.

### **Conclusion**

This study centered Multiracial college students using a phenomenological approach to understand the essence of their social media experiences building and maintaining community.

This inquiry was guided by MultiCrit and virtual kinship frameworks. I purposefully sampled 10 Multiracial college students from throughout the United States. Using participant-generated visual methods and elicitation interviews, I produced data as participants made meaning of their digital worlds and shared their thoughts. I used thematic analysis and CTDA techniques to analyze interviews and participant artifacts. As this research applied to social media behaviors and online community activity, I obtained informed consent and incorporated ethical considerations to maintain participant privacy and confidentiality. I promoted trustworthiness through credibility using member checking and thick description.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I share and discuss the findings of the study. I used a phenomenological approach to investigate the research question: How do Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community? Participant-generated visual elicitation methods provided the data. I analyzed the data using MultiCrit and virtual kinship frameworks and thematic analysis and CTDA lenses.

In this chapter, I first briefly describe the participants to provide context for the discussion. Then I identify and explain the three primary themes—seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse—each of which includes related subthemes. These themes illustrate why Multiracial students use social media for community-building and maintaining, how they do so, and what activities they partake in while online. Interpretations of the findings through the two frameworks appear at the conclusion of the chapter.

*Note: Participant-submitted artifacts appear throughout this chapter, with identifying information obscured to protect confidentiality. I used white markings when study participants were the subjects and other colors to cover nonparticipants. This strategy helped to maintain the integrity of the artifacts and show interactions between users while maintaining confidentiality.*

### **Participant Demographics**

The 10 participants were students at universities throughout the United States, from the West Coast to the East Coast, including public and private institutions. All self-identified as Multiracial or of two or more races as an inclusion criterion for the study. The participants varied in their individual identity designations, with this diversity consistent with Renn's (2004) patterns of college student Multiracial identities. When referring to individual participants, I use the specific racial or ethnic language participants provided for themselves. Participants used a variety of social media applications, and all primarily used at least two platforms (see Table 2).



Table 2

Participant Summary

Pseudonym	Student profile	Racial/ethnic self-identification	Social media used primarily
Amy	Third-year student at a large public university in the West	white and Asian	Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest
Charlene	Fourth-year student at a large private university in New England	white and Black, Bahamian	Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube
Emily	Fourth-year student at medium private university in the West	Chinese American	Instagram, TikTok
Gloria	Third-year student at a large private university in New England	Asian and white	Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok
Jun	Fourth-year student at public university in the Southwest	Mixed, or Japanese/Asian	Instagram, Reddit, Twitter, YouTube
Katherine	Second-year student at a large private university in New England	Half Filipino and half Ukrainian	Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Kero	First-year student at a large public university in the West	Asian and African American	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube
Liz	Fourth-year student at a medium private university in the Pacific Northwest	Native Pacific Islander and Filipino	Instagram, Snapchat
Olivia	Fourth-year student at a large public university in the Midwest	Mixed Race, Chinese and white	Discord, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube
Sabine	Fourth-year student at a large public university in the West	African American and Chinese	Facebook, Instagram

## Emerging Themes

This section presents the themes and subthemes. The three primary themes are seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. I summarize the themes and explain each with examples from the data. The theoretical frameworks were MultiCrit (Harris, 2016) and virtual kinship (Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2017). I used thematic analysis and CTDA (Brock, 2018) to analyze the data and identify the themes. Figure 1 shows the themes and subthemes.



Figure 1. Themes and subthemes

### Seeking Similarities With Multiracial People

Through social media, Multiracial students sought and found other Multiracial and mixed race people with similar identities or experiences. The following subthemes show how Multiracial existence manifested on social media. Within this theme, the subthemes indicated

how participants described the importance of representation and explained the role of influencers. The final subtheme shows how students found relatable content and validation of their lived experiences as Multiracial people through social media interactions.

### ***Representation***

Seeing others with similar racial and ethnic identities online was especially meaningful for those who did not have other Multiracial people accessible in their familial or social circles. Gloria, who identifies as Asian and white, grew up in a predominantly white area and has no family members her age:

I'm kind of the only child, and I don't really have any children that can share experiences with me. So social media has been really helpful. I mean a really good tool for me to see, "Oh, there are other people; it's not just me." Like it has been my whole life. ...It's not impossible cause I have met other Wasian [white and Asian] people in real life, but it's definitely a lot harder than it is to meet people who are just one race.

As Gloria's experience shows, the internet and social media applications specifically provided opportunities to build community connections with Multiracial people not otherwise available to them.

For some participants, growing up or living in a diverse environment did not guarantee connections with mixed race people, so they turned to social media for the opportunity to engage with fellow Multiracial people. Charlene identifies as white and Black, Bahamian. She attends a large private university in New England in a large city. However, she said the internet offers better opportunities to find people with her particular experience:

Even though [institution] has a huge number of students, because it's so diverse, I'm pretty sure it'd be really hard to find a wide community of people who have the experience of being a white-passing mixed person who is Black and white.

Here, Gloria and Charlene are speaking to one of the MultiCrit tenets, which requires an acknowledgment beyond a monoracial paradigm of race and calls for an understanding of a

fuller Multiracial reality. By seeking out and finding people with similar Multiracial experiences online, participants were using social media to break down the monoracial understanding and validate their existences as holistic Multiracial people, with the many nuances and facets within the Multiracial community.

The positive impact of seeing one's identity or similar identities represented in an online forum is important to note. Participants listed multiple types of Multiracial representation. Emily, who identifies as Chinese American, explained,

I know social media gets a bad rap, rightfully so in certain aspects. But I also think it's really powerful because this is the first time in my life seeing so many other people who look like me with a powerful voice or being visible in a meaningful way.

As Emily described, social media offered participants opportunities to see themselves reflected in voices, images, and characters. Mainstream media may relegate people with their identities to the margins, but with social media participants could find significant representation in a host of accounts from people like them. Participants mentioned various types of representation they see on social media, ranging from celebrities to artists, scholars to foodies, and social media personalities to regular users like themselves who happen to have similar identities.

As an example of celebrity representation, Liz, who is Native Pacific Islander and Filipino, reposted an Instagram story from a sports media account when Filipino boxer Manny Pacquiao won a big match. She added a goat emoji, signifying the "Greatest of All Time" moniker, to voice her support for the athlete. In describing the importance of celebrity representation of one of her racial backgrounds, Liz explained how seeing such prominent figures succeed is the equivalent of them saying:

"I'm out here doing what I wanna do, and I'm gonna make sure that I'm gonna represent my island, my culture, and tell people I came from there to come here to show you what we can do, what I can do, what my people can do. And it's not just, you guys can do it.

Anyone else can do it like that.“ I feel like the representation, it’s pretty much like proof that we can do other stuff other than what people think we can do, like stereotypes. Other participants readily named Multiracial celebrities, singers, actors, athletes, and other known personalities as positive examples of representation they enjoy following and seeing on social media.

Mixed people represented on social media do not need famous credentials to carry significance. For some participants, just seeing other users who were like them was exciting, as Kero, who identifies as Asian and African American, described:

There was surprisingly a small mixed community on [TikTok] that just came up on my For You Page one day. ...There were some really good [TikToks] about being mixed, and I would follow them. And in the comments, you also find people who are saying their mixes and being like, “Oh yeah, I’m like specifically this, this too.” And then someone else will be like, “Oh my God, I’m the exact mix as well.” ...Seeing other Blasians [Black and Asian people] existing was very nice.

Viewed through a CTDA lens, Kero’s reflection describes how the technological affordances of social media algorithms facilitated connections between users with similar identities. When their social network feeds contained content relevant to their racial identities, they felt affirmed and this expanded their communities of people who were potentially like them.

Sabine, who describes herself as African American and Chinese, participated in the Multiracial representation on social media by contributing her image to a social media account devoted to showcasing profiles of mixed people, specifically Blasian youth. She said,

Whenever a new person is posted, usually the purpose of it is so that people can follow that person or reach out to them and be like, “Oh, hey, I’m similar to you,” or something like that. So it felt at first, I was a bit nervous about having to account post a picture of me. ...But then I kind of started to see it more as a community, almost as if everyone’s pictures was up on a wall together so that people could find each other.



*Figure 2. Representation*

Sabine said she was initially hesitant to contribute for fear of being fetishized for her mixedness. However, after seeing accepting comments on the account and noticing most other followers were fellow Multiracial people based on their comments and profiles, she deemed this a supportive space and agreed to submit her photo. After having an overall positive experience with this post, Sabine contributed another photo of herself when a similarly Multiracial-focused account reached out asking her to submit.

### ***Influencers***

A social media influencer is a person who has a following in a defined niche. Multiple participants identified influencers as important for their online experience. Some influencer accounts were specifically Multiracial, some were people who happened to share racial or ethnic identities with participants, and others discussed social justice–related topics that

resonated with participants. After Sabine started following Blasian influencers, she began receiving more relevant content in her feed, and her perspective on the utility of social media changed:

I would say before I started following Blasian influencers, I wasn't getting any content of people that looked like me as much. ...But once I did start following the Blasian influencers, then I realized how beneficial it was for me to follow them. I realized, "Oh, wow. I didn't know this could be an aspect of my social media use." Whenever I'd see a makeup tutorial on my feed, I'd watch it, but I wouldn't think, "Oh, I'm gonna try that on myself," because that's not gonna look good on me. ...But then when I started following those influencers, it became more about whenever I see something they post, I'm actually thinking in my mind, like maybe I could try that out or maybe I'm interested in that. I had never seen accounts in that way before.

This marked a transformation in how Sabine viewed and experienced social media. Once she started following Blasian influencers, she saw more of her identities reflected, and the content became more applicable to her life. After incorporating more influencers into her feed, Sabine changed her behaviors and tried out new techniques, which were more effective for her skin tone and facial features. The Blasian influencers truly influenced her daily life activities.

Emily, a Psychology and English major, likes to find scholars and theorists as influencers on social media. She described one such account of an Asian sociologist influencer she follows:

I usually don't see people who look like me in humanities and social sciences. We're often pigeonholed into STEM and, again, this kind of techno-Orientalist of, "Oh, Asians are built to work and do all science-y things and just sit quietly and produce material goods." And, I thought this particular person/academic influencer, she's pretty amazing because she is an Asian PhD candidate in sociology. I've never seen that before publicly before I saw her account.

Influencer accounts like this opened possibilities for Emily and other students. By seeing their identities represented in positive ways in a variety of successful contexts, participants were able to not just imagine but literally see pathways to professional or personal goals of their own. This was especially powerful when the possibilities went against the norm, as with Emily's influencer example, who was an Asian woman in a profession where Emily had not previously seen much Asian representation.

Gloria emphasized the impact of having relatable Multiracial influencers on her racial identity development:

I engage with their content a lot. It is really important that I have people to relate to. And I guess that's the most important aspect of mixed social media: having people to relate to. 'Cause I feel like once I see more Wasian people and I can maybe present myself as more mixed or more white, I can stop presenting myself as just Asian on social media. It's definitely let me become more comfortable with that.

Gloria currently has limited contact with Multiracial people in her family and friend circles. Therefore, exposure to influencers who are Multiracial and other mixed race people with whom she can relate on social media has expanded her opportunities for Multiracial socialization and cultural experiences, which are known influential factors for Multiracial identity development (Wijeyesinghe, 2001).

### ***Relating and Validation***

Participants often looked to social media to find opportunities for people to relate to each other and hear validation for their experiences as Multiracial people. In using the social media applications, participants sought or created opportunities to interact with others who could empathize with their feelings and experiences as Multiracial people. They bonded with each other over these topics, using these technologies and bypassing any physical barriers to build communities within the social media apps.



Olivia had joined two Facebook groups related to her racial identity. In these groups, users post resources, memes, videos, and other content related to both mixed identity and Asian identity. She explained how despite not being an overt, active poster in the groups, she still finds value in being a member by seeing relatable content:

I feel like both of those are really nice places to see people who are going through things that are similar to you. Even though I'm not necessarily sharing to those groups with my own words or anything like that, I feel like it's still nice to just be able to see people and read conversations or comment every so often and just be like, "Oh, this is something I can relate to." And feeling like you're not as alone out there.

