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### Understanding Black Experiences and Access Barriers in the Expressive Arts Activities and Therapies

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**Understanding Black Experiences in  
Expressive Arts Activities and Expressive Arts Therapies**

by

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**Abstract**

Black individuals in America experience racism, discrimination, and microaggressions that can affect their mental and physical health. (Alvarez, Liang, & Neville, 2016). Unfortunately, Black individuals typically do not seek out mental health treatment because of mistrust, stigma, misdiagnosis, and lack of culturally sensitive approaches to treatment (NAMI, 2002). One way to encourage Black individuals to seek mental health support and to provide more support could be through expressive arts. Expressive outlets may act as a protective barrier against adverse experiences and serve as an opportunity to bring healing amongst uncomfortable feelings of racial trauma and more. Historical and empirical evidence suggests that ethnic-racial minorities may benefit from expressive, creative approaches (Molina, Brigman, & Rhone, 2003). Expressive arts therapies and activities may be a more culturally appropriate intervention for Black individuals, instead of the traditional mental health treatments. This current qualitative study with Black individuals revealed themes on Black experiences with the expressive arts, and what barriers they may have faced in efforts to engage with these expressive activities and therapies. Findings informs mental health interventions for Black individuals in the future, and advocates for expressive arts mental health benefits.

**Keywords:** Expressive arts, Black/African American, activism, barriers, coping, community

### **Understanding Black Experiences and Access Barriers in the Expressive Arts Activities and Therapies**

Mental health wellness is essential to a person's overall health and well-being. Thus, researchers and practitioners alike aim to use research-informed intervention and prevention to foster positive mental health. Evidenced- based practices within expressive arts activities have been an effective approach for helping various mental health issues. However, based on empirical research, there is a disparity in mental health across ethnic racial groups, specifically among Black and African American identifying individuals. The Black community, like other communities of color, are more likely to experience socioeconomic disparities such as exclusion from health, educational, social and economic resources. These disparities may contribute to worse mental health outcomes (NAMI, 2002). Despite this fact, Black people are less likely to utilize mental health services (Alegria et al., 2015). Consequently, there are less Black individuals seeking and receiving mental health services. Although a disparity remains in mental health services for Blacks in America, creative expression through art, music, theatre, dance, and poetry has all been outlets for an individual to express themselves. With the historical salience of artistic expression within the Black community in dealing with adverse experiences, an effective intervention could be expressive arts therapy and related expressive arts activities. Black identifying people may especially benefit from expressive, creative approaches to addressing mental health issues (Molina, Brigman, & Rhone, 2003). Despite this connection between the expressive arts and mental health interventions, minorities are less commonly found in expressive arts therapy services or expressive arts therapy empirical articles due to a variety of barriers (Hunnewell, 2019; Reed, 2018; Quimbay Nolasco, 2019). Expressive art therapies and activities can be a way to connect these communities to mental health wellness and healing. The current study investigates the experiences of Black identifying individuals who use expressive

arts activities to cope with difficult life experiences, including mental health issues. This paper will also address the barriers Black identifying individuals encounter when seeking expressive arts activities and expressive arts therapies.

### **Mental Health Disparity for Black People in America**

Mental health disorders are more severe, persistent, and disabling among Black Americans in comparison to Whites (McGuire & Miranda, 2008). Blacks are less likely to utilize mental health services, and usually the care that is received is of lower quality in comparison to services provided for Whites (Alegria, et al. 2015). Black identifying Americans have less access to mental health services than Whites do (Gamst et al., 2008). Consequently, there is a greater need for mental health care among Black people than White people. It is disappointing to see the small numbers of Black identifying Americans seeking mental health services, when the need for services is so apparent. Black identifying individuals face a variety of challenges which include minority stressors of oppression and racism, urbanization in low-income areas, limited access to resources, post-traumatic stress, depression, substance abuse, aggression, violence, and more. Racism and discrimination are stressful events that ultimately affect mental health, which place minorities at a higher risk for mental issues (McGuire & Miranda, 2008; Santiago & Miranda, 2014). Black Americans are overrepresented in vulnerable, high-need populations because of homelessness and incarceration (Gamst et al., 2008). Mental illness services in these populations are of higher need due to the disproportionate effects of being at risk. In a cross-sectional survey study, only 25% of those with impairing mental illnesses received guideline-concordant treatment. Large predictors of receiving this guideline concordant care included being white, female, severely ill, and having mental health insurance coverage (Wang et. al, 2000). A very possible explanation for this finding may be due to how Black Americans are observed in

empirical research to receive inferior care for both physical and mental illnesses (McGuire & Miranda, 2008). For these exact reasons, mental health resources need to be better accessible and of better quality to this community. Culturally tailored interventions and patient centered approaches can help address barriers to depression care among ethnic minorities (Cooper et al, 2003). It is just as important that these mental health resources to be culturally appropriate and compatible with a patient's background and beliefs.

### **Black Mental Health Stigma & Fear of Seeking Help**

Black identifying Americans typically do not participate in mental health treatment because of mistrust, stigma, misdiagnosis, little understanding about mental illness, and feeling culturally misunderstood (Nami, 2004). Recent studies show that African American women can be guarded around reporting symptoms, especially because of reported mistrust of providers who can lack sensitivity to certain issues and lack cultural awareness. (Jones et. al., 2015). Mental health stigma, which is widespread in public, is generally associated with negative help-seeking attitudes (Leong & Zachar, 1999; Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005), especially for Black identifying Americans (Mishra, Lucksted, Gioia, Barnet, & Baquet, 2009; Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). One of the reasons for this might be that there is a mismatch between the traditional approach to therapy and cultural values held by Black identifying Americans. For example, studies show that self-concealment is particularly relevant to Black college students, as it overlaps with Afrocentric cultural values, such as collective harmony and communalism, as well as a historical maltreatment of African Americans in the United States (Townes et al., 2009; Wallace & Constantine, 2005 as cited in Masuda et. al, (2012). Sitting in an office discussing personal experiences to a professional is less culturally referenced for some minorities (Paniagua, 2005). Black Americans carry stigma against talk therapy because it can evoke a

sense of cultural and familial betrayal. Traditional mental health care models are questioned by members of Black and African American communities (Cooper et. al., 2003). Even in some cases where Black individuals do have access to mental health services, there are still invisible barriers of cultural incompatibility with seeking mental health help.

Clinicians working with ethnic minority patients need to address cultural and social perspectives in order to help more effectively. Their beliefs about their spirituality, their preferences for culturally sensitive providers, and their concerns about financial stress should be considered. Most importantly, commonly held negative perceptions like the lack of effectiveness of treatment and/or the painful nature of counseling may serve as barriers to care. (Cooper et al., 2003). In addition to the institutional barriers, clients face cultural barriers. Recent work suggests that patients that prefer counseling over medication (like African Americans) may need additional interventions to enhance entry into treatments. A patient-centered approach with culturally tailored interventions can address these barriers to mental health care (Cooper et al., 2003). According to the Philadelphia Urban League (2007), African Americans may be reluctant to seek help for depression because they mistrust medical health professionals, which can stem from cultural barriers or poor relationships between doctors and the community. Black individuals are less likely than non-Hispanic White individuals to seek or receive outpatient counseling/psychotherapy or psychopharmacological treatment for depressive or anxiety disorders. They are more likely to seek informal help from close friends and communities (Dean et al., 2018).

For this exact reason, ethnic-racial minorities may especially benefit from expressive, creative approaches (Molina, Brigman, & Rhone, 2003). Nontraditional settings like clinics and centers that offer expressive arts may be a healing technique that is more socially accepted. For

Black American children, the best models are characterized by social and affective emphases, creativity, and nonverbal communication, including movement and rhythms (Willis, 1989). Community-based expressive arts programs for increasing self-control, resilience, and self-concept in Black American youth has been effective (Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, & Cherry, 2000; Shelton & Lyon Jenkins, 2000). Overall, recent studies that have been conducted within Black and African American communities and expressive arts have shown effectiveness due to factors of group cohesion, collective efficacy, and group counseling. In efforts to overcome stigma and fear of therapy, expressive arts may be the answer.

### **A History of Coping with Pain and Maximizing Voice in Expressive Art**

Artistic expression within the Black communities have been around since the beginning of Black existence. Art, in a variety of forms, is an outlet to cope with adverse experiences, uplift oppressed communities, and promote confident voices. A recent example of this is in an analysis of three short theatre plays written by Paola Lopez (2020), she examines how the plays, one of them being *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*, deal with social and political issues affecting Black communities across the United States and United Kingdom. Lopez describes the performance as a “choral repetition of this verbatim insight by Sandra Bland. It was a powerful collective performance that depicted issues of intersectionality and the Black Lives Matter Movement through aesthetics of the play (Lopez, 2020, p.206). This like many other artistic activist-like demonstrations are a part of Black expressive art history and current day instances. Black art, in its diverse and multi-faceted form, is a tool for revolution and healing power. It brings Black cohesion in times of adversity and pride in a marginalized identity. The expression of Black stories and perspectives along with the recreation of dominant narrative is a Black



reclamation of truth. Black art was and can be very politically concentrated, as it is a method to amplify Black voices above the pressures of rigid and limiting racist categories.

Historically, the many efforts to express the Black aesthetic has become part of Black American culture. The Black Arts Movement, like the Harlem Renaissance, were periods in American history known for the explosions of Black expression. Black Americans created a variety of art forms across categories that led to unprecedented creative freedom and control in the creation of popular music in the second half of the 20th century in America (Baraka, 2010). Rickey Vincent, a Black artist himself, described the Black Arts Movement that took place in the 1960s and 1970s as a musical era that celebrated the entire spectrum of the black music tradition (Baraka, 2010). Leroi Jones, also known as Amiri Baraka, states, “But it is just this why of Negro music that has been consistently ignored or misunderstood; and it is a question that cannot be adequately answered without first understanding the necessity of answering it” (Baraka, 2010, p.137). Important moments in time like the Black Arts Movement brought feelings of pride about identity in various forms of art through persecution and racism in a country that enforced Eurocentric cultural institutions. These movements were an essential response to the blatant oppression and mistreatment of Black people in America, and they continue to replicate themselves in present day manifestations. Black Americans brought forth new cultural institutions where they could express themselves freely of Black narratives and pride. Movements full of expressive arts like this resiliently gave opportunities of confidence, healing, and self-appreciation in a white dominated society. Pride and confidence in Black identity is important to Black mental wellness. The trend in expressive arts within Black and African American communities should be continuously pursued in mental health services, given the historical and cultural salience.

**Art and Activism, “Artivism”**

Art and activism have a unique connection in making Black individuals in America feel seen. Jean-Michael Basquiat served as a well-known Black artist who often depicted Black royalty in his art despite dominant white culture pressures to conform. One of his most famous symbols was his use of the crown throughout many of his pieces. As many European artists, like the Italian Jacopo Tintoretto, developed depictions that emulated royalty and divinity, Basquiat felt like he could paint some of his own representations of royalty. In Basquiat’s piece *Untitled (Fallen Angel)*, he incorporates the techniques of the Italian masters he studied (Luckett, 2020). He adapts colors of rose, blue, white, and gold that can be easily found in pieces like *The Origin of the Milky Way* by Jacopo Tintoretto. Some critics even say that Basquiat may have used *Untitled (Fallen Angel)* as a “meta-self-portrait” where he made himself the angel as if he were Juno, Jupiter, or baby Hercules. Basquiat, in his own way, painted fiercely to bring forth perceptions of African royalty and stable Black masculinity. Although Basquiat’s time on this earth from 1960 to 1988 was short, present day artists like Kanye West and JAY-Z declare they are Basquiat and emulate his Black royalty and divinity. More artists like Kehinde Wiley take after Basquiat in appropriating the way the “old masters” painted, but instead featuring young Black men where Europeans were commonly positioned. Wiley’s pieces would present images of Black men in bright light that highlighted their facial features, making the subjects’ skin shine (Luckett, 2020). In a Eurocentric society, artists like Basquiat and Wiley directly challenged these rules through their artistic talents. Almost every piece served as an outlet of activism in making Black a beautiful thing to be appreciated and uplifted. Black art has a history of being political in the fact that Black beauty and appreciation depicted in these pieces are juxtapositions to white supremacy and traditional Eurocentric standards. Ultimately, Basquiat illustrates how an

expressive outlet can combat stressors of oppression and racial tensions. In efforts to emotionally express himself without the restraints of dominant white depictions, he works to make images that look like him and people like him. Through expressive mediums, an artist can amplify their voice and representation.

Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sberald are both widely known as the artists who painted America's first Black president and first Black first lady. Many of Sberald's artworks are responses to the lack of Black individuals in dominant narrative and cultures. She, like many other Black artists, have made the decision to create their own narratives. Sberald notes that her art created a mirror and resting place from "all the media exposure to violence on young Black boys and Black girls and men and women" (Sberald, 2019, p.52). In needing the escape for herself, she recognizes the power in "imagery and how we [Black people] experience ourselves one way and how we experience ourselves in the media" (Sberald, 2019, p.52). One of Sberald's deepest inspirations arises from how she decided, in her own way, to control Black representation instead of allowing mass media to describe or define it for her. As the 2019 NAEA National Convention Keynote Speaker, Sberald shared how often Black artists are usually overlooked until more recently. Black artists have been denied space for a long time because it usually seemed primitive, but many museums today want to diversify their museums to jump on a bandwagon of inclusivity (Sberald, 2019). Sberald serves as an example of an empowered artist who makes space for herself and many other Black artists through her artistic expression. Despite being born in the year of 1973 shortly after the civil rights movement and feeling obligated to repress herself to make others feel comfortable, she utilized her art platform to cope with the stressors and limits of oppression and racism. As Wiley and Sberald both unapologetically use their artist platforms to embrace Black identity and promote confidence,

they offer examples of how to use art to cope with lack of representation in mass media, discrimination, and being part of a community that shows higher risks in vulnerability and mental health issues. Evidently, Black artists actively use their freedom of imagination and creativity to decolonize dominant white image.

### **Creative Means as Protective barrier against Adverse experiences**

In the world of creative expression and activism, art therapy holds a special place in expressive arts interventions for generating agency and resiliency. Art therapists utilize social justice frameworks and recognize artistic creation to challenge oppression (Hocoy, 2005; Kapitan, 2009). Art can uplift spirits, incite revolution, provide a sense of agency and power, and be an important piece of the healing process. Art therapists help facilitate these unique healing processes through creative expression with consideration of using art for social change (Gipson, 2015; Hocoy, 2005). Owen Karcher (2017), a highly reflective and socially aware art therapist who advocates for art therapist critical self-reflection, notes that they have observed typical responses to trauma among clients with marginalized identities. This especially happens when events that target their marginalized communities or harm individuals with similar identities occur. Usually there are varying levels of anxiety, denial, depression, despair, rage and anger, grief, numbness, hypervigilance, fear, hopelessness, and feelings of shame that surface. Hocoy (2005) suggests that a social justice approach within expressive arts interventions shows recognition of sociopolitical context and collective experiences of oppression. Van der Kolk (2014) wrote, “Trauma almost invariably involves not being seen, not being mirrored, and not being taken into account. Treatment needs to reactivate the capacity to safely mirror, and be mirrored, by others, but also to resist being hijacked by others’ negative emotions” (p. 59). (Karcher, 2017). Hopefully within these expressive arts interventions, Black identifying

individuals can seek expressive art therapy for a safe place in coping with stressors of oppression and racism. With a social justice approach, these interventions may provide opportunities for healing and liberation instead of recreating oppressive dynamics in society that hurt Black identifying individuals.

In one of Jean-Michel Basquiat's well-known pieces, *Untitled (Fallen Angel)*, an angelic figure is depicted with what seems to be a large crown-like symbol with large spikes. This feature of his painting is said to add a sense of power even along with its protective detail that surrounds the figure that also implies vulnerability. As the crown's collar simultaneously adds divinity and the connection of thoughts, it protects the mouth to shield him from the miswords and misdeeds of others (Lockett, 2020). Despite this being a very symbolic example of how Basquiat's art depicts the protection of the Black man, many artists today use art and creativity to foster feelings of protection and belonging. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), the flow of consciousness is a cognitive state experienced during expression. This flow of creativity that happened when artists were engaged with their work became a protective factor to suicide risk. Increased levels of hope, purpose in life, and resilience were found in the participants that choose to major in art related studies. The creative individual can actually protect their well-being by engaging in creative expression. Creativeness can help people achieve optimal human functioning by consciously and subconsciously healing from the past, sustain them in the present, and protect them from the future (Hallaert, 2019). The psychological benefits of creativity through the engagement in expressive activities can help in further development in future interventions for mental health. The purpose of Hallaert's study (2019) was to determine how the flow of consciousness through creative expression could be a protective factor to suicide risk in college students. This study discovered that hope, resilience, and purpose of life had

significant positive relationships with flow for art majors and non-art majors. Creative activities that consisted of visual art, music, writing, and performance all resulted in decreased suicide risk which can be attributed to increased purpose in life. The majority of participants (77.8%) were White while only 2% of the sample were Black or African American identifying in this study. Expressive arts-based interventions need to be thoroughly explored for this specific population to determine if these trends of creative expression serving as a protective factor can increase purpose in life and decrease symptoms of mental disorders or risk factors to mental health.