When participants found spaces or people they could relate to based on similar life experiences, they felt an increased sense of belonging. These were opportunities to be in community with their online connections.

In one instance, Kero posted an Instagram story about an incident where she was mistakenly identified as Latina by a rideshare driver. When describing why she posted the story, she explained:

I feel like there's a lot of like people that could relate to this, at least that I follow. Now that I have more mixed friends, that can be like, "Oh my God. Yeah, the same happened to me. I was also mislabeled because of how I look." But then it's also a way for people who don't know I'm mixed or don't know what it's like to be mixed or just like, "Oh, I didn't know that would happen to you."



*Figure 3. Assumptions*

After posting this story, Kero recounted that many friends, both Multiracial and monoracial, had a variety of reactions to her storytelling. Some were affirming and acknowledged what happened to her with “likes” or brief comments. Some laughed with or at her, saying things like, “Oh, I thought you were Latina too when I first met you.” Others (mostly monoracial followers) were surprised this situation happened to her.

In another example, Jun responded to a query on Reddit in a community for Multiracial people with Asian heritage. In this forum, they added a comment from their perspective as a mixed race person with the dual purpose of contributing to the dialogue and seeking validation for their own experience from a supportive audience:

I wanted to get it out somewhere, or I wanted to have a community of people that understood what I meant and see if they could relate to that. So, I was like, “Anyone

else?“ ... I was looking for reinforcement. Or I guess community is probably the best word, support.

Jun sought out Multiracial-focused Reddit forums to find people who had similar experiences. They said, “I was already having the hypothesis of a bunch of mixed people have the same problems. ... I needed to know that what issues I am facing are universal.”

By sharing their experiences as Multiracial people and those of other mixed race people, participants embraced another MultiCrit tenet: experiential knowledge. This tenet focuses on honoring the lived experiences of Multiracial students and centering their voices. Social media is an ideal platform for experiential knowledge as users control what content they post and how they develop their narratives. This autonomy gives Multiracial students authority to craft counterstories to build community with each other and challenge dominant ideologies.

Multiracial participants looked to social media to find people who were similar to them in their racial and ethnic identities. In these virtual communities, they found Multiracial representation in ways they might not see in person. Representation was meaningful, as participants saw themselves reflected in others on social media and felt affirmed in their racial identities. Influencers who shared participants’ identities served as culturally relevant role models and inspiration. Accessing relatable content and validation from other people with similar life experiences builds and maintains community, as participants find belonging and realize they are not alone in their experiences as Multiracial people.

### **Cultivating an Online Persona**

Participants were intentional about how they showed up online and whom they crafted themselves to be in the virtual space, as racialized beings and as attending to other salient aspects of their identities. They utilized their knowledge of the technology tools the various social media platforms afforded them to curate personas. By intentionally creating their online personalities, participants took charge of their personal narratives and, by extension, the creation of their online communities. These strategies communicated messages to prospective

and current members of their online communities, which allowed the participants to mediate how people interacted with them in online spaces. The subthemes show how participants cultivated their online personas with intentional Bios and Profiles, documented life snapshots and core memories, and surrounded themselves with deliberate internet connections.

### ***Bio and Profile***

Most social media platforms allow users to have a Bio or Profile page with a photo and brief information about themselves. A key decision for many participants was if and how they would publicly declare their racial identity in these spaces. Participants described multiple strategies and decision-making processes. For Multiracial people, a common question is, “What are you?” regarding racial and ethnic identities. With strategic use of the Bio and Profile pages, participants were able to proactively preempt intrusive inquiries and reclaim their racial narratives. Others opted not to make race a central aspect of their online persona, which was also evident in their Bios and Profiles.

Some participants were explicit about their race in the online space. A popular strategy was using the flag emoji to represent their specific heritages or identities. Emily described the development of her online persona:

I’ve definitely evolved a lot over time. I used to be completely silent about it and now that’s pretty much every other thing I posted about my Asian American identity or shouting out an Asian American artist that I really love and want to amplify. So I think it’s become a very integral part of my online presence. I think my Instagram bio even has the flag, the Chinese flag, and also the rainbow flag. So, my queerness, woman of color status. I’m definitely very expressive now about my identity and how much I know myself in a certain way online.

Emily clearly stated her identities in multiple opportunities offered through her profile, such as using the flag emoji and posting related content. This content showed her current level of confidence and salience of these identities. CTDA provides a framework for understanding why

Multiracial students may especially appreciate social media's dynamic nature. One of the beneficial attributes of social media is the ability to edit, which is conducive to college students' ongoing identity development. When students change their minds or grow, they can easily click the "edit" button, delete text, or switch out a photo. For Multiracial students especially, it is helpful that Bios and Profiles are not permanent, as racial identities can be fluid or contextual.

Gloria also used platform tools to present herself online. Wanting people to perceive her racial identity in a specific way, she intentionally crafted her social media to elicit that response:

This is some internal things that I have to deal with, but I definitely cultivate myself to be more Asian online. Pretty much people do perceive me as Asian in real life. But there's definitely more people who perceive me as either white or Wasian in real life than on social media. 'Cause on social media, the first thing you'll see in my Instagram is the Philippine flag in my bio and then all my pictures. And so it's kind of cultivating my image. ...It's just because it does not sit right with me when people think that I am fully white.

For Gloria, having the flags and other visual cues on her social media is an easier and more efficient way to communicate her racial identity than responding to the queries that often come up during in-person interactions. She is especially troubled when people make assumptions of white monoraciality, so she wants to proactively debunk that by intentionally presenting as more Asian in online space.

In addition to flag emojis, some participants used other cultural signifiers to represent their race or ethnicity. For example, Jun said, "I've never really thought about it, but I do try a lot to show that I'm Japanese. I put my name in katakana [Japanese characters] on my Instagram page and my Tinder."

Liz's Bio had undergone multiple iterations before the current version, as she has changed and developed her identity over time. She previously utilized the flag strategy but has

since edited her Bio. She now adopts a more action-oriented strategy of letting her posts showcase her racial and ethnic identity:

My bio before this, it was really long. I had the “indigenous plus the mix of everything,” but I also had the flags of Guam and Philippines and other identifying things that aren’t racial or cultural, but more personal nerdy stuff. But when I let people know who I am, I just post those things: Filipino American History Month, Asian Pacific Islander Heritage Month. ...I always try to show off back home, the beaches, the hills, the sunsets and the food. It’s just what I do on an everyday basis more, so that’s how I show who I am on my race and everything.

This truncated version of Liz’s Bio hints at her racial identities, and her online behaviors serve as further evidence to back up her racial and ethnic claims. This combination represents Liz’s counterstory and her manifestation of the MultiCrit tenet experiential knowledge (Harris, 2016). Her posts document her multiple racialized lived experiences, reflecting her reality as a Multiracial person, specifically one who identifies as Native Pacific Islander and Filipino.

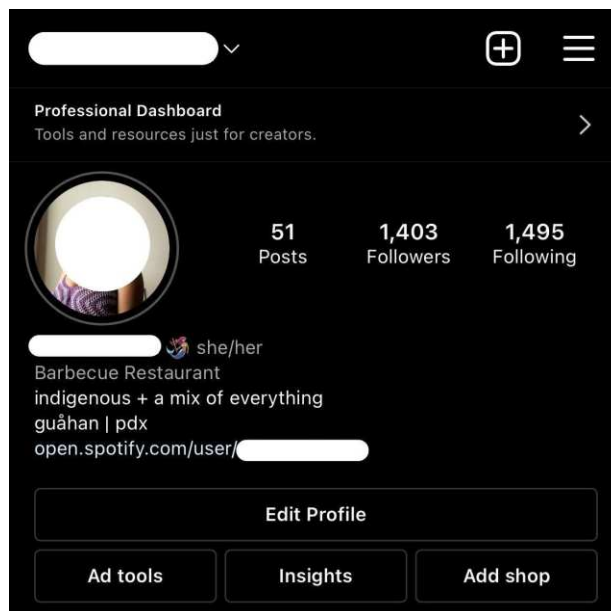


Figure 4. Bio

Other participants adopted a more subtle approach and were not explicit about their racial identity in their Bio or elsewhere on their social media. Amy explained her strategy:

I don't really show up as anything [in regards to race]. [*laughs*] Besides what I put in my profile and that kind of thing. I just wanna let people just infer from pictures and talking to me, that kind of thing. I don't consider [my race] something I have to shout from the rooftops to let people know.

For participants like Amy, their racial identity might not have been their most salient social group membership. Therefore, it was not the central component of their social media presence, either. Although they were not hiding their racial identity, they were also not placing it front and center. Salience is a key component of Multiracial identity models (Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001, 2012), and it can vary among contexts, time, and personal choices. Although some participants emphasized their race, those who did not found opportunities for connection with friends around other commonalities in their virtual communities besides race. For these participants, their social media posts may have included other examples of being in community with others, such as pictures from adventures with friends or visits to restaurants with family members. Their racial identities were implicit in their lived experiences as Multiracial people, but not explicitly called out or named in their content.

### ***Life Snapshots and Core Memories***

Participants used social media to document important occasions in their lives or even seemingly mundane instances which carried some significance to them in the moment. Kero used Instagram stories to share the incident with the rideshare driver who erroneously assumed her racial identity. The temporal nature of the Instagram story feature was key to commemorating moments like these. Kero said, "People can't view it forever, like a post. It's not something that I'm going to put permanently on my account, and it's just a funny way to give a little snapshot into my life." By using social media to offer glimpses into their lives, participants extended entry points for community to their followers. Each story and each post was a chance

for someone else to relate, react, comment, or otherwise build community with participants based on the content reflected in the post.

For example, Gloria used Instagram stories to document two particular moments in her life as a Multiracial person. The first story (see Figure 5) depicts a lunch with a group of friends eating American-style food around a fire pit on campus. Gloria described it as an “American college experience.” The second story (see Figure 6) was also a collective meal. This time, she had gathered for Lunar New Year with a different group of friends of various Asian ethnicities to eat Asian food. Gloria called this “a core memory.”



Figure 5. Collective meal – lunch with friends





*Figure 6. Collective meal – Lunar New Year*

Gloria reflected on the similarities between these two events, noting they both included gathering together to share food and reflected similar communal values. She explained that moving to college was the first time she had lived outside an Asian household. Living with roommates and making new friends was experiencing a new way of life, which she enjoyed. Using a CTDA perspective to consider the digital features, these posts show how social media can showcase the duality of virtual community and physical community. Gloria's posts commemorated two in-person group gatherings while also bringing together her friends in the digital sphere through tagging and reaction tools. Here, Gloria uses social media to help maintain her in-person friend communities through the use of social media.

**Family Appearances.** For Multiracial people, family members and relationships are often major influences on racial identity. Therefore, it was no surprise when families were key components of the virtual world for many participants. More than half of the participants

incorporated family in their social media content, ranging from photos of or with their relatives to discussing relationships with family members in comments. Online posts featuring families served multiple purposes in regard to participants' community development. First, they solidified their relationships with relatives. Second, having representation and discussions about mixed race family was another opportunity for Multiracial people to relate with each other and build community around a common interest and experience.

On Instagram, Sabine posted a picture with her sister, with whom she is close; however, people often assume they are not fully related.

People don't always associate us as sisters. We get mixed results. Some people say, "Wow, you look so much alike." And other people say, "You look nothing alike." Not everyone always connects us together. But to me, it's just my sister. So I wanted to post a picture of us together.

Sabine feels hurt when she hears comments from people questioning her relationship with her sister, which she labels "microaggressions." By posting the photo with her sister on social media, she could subtly declare a familial connection and proactively dismiss disparaging remarks.