### **A Call for Black Diversity in Expressive Arts Therapy and Related Activities**

There are a variety of expressive arts-based interventions that have provided evidence of effectiveness for majority white participants. Nora Stinley, the lead art therapy consultant in the Evidence-Based Healing Arts program for Creative and Therapeutic Arts Services at Children's National Health Systems in Washington, DC, and her colleagues (2015) found that heart rate in children who created mandalas while waiting for their medical procedure was significantly lower than those in standard care five years ago. The study showed that creating and coloring mandalas works as pain relieving and empowering intervention. Although the participant experiences with needle stick procedures were diverse, there were no significant differences in demographic characteristics between treatment groups or control group. In a pilot study conducted by Beerse et al. (2019), they addressed the gap in research for proactive mental health programs for college-level students by assessing full-time students' levels of anxiety and stress. They found that manipulating clay demonstrated positive effects on stress and anxiety. The group that engaged with mindfulness-based art therapy experiences less anxiety symptoms, salivary cortisol concentrations, and perceived levels of stress. The group that engaged with undirected neutral clay-manipulating tasks experienced significant decreases in cortisol concentrations within Week

1. Although this study shows that art therapy practices have anxiety-reducing benefits and can provide a biofeedback response for stress, participants in this study were 60% white and only 13% Black. (Beerse et al., 2019) It can be asked whether either of these studies would have had different results if the entire sample were Black or Black American identifying. While these supporting findings are highly important in the expressive arts community, these studies like many others in expressive arts therapy, lack ethnic demographic specificity.

As many modern-day studies are investigating who might need expressive arts therapy, there continues to be some variation in health conditions of study participants with less variation in ethnic background. A recent group counseling study for at risk African American youth provided a unique, collaborative effort between therapists and artists to better assist this specific group. The researchers incorporated therapists of color to deliver expressive art activities for self-expression, self-confidence, emotional regulation, communication skills, enhancement of resilience, and a sense of community (J. Goicoechea et al, 2014). Their model helped these individuals express themselves freely to help with racial and cultural pride. Studies show that if there is an increased racial pride and cultural affiliation in African American children, then it can decrease the number of depressive symptoms and aggressive behaviors. Studies also show that an increase in racial pride and cultural affiliation can increase self-esteem and coping.

(McMahon & Watts, 2002). Mandara, Gaylord-Harden, Richards, and Ragsdale (2009) states that ethnic pride may be just as important as self-esteem to the mental health of African American adolescents. America's oppressive and painful history against Black Americans has led to the internalization of negative stereotypes about the self, but there can be healing in expressive arts therapy and activities. If there are culture specific interventions for Black and African American identifying people, it can help cope with the many minority stressors of

discrimination and racism to increase resiliency, self-esteem, and achievement among African American youth (Belgrave et al. 2000).

### **Current Study**

After reviewing the literature on expressive arts therapy, it is evident that Black representation in expressive arts activities and expressive arts therapy programs and centers is lacking. In noticing that the majority of clientele were white identifying patients in expressive arts therapies research, the question arose if this was a trend in current literature and in other spaces. The goal of this project was to explore Black experiences in expressive and creative arts related activities, if and how expressive and creative arts related activities are used to cope with adverse experiences, and if and what barriers there are in accessing expressive arts activities and therapies. The current study uses a qualitative approach to investigate expressive therapies arts activities within community and outside clinical settings for participants who are involved in expressive arts activities. This study format is important to capture what might be working what might be working for Black identifying patients that use expressive and creative activities to help cope and heal in their own ways. This approach is pertinent for this population, especially in consideration of how underrepresented Black communities are in clinical and medical settings due to several factors that prevent access to clinical settings. Within this study's qualitative interviews, valuable moments of participant reflection will help explain the experience within expressive arts related activities from the perspective of a Black identifying individual.

There are two central aims for this study. Aim 1 is to gather more understanding of the Black experience in the context of expressive arts activities. Aim 2 is to understand alternative coping strategies that are outside of clinical settings for the Black community that may suffer from mental disorders or issues. The overall goal is to get a better understanding of Black



identifying individuals' experiences with expressive arts and identify possible access barriers for Black identifying individuals' outside expressive arts therapy services.

**Participants:**

Participants were recruited through online resources from virtual recruitment flyers. The flyer was posted often through online social media platforms Instagram and Facebook. The flyer for this research study was dispersed through email threads at Clark University. A total of 10 Black individuals participated in this study. Among the 10 participants, 70% identified as African American, 10% as Afro-Caribbean, and 20% as Mixed Ethnicity or Race. All participants were college aged. Thirty percent of the sample were male, Sixty percent of the sample were female, and 10% of the sample were genderfluid. Most participants had a college degree or higher education (60%). Other participants had a two-year degree, attended a college or technical school, or a postgraduate degree (40%). Primary occupations varied: a literary intern, an entrepreneur, a cellist musician, four students, an administrative intern, a writer and educator and, and one unemployed. Eight out of ten participants had some version of health insurance.

**Methods**

Eligibility criteria required that participants be at least 18 years of age. Individuals who sought expressive arts related activities in art, music, dance, theatre, and poetry were recruited through online platforms Instagram and Facebook. The flyer posted asked for "Black/African American identifying volunteers who are willing to discuss their experiences in the expressive arts" The flyer also disclosed the direct contact information (email, phone number, Instagram name) of the study conductor and research advisor to make it available for the participant to reach out on their own if interested. Some participants were also read oral statements for

interested individuals, and then given the flyer. It was completely up to the participant to engage with the examiner or study. Once the participant reached out to the researcher via email, phone number or, more information about the study along with the planning interview will take place over email. Once the participant verified an availability with the first author/research conductor, the participant was sent a confirmation email of their date and time of interview. Twenty-four hours before the interview time, the participant was emailed with the Zoom link to the interview, and two Qualtrics links. The first Qualtrics link was provided for the participant to access the Consent Form & Demographic Survey.

The Participants completed the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 1975) consisting of 53 items covering nine symptom dimensions: Somatization, Obsession-Compulsion, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic anxiety, Paranoid ideation and Psychoticism; and three global indices of distress: Global Severity Index, Positive Symptom Distress Index, and Positive Symptom Total. The global indices measure current or past level of symptomatology, intensity of symptoms, and number of reported symptoms (Derogatis, 1975). T scores <60-65 on any of the subscales indicate that they meet the clinical cutoff for that subscale. Because the sample was recruited from the community, this measure was used to gain understanding and context in what kind of mental health problems participants are dealing with in their daily and recent experiences when utilizing expressive arts. Participants were not directly asked if they are diagnosed with any mental health disorders.

All interviews were conducted at an agreed upon location between the examiner and participant, where the participant felt most comfortable answering questions about their personal experiences and mental health services. All interview locations for participants were conducted over Zoom, although given the option to choose between a phone conversation and a Zoom call

conversation. A phone conversation was offered as an option in case participants had varying access to either a phone or wifi. The participant was reminded that all questions were optional, and that they can decline to answer any of them if they feel uncomfortable disclosing any information. Participants were also informed that the interview will be recorded and transcribed for research purposes but will be completely confidential. All participants were informed of their \$15 Venmo compensation for the completion of the interview. After the interview has concluded, the participant was sent a completion of interview email. This email included a thank you for their participation, accessible mental health resources, and a link to access compensation via Venmo. This study did not require a debriefing, because there were not any changed opinions or beliefs.

***Note about researcher's ability in handling psychological discomfort:***

This study asked participants personal questions about their mental health and difficult experiences. Therefore, questions might evoke psychological discomfort. When psychological discomfort occurred, the examiner had experience in interacting with participants with mental issues and disabilities. When the opportunity presented itself, the examiner responded appropriately to sudden outbursts, descriptions of traumatic or stressful life experiences, or disclosure of harmful situations. In addition, accessible mental health services were provided to the participant after the completion of the interview.

***Interview Methods – Qualitative Inquiry***

Qualitative inquiry is an approach that covers more than just one aspect of psychology. Instead of just collecting data, the time-consuming method includes history, society, culture, life

worlds, social locations, and intentional actors (Marecek, 2003). Interviewing is a widely used technique for conducting social inquiry as it gives large possibilities of what can be discovered. It is a way to generate empirical data about the social world by asking people to talk about their lives. In traditional and conventional approaches to qualitative research, the subject is seen as very passive vessels. It usually is the goal to extract information from the subject with direct questions to produce uncontaminated answers. There are a variety of highly refined interview technologies that streamline, systematize, and sanitize the process, but interviews are naturally a two-way conversation and are unavoidably interactional and constructive (Holstein, J. A. & Gubrium, J. F., 1995). Although traditional methods might be best for some research, more of an active interview approach was taken in this study. Instead of approaching participants with the intention of gathering specific facts and details in a neutral space, it is purposely mentioned by the interviewer when they personally relate to a topic that is disclosed. As a Black/African American identifying interviewer who also enjoys the artistic benefits of expressive and creative arts activities, it would be unfair to not consider the interviewer's positionality in this interview process. Some may say that posing questions that acknowledge alternative sides of an issue is being more "neutral" and "pure" with objective answers, but the identity of the interviewer is undisguised and would be perceived as an in-group interviewer instead of an outsider looking in.