Figure 7. Sisters

In addition to images, there was also conversation about family on participants' social media. Amy shared a post from an Instagram account of a community organization focused on Multiracial issues. They posted a discussion prompt, "Growing up, did your parents talk to you about being *mixed race*?" Under the post were 187 comments. Although Amy did not contribute to the conversation by commenting herself, she read others' comments and reflected on what she saw. She said, "It was interesting to see how many people's parents didn't talk to them about this. It got me thinking about my parents 'cause I can't really remember them talking to me specifically about being mixed." Amy considered her upbringing and racialized experiences from her youth, such as visiting Japan with her brother and being treated as more beautiful due to their mixedness. Although Amy was not one of the active commenters on this post, she was

connected to others through reading their comments. Involvement in this community prompted her continued racial identity journey by sparking critical reflection on her racial socialization from her parents. Even without actively commenting or directly interacting with others on the post, Amy was inspired to analyze her own upbringing after reading what other Multiracial people had to say about their experiences.

**Cultural Indicators.** Symbolic representations of racial identity often showed up on participants' social media. Frequently, the symbols were food; other times, they were examples of common cultural experiences. With posts like these, participants were embracing and communicating their racial and ethnic identities, which aided in their community-building with other people with similar identities.

Participants frequently spoke of food representing their racial or ethnic heritages. Some mentioned following cultural food-related accounts, such as restaurants or “foodies.” Others mentioned searching for specific food posts or posting their own photos of culinary delights. In one example, Gloria posted an Instagram story of a time she acquired items from a particular Filipino fast-food chain:

Jollibee will only be recognized within a community of Southeast Asians. My friend is from Vietnam. So I was like, I'll bring some back for you. It's rare to get, so it's kind of like a flex. And I was like, yeah, this is my culture, this is my heritage. I'm proud of it. ... And so I'm gonna display that on social media.



*Figure 8.* Cultural food

Gloria added a bragging caption and heart face emoji to the photo to further capture her expressions in this moment. In posting this story, she was sending a signal to other members of her specific racial community, boasting she was able to obtain and experience the coveted fast-food meal.

In another Facebook example, Olivia shared a post of a video with an elderly Asian grandfather figure walking around the house with his hands stereotypically folded behind his back and a young grandchild following behind, imitating the pose. Olivia was sure to tag her siblings in this post so they could reminisce about their childhood and laugh together. Despite her father being white, she could relate to the Asian stereotype and remembered being a young East Asian child, “walking around like little ducklings,” imitating their parentage. As this example shows, by sharing a social media post and using the tagging feature, Olivia connected with the

larger community related to this stereotype and drew her siblings into the conversation as they had similar experiences.

Viewed through a MultiCrit lens, the ways participants cultivated online personas were indicative of students essentially creating their counterstories online as they decided which content to create and post. Participants utilized their experiential knowledge to share their life snapshots and core memories. These posts centered Multiracial students' voices and honored their lived experiences, as social media is a platform to hear directly from students.

### ***Internet Connections***

In terms of their online connections, there were three distinct categories of people with whom participants were connected online. First, there were people whom they knew IRL. These were often family members, friends, or school or work colleagues. Participants said they would meet people in places like classes, club meetings, and educational conferences and then follow each other on social media to keep in contact. Social media was essential for maintaining participants' communities with this first category of people, often keeping them updated on the lives of those important to them whom they might not see in person often. These IRL internet friends were the majority of participants' internet connections.

The next two categories helped participants expand their networks and communities. The second category comprised celebrities and influencers. Participants followed users in this category mainly to consume their content but not to have a relationship with them. The third category was internet acquaintances, people with whom they are familiar online but had never met in person. Charlene illuminated how she interacts on TikTok with this third category of people:

Sometimes I see people that I don't even follow that it's still a part of that community because it's the same kind of content that I like where it's Multiracial identities talking about various experiences or just racial identities in general or other stuff.

Despite not having a direct personal relationship with them, Charlene described the significant connection she still feels with people in this third category. These connections were an essential aspect of participants' online communities. While they may not have been representing their inner circles or closest friends, their internet acquaintances served important purposes.

Olivia described the two Facebook groups she is in as people having a "shared consciousness." She said, "It still feels supportive and a nice community, even though it's not necessarily people I know personally or that I know by name." Users in these groups have formed communities based on common understandings of similar life experiences, and they are able to have relatable conversations.

Participants were wary of the potential risks of internet interactions. To protect their privacy, they often opted to use protective features within the social media apps as defenses against any potential unsavory or hateful interactions, such as keeping their accounts on "private" mode or posting to only "close friends," which is a curated list of invited people. Some spaces were deemed "safer" than others, especially when race-related or personal content was discussed. For example, some groups were moderated or invitation-only, as opposed to being open to any public user. As Jun explained with Reddit, "It's a cool place if you have niche interests. But otherwise, it's kind of a breeding ground for a lot of bad things [*laughs*] ...'cause it's a group of random people on the internet." Jun observed some monoracist behavior in one open Reddit forum for Multiracial people with Asian heritage. However, they were then invited to join a closed, more closely moderated forum for Multiracial people, and that space was more supportive.

Participants were intentional about their online presence and used the technology afforded them to create their virtual worlds. Their Bio and Profiles were key elements in establishing their online identities, as they often included racial and ethnic markers in these spaces. Key life moments and memories were documented through photos and posts on profiles to represent their identities and communities. All of this was in relation to people to

whom they were connected online: Some they knew IRL, others only via the internet, but all served specific purposes for their virtual communities.

### **Engaging in Multiracial Discourse**

Participants used social media as a platform to engage in Multiracial discourse. They discussed topics related to their Multiracial identities, racial identity journeys, social justice advocacy, and more. At times, they were courageous, vulnerable, passionate, and funny as they engaged with fellow Multiracial people, monoracial people, and all others on the internet about various topics. The online communities they had created were conducive to these purposes of dialogue and interaction. The subthemes represent some topics participants often discussed online, including racial (in)authenticity or feelings of “enoughness” and their attempts at reconciling with their proximity to whiteness and associated privileges. The subthemes also show how participants’ online behaviors were purposeful in combatting stereotypes, engaging in activism and education, and giving or receiving advice.

#### ***Racial (In)authenticity***

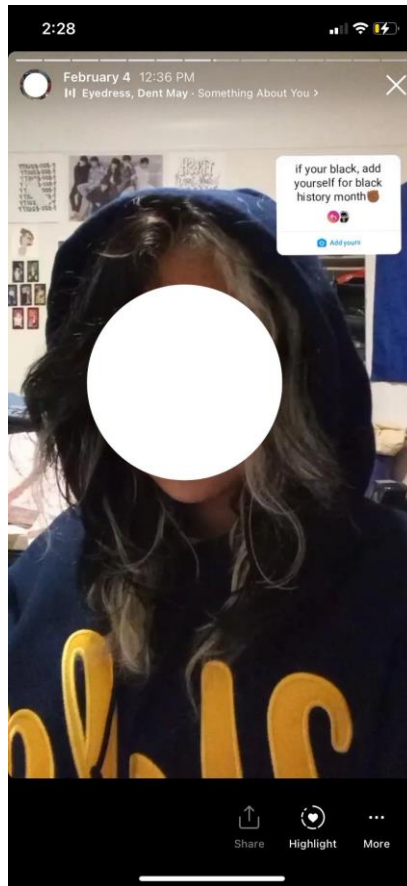
A common concern among Multiracial people is not feeling “enough” in regard to one’s racial identity. This subtheme was apparent in how participants decided to post content, present themselves online, and engage between the digital and physical worlds. When participants shared their experiences mentioning racial (in)authenticity in their online content, it was an opportunity for others to relate with them and build community in solidarity around the topic.

During February, Kero decided to participate in a collaborative Instagram post using the “Add your story” sticker. This interactive feature allows users to add their own responses to a prompt provided by another user, creating a chain of related posts. In this case, the prompt was, “If your [*sic*] black add yourself for black history month [black fist emoji].”

I was a bit hesitant to do this one at first 'cause I was like, I don't know if I can participate. 'Cause there's always the dilemma of, can I actually? 'Cause I'm Black, but I'm not full Black, you know? But then there's also people that are like, it doesn't matter



what percentage, you're still part of that. So at the end of the day, I was just like, you know, who cares? The only people that are gonna see this is the people who responded to the prompt and people who follow me. So I was like, I would like to participate in Black History Month things.



*Figure 9. Black History Month*

Although Kero received one response from someone who said he was unaware she was Black, she mostly received supportive reactions to this post, which made her feel validated in her Black identity. CTDA helps to see that by contributing to the collaborative Black History Month Instagram post, Kero was literally and figuratively claiming her space in the Black online community. All of her followers would see this post, and all future contributors to that interactive story will see her in her Blackness.

Multiple participants were involved in campus student organizations that affirmed or swayed their feelings of racial authenticity. Involvement with these organizations was essential to participants' development of community, both offline and online. These activities were often reflected in their social media activities. Many were connected to their institution's Multiracial or Mixed Student Union (MSU), often having leadership roles in the group. Jun was the founder of their university's MSU, and Kero helped manage their social media. Although other participants were not active MSU members, some said they still followed their school's MSU on social media to keep apprised of activities and learn about mixed issues. In addition to MSUs, participants were in clubs with other foci and affinity groups for specific racial identities, with varied experiences of belonging, which manifested in their social media.

Katherine wanted to join a sorority in college, and her Multiracial identity factored heavily into this decision. She described her thought process when trying to choose between Greek organizations with a social or cultural focus: "I feel as a mixed person, there's some pressure into picking a race in that. Do I go with something cultural because I'm half Asian? Do I go with something not cultural? Is that okay?" In the end, she selected a social organization and said she is happy with her choice:

I do know some people in some of the cultural Asian sororities that I could have joined. And I think I just fit in with the culture here more because it's not about culture; it's just social. And so I think it just alleviates that pressure of trying to prove how Asian I would be in an Asian sorority because I am half white.

Her sorority recently went on a retreat, and she posted a series of photos on Instagram with her sisters, which included happy, smiling group shots of them at a lake, canoeing, and bonding in their matching sweatshirts. Although she elected to join a social sorority, Katherine is still engaged with cultural issues. She volunteered to serve as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Assistant, where she helps facilitate activities and discussions promoting topics of diversity and social justice. By posting photos of her positive experiences with the social sorority, Katherine

displays her choice to join that community and affirms her decision to do so. As a Multiracial person, she feels accepted in that space and is proud to be a member of that organization, so she posts on social media about being a sister.

Liz is involved in multiple cultural-based organizations on campus related to her racial identities, including MSU, Chamorro Club (for people from Guam), and Filipino Club. In one Filipino Club meeting, they played a trivia game, but some of the questions included Tagalog, which she does not speak, and Filipino pop culture references, for which she does not have context.

But then they were talking about food and the stereotypes of an Asian grandmother. I don't have an Asian grandmother, but I do understand the stereotypes. And I understand food and the other cultural aspects of that. So I was able to connect to that part. So even though there is a disconnection, I still am able to find a way to embrace my small part of what it is. ...[I am a] jack of all trades, master of none.

Multiple participants mentioned language as a signifier of race. Some were multilingual, and others said their limited language skills made them feel less than or unable to claim certain racial labels. Emily spoke to this when she posted a poem to her Instagram stories prompted by the theme of paradox entitled, "one ever feels her twoness." In this poem, she described linguistic challenges, including, "i can only say hi in syllables muffled by assimilation to grandma and grandpa on the phone i feel shame during lunar new year i look up 'gung hay fat choy' covertly." Jun said they started learning to speak Japanese in an attempt to connect more with their Asian culture. This happened after a particularly impactful Reddit post where they received a significant number of replies after asking other Multiracial people about their experiences learning their cultural heritages.

### ***Proximity to whiteness***

Multiple participants reconciled with their proximity to whiteness as Multiracial people, which played out in their social media content. Some participants found connection or solidarity

with other mixed people online, whereas others did not appreciate how fellow Multiracial people presented themselves. These polar responses indicate the heterogeneity within the Multiracial community in that it is extremely diverse in makeup and perspectives.