As traditional methods can sometimes be shallow and standard, creative and active interviewing recognizes that participants are "well-guarded vessels of feelings" (Douglas, 1985). Douglas specifies that disclosure legitimizes the respondent's reciprocal revelations that can often be suppressed by cultivated neutrality of the standard survey interview. Although Douglas recommends a deep disclosure, the interviewer used more of a surface level disclosure method. In response to questions asked in the interview, the interviewer would generally and truthfully

disclose briefly that they agreed with what's being said, that they also have similar challenges, and similarly receive expressive arts benefits brought up by the interviewee. This is done to establish a climate for mutual disclosure to move on from mere words and sentences exchange in the interview process, and that interviewees can then develop a willingness to share his or her feelings and deepest thoughts (Holstein, J. A. & Gubrium, J. F., 1995). In all, the interviewer's goal was to achieve mutual understanding, elicit true feelings and experiences from the interviewee in exchange for their own general disclosure of identity and interests.

It is important to note that the conductor of this study is aware of supporting literature of the Black individuals' tendency avoid disclosure and mistrust mental health related discussions. Active interviewing was used intentionally in hopes to avoid cultural-incompetence, lack of disclosure, and comfortability in these interviews. Studies show that self-concealment is particularly relevant to African American college students, as it overlaps with Afrocentric cultural values, such as collective harmony and communalism, as well as a historical maltreatment of African Americans in the United States (Townes et al., 2009; Wallace & Constantine, 2005 as cited in Masuda et. al, (2012). All participants were college aged Black identifying individuals who could feel like discussing personal experiences to a what they may percieve as a "professional" is less culturally referenced (Paniagua, 2005). In active and creative interviewing, the interviewer worked to create a safe interview environment of reciprocation and shared identity to hopefully welcome comfortability in sharing their personal experiences and narratives.

### ***Qualitative Data Analysis***

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative interviews. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke,

2006). Before reviewing interview data, the researcher verbally acknowledged their own theoretical positions, values, and identity in relation to the study. The researcher addressed all assumptions about the nature of data, making their view transparent. This created a culture of ongoing, reflective dialogue between researcher and research assistants with an openness in challenging the researcher on the trends they see versus what they see. It was important to retain flexibility in looking at possible themes in efforts to look at all possible codes. Although researcher's insight as a Black identifying interviewer who also enjoys the artistic benefits of expressive arts was important to understanding the data, research assistants were prompted to determine prevalence across all transcripts based on recurring and overarching themes. An inductive and deductive thematic analysis was used to look at all data without containing it to a pre-existing coding frame and/or researcher's analytic preconceptions in most cases, but also had a focus in looking for barriers participants faced in attempts to accessing expressive activities and therapies. Finding themes were based on finding a rich thematic description to find an accurate reflection. This is a particularly useful method for investigating an under-researched area (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This sample of Black identifying participants who are interested in expressive arts and therapies provide perspective in under-explored views.

Prior to conducting thematic analysis consensus meetings, the researcher trained both research assistants on how to use thematic analysis methods and operate NVIVO software to gather notes on data. The researcher and research assistants looked over one to two transcripts per week independently and meet bi-weekly to go over general emerging themes. Any disagreements in trends were discussed in bi-weekly meetings led by the researcher to reach consensus in ideas. The researcher then independently made the final round of consensus to finalize all codes and themes. Transcripts were coded for themes that continued to arise across

transcripts. Analysis of the data involved the movement between extracts of data and the master codebook. General study findings were shared confidentially through presentations and publication without individual or specific descriptions or information shared.

***Semi-Structured Interview Guide:***

Artist Identity Questions:

Tell me a bit about being an artist. What kind of artist are you?

What do you like about expressive art activities?

Do you remember how you started being creative/doing expressive activities/art/music/poetry/theatre?

Are you a part of any programs/groups/clubs/social groups that do creative activities?

Does anyone know that you do expressive art activities?

What do your family or friends say about you doing expressive arts activities?

Expressive Arts Challenges:

Was it difficult to get expressive arts? What were your difficulties?

If so, how did you overcome some of these difficulties then?

Expressive Arts Motivations and Benefits:

What motivates you to do art? Why do you do artistic activities?

How do you usually feel when you create? How does it make you feel?

When there are stressful life events or uncomfortable feelings, do you use the arts to help?

What do you get out of/learn from creating things/writing poetry/singing/rapping/painting/etc?

Black Identity:

Do expressive arts help you cope with racial anxiety and stress?

Do you express parts of your Black identity and Black experiences through the expressive arts?

Would you say that there are a lot of Black artists?

Expressive Arts Therapy:

Have you ever heard of expressive arts therapy?

What would you say is the reason for why you're not expressive arts therapy?

Was it difficult to get expressive arts therapy services?

Would you ever try expressive arts therapy? Why or why not?

### **Findings and Discussion**

The thematic analysis yielded three different themes. These themes captured the Black Experience in coping with expressive arts activities, barriers to expressive arts activities and therapies, and the use of activism, black identity, and artist identity within the expressive arts. Within each theme, there were subthemes that elaborated the broader themes. The three themes and subthemes are discussed in depth below.

#### **Theme 1: Expressive Arts as a Coping Mechanism**

There was an emergence of expressive arts benefits in the interview data, but an overarching theme throughout transcripts was how participants used artistic activities to cope. Expressive Arts activities were used to cope with uncomfortable emotions and regulate their emotions that are hard to describe and process without the use of expressive arts as a coping mechanism. This showed positive emotional benefits and growth in using these coping mechanisms with various types of stress sources and difficulties.

According to Folkman & Lazarus (1985), coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage, master, reduce, or tolerate a troubled person-environment. In this study, participants used expressive arts activities to “cope” and deal with stressful situations and



difficult demands that were internal and external. Participants expressed how important their coping skills within their creative means helped them with uncomfortable emotions that were hard to describe and process without the use of expressive arts. Expressive arts simultaneously provided a safe and escapist-like space away from various pressures and difficult experiences and created a safe place to confront the same issues. These creative approaches were described as tools to alleviate intensities, calm the participant, and begin to address parts of the self the participant that the participant felt needed healing. Participants show examples of active coping, which involves an awareness of the problem or situation causing stress with a conscious attempt to reduce symptoms of stress. Participants also show examples of avoidant coping that may or may not be accompanied by the awareness of the problem. In this case, they may be avoiding the actual coping to stay in a safe place of denial (Hong et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2020). In both cases, participants use the expressive arts to cope, which elicited positive emotional benefits and even examples of personal growth in their coping mechanisms and emotional regulation associated with the activities.

### **1a. Mention of Expressive arts as a Coping mechanism**

J.B. was able to find peace despite the pressure between the family responsibilities and pandemic with theatre art. In the end, art kept her feeling very grounded in moments where she felt out of control:

"So, it was like finding peace and being able to create or being able to have art surrounding me definitely was something that kept me sane. Because not only was the pandemic happening, but I was helping take care of my grandfather. Then, I was home with my whole entire family, and I'm the oldest of five... this whole word was happening

around me, but I was like, "Okay. I still have my art. I can still do what I do," which grounded me."

The expressive arts gave artists an outlet to express their anxieties, stressors, anger, or sadness in creative means and cope with those difficult feelings:

“ Creating is one of the times where my brain just shuts down, which is nice. I was a very busy person at the height of me doing most of my art. I'm talking like 90-hour work week kind of thing, between school, between clubs and all of this. And so for me, art has always been a way to not feel anything, not think anything and just shut down and be like, "Oh, I'm going to take this color and this is it." So I don't think any of my emotions go beyond, "Oh, I'm really excited that I did this." L.O.

“ It's probably one of my favorite coping mechanisms, because I feel things very big and very deeply. And when I do feel them, I like to feel that I give it all its chance and then just let it go. Art is a great way for a release for me. Like I said, it's a great time for me to zone in and zone out from the world. And probably one of my favorite things is this anger exercise of writing a letter to someone... or whatever emotion it is; I usually use it for anger. But writing a letter to someone about how they made you feel, why they made you feel that way, and then rip it up, glue it to a plate and then just paint over it.” -L.O.

“I used to write these short little love letters to this girl I liked, and...crazily enough, that same girl passed away, back in 2019...To cope with her death, I wrote a poem, and it was to cope with her death and the death of other people I had lost in the last couple of years. Her family enjoyed it, and a few of my friends enjoyed it, and they asked me to continue writing.” – N.

“When she died it was like, she just went quiet. I didn't really know what to do, what to think about. And so, I wrote about that confusion and that silence. And then I wrote a lot about honoring her. Yeah, I wrote a lot about honoring her. Just all the stuff that she did, that she went through, just how proud I was to have experienced her, to have known her, and to be able to look up to her even now.”- C.