One illustration of this dynamic nature was apparent among people who identify as Wasian. Gloria found it validating to see other Wasian people represented on social media, especially as she did not have many who shared that identity in her physical proximity. However, not all Wasian representation received such admiration from participants. A trend called “Wasian check” was especially popular on TikTok, wherein white and Asian Multiracial (mostly younger) people would showcase the white side of their identity and then show off their Asian side. Jun found this trend disturbing. In a Reddit post responding to a monoracial Asian person who was concerned about wanting to be more Wasian-like, Jun called the trend an unrealistic representation of the Wasian experience perpetuating white supremacist standards of beauty.

Charlene also entered into the Wasian discourse. Although Charlene is not specifically Wasian, she is similar in that she is white-passing and therefore benefits from being proximate to whiteness. On TikTok, she commented on a video interaction of two Wasian daughters jokingly reacting to the question, “Who is that little Asian lady who is always with you?” Another creator stitched [connected] a video in response saying, “This is why I could never have Wasian babies.” Charlene and another commenter shared their reactions as distinct from how the two Wasian women in the video were behaving:

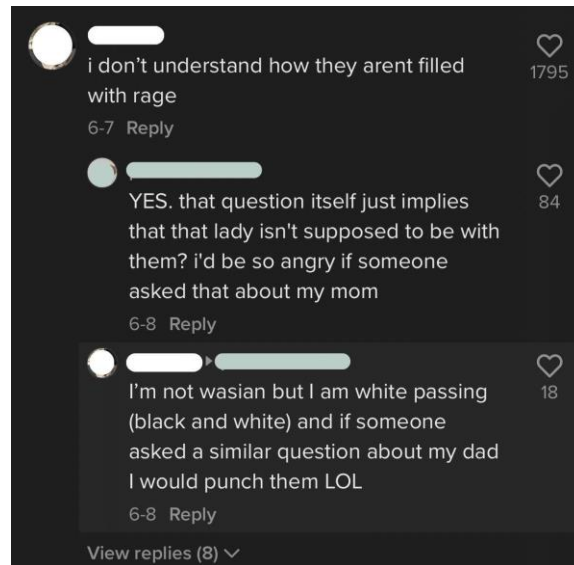


Figure 10. Wasian reactions

Charlene said she commented here to communicate her disdain for the ways some mixed people act.

Participants varied in their acknowledgment or awareness of their privilege as Multiracial people. In another example, Charlene posted a tweet in response to a TikTok video of a white-passing Multiracial person saying they felt like they had the right to say the “N word.” Charlene’s tweet saying, “like???????? omg???????? LMAO” was intended as a disparaging reaction to this person’s behavior. She wanted to make it clear she vehemently disapproved:

I understand why sometimes mixed people are excluded from the conversation [in the Black community]. ...And I want people to be like, yeah, I recognize my privilege as a white-passing person. I want you to check me. And I definitely disagree with these people who are doing that within my community.

Content like this separated participants from other mixed race people with whom they disagreed. They are sending messages to their followers that they are aware of their Multiracial privilege and will act in socially appropriate ways, especially with People of Color. Showing solidarity with those aligned in racial justice matters was significant for community-building, especially for participants with proximity to whiteness. Even small acts of unity were meaningful,

such as a time Emily reposted a cartoon infographic about antiracist fallacies in an attempt to ease into difficult conversations. In another instance, Charlene commented simply “same girl” with a “heart/like” reaction on another user’s TikTok thread where they were discussing their experiences as a white-passing Person of Color. These posts were important for Multiracial participants who were white-presenting or proximate to whiteness to demonstrate their values and be in community with others with similar perspectives.

Participants would also leverage their privilege to advance the collective causes of their racial communities. Emily reposted on her Instagram story a tweet promoting the importance of disaggregating AAPI data, uplifting Pacific Islander and South East Asian voices, and building solidarity between Black and Asian communities. When deciding to repost this tweet, Emily said she thought, “You have to recognize that you also have to amplify the people who are most marginalized in your community and empower them first because that’s how we get somewhere in this world.”

By confronting their proximity to whiteness and their Multiracial privilege, participants were addressing the MultiCrit tenet of racism, monoracism, and colorism. Multiracial people are not immune to racism, experiencing specific forms of racism, monoracism, and colorism. Social media allowed participants to explore and explain their experiences within these oppressive systems. They encountered varying viewpoints and reactions, which led to interactions like the aforementioned, wherein participants added their own comments or replies to posts. These interactions also often sparked self-reflection and increased awareness for participants about their own power and privilege related to their racial identities and place in societal systems.

### ***Combatting Stereotypes***

Participants often used their social media reach to dispel assumptions about their racial identities or cultural backgrounds. They intentionally posted content meant to counter myths about their heritages or communities. Participants used social media to amplify complementary figures and favorable imagery and display solidarity within their communities by showcasing

counterstories. This social media use contributed to community-building around the counternarratives.

Emily used a recent Instagram post to declare her identity as a scholar and push back against systemic barriers. She had recently presented original research at a conference, and this post showcased her accomplishments:

This was a way for me to model community and show as an Asian person, I can be a researcher. I can be a scholar in a way that isn't just being a studious, machinic person, but reproducing my self-knowledge that challenges tools and systems of knowledge that have been used to oppress people who look like me. ...So how can I use these tools to challenge the systems that produce them?



Figure 11. Scholar

This post was not a grandiose display of Emily's academic achievements but an attempt to dismantle systems by challenging the model minority stereotype of Asian women as meek and humble bystanders. By proudly sharing about her research and presentation, she confidently establishes herself as an achiever and becomes a possible role model for her followers, some with like identities.

Gloria shared a photo on Instagram from a recent visit back to the Philippines. She wanted to showcase the positive qualities of this country, which may not be as well known:

It is so important that people know that the Philippines is a really beautiful country because I know it doesn't have the best image in other people's minds of being like a third-world country and everything. But it is very beautiful to me, and I hope it is very beautiful to everyone. So I will post as much of it on my story as I can.



*Figure 12. Beautiful country*



By posting photos and other content from her travels, Gloria leverages her outlet on social media to advance her goal of educating others about what the Philippines is really like, instead of what derogatory stereotypes indicate about this country and its people.

With these types of posts, participants embraced the MultiCrit tenets of using their experiential knowledge to challenge dominant ideologies. As both examples show, participants used their narrative voices on social media to tell their counterstories. Emily's goal in posting her scholarly achievements was to show other members of the Asian American community they could also be researchers and engage in the world of academia. Gloria has the privilege of traveling to the country connected to her racial community. She amplifies her message to her followers so they can vicariously experience the beauty she sees firsthand.

### ***Activism and Education***

Participants used social media to educate themselves and others, especially about social justice and equity issues. Topics mentioned in the interviews included racial justice (particularly Black Lives Matter, Stop AAPI Hate, and indigenous rights), gun violence, and reproductive rights. Participants said they share infographics, resources, and actionable content for themselves and their followers. Charlene explained, "I try to repost and make posts easier to read, make petitions easier to sign. So people just swipe up and do it." By making posts actionable, participants encourage engagement with other members of their virtual communities. Instead of passive consumer content, clickable and actionable posts like petitions are interactive and reactive. CTDA calls for an analysis of technological belief and practice. With these strategies, participants were attempting to use technologies to put their beliefs into action by providing tangible steps that could be taken through their social media posts.

Liz explained why she chooses to pose educational and activist content on her social media, specifically Instagram stories, which are easy to click through mindlessly:

Of course, it's not gonna be perfect. This isn't gonna stop [racism], but it's one way of doing it. ...I feel like just being able to talk about a situation changes the situation

through the changing of a mindset. ...I feel like it is an integral way of educating people, especially through a social media platform, because people can just be scrolling through their stories, seeing like, Oh someone went hiking today. Someone went to go get food. *Oh racism*, in the next story. You sometimes get caught off guard.

By posting this kind of informative content with a social justice theme, Liz wants to interrupt the typical conversations happening online and perhaps spark some kind of reaction or change with her followers.

Current events were often brought into online spaces. After the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* (1973), there were many reactions. Olivia turned to social media, and her siblings, to process her feelings. In a Facebook messenger chat with her siblings, Olivia shared a post from the Facebook group for mixed race people where another user had commented about Loving (referring to the *Loving v. Virginia* [1967] Supreme Court case that legalized interracial marriage) potentially being overturned next as a form of revenge on Justice Clarence Thomas, who is in an interracial marriage and was one of the justices who voted to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Olivia elicited conversation with her siblings and shared her upset feelings in the chat by asking, “Did yall know that people are saying this. [crying face emoji]”



Figure 13. Current events

Olivia said she was sad and angry after *Roe v. Wade* was reversed. Through Messenger, she sought conversation with people whom she felt could understand her:

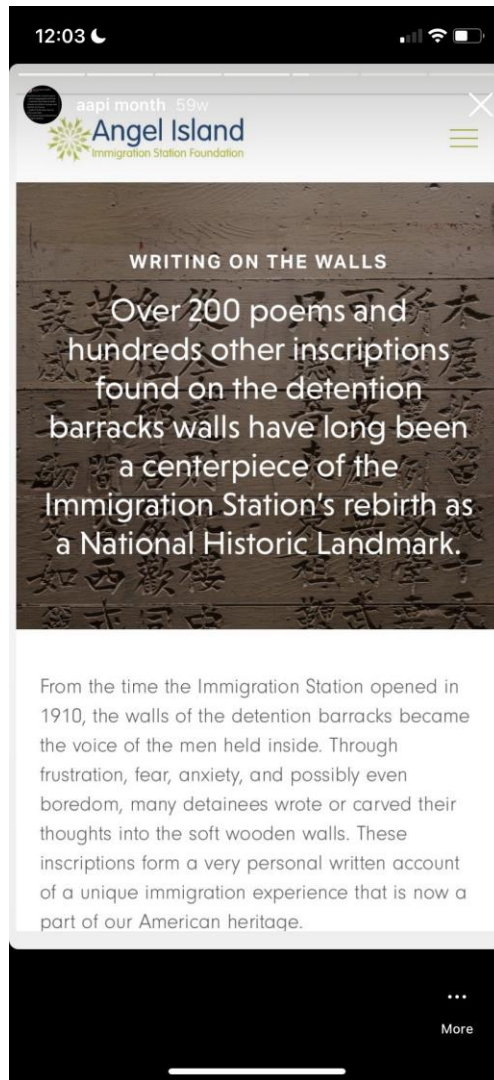
It's nice to have an outlet with people who might relate to you more, at least in that certain aspect, than other people in your life. ...I go to [my siblings] when I have things about this identity that I wanna talk about.

She used the social media space to process her reaction to *Roe v. Wade* and the specific connection to her Multiracial identity.

Emily posted an article to her Instagram story in response to the rise in anti-Asian hate crimes. She explained how she wanted to humanize the historical violence Asian Americans have experienced in this country. She said she was compelled to post this article after feeling frustrated by uninformed responses from her peers who did not seem to understand Asian American experiences with racism:

That was universal across my white peers and also people of color that I knew who weren't Asian. They were like, "I didn't think y'all experienced racism before [the rise in hate crimes]." ...So, I just really wanted to challenge that with some of the history behind a lot of the ways Asian hate is state-sanctioned violence in America's history. ...And this is why people think that somehow that spike in hate crimes was an anomaly. When it's just an echo of history.

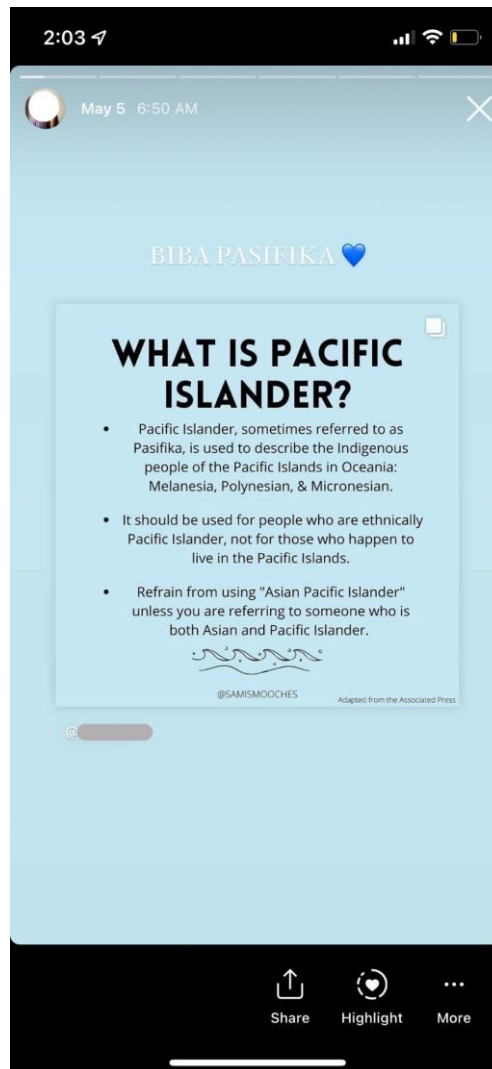
Emily noticed a dearth of education in her community regarding the history of anti-Asian American racism. She took to social media to influence her peers, as this is where she felt she had a platform and influence. She was passionate about the topic and shared information and resources to educate herself and others.



*Figure 14. History*

Multiple participants talked about reposting infographics or simple animations as a method of communicating often-complex concepts in an accessible, digestible manner. For example, Liz reposted a graphic on her story entitled, "What is Pacific Islander?" There were multiple purposes for sharing this post. First, it communicated her identity as a Pacific Islander, as someone who is from Guam. She added the caption "BIBA PASIFIKA" ["Hooray Pasifika!"] with a blue heart emoji to demonstrate her ethnic pride. Second, she wanted to educate people on the proper usage of this identity, as there are often misconceptions about who can use the

term. “I wanna make sure people know that you can’t really take away what other people are and claim it as yours. I’m big on cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation,” Liz explained.



*Figure 15. Educating*

Applying a MultiCrit analysis, participants challenged ahistoricism in their efforts to engage in activism and education, especially related to current events and social justice topics. Fully understanding the experiences of Multiracial students requires an understanding of historical and contemporary contexts. Participants contributed to this understanding for themselves and others through their activist and educational social media activities. They tried to keep themselves and their followers informed about relevant issues, such as a potential

Multiracial connection to *Roe v. Wade*, historical context for anti-AAPI hate crimes, and appropriate use of the Pacific Islander identity.

### ***Giving and Receiving Advice***

Another aspect of discourse was the exchange of advice or support, especially related to matters of race or identity. Sabine found culturally appropriate makeup tutorials on Instagram. Jun turned to Reddit to ask questions regarding their racial identity. Jun also often replied to Reddit posts and comment threads in forums for Multiracial people. In one private Discord group chat with friends, Olivia shared about her racial identity journey and how she has become more comfortable with her mixed identity over time. Her friends responded with “heart” and “applause” supportive reactions.

In another example, Jun wrote a lengthy reply to a question sharing some of their personal story. A month later, the original poster wrote back, expressing gratitude, and Jun replied with additional comments and support. Jun saw this exchange as “community in action.” When asked why they post this kind of content, Jun explained:

I’m kind of doing what I can to help people who have been hurt by the system the same way I have. And just being able to tell people that I guess they’re not alone. Other people are going through this, and it’s not your fault.

In these ways, the participants were benefiting from, contributing to, and furthering supportive dialogue in online spaces for Multiracial people.

These kinds of Multiracial discourse were important for many participants, although they did not feel burdened. They considered entering into these kinds of conversations to be a personal choice. Jun said they felt that once they became more self-aware and engaged with Multiracial issues, they were compelled to be more vocal online and also in person:

Now that I have been in the position where I can see all the working parts and everything, why should I not? There’s obviously so much work that needs to be done.

...If I wasn't conscious of all the systemic issues that were affecting me and people within my community, why should I not? Why should I turn a blind eye to it?

These comments indicate feelings of empowerment shared by participants in the study. Social media helped them understand they had something to say, encouraged them to develop their voices, and facilitated them finding people to share their messages with. They also realized they were in control of those virtual communities: who is in them, how they are built, and how they are maintained.

To build and maintain their online communities, participants engaged in Multiracial discourse on their social media. They talked about topics and issues pertinent to them as Multiracial people and their identities. Discussions about racial (in)authenticity and feelings of being "enough" were common in both their online and physical worlds. Conversations about Multiracial privilege and intersections with whiteness provided a critical perspective. Often, participants sought to oppose stereotypes and provide positive counternarratives of their racial identities through their social media. They were also activists and educators, often purposefully sharing information and resources. Finally, they were cultivating affirming communities through advising and supporting each other.

### **Interpretations of Findings**

I used two frameworks for this study and applied them to interpret the findings in the following section. In applying virtual kinship networks frameworks, I analyzed the ways Multiracial students connected with different people and why they connected. The findings also confirmed multiple tenets from MultiCrit, and I provided explanations for each tenet.

### **Applications of Virtual Kinship**

Applying the framework of virtual kinship networks (Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2017) to this study, I found that Multiracial students created and maintained different types of kinship networks. The findings indicate Multiracial students are connected to a variety of categories of people when online, each with various purposes and different expectations of

intimacy and connection. The three categories of people students interacted with are those they knew in real life (IRL), influencers, and internet acquaintances.

In the first category were people students knew IRL, which often included family, friends, and classmates. This network would be most intimate and privy to private details of students' lives. Most participants said the people in this network were most prominent in their social media connections. They used social media to maintain community with their IRL blood and chosen kin. As college students, they might not live near family and friends or see them as often, so social media allows them to stay updated with life happenings. Multiple participants incorporated family into their social media content or used these tools to stay in communication with siblings or relatives. A generational divide was evident when students spoke about Facebook. Several participants mentioned this resource was not their primary media, but they checked in on the application for their elder relatives. This first network also facilitated community-building with new connections. Participants stated they would often share social media handles when meeting new people or follow each other upon making contact in person, such as at an event or in class.

The second category was celebrities or influencers, people with whom the participants did not have direct, personal relationships. This network's purpose was more transactional or utilitarian. Participants connected with this group to learn information, be inspired, and stay current on trends. Though this second network might not have provided emotional intimacy, it was important for identity affirmation. Students saw themselves and their identities represented in positive, successful circumstances, whether as sports figures, actors, scholars, or others prominent in their field. Role models like this combat negative stereotypes about participants' identities or cultures. This network's impact extended from the macro (e.g., international movie stars) to the micro (e.g., individual users documenting their life travels), as participants discussed feeling connected to people like them as they followed these accounts on social media. This network served to affirm and expand participants' confidence and worldviews.



The final category was internet acquaintances, people with whom participants interacted online but had not met in person. Most often, students opted into participation and cultivation of these networks, happening upon or seeking out networks through trending topics, hashtags, Facebook groups, and other content related to Multiracial issues. After they viewed and interacted with the posts, predictive and recursive social media algorithms, like TikTok's For You Page and Instagram's Explore page, showed participants similar content, further expanding their networks.

Zappavinga (2011) called this kind of connection ambient "affiliation," defined as a "copresent, impermanent community by bonding around evolving topics of interest" (p. 800). Multiracial students could opt into the loosely affiliated networks related to Multiracial topics. They might see some familiar avatars or usernames if they are frequent visitors to those spaces; regardless, they were united in the commonalities of identities and lived experiences as Multiracial people. Although they have not had interpersonal connections with people in this third network, their virtual kinship and ambient affiliation were essential components of their Multiracial community. Participants could find others across the internet with similar Multiracial identities or relatable experiences, which affirmed and validated their own lived experiences. They also engaged in meaningful discourse and dialogue with people in this network, as well as the first network of IRL connections.

### **Applications of Critical Multiracial Theory**

The second theoretical framework for this study was MultiCrit (Harris, 2016). MultiCrit is a means to specifically account for the racialized experiences of Multiracial students in higher education, making it ideal for this study. The findings supported multiple MultiCrit tenets, particularly experiential knowledge, challenge to dominant ideology, challenge to ahistoricism, and racism, monoracism, and colorism.

### ***Experiential Knowledge***

MultiCrit focuses on narratives directly from Multiracial students to highlight their experiential knowledge. MultiCrit, and CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano et al., 2000), on which it is based, encourage experiential knowledge through storytelling and counternarratives. In this tenet, Multiracial students' knowledge forms their lived experiences, expressed through stories via whichever media has power, and is important to understanding and combatting systems of power and privilege. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) stated, "Powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of common humanity" (p. 51). Social media were ideal for centering the voices of Multiracial participants in this study, affording students independence over their content so they could control how and what messages they publish about themselves. Participants displayed deft skill in using technologies to craft their online identities intentionally. They demonstrated their experiential knowledge through their Bios and Profiles, proudly proclaiming their racial and ethnic identities. With posts of life snapshots and core memories, they documented lived experiences as they navigated the world as Multiracial people.

### ***Challenge to Dominant Ideology***

Working in concert with experiential knowledge, another component of MultiCrit is challenging dominant ideology. Counterstories are useful to "challenge, displace, or mock" stereotypical or discriminatory beliefs about racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 50). Study participants used their counternarratives to challenge prevailing ideas about their racial and ethnic cultures, whether they held overall Multiracial or specific monoracial identities. Students were well aware of master narratives and stereotypes imposed upon them by societal norms. They pushed back against these perceptions with their intentionally curated social media content selected to represent positive or noteworthy contrasting characteristics. They used their virtual voices to reject the dominant ideals and offer alternative views based on their lived

experiences. Harris (2016) stressed that Multiracial students could use their experiential knowledge to challenge dominant ideologies and address racial inequities in education and U.S. society. This study's participants voiced similar motivations.

### ***Challenge to Ahistoricism***

MultiCrit is a challenge to ahistoricism, accounting for both historical and contemporary contexts. As a means to fully understand race and Multiraciality, this tenet indicates establishing analysis within U.S. history and contemporary society. Social media was particularly good for accounting for the contemporary context by helping participants become conscious of current events and trends. Participants attempted to use social media to stay informed and educate others regarding social justice topics and matters related to their racial identities. They sought information, news, and resources; posted identity-related content, especially during heritage months (e.g., Black History Month, Filipino American History Month); or shared videos about causes meaningful to them (e.g., indigenous rights). Social platforms allow them to react, repost, and disseminate these resources to encourage further action or information-sharing with their followers.

### ***Racism, Monoracism, and Colorism***

CRT shows racism as socially constructed, endemic, and permanent to U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). MultiCrit expands this tenet to account for Multiracial students' experiences with monoracism and colorism. This study's findings confirmed the presence of racism, monoracism, and colorism in social media for Multiracial students. Participants both used social media to document their experiences with these oppressive systems and experienced instances of prejudices through these media. Students were empowered to share stories when they felt strongly about injustices happening in the world or impacting their communities, often posting specific resources or personal posts related to racial justice. Yet, at the same time, participants were susceptible to Multiracial microaggressions while online, such as when Kero posted her Black History Month Instagram story, and someone responded they

did not know she was Black. Although they might seem minor, the comments still perpetuate the microaggression of Multiracial identity denial.