### **1b. Expressive Arts used for emotional regulation and expression**

C. used poetry and journal writing to free herself of intense anger and sadness by channeling these emotions to put on paper:

"It's weird, but I love synonyms, I literally look them up all the time, and I guess that just kinda funnels my need to say what I have to say, and then say it how I have to say it." "take me a minute to sit there and, okay, evaluate, analyze, whatever, whatever. And that's the same way in my writing. When stuff happens, I process it and then I write.

Even if I'm writing something off reel, I'll never finish a poem right then and there. I have to evaluate and analyze what's really going on."

Art helped interviewee say and express what needs to be said without always resorting to normal means of communication using verbal interactions. Direct language instead communication. Instead, artists use their art mediums to express themselves and process information, as if they were using an art language instead to communicate. After this being able to engage in these expressive activities, she feels that these hard emotions have been released and "gone". Lastly, it is common that artists use their art mediums to help communicate. This means that the artist would express what needs to be said without always resorting to normal means of communication using verbal interactions. Instead, artists use their art mediums to express themselves and process information, as if they were using an art language instead to communicate:

"...conversation between me and everyone else and between the dancers, between the dancers and the musicians, how do they experience each other and what is the sum of that experience? How can we present something and then have it open a conversation with the audience effectively so that they then also, and they come into our conversation." (Prof. L)

"And now, recently, I've been trying to write more poems where I'm appreciating something or I'm explaining something, loving something because I realized that I can use poetry to express any emotion, not just sadness. So a lot of my older ones are pretty bad. That was just how I felt, really." (S.)

Prof. L. felt that there was a conversation between dancers, musicians, and the audience. Instead of relying on a direct explanation of what everyone is doing, there was an open expression in the dance experience. C. also used synonyms in poetry to help express her thoughts and feelings instead of just using direct language or conversation. Participating in the arts gave many of the interviewees an outlet when dealing with difficult emotions or a way to express their emotions outwardly.

“I’ll let situations and the things I’ve been through, I’ll let them just sit in my head, and it doesn’t really become real until I put them into words, and then it makes me face it. And I’m not typically an emotional person, at least in the sense of being upset. I might get angry, but getting upset and sad, I typically keep that, that’ll stay in my head. So when I do put it into words, it’s just like, “Okay, it’s out there. It’s gone now.” – C

“It can be draining, depending on what type of poem it is. Just because a lot of poets don’t write happy poems. So ... Especially not in slam, not in spoken word. So we are not out here writing happy poems. We’re not out here talking about the rainbows. And so you’re taking some part of yourself, your life, and you’re putting it on paper.” - A.R.

“And probably one of my favorite things is this anger exercise of writing a letter to someone... or whatever emotion it is; I usually use it for anger. But writing a letter to someone about how they made you feel, why they made you feel that way, and then rip it up, glue it to a plate and then just paint over it. So for me, one of the last times I did that, it was great to one, put into words all of the things I was feeling.” - Lo.

“I know for me personally, I’m a very emotional or emotionally-driven person. So it was like, "How do you cope with this ridiculous mix of emotions that are boiling and festering inside of you? And the world is literally ending when you open the door." For some people, that was just like, "Okay, I’m going to shut down." For me, that was making art.” - J.B.

Many of the artists have utilized art in order to find a way to express their emotions as well as cope with things they may be going through in their lives. Participants used various expressive arts mediums to deal with emotions that may be difficult to handle on their own. C. and Lo. described how they are able to use writing to truly feel their anger or sadness and put those feelings into words to digest and understand their emotional states. C. used writing to cope with feelings of “confusion” and the “silence,” following her aunt’s death. N. also used poetry to help cope with several deaths that he experienced all within a short period. When participants feel emotions of sadness or anger, they are channeled into creative word choice, dance, or visual art. C., like other participants felt like she was able to release the emotions’ intensities by engaging with the chosen expressive art mediums.

Although the process may take a lot of energy, participants are able to creatively record their emotional affect. J.B. used their expressive arts poetry to channel all her emotions in

response to her internal difficulties in understanding her complex emotions and difficulties in making peace with social problems. Instead of shutting down or getting overwhelmed with emotions, participants utilize their skills in creative outlets to help cope with their uncomfortable emotions.

Participants' perception of expressive arts as coping mechanism and a way to regulate their emotions is consistent with existing studies on coping and emotion regulation. For example, studies show that with the help of visual expression to organize and integrate information and guidance from an art therapist, the therapeutic work can create a focus on identifying emotions, discriminate among them, express emotions appropriately, and soothe emotions when necessary (Hinz, 2009 as cited in 2017). Studies also show that therapeutic use of kinesthetic components can involve helping patients use of movement to release pent-up energy, become more in tune with the healing rhythms of their lives, and create healing inner sensations (Hinz, 2017). Unfortunately, the majority of the studies on expressive arts and coping have ignored if and how arts could be particularly helpful for Black identifying individuals. The collective experience of the participants of seeing arts as a coping mechanism illustrate how Black identifying people may especially benefit from expressive, creative approaches in addressing intense emotions, stressful life events and communicating these experiences.

### **Theme 2: Barriers in Accessing Expressive Arts**

Another theme that was common throughout the interview transcripts had to do with the different obstacles the interviewees faced in their experience being an artist. Specifically, these difficulties acted as access barriers to expressive arts activities and therapies. In attempts to access expressive arts activities, artists ran into mostly external barriers that push them back from receiving the benefits of expressive arts. External barriers are characterized by social

structures and environments that enforce barriers on individuals. These barriers consisted of lack of resources, social pressures, social and political unrest, racism, and time constraints. It must be noted that the expressive arts barriers that are more internal are enforced by lot of larger and societal forces. There were some examples of internal barriers like lack of confidence levels in expressive arts and refraining from speaking up about their capabilities or who they are, but did not come up frequently enough to note as a theme across transcripts. This theme of access barriers gives insight of how these large and external barriers impact Black individuals.

### **2a. Racism, Sexism, Elitism, and Oppression**

When participants were asked about difficulties in the expressive arts, they usually spoke about external barriers. One of the most mentioned external barriers were based in racism, sexism, elitism, and the effects of oppression. Participants described how a variety of external difficulties made them and others like them feel subordinate to dominant groups.

A.R mentioned that she submitted one of her poem pieces that unapologetically expressed her blackness to a literary magazine. She received a blatant rejection, stating that it did not follow the guidelines of submission. Her poetry advisor and teacher even specified that she did not violate any guidelines in her submission:

“But my teacher...She's like, it's not hate speech, it's not wrong, she's not slandering anybody per se. She's like, this may make you uncomfortable as a white person. Because it was mainly white students that were looking at the poem. She was like, this may make you uncomfortable because y'all are white, y'all should sit with it. But the poem's not going against anything that we have, regarding ethics and stuff.” - A.R.

This rejection inhibited A.R. to participate with other expressive artists, and also made her feel like she could not be herself in the midst of her white peers:

“...being a Black poet and talking about certain things, when you do want to get published in a lot of these predominantly white magazines, you don't. Like, you don't. And you send it all these poems, and they're just like, um, we thought your submission

was really interesting, very different, but we're not going to go through, we're not going to publish you..." - A.R

Participants note how exclusionary white dominated expressive arts spaces can be. The following excerpts from Participant K. interview data outlines well what other participants mention as racist, sexist, elitist, and oppressive behavior within their creative spaces:

"And that's why I said that conservatories are really horrible, because there's a very skewed sense of community, and it's based more so, not on caring about each other, but competitiveness, envy, just elitism, racism. A lot of that, especially against black people. Especially against black people. There's an Instagram page where it's called Orchestra's Racist, and it's one of those confession pages, and there are hundreds..."

"Any black musicians. Yeah. You actually have to be good. You have to be quite good...obviously, as a black person, that usually involves you being really good. It is, unfortunately, a field that is dominated by white males, and so you have to be a step ahead of a lot of people in order to... And that's why I was saying, as a soloist, it's much more difficult."

"He wanted to audition into one of the really big conservatories back in his day, and his teacher, obviously a white guy, he honestly told him, he was like, "Troy, you should not audition here. You are black."

"Teachers feeling super entitled. Then their students feeling super entitled. I know at Julliard, there is, literally, a teacher. He's extremist. Apparently, he told... So, he had a female student, and she was Asian, and he told her, because he didn't like the way she was playing in a lesson, he told her that she should quit cello and become a mother."

Participants often described ways racism pervaded parts of their life that simply made everyday tasks and expressive activities engagement difficult to do:

"...limited amount of BIPOC students that we have in our school... even though theater is supposed to be this inclusive thing, but it has never been this inclusive thing. It's been inclusive things for white people and white passing people, but never for BIPOC. Unless your director is black, unless the show is predominantly black, or one of the producers is BIPOC. That's the only way" - J.E.

"How hard it was for me to go to sleep, and how the world is going crazy. I can't even really go outside without police patrolling my neighborhood" - N.