### **Conclusion**

Participants shared glimpses into their virtual worlds through interviews and selected artifacts from their online activities, providing data for this study. Analyzing the data using MultiCrit and CTDA strategies to explore how Multiracial college students build and maintain community using social media showed three themes and multiple subthemes. The primary themes were seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. Seeking similarities with Multiracial people showed why students turn to social media to find and build communities with those having like identities and experiences. Participants sought Multiracial representation on their social media, followed influencers with similar identities, and found relatable content and validation through their online interactions with other Multiracial people. Through the theme of cultivating an online persona, participants demonstrated how they use the technological features of social media to build and maintain their virtual communities. They used their Bio and Profile features intentionally, documented key life snapshots and core memories, and surrounded themselves with purposeful networks of internet connections. Finally, the theme and subthemes within engaging in Multiracial discourse showed the types of behaviors Multiracial students display within their online communities. In this discourse, they interacted with each other about essential Multiracial topics, including feelings of racial (in)authenticity, wrestling with Multiracial privilege and whiteness, challenging stereotypes about their race, advocating and educating, and advising and supporting fellow community members. The findings also showed types of virtual kinship networks formed by Multiracial students, confirming some MultiCrit tenets. Chapter Five presents a discussion of the connections to literature and recommendations for practice.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONNECTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand how Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community. I conducted this inquiry with a phenomenological approach using data from participant-generated elicitations and interviews with 10 Multiracial college students from institutions across the United States. Using thematic analysis and critical technocultural discourse analysis, I arrived at findings consisting of three main themes and related subthemes. The primary themes were seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. In this chapter, I connect these findings to current literature and theory, provide implications for practical action for Multiracial people and higher education practitioners, offer recommendations for future research, and conclude with researcher reflections.

### **Connections to Literature**

In this section, I situate this study in the context of related scholarship. Building on theories of Multiracial identity, the findings show counterstorytelling and systems of monoracism. The concept of virtual ecologies was also applicable as participants engaged in virtual environments with their communities.

### **Multiracial Identity Theories**

This study suggests ways social media can affect Multiracial students' identities in both expression and development. In studying the virtual world, I enhance previous theories of Multiracial identity and present current students' realities. By accounting for the virtual world, scholars can have expanded understanding of previously established Multiracial identity patterns (Renn, 2004, 2008), concepts of salience (Renn, 2003; Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001, 2012), and influential factors for Multiracial identity development (Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001).

Renn (2004) identified five patterns of identity in Multiracial college students: monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identities, Multiracial identity, extraracial identity, and situational identity. According to Renn, students can identify with one or more patterns, depending on their contexts and environments. The participants in this study exhibited some of these patterns. The information Jun and Olivia shared indicated their identities would fit the Multiracial identity pattern, as they labeled themselves mixed or mixed race. They both joined social media groups and forums related to these mixed identities to engage in dialogue about this part of their lives. Other participants showed the pattern of multiple monoracial identities, such as Liz, who identified as Native Pacific Islander and Filipino. Liz participated in cultural clubs for both monoracial identities as well as the MSU for her Multiracial identity. No participants expressed the extraracial identity pattern, which is the rejection of socially constructed racial categories. Although some participants might not have deemed race their most salient identity, this did not mean they rejected their race as an identity they held. This extraracial identity pattern was the least prominent in Renn's study, so its lack of representation in this sample was unsurprising.

One of Renn's (2004) patterns was situational identity, where a person's racial identity is stable, and certain aspects could be more salient in different situations. Traditionally, situational identity could mean a student identified as Black at home and Asian at school. Situational identity applies to movement within the various patterns. Renn accounted for ecologies and peer cultures as influences on students' identity patterns but did not discuss the online environment as a factor. This study offers virtual environments as additional situations for Multiracial students to consider as they navigate their identities. Students must decide if and how they will present themselves as racialized beings in online situations—for example, whether to list their racial identity in their Bio or Profile or post race-related content in their feeds. This study's participants spoke of their intentionality in cultivating their online persona regarding race. Some, like Jun and Katherine, discussed their attempts to convey their non-white racial identities in online spaces, a contemporary version of the situational identity pattern.

This study affirms and expands the understanding of salience as it relates to Multiracial identity. Scholars have discussed salience as an essential component of Multiracial identity, meaning how important individuals' Multiracial identity is to them at a given time (Renn, 2003; Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001, 2012). Salience can be contextual and variable, such as when a student is with family versus at school. This study contributes the digital sphere to discussions of salience. The participants' discussions showed they made frequent decisions about how salient their Multiracial identities would be in their virtual worlds, which impacted how they cultivated their online personas. Some students with high salience were explicit and upfront about their racial and ethnic expressions in their social media activities. Those with lower salience might have primarily reflected other topics or personal interests in their social media content.

This study's findings suggest the virtual environment and media systems can also be influential factors in Multiracial identity development. Using ecological paradigms, scholars have attempted to determine factors and systems influencing Multiracial identity (Root, 2002; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Among other topics, family structures, physical appearance, and cultural knowledge emerged as important factors in Multiracial identity formation. Participants' further developed their Multiracial identities by connecting with others like them online, crafting their own narratives, and engaging in meaningful interactions about these topics. Students sought out Multiraciality in virtual spaces and engaged in interactions related to their Multiracial identities while on social media. The monoracism and other systemic oppression they encountered on the internet could have contributed to their Multiracial identity development, encouraging critical reflection that facilitated community-building among Multiracial students and their peers who held like identities or life experiences. This finding is similar to Chan (2017), who found students of color made meaning of their racial identities through their social media interactions. In this digital age, it is logical for such pervasive technologies as social media to impact Multiracial students.

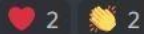
## **Counterstorytelling**

The literature provided context for participants' counterstories about their racial journeys using social media. Kellogg and Liddell (2012) discussed critical incidents for Multiracial students as they came to understand their race and racial identities. Many of this study's participants used social media to document these kinds of critical incidents as they posted or commented about their racialized experiences and crafted their counterstories online. Gloria's photos of the two similar but contrasting group meal gatherings are examples of critical incidents. Commemorating these events on social media helped facilitate community building and meaning-making for Gloria.

Participants also told their stories of racial navigation and reclamation. As in Chang's (2014) study, my participants acted as racial *atravesados/as*, claiming their (virtual) spaces and speaking their truths about their racial identities. The digital racial *atravesados/as* might have navigated tensions in monoracial environments, but they also navigated their own racial identities. Figure 16 shows an example of storytelling of racial navigation in a private Discord chat Olivia had with close friends. In this exchange, her friends were asking each other about lessons they had learned since being in college. Olivia wanted them to know about her journey regarding her Multiracial identity and how her perspectives have changed over time, making her more confident and comfortable with herself. Olivia found it important that her loved ones know these things about her, so she was willing to be vulnerable and share her racial narrative. Her friends responded supportively, with "heart" and "applause" reactions, and she felt encouraged. Because Olivia and her friends no longer live in the same location, they could stay connected digitally and asynchronously via social media.



Okay and my last one! You guys know that I have always felt a little lost in how I think about my racial/ethnic identity, because I never found a label that fit, so I would get butthurt if strangers would say I was white or I was Asian (because to me it felt like they were assuming I was only that thing). But I've gotten involved in multiracial research here at [redacted] and like it's been so validating. Now I have vocabulary to describe who and what I am, and I've found peace knowing that there isn't a perfect category for me and that I'm happy in knowing that I exist in a wacky space beyond typical categories. So now my label of choice is "mixed," but I also don't mind nearly as much anymore if someone calls me Asian or white or something like that because I'm so more more comfortable in my own skin and realize that I am both things as well as mixed, not just fractions of different things that are mixed.



*Figure 16. Critical racial storytelling*

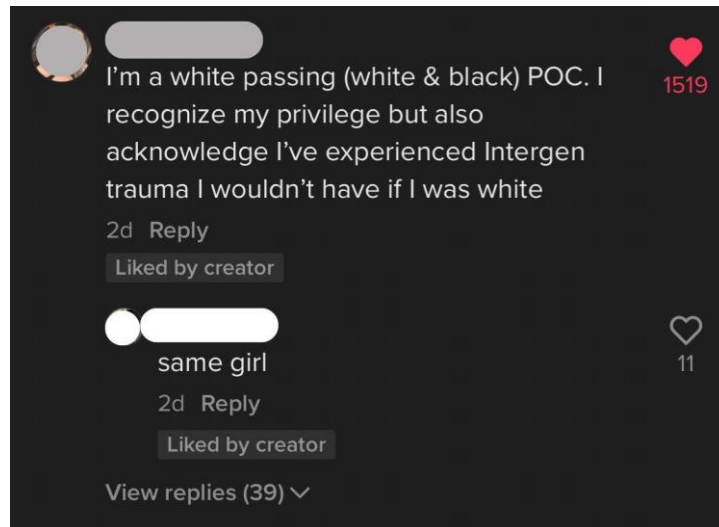
Through engagement like Olivia's, the Multiracial study participants used their experiential knowledge and counterstories to build and maintain community with each other and their friends.

Some consequences of sharing Multiracial students' counterstories are exposing, analyzing, and understanding (mono)racist systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harris, 2016). Participants' intentions to engage in Multiracial discourse on social media aligned with Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) claim, "Stories can name a type of discrimination (e.g., microaggression, unconscious discrimination, or structural racism); once named, it can be combated" (p. 51). Sharing posts that challenged stereotypes or exposed monoracist experiences was a means to dismantle oppressive systems. Participants used social media specifically to challenge dominant ideologies because the platforms allow for widespread reach and impact. Although students might be limited by their friends on campus or family at home, their internet posts can be seen and shared by followers and others across physical and temporal boundaries. Some students had private accounts or stricter sharing settings, yet social media afforded them an audience and opportunities to broadcast their stories. Even working within privacy settings, participants could share within their networks and stay connected to the members of their online communities by providing their perspectives and stories.

## **Monoracism**

Racism, monoracism, and colorism were often apparent as participants encountered Multiracial microaggressions (see Johnston & Nadal, 2010) related to systems of racial oppression. Kero's monoracist incident with the rideshare driver was a quintessential example of the assumption of monoracial or mistaken identity as Multiracial microaggression. Much of the data within the racial (in)authenticity subtheme were instances of exclusion or isolation microaggressions. Participants received implicit messages from others that they had to choose a racial group or felt they did not fit authentically in (mono)racial spaces.

Gay et al. (2022) proposed an emerging microaggression category: white-mixed superiority. This microaggression occurred especially when mixed race people with white heritage displayed prejudice toward other Multiracial people who held multiple minoritized identities. Although the students in this study might have encountered instances of white-mixed superiority microaggression online, they were not apt to perpetuate it. On the contrary, participants who chose to acknowledge their proximity to whiteness or Multiracial privilege were explicit about combatting systems of white supremacy and distancing themselves from others who espoused such concepts of superiority. Figure 17 shows Charlene's exchange on TikTok after responding to another user's comment. The poster explained the delicate balance between acknowledging their privilege in being a white-passing Person of Color while holding their traumatic realities as a non-white person. Charlene responded with a sympathetic "same girl" and a "heart" reaction to show support.



*Figure 17. Addressing Multiracial privilege*

Charlene's comment shows solidarity with the poster reflecting on their privileges, in contrast to promoting the white-mixed superiority microaggression Gay et al. (2022) found. Instead of avoiding topics of Multiracial privilege or systems of white supremacy, study participants sought out opportunities to engage in conversations or initiated productive dialogue themselves.

Some participants also exhibited internalized monoracism, which Johnston-Guerrero and Wijeyesinghe (2021) found "occurs when Multiracial people adopt monoracial-only understandings of race and act in ways that uphold this paradigm" (p. 65). Monoracism was apparent when participants elected not to engage with racial justice topics or activism for fear of controversy or discomfort based on their perceived racial privileges and social location. Internalized monoracism was also evident when participants questioned their racial authenticity or group membership, which were feelings of racial inadequacy on social media also shared by Multiracial participants in previous studies (Betancourt, 2018; Verlezza, 2020). Another example of internalized monoracism is the unwillingness to recognize instances of monoracism itself. Johnston-Guerrero et al. (2020) found Multiracial participants experienced Multiracial microaggressions or other incidents of racial oppression but did not name them as such. Some of the students in this study exhibited similar behavior. Amy described her and her brother being

called beautiful and treated differently when visiting Japan as children. However, she denied these were racist experiences, dismissing the behavior as typical of elders in the community.

### **Virtual Ecologies**

Within Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1993) ecological system theory, individuals develop in relation to their environment and the levels of systems in that environment. In their "technologized" adaptation, Navarro and Tudge (2022) added the virtual microsystem to Bronfenbrenner's theory. This study confirmed the importance of and interplay between virtual and physical microsystems in Multiracial students' ecologies and communities. The students demonstrated how they existed in the virtual and physical microsystems simultaneously, especially those lucky enough to have accepting communities within their local environments. For example, participants who were members of student organizations, like Katherine, would engage in face-to-face group activities and post about the organizations' activities on their social media to represent their membership and connect with others in the group. This finding differed from Patterson (2017), whose participants identified a greater distinction between the online and offline worlds. Whereas Patterson's Multiracial participants created community with their YouTube audiences, the students in this study discussed a variety of kinship networks across multiple physical and virtual ecologies.

Certain features of social media virtual ecologies especially lend themselves to the development of community for Multiracial students, particularly availability, replicability, and visualness (Navarro & Tudge, 2022). These affordances facilitate connection for Multiracial students across traditional barriers of time and space, helping students find people with like identities and experiences across the World Wide Web. This study's participants voiced attitudes similar to previous research on Multiracial students' social media activities, such as Ingram et al.'s (2014) study, where a majority of Biracial students surveyed said they used social media to connect with other "multicultural individuals." King-O'Riain (2022) described the development of a global virtual community in relation to the #Wasian and #WasianCheck social

media trends. Multiple participants in this study organically named and discussed these trends as salient to their online experiences and Multiracial identities, further demonstrating the impact. Notably, a Multiracial U.S. college student started the #WasianCheck trend. It is unlikely this student could predict his video and sound would go viral internationally, yet the hashtag resonated with members of the Multiracial community, sparking thousands of reaction posts and launching an entire virtual sensation.

### **Implications for Action**

With this study, I hope to inform higher education practice in support of Multiracial students. It is time to disrupt higher education institutions rooted in monoracial paradigms. Multiracial student populations are growing, yet higher education institutions are poorly equipped to serve them. This study is significant as it addressed a gap in the literature at the intersection of media studies and higher education scholarship, both of which have historically focused on monoracial populations. The following are recommendations for affirming and inclusive practice for Multiracial people grounded in this study's findings. These suggestions can promote the building and maintenance of the Multiracial student community in virtual spaces.

### **Acknowledge Critical Realities of Multiracial Students' Experiences**

It is essential to continue to situate Multiracial students' lived experiences within a critical context. They live and learn within systems often engrained in monoracism, white supremacy, and other intersecting oppressions. MultiCrit was a useful framework to analyze participants' counternarratives, leading to findings related to tenets of experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideology, challenging ahistoricism, and acknowledging racism, monoracism, and colorism. Incorporating this critical lens into everyday practice and organizational policy would be advantageous. For example, institutions should examine their practices for counting and reporting Multiracial demographic data and ensure they accurately capture the "two or more races" population in their communities. Multicultural affairs departments should reflect on their practices regarding the inclusion of Multiracial students, especially amid structures based on

monoracial identity categories. It is time to examine what messages about welcoming and belonging, explicit or implicit, institutions rooted in monoracism send to students of more than one race about their opportunities for engagement with certain multicultural or diversity resources.

Critical conversations about Multiraciality should be encouraged among not only Multiracial students but also wider campus communities. Museus et al. (2011) found that “colorblind” strategies that do not address race or racism were not helpful to campus climates, especially for Multiracial students. As participants in this study demonstrated, Multiracial students are already tackling these critical topics in their conversations and interactions with each other, and they are eager to discuss these topics. As practitioners plan curricula and develop programming, they can support these efforts and encourage the development of Multiracial consciousness in Multiracial students (Malaney-Brown, 2022). Ways to achieve these objectives include guest speakers, social events, educational programming, and others. Multiracial scholars, guests, and narratives should be incorporated into campus life and academia, and they should be named as such to increase awareness and promote inclusion. The Ethnic Studies Department could offer a course entitled “Mixed Race Studies,” with curricula that include histories of Multiracial people, racial policies impacting this population, and social justice dynamics, such as monoracism. As this study’s findings show, there is power in representation. Seeing oneself represented in the classroom and beyond would be affirming, a sign of recognition and legitimacy from the institution.

Encouraging and facilitating Multiracial students on social media are ideal antidotes for challenging certain characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 2021). The “either/or and the binary” characteristic of white supremacy calls for reducing “the complexity of life and the nuances of our relationships with each other and all living things into either/or, yes or no, right or wrong in ways that reinforce toxic power” (Okun, 2021, p 14). Multiracial people who do not fit neatly into monoracial or binary racial categories disrupt this by claiming space and sharing their

stories on social media. Another characteristic is “worship of the written word,” which “explores our cultural habit of honoring only what is written and only what is written to a narrow standard” (Okun, 2021, p. 17). As an opportunity for challenging this, social media are dynamic, often enabling multimedia with video, sound, text, emojis, and graphics so Multiracial people can express themselves in various ways in addition to the written word.

### **Encourage Multiracial Virtual Affinity Spaces**

Findings from this study and others (e.g., Chan, 2017; Miller, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017) indicate college students are exploring their identities in virtual spaces. Higher education professionals should assist Multiracial students in meaning-making with these technological tools. Participants in this study demonstrated they have much to discuss regarding their Multiracial identities and experiences. Museus et al. (2011) recommended having dialogues about racial topics, including Multiracial issues. King (2008) suggested the creation of “racial homes” (p. 39) for Multiracial students. Virtual spaces, specifically social media, could be solutions for Multiracial students, especially if physical options are limited or feel unwelcoming. If given opportunities and gentle facilitation, Multiracial students could be willing to converse and engage with each other in online spaces. Lightly moderating these spaces would prevent hateful interlopers from encroaching on arenas intended to be supportive communities. However, the monitoring should not be such that students cannot feel free to be their authentic selves.

Easy entry points for these activities are Multiracial student organizations, such as MSUs. Most student groups, Multiracial or otherwise, have a social media presence. Advisors can support the development of intentional social media strategies with Multiracial student groups. Beyond promoting upcoming events and elections, clubs can use social media for building and maintaining community and offering inviting and inclusive connections. The participants in this study would appreciate relatable content where students can see their experiences affirmed and validated and view examples of Multiracial discourse.

Figure 18 shows an example from the MSU at Jun's institution. During an in-person meeting, club members created a word cloud responding to the question, "What is it like to be mixed?" and discussed reactions in that space. After the meeting, they posted the image on the club's Instagram account to continue the conversation. By incorporating social media, this kind of content has the potential to bridge virtual and physical ecologies. Students who participated in activities physically can see their experiences documented. Those who could not engage in person have opportunities to participate virtually through comments, likes, and shares. Social media expands interactions for the MSU community and invites students not otherwise able to be in relationships with each other.



Figure 18. Mixed Student Union

### Provide Media Literacy and Technological Education

Students often hear how not to behave on the internet or how to engage in meaningful ways on social media. They hear warnings about posting crass behavior on the internet in case potential employers see it when searching their name. Rarely do they receive coaching on how to have a positive presence online or how social media could be beneficial or meaningful in their personal growth. In addition, it is becoming increasingly common for younger generations to turn to social media for research instead of more traditional sources. In this study, for example,



Sabine looked for culturally relevant makeup ideas, and others sought ethnic food recommendations. Recent surveys also indicate members of Generation Z look to TikTok and Instagram for news and other sources of information (Cavender, 2022); however, the potential for misinformation remains. Media research organization NewsGuard (Brewster et al., 2022) reviewed 540 TikTok news-related videos and found nearly 20% contained false or misleading claims. Media literacy education is essential, and this is an opportunity for higher education professionals to provide support. Through workshops and resources, students can determine which online sources are credible and how to protect themselves in virtual environments.

Technological education should not be limited to students. Higher education professionals should be well-versed in media literacy and social media strategies. They should be familiar with popular applications so they can knowledgeably engage in social conversations. Professionals should be aware of common technologies and the basics of how they operate. To reach Multiracial students, colleges and departments would benefit from having active social media accounts, as study participants mentioned following accounts for informational purposes. Professionals' knowledge of cultural trends or events relevant to Multiracial populations would also be helpful. They could use social media monitoring or listening resources without significant time investments, such as Google Alerts or other topic-tracking tools. This is also a great opportunity to embrace MultiCrit tenets and the experiential knowledge of Multiracial students themselves. By inviting students to share their expertise on social trends and online experiences, professionals could facilitate mutual learning conversations about social media.

### **Directions for Future Study**

This study contributes to the ongoing conversations of Multiracial scholarship and media studies. There are several opportunities for future researchers to continue the dialogue and advance the literature. First, I suggest expanding the sample population to increase understanding of Multiracial students. Next, I offer thoughts on methods and suggestions for complementary studies to build upon this research.

This study was significant as it addressed a gap in media studies where literature has had a mostly monoracial paradigm. Most prior studies related to social media included samples with single-race demographic data or did not specifically address Multiracial populations. Findings from this study contributed to the conversation as I explored the experiences of Multiracial people with a purposeful sample of 10 Multiracial undergraduate students throughout the United States. However, some identities were less represented, indicating opportunities for future studies. Although the sample population was undergraduate students, Multiracial graduate students were eager to participate, indicating the significant potential to learn about Multiracial graduate students' needs and experiences. Future researchers could include graduate students in study populations or focus solely on graduate students as the sample.

There is a dearth of Multiracial scholarship about students in the community college system. Despite a nationwide call for participants, I did not contribute to closing that gap, as all participants in this study attended four-year institutions. Future research should include Multiracial students at community colleges and perhaps explicitly focus on their experiences and community-building at these institutions.

Johnston-Guerrero and Wijeyesinghe (2021) asked, "How does monoracism intersect with and support other systems of domination?" (p. 62). Future scholars could adopt an intersectional lens when developing research inquiries to address this question, as other social identities, including gender, class, and disability, impact Multiraciality. Samples should include populations specific to the relevant questions, such as Multiracial students of particular genders, from varying socioeconomic statuses, or with disability experiences.

Researchers might incorporate methods similar to those in this study. I used PGVM, specifically social media elicitation interviews, to gain an authentic glimpse into the participants' virtual worlds. I invited participants to select examples from their social media and submit these as a basis for our interviews. Elicitation methods encourage meaning-making for participants and disrupt power dynamics between the researcher and participants (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004;

Kortegast et al., 2019; Pain, 2012). I selected PGVMs to honor privacy and boundaries with participants such that I would not be directly connected to their social media accounts. This was an effective strategy, allowing for substantial conversations and robust data. Participants were thoughtful in their selection of artifacts and provided nuanced insights into their online experiences, attitudes, and behaviors. Future researchers with studies related to virtual arenas, online behaviors using social media, and similar topics might consider these methods.

In this phenomenological study, the data corpus included interview transcripts and participant-generated artifacts from their social media accounts. Thematic analysis and CTDA (Brock, 2018) were the methods used to arrive at the findings and interpretations. Scholars who elect to use CTDA might focus solely on analyzing digital artifacts collected directly from public social media sites instead of relying on participants. Researchers could examine phenomena or specific case studies by selecting particular hashtags or trending topics relevant to Multiracial virtual communities, such as #MixedFamily, #Hapa, or a term contextual to the moment. They could then review sample posts from the selected social media sites for further analysis.

My approach to this social media research was one of inclusion and breadth. I offered extensive opportunities for participants to submit artifacts from any social media platform on which they were active as a Multiracial student. The participants shared examples from a diverse array of applications, including Discord, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Reddit, and mentioned activities on Pinterest, Snapchat, and YouTube during interviews. Future researchers could adopt a focused strategy and explore community dynamics within a single platform. Scholars using this more in-depth approach might notice nuances specific to a particular online community. The affordances of a specific application could have advantages and disadvantages for Multiracial communities, which researchers could extensively observe in a study focused on one application.