"Also with therapy in general... I already got so many boxes checked off that are complex and intertwined to me as a human in whatever I'm going through, that it's like I won't have to like extra explain stuff." - L.

“Like when I go into a PWI and I'm going to be a black woman leader anyways, there's always the onus of teaching others and being a lecturer, and being an expert always fell on my shoulder even though I'm like, "Yeah, see, I don't really care about that." But it was really cool because I did host and lead some other events throughout the school year with our multicultural office...That's why I'm tired.” – L.O

Throughout human history there have been generally two types of groups: the oppressor groups and the oppressed, the privileged and the marginalized. In the United States, oppressor groups usually include White males and heterosexuals. Victim groups would include Black people, members of the LGBTQ community, Latinx identifying individuals, immigrants, and women. With this Marxist and global progressive ideology, equity and social justice would mean that there would be more strengthening of victim groups and weakening of the oppressors (Fonte, 2002). Within this study, participants described how oppressor groups (white, male, and wealthy) held power in making participants disadvantaged or feel disadvantaged within their marginalized identities. Participants in this study who have marginalized identities described their experiences in lacking power in comparison to oppressive groups.

In obtaining expressive arts activities, barriers of elitism, racism, and sexism made it difficult to participate in expressive arts activities. These oppressive influences created pervasive social pressures that made participants feel like they needed to conform. Participants felt that there were heavy influences exerted on them by other people, groups, and norms on how to navigate their expressive arts activities and therapies. These pressures acted as forces against participants in following their own paths in their creative means:

“I think you have to gauge the type of audience that you have if they don't look like you. So if I'm around a lot of people and they're not really aware of the fact that, it's white as hell and there are Black people in here, then I should probably go” - A.R.

“But primarily I'm a poet. So I, like, spit stuff, spoken word. And I've found that it's very interesting going from slam to written poetry. They're different worlds. One is a bit more seasoned than the other. So trying to get published is a lot harder than trying to win a



competition or do well in spoken word things. Because the medium that they find acceptable is so ... is very different.” - A.R.

“I kind of hate the narrative that it attaches to me. I think that people hear, ‘Oh, she does poetry and all of this,’ and they assume... I open my mouth to talk and they're like, ‘Oh, you don't really sound you should be ... Oh, you do poetry? You shouldn't really be like that.” - C.

“And then you have the whole black men complex where you don't want to be seen as... you're in tune with your emotions. Being in tune with your emotions is typically attached to being feminine.” – C.

“Just because you have that poem doesn't mean you should just put it out. And because of the way that slam works, it's random people judging you... So you may want to put this poem out, but you know this poem is not going to score high. If you would like to win, if you want to score high, you probably shouldn't pull this one out.” - A.R.

“It's no wonder I kept ending up in this cycle of just disappointment... comparing them to other artists, comparing them to other people's expectations, and then failing to meet them. and then obviously I'm going to get down on myself, and I'm going to be mean to myself.” – L.O.

Not only do these participants face oppressive external barriers, but they also face the overwhelming pressures to conform and bend their narrative to appear more “acceptable” to oppressor groups. This consistent with literature that supports that artistic and creative spaces can be white dominant. For example, Black artists have been denied space for a long time in museums because it usually seemed primitive (Sherald, 2019). Baraka (2010) writes that most jazz critics have been dominated by White Americans, but the most important jazz musicians have been Black artists. Because of exclusionary artistic spaces like these, A.R. made a conscious decision to avoid white dominant spaces because of the rejection and pushback she’s experienced in the past by them. This directly limited her resources to a variety of poetry spaces in efforts to find alternative access to acceptance and social support. Participants C. and Lo. both felt pressured and confined by assumptions and expectations that are attached to Black artists like themselves. C. felt like she did not “sound” like other poets, while Lo. felt like she ended up

in a never-ending cycle of comparing herself to other artists. A.R. lacked support from teachers or institutions because of their loud expression of their Black identity within their expressive arts, which hindered their overall growth as an artist and discouraged them from sharing their work with others. C. and A.R. both talked about how the expectations influenced them to act or speak in certain ways that weren't true to themselves. And Lo. made an interesting point of how they struggled with their own expectations for themselves and how comparing themselves to others made them feel worse as an artist. These participants served as examples of how people of marginalized racial identities are harmed by society because of how race can also be performative and forced. As this can be often created by whiteness, environments are damaging to minorities because they are heavily pressured to perform stereotypical forms of their race, rather than their individuality in order to be given recognition and resource access my majority subjects (Major, 2012 as cited in Hunnewell, 2019).

These social barriers created a heavy impact, causing them to question their abilities. Lo. even mentions that she failed to meet her expectations of how she should be producing her expressive work and can be mean to herself. This created an internal barrier of low self-efficacy, as if she is incapable of participating in the activities that actually brought her peace and joy. Many artists felt the pressure of expectations to be or act in certain ways that hindered them receiving their own benefits from their art. These findings are consistent with current research that state how psychosocial factors, like poverty and racism, and racial-ethnic mismatch have shown to relate to the underuse of beneficial services or resources preference among Black identifying Americans (Diala et al., 2000; Dobalian & Rivers, 2008; Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009; Whaley, 2001 as cited in Masuda et. al., 2012).

**2B. Lack of Resources** – A resource is defined as anything that could help the artist in gaining access to the expressive arts. The lack of resources made it difficult for these Black individuals to get involved with the expressive arts or continue their access to the expressive arts. Artists lacked resources of financial help, knowledge of opportunities, institutional and social help, social support, and health providers.

Participant K. feared for his continued access to classical music would be hard in light of his nearby graduation. It also appeared that he felt challenged with finding ways to “try” to make classical music “accepted”, as if he felt that there are instances that he may not be accepted in society for what he does in the expressive arts without the immediate social support of an institution to rely on:

“The problems I see are more like figuring out what's going to happen after I no longer have the full support of an institution, or an institution at my disposal 24/7. I think that would be just trying to find ways to put classical music into the world, and trying to have it accepted, and things like that.” - K.

When participants were asked about expressive arts therapy services, they responded in not knowing about this mental health service:

“I want to try it, I just never really have. It's like, they're just out of reach. I wish it was more accessible.” - L.

“I haven't heard of that as a practice itself.” - J.B

“I have not.. I mean, if it's theater I'm in.” – J.E.

“One of my biggest barriers is probably just not knowing how to find one. I just literally didn't even know that was a thing or an option.” – L.O.

These findings are consistent with current research that state how lack of access to resources have been shown to relate to service underuse and preference among Black Identifying Americans (Diala et al., 2000; Dobalian & Rivers, 2008; Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009; Whaley, 2001 as cited in Masuda et. al., 2012).

A reoccurring sub-barrier throughout transcripts is the lack of time and money participants feel in attempt to engage with expressive activities. The well-known saying and sentiment “time is money” truly took precedent in this research. Many artists faced was feeling as if they didn’t have the time or the money to afford to pursue an artistic career or even participating in expressive arts related activities, even if it did provide benefits. Participant N. and Participant K, described the family expectation and pressures for them to work towards a basketball career in order to obtain a scholarship, when in actuality, he had a heavier interest in expressive activities like photography, music, and poetry:

“Well, back in high school, that's when my interest in photography kind of got sparked. I took a class, and we were doing these assignments that were really [inaudible 00:02:48] I had the interest in it, but didn't really have the time to really pursue it, because of my basketball career. So, other things that I [inaudible 00:03:00] different clubs that I was in.” - N.

“I went to B. Art high school, which is an amazing arts high school in intercity B. It's a public city school, which a lot of people don't think it is. But that's why it was founded. To be an institution in B. that cater to city kids that wouldn't necessarily have the opportunity, or just because of money, because music programs are super expensive...All I knew was to get into college through a basketball scholarship, getting into a division one. And the only reason for that was to get an education, to get a better education. To ensure that I will go to college and get a degree. The plan was never to get into the NBA, that was never the plan. The plan was to get an education.” – K.

Many other participants described the lack of time to pursue their expressive interests, which often seemed like they stemmed from financial limitations or other obligations to spend time on:

“I mean we're kind of adults... I just don't have the time to go to gallery shows. I don't have the time to put my work in a show or make enough income to have a studio.” - L.

“And I realized that if I wanted to do anything with dance, which I had always wanted to do, I better do something fast.” – Prof. L.

“So with that and having to work there's no time for her to just express herself and do what she wants. That's why I dropped the major. I was like, "Yeah, I'm not going to do it." – S.

“Sometimes I get too stressed or too overwhelmed with school to work on an art but art is what I actually want to pursue.” - S.

For many participants, financial barriers and time constraints made it hard for them to expand audiences or access services in expressive arts activities or therapies:

“And you send it all these poems, and they're just like, um, we thought your submission was really interesting, very different, but we're not going to go through, we're not going to publish you, we're not going to give you the money” – A.R.

“I don't have the time to put my work in a show or make enough income to have a studio.” - L.

“Biggest barrier with therapy usually is money. Is money. Because it can be so expensive.” – A.R.

“Preferably a nice sliding scale fee, because I'm broke.” – A.R.

“Theater is an expensive, very expensive... It seems like it's not, but it is. Especially if you want to go to college for theater, that is the biggest door theater throws down on BIPOC students. Because if you have someone from F.W or from the projects who can sing, dance, probably be the next Norm Lewis, we wouldn't even know because he can't pay to go to New York. He can't pay to go to Chicago. She can't pay to go to LA. She can't pay to go to Florida to audition. If you can't pay the tuition for the college of 20,000 a year, and they say they give you a scholarship, but the scholarship is only \$1,000.” – J.E.

“You're paying for housing. You're paying for your food. You're paying for all these things on top, and then your family has to survive. So theater, even though it's all seemingly welcoming, there are settled doors. So they'll stronghold doors that will stop BIPOC upcoming artists from growing. From being seen. Because as much as everyone says that they were going to go around and scout out the talent, they're only going to go to places that they know have good talent. They're not going to go to a new spot all the way downtown, two hours ago. A small high school and see who's there.” - J.E.

“There is a goal and you set that, so as to pull you through the process. And one of the things that's always frustrating is that it's very hard to find performing opportunities, and most often dancers basically have to pay to be able to perform.” - Prof. L

In all presented excerpts from the interview data, there is a trend in lack of time and money. The lack of time to engage with activities or tasks that are non-work related is consistent with research. There is a workaholic culture in the United States, and it is often contributed to moving up in a company, which can lead to negative consequences (Clark et.al., 2016). This

literature is not mentioned to describe participants as workaholics, but it is to highlight that they have similar internal conflicts like workaholics in experiencing feelings of guilt in not working because there are internal compulsions to do things more related to productivity in areas associated with work. Symptoms like these in workaholics show up in other aspects of life by causing stress, decreased physical health, and burnout (Clark et.al., 2016). In looking at participants problems with not having the time to engage in expressive arts activities, their interests were stifled by having to be more focused on dedicating time to school and money-making related tasks. Although engaging with expressive arts that brought a number of positive effects, participants felt they needed to instead focus on “realistic” majors, basketball scholarships for college, and methods of money making.

Participants that were unable to dedicate time towards expressive arts, also simultaneously stressed the importance of money in having access to expressive arts. Artist lacked the income to have a studio to create, go to expressive arts therapy, or share their expressive arts mediums with their community. Expressive arts can be a very expensive activity, especially when artist need to find ways to develop creative ways to afford it despite financial and time constraints. Participants that lacked financial resources struggled to access resources of expressive arts. These expressive and creative activities acted as coping mechanisms to deal with difficult experiences and mental health difficulties. This is parallel with current literature that states show that poor communities, who are more likely to be inhabited by ethnic minorities, can are negatively affected by limited access to mental health resources (McGuire & Miranda, 2008). These findings are consistent with current research that state how psychosocial factors, like lack of access to services have been shown to relate to resource underuse and preference among

Black identifying individuals (Diala et al., 2000; Dobalian & Rivers, 2008; Townes, Chavez-Korell, & Cunningham, 2009; Whaley, 2001 as cited in Masuda et. al., 2012).

### **Theme 3: “Black Activism”**

Artists incorporated Black identity and activism into expressive arts activities that enhanced feelings of confidence and self-efficacy against white-centered social norms. Activist contributions included ways to get involved with achieving social and community goals through different positions, activities, and demonstrations. If participants did not personally take part in activism or pro-black related activities, they at least acknowledged either the need for it or other Black individuals participating these activities. These Black identifying artists created and promoted Black community, Black identity, and Black pride within and outside their expressive talents despite pressures to not do this. Interview data shows a trend in artists experiencing feelings of ethnic self-esteem, comfort in their ethnic identity, and positive values of being Black all while promoting this pro-Black experience for other Black identifying to support their communities. Although activist efforts can become tiring, these activist effort acted as more of a protective factor than a risk factor for these participants.

#### **3a. Activism and Social Change**

After participants were asked about their barriers in the expressive arts, they were asked about their efforts overcome barriers or “get around them”. Often participants mention a form of activism or social change in response to overcoming expressive arts barriers. Participant J.E., a participant who attended an expressive arts related school, mentions:

“Right now, specifically with my school, we're going through a revolution or a reform, and we're trying to add BIPOC students to the faculty decided shows, make them racially unbiased... I have not seen. It's rare that I hear of a producer being BIPOC. That's the biggest thing. You'll hear writers being BIPOC. You'll hear a director being BIPOC. But

the people who produce the show, the people who create the team to create the story are usually not BIPOC. Not the people who need to tell the stories, need to let the children who are trying to make it see that, 'Hey, I made it, so can you'... And the problem is, is our faculty is an all-white faculty, until very recent... Until we were adamant this summer about having a BIPOC faculty member be onboard. Because, especially during all the things that went on, we needed someone to understand where we were coming from, where we were making these demands and why we're making these demands. And sometimes white people just don't understand. They understand, but they'll never get it. So we needed someone who would understand and get it, and then advocate for us as well."

This participant uses "we" language suggesting he is a part of this BIPOC community on campus pushing for a more inclusive faculty. This inclusivity will, in return, make a more inclusive theater community with Black individuals in higher positions of power. In hopes of this change, this participant notes that this can contribute to the next generation of artists seeing that they can also be a part of this creative community.

### **3b. Individual "Black Artivism" Efforts**

Most participants mentioned activism and social change, but they also described their own personal contributions to creatively incorporating activism into their artistic mediums:

"Me and a couple of the guys, we literally ... every day, we wake up in the studio, and we go to a protest, come back home to the studio and make music about what we just saw, or about what just happened." – N.

"But with that responsibility, we have ... [inaudible 00:00:17] to our generation to act on. I know that a few of my mentors have told me that [inaudible 00:00:26] that music and art is going to live forever. Because we learn through two different ways. Through either literature or art. And so, as an artist, we all have a responsibility to be the voice of our generation and of our time." - N.

"I'm an art teacher, I want to do this section on protesting and revolution and the part that art has met, while simultaneously teaching different print making, poster methods, weed paste, things like that and how to make posters and signs and information and symbolism in that." - L.

"...we have a whole lot of stuff that goes beyond just race, but it goes into class, and it goes into intersectionality... So that art in that class was a great time for me to just be like, "Huh, these are things that matter to me." And putting them on paper, I think putting them in a visual was also great with my classmates to recognize this is not just something



small. I did a huge project on the Harlem Renaissance... I sat down and I gave them a class activity, and basically it was them creating their own Harlem Renaissance type art, whether it be music, whether it be dance, whether it be a short poem or something. I had all of them sit down, and I'm like, "It can't be some very simple, I'm gay," you know? Like, "Cool, you're white and you're gay, and that's kind of where it ends. But let's talk about what kind of issues were black people going through?... it was about learning by ourselves as women as empowered learners and leaders... so that was a huge opportunity where I took art, and I'm already big on activism, I'm already big on a whole lot of stances... it was a wonderful opportunity to connect art with a purpose, and just being like, "Oh, there are heavy emotions in there. There are political things. There is morality that is tied to this. You can't just skip over something and think that because you're white, you have the privilege of not even knowing the Harlem Renaissance exists, and I'm black and I need to know why we need renaissances like that kind of thing." – L.O.

Many of the efforts to incorporate Black identity into expressive arts took form as narrative sharing and storytelling. A lot like participant L.O. in telling the story and history of the Harlem Renaissance, many of the interviewees talked about using their art as a form of activism in terms of speaking out to spread awareness or help to educate others. This looked like telling historic stories and their own stories through their music, poetry, and paintings to the masses to understand Black, marginalized experiences:

“But yeah, it's all just kind of ... I just love telling a story through pictures. If you could tell a story through a picture ... they say a picture says a thousand words, so you try to create those thousand words if you can.” - N.

“It's literally in everything I do. [inaudible 00:24:57] any time I open up my mouth, you hear something about me being black. In every one of my songs, I talk about different pieces of my black hood, blackness. Especially my music. I love talking about how black I am in my music.” - N.

“But when I'm thinking about things that I'm going to write, it's typically about myself. Like, the internal things that I have going on. Family stuff, lots of breaking down the Black family. And just really getting into what that looks like.” - A.R.

“I focus primarily on black culture, because that's what I know best.” - C.

“I think Black people, we've always expressed ourselves. And particularly with writing, I don't think that's something that's foreign. You know, there are all types of great Black writers, everywhere. And even when you think about the number of hip hop artists we have. Hip hop, rap, is literally poetry. It's rhythm and poetry. That's what rap means. So I think it's something that we've always done.” - A.R.