## **Conclusion**

This study was an exploration of how Multiracial students use social media to build and maintain community. Based on the data generated and analyzed, the participants built and maintained community by seeking similarities with Multiracial people, cultivating an online persona, and engaging in Multiracial discourse. As I connected these findings to the literature, I first explained how this study expanded the understanding of Multiracial identity theories. I showed how participants demonstrated counterstorytelling with their racial journeys and how they illustrated monoracism. Finally, I described how the findings pertained to virtual ecologies. I provided recommendations for action for Multiracial people and higher education practitioners, including applying a critical lens to policy and practice and developing Multiracial virtual communities. The chapter concluded with suggestions for future studies.

## **Researcher Reflection**

A goal of this inquiry was to center the voices of Multiracial students and affirm their experiences. I found that speaking with the 10 study participants, hearing their stories, and bearing witness to their examples was a powerful experience. They were deliberate in their selections and reflective with their commentary. I am honored and humbled to represent them with this scholarship, and I hope I have done so with care and justice.

I started this dissertation with an excerpt from Root's (1996) *Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage*, and it feels appropriate to revisit it as I reach the conclusion of this journey. The reading begins, "I have the right... Not to justify my existence in this world." For so much of this doctoral process, and truly much of my life as a Multiracial person, I have felt obligated to justify everything: this research, my Multiracial identity, my existence. But now, it is complete and significant and no longer needs justification. At its core, this dissertation is a letter to the Multiracial community. It is an affirmation to our people that we exist. We are enough. We are loved.

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## APPENDIX A: BILL OF RIGHTS FOR RACIALLY MIXED PEOPLE

I have the right

not to justify my existence in this world

not to keep the races separate within me

not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity

not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

I have the right

to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify

to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me

to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters

to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right

to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial

to change my identity over my lifetime — and more than once

to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people

to freely choose whom I befriend and love. (Root, 1996, p. 7)

# RESEARCH STUDY

## FOR MULTIRACIAL COLLEGE STUDENTS WHO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

### WHAT'S THIS ABOUT?

To understand how Multiracial college students build and maintain community using social media.

### WHAT WILL YOU DO?

You'll share examples of your own social media and what they mean to you during 1-2 Zoom interviews.

Participants get a \$20 e-gift card as thanks for completing the study!

### YOU MAY QUALIFY IF YOU:

- Identify as Multiracial or with two or more races
- Use one or more social media platforms during college and engage with content related to Multiracial or mixed race topics
- Are an undergraduate student at a college in the U.S. and are over age 18

Interested? Fill out this  
brief eligibility survey  
[bit.ly/MRstudy](https://bit.ly/MRstudy)



FOR MORE INFO, CONTACT RACHEL LUNA,  
MULTIRACIAL PHD CANDIDATE AT COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY  
@RACHELHLUNA OR RACHEL.LUNA@COLOSTATE.EDU

## APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT MESSAGES

### **To students:**

Dear Student,

My name is Rachel Luna, and I am a Multiracial doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. I am inviting students to participate in a study about Multiracial students and how they use social media to create and maintain community.

### **Logistics of Study:**

This study involves a 1-2 hour interview with me as the researcher and the opportunity to share some examples of your social media postings. You may also be invited to participate in an optional follow-up interview. Interviews will occur over Zoom. To thank you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$20 e-gift card after completing the interview.

### **Criteria:**

The criteria for participants involved in this study include the following:

- Identify at some point during your college experience as Multiracial, or with two or more racial groups
- Active on one or more social media platforms during your time in college and engage with some Multiracial-related content
- Currently enrolled undergraduate student at a U.S. higher education institution and over the age of 18

If you are interested in volunteering to participate in this study or know others who might be interested, please contact me.

Thanks,  
Rachel Luna

**To professional partners:**

Dear Partners,

My name is Rachel Luna, and I am a Multiracial doctoral candidate at Colorado State University. I am recruiting students to participate in a study about Multiracial students and how they use social media to create and maintain community.

**Logistics of Study:**

This study involves a 1-2 hour interview with me as the researcher and the opportunity to share some examples of their social media postings. Participants may also be invited to participate in an optional follow-up interview. Interviews will occur over Zoom. Participants will receive a \$20 e-gift card at the completion of the study.

**Criteria:**

The criteria for participants involved in this study include the following:

- Identify at some point during your college experience as Multiracial, or with two or more racial groups
- Active on one or more social media platforms during your time in college and engage with some Multiracial-related content
- Currently enrolled undergraduate student at a U.S. higher education institution and over the age of 18

If you know of any students who may fit these criteria and would be interested in participating, please share my contact information with them, or feel free to send me their information and I will reach out to them directly.

Thanks,  
Rachel Luna

APPENDIX D: ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Name:

Email:

How do you identify racially and/or ethnically? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you 18 or more years old? Yes or No

Are you currently enrolled at a college or university in the United States? Yes or No

Are you active on social media? (ex: posting, responding to others, etc.) Yes or No

If yes, on which platforms/apps are you active? (select all that apply)

Facebook

Instagram

LinkedIn

Pinterest

Reddit

Snapchat

TikTok

Twitter

WhatsApp

YouTube

Other (write in): \_\_\_\_\_

Do you post about and/or engage with content related to Multiracial or mixed race topics on social media? Yes or No

If yes, what are your goals when you use social media: (select all that apply)

Share information

Meet other people

Social or political activism

Voice my opinion

Learn new things

Get news

Play games

Create content

Other (write in): \_\_\_\_\_

If there is anything additional you would like to share with me about participating in this study, please do so. (optional)

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your interest. I will follow up with an email regarding your participation.

## APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT PROJECT INFORMATION

Thank you so much for being willing to participate in this study: *Understanding Multiracial College Student Virtual Community*

Your part in the study includes submitting **five to 10 examples** of your own social media postings from your time as a college student that are meaningful to you in relation to your Multiracial community and/or identity.

There is no “right” way to participate in this project. Here are some prompts that may help you think of examples to share:

- How do you use social media to connect with other Multiracial people?
- What do you post and/or who do you follow in relation to Multiracial topics?
- What kind of Multiracial community do you have online?
- What does being Multiracial mean to you?
- How do you show up as Multiracial online?

### **Digital Media Uploads**

You will submit your social media examples using a shared Google Drive folder that is only accessible to you and me (the researcher).

You can upload screenshots, videos, files, etc. If you need help uploading the examples, please let me know and I can help.

### **Confidentiality**

Your privacy has been and will be protected during this study. Usernames, faces, and other identifying information will be removed or obscured.

### **Questions?**

I am available to answer any questions. My contact information is [rachel.luna@colostate.edu](mailto:rachel.luna@colostate.edu) and ###-###-#### (you can text or call). You can also direct message me @RachelHLuna on Instagram or Twitter.

You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Sharon Anderson, at [sharon.anderson@colostate.edu](mailto:sharon.anderson@colostate.edu) or for questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

## APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study Colorado State University**

#### ***Understanding Multiracial College Student Virtual Community***

##### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?**

My name is Rachel Luna, and I am a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University, working with my faculty advisor Dr. Sharon Anderson in the School of Education. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which seeks to understand how Multiracial college students build and maintain community using social media.

##### **WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?**

You are being asked to participate in the study because you fit these criteria:

- Identify at some point during your college experience as Multiracial, or with two or more racial groups
- Active on one or more social media platforms during your time in college and engage with some Multiracial-related content
- Currently enrolled undergraduate student at a US higher education institution and over the age of 18

##### **WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be invited to share examples of your social media postings. Then, you will discuss the examples in a one- to two-hour Zoom interview with the researcher. You may also be invited for a second follow-up interview. You will be asked to digitally sign an informed consent document. No postings will be used or published without your consent.

##### **ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

There may be no direct benefit to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn more about Multiracial students and how they use social media.

##### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken all reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. While the level of risk is minimal, you may become uncomfortable with some questions related to social media use or your Multiracial identity.

##### **WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

To thank you for participating in this study, you will receive a \$20 e-gift card after fully completing your interview.

##### **WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?**

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. Your privacy is very important, and we will take every measure to protect it. Your information may be given out if required by law; however, the researchers will do their best to make sure that any information that is released will not identify you. With your permission, the interviews will be audio and video recorded for purposes of accuracy. Any names used in the recording will be changed to



pseudonyms or omitted when the interviews are transcribed. Any names or faces will be removed or obscured from social media postings used in publication or presentation.

All records from this study will be stored on a password-protected cloud server for three years after completion of the study and then destroyed. We may be asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

### **DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?**

Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the researcher or your relations with CSU. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study before signing this form and at any time during the study.

### **WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?**

For questions or concerns about the study, you can contact me, Rachel Luna, at [Rachel.Luna@colostate.edu](mailto:Rachel.Luna@colostate.edu) or my advisor Dr. Sharon Anderson at [Sharon.Anderson@colostate.edu](mailto:Sharon.Anderson@colostate.edu).

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects or any complaints regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact the CSU Institutional Review Board at [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

### **PERMISSION TO RECORD INTERVIEW**

The researchers would like to video and audio record your interview to ensure your comments are accurately recorded. Only our research team will have access to the files, and they will be destroyed when they have been transcribed.

*Do you give the researchers permission to video and audio record your interview? Please initial next to your choice below.*

- Yes, I agree to be digitally recorded. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)
- No, do not record my interview. \_\_\_\_\_ (initials)

### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT**

I agree to participate in this research project. To the best of my knowledge, I meet the criteria for participation in this study. I have had the study explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of the project and give my consent to participate. I understand I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Researcher Contact Information**

Principal Investigator: Dr. Sharon Anderson, [Sharon.Anderson@colostate.edu](mailto:Sharon.Anderson@colostate.edu)  
Co-Investigator: Rachel Luna, PhD Candidate, [Rachel.Luna@colostate.edu](mailto:Rachel.Luna@colostate.edu)

## APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### Consent and Process

Hello, my name is Rachel, and I'm a researcher from Colorado State University in the Higher Education Leadership department. We are conducting a research study on how Multiracial college students use social media to build and maintain community.

We would like you to share your experiences and thoughts about social media as a Multiracial person. Today's conversation will take about 60 to 90 minutes. You may also be invited for an optional follow-up interview. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are invited to share what you wish and pass on any questions if you feel uncomfortable. You can also end the interview at any time. All information has been and will continue to be kept confidential. I will take notes using an alias you select. *What would you like your alias to be?*

The results of this interview, including your social media posts, may be used for research, including publication. We will be collecting your selected social media posts and interview transcripts. Any usernames or identifying information will be removed or obscured. When we report and share data with others, we will combine data from all participants. There are no known risks or direct benefits to you, but we hope to learn more about Multiracial students and how they use social media. You will receive a \$20 e-gift card as thanks for fully completing your interview. *What, if any, questions do you have about this process?*

With your permission, I would like to video and audio record the conversation today. *Do I have your permission?*

*Would you like to participate?*

- Yes - Proceed
- No - Thank you for your time.

### Introductions

- To begin, I'd like to know a bit more about you.
  - Can you share a bit more about yourself - what are you studying? What year are you?
  - How do you identify racially and/or ethnically?
  - What additional aspects of your identity are important to you?

### Virtual Kinship

- What are your favorite social media?
- What kinds of social media do you use to connect with Multiracial folks?
- What social media or online communities are you part of? Groups, hashtags you follow, etc.?
- How do you describe or define your online community?

### Social Media Elicitations

- This is a study about social media, so let's continue our conversation with the social media examples you picked. For each example:
  - Describe your **P**icture/**P**ost.
  - What is **H**appening in your picture/post?

- Why did you take a picture **O**f/post this?
- What does this **T**ell us about your life? *Your life as a Multiracial student?*
- How might this picture/post provide **O**pportunities for us to *build and maintain communities for Multiracial students?*

### **MultiCrit**

- How do you show up as Multiracial online?
- How do other people treat you online when they know or think they know your race?
- To what extent do you engage in Multiracial activism online?

### **Conclusion and Gratitude**

- What else would you like to share about how and why you use social media?
- What else would you like to share about your experiences as a Multiracial person, online or offline?
- Thank you for sharing your experiences and spending time today.