“And I know there's a poem in there about the whole rite of passage of where my momma used to take me to the hair salon. I would get my ends bumped, come out looking like James Brown to versus when I went to the hair salon, I was 18. And I took myself and the lady [inaudible 00:17:39], she did not know how to do natural hair. And I came out looking the same way that I did when I was little girl. And I was just like, that's crazy, times ain't changed. But then I know I also had something in there that was about when I was little, my mom's family is from a rural area outside of Ch.” - C.

“I tried to mix the realism of the face and then bright flowers, bright colors. Because I wanted to showcase black women in a positive and a delicate type of look instead of...that strong façade all the time. So flowers are delicate... So flowers are beautiful, they're pretty, they're so strong but delicate. [inaudible 00:18:24]. I was just in that type of mood and I just felt like painting something that could uplift black women. – S.

"Yeah, everyone can draw a stick figure. Everyone can draw a tree. Now if we can all talk about... We can draw a tree, we can [inaudible 00:16:30], we can talk about, 'okay this is a black tree, this is a white tree. This is what happens to the black tree,' you know?" And I think it's another way for people to start having a lot of these difficult conversations.” – L.O.

“The sense of showing, I don't know, it's showing how you feel an emotion. There's always a story and art is very much storytelling. I like listening and I'm nosy and I like sharing, and that all goes together.” - L.

“So, not only as an activist knowing the storytelling ability is what makes people see other people as human is so important, but also making those stories accessible to those who don't have that same kind of ... that same access.” - J.B.

“Amplifying voices of those who don't have the ability to do so is so important. I think that's what makes theater such a important vessel for activism because theater ...”  
 “Theater, I feel, is a great tool for activism because you have the opportunity to be like, "Here are these other stories that are so unlike your own that you can empathize with." And it's not just seeing a show about slavery. It's not seeing a show about the Civil Rights movement. We're not past it, but we can continue this conversation.” – J.B.

“...we explore a whole bunch of things like copyright issues, dance diplomacy, and of course the concepts of the black body, the black dancing body and how important those concepts are in terms of not only individual and personal experience, but also societal experience, and how little we understand the extent to which the concepts of the body undergird our experience as people of color. So this is one of the things that wants to bring it to awareness, that all of these things are part of our experience.” - Prof. L.

“It's really empowering to be able to write about it. To be able to express what I've been going through or what I've watched other people go through... I use a lot of metaphors because metaphors is my way of saying how I'm hurting...people don't get it so you have

to write it in a way where they're like, "Oh. I see. You feel like this. Oh, okay." Just so people who don't understand that life, they can understand that, "Oh. If you compare it to this. Oh, that's how it feels." So it takes a lot of truth, a lot of vulnerability, and a lot of creativity so a lot goes into it really." – S.

"So it's not even that you have to sit there and say something that's going to resonate with each and every one of them. But you have to be sure enough of yourself that what you're saying is what you believe in... what you're saying is yours. So you have to have that, that persona that you good. So the same thing when I go meet somebody, I'm not worried about if they gone like me or whatever. I know who I am. I see me too." – C.

All transcripts mentioned a form of activism whether that be in their own efforts or the efforts by others around them within their community. Participants commonly mentioned the importance of teaching the masses about marginalized experiences. Interviewees addressed lack of representation, lack of understanding, and lack of awareness by providing their own contributions in hopes to make their experience more well-known. In their artistic and activist like roles, they became educators to describe the black experience and put it on display for others to perceive. They took their artistic activism seriously in positioning themselves as teachers and leaders of change to edit dominant, white-centered narratives with their Black perspectives. Many spoke about how they felt like they had a responsibility to use their art as a voice, especially for their generation and communities. A lot like artists felt obligated to communicate their direct experiences in their own artistic activism; Sherald, in needing the escape for herself, recognized the power in "imagery and how we [Black people] experience ourselves one way and how we experience ourselves in the media" (Sherald, 2019, p.52). Both Sherald and the participants in this study felt like they need to control Black representation instead of allowing mass media to describe or define it for them.

Storytelling and narrative sharing were a way for participants to encourage people to see stories from others' perspectives in order to understand their experiences. Not only did they feel like this was to spread awareness, but it was also with the intent to empower their peers with

similar identities and create an empowered community. With the goal of empowering others, artists often empowered themselves in controlling their own narratives, which are usually written for them in societal norms and stereotypes of who Black people are. They could publicly claim their pain and struggles in resistance to any societal constraints. No one could deny them of what they experienced or how they experienced, when they could create an image of what Blackness entailed. Participants received validation and support in presenting and describing their intergenerational, cultural, and collective trauma through their expressive arts. According to Barlow (2018), by employing social support and maximizing the use of storytelling, Black individuals can connect with their current situations with historical phenomena under discussion. Ultimately, they controlled what others will see when they perceive Blackness in opposition to what stereotype heavy narratives said about Black individuals.

### **3c. Finding community in “Black Artivism”**

Participants, in efforts to participate in activist related expressive activities, gained support in others who also participated in uplifting the community and promoting pro-blackness in their expressive art activities. In realization that they are not the only ones pushing for social change, there was solidarity and power in numbers:

“Especially, I've been doing it most, in my city you got a whole bunch of rappers, and I look at them the same way that I look at myself. It's a different medium, but we doing the same thing. - C.

“And then you get to go home... I saw this guy that I'd been slamming with. And I was like, yo. He was like, yo. We do like poetry class. So it is nice to have that community. And it's nice to have people who kind of, like, they peep the stuff the you've been keeping in the world, and they see it.” A.R.

“The poetry community is really, it's great, honestly... you make a lot of friends... So it is nice to have that community. And it's nice to have people who kind of, like, they peep the stuff the you've been peeping in the world, and they see it. And just to see the different ways that people can turn something into art. It's like, oh wow I would have never thought of that like that.” - A.R.

“I think one of the ones that's most delightful is when there's a sense of consonance, there's a sense of everyone working together towards the same end, and you feel, it could be coming from an unexpected direction but it feels right.” - Prof. L.

“One of the people in there was actually my cello teacher, and he's a black man... he's had such a cultivating experience in the arts, as a black man... for some reason, that day in my lesson, that was one of the best times I'd ever played, ever” - K.

“Music that means something. I hang around these guys, and they support my activism as well. We're all active in the community. - N.

“That's why I love my school, because it's such a tight knit community. You find your people, and your people really look out for you. And just because they look out for you, that doesn't mean that they can't look out for other people as well. They'll also look out for their course mates.” - K.

“It's also nice to be in a place where everyone's really welcoming and just wanting to do fun things and supportive and interested in what everyone else is working on. It's definitely a community that was there. I just never saw it until suddenly I was in it.” - L.

A few of the interviewees talked about having the influence and support of their families that encouraged them to continue making art. Participant N. notes that his motivations for his creative social change will hopefully make a bigger contribution to his immediate community of his family, leaving a legacy for them to also appreciate and receive feelings of belongingness from:

“I think what I enjoy the most being able to not only put a smile on my mother's face, but on my nephew's face. Because I'm doing it for them. I'm doing it for my nephew. I'm doing this for my future son, God willing. My future daughter, God willing. To be able to [inaudible 00:10:52] music that my mom can then share and enjoy herself, that's something that I enjoy.”

So, being an artist is just kind of my way of giving to my community, and also creating a legacy for myself and something that I can pass down and show my children when they come along...I wear my heart on my sleeve as I aspire to lead in this generation.”

There were several instances described how having support from other artists and their community or even their family encouraged them to continue pursuing artistic social change and helped them to feel less alone in their creative activist efforts. C. had both the support from other rappers in their city along with her mother, who introduced them to their love for words. A.R.

had a teacher as well as friends as an artist community who supported her art as well as allowed them to feel like they belonged in a space with like-minded people. N. also talked about how he loved doing art for his family and how sharing his art with his mom and hopefully future children encouraged him to keep going.

Having a community of Black people, for many of the artists, encouraged them to have a voice to speak with their peers and push for collective change of dominant narratives in their expressive art making. Participants felt feelings of cohesion and consonance with forming communities with those who were shared similar goals of empowerment, pride, and expression. In the same breath, artists felt validate in surrounding themselves with other Black individuals, knowing that their experiences were not singular or only specific to themselves. K. talked about how having other Black artists in their community encouraged them to continue using their voices and being heard as artists. It allowed them to feel less alone against pre-established limitations of the way things usually go. It is evident in many of these interviews that activism is an essential part of their lives. Art gives them another medium to spread awareness for the causes that are most important to them and gives them inspiration to keep creating and fighting for what they believe in. All these examples and more show that the Black artists supported their community with empowerment and sharing narratives, while also receiving support from their communities to continue their efforts in artistic activism and social change. This give and take relationship between artist and community is consistent with current literature that supports how effective Black community is positive for Black people's empowerment. According to Barlow's (2018) description of a Black healing circle, when black students learn more about themselves and their peers, they are also experiencing heal and uncovering trauma. This type of healing has the potential to create community and transformation regardless of physical spaces. In addition,

studies show that social contact with Whites and the attitudes of Whites are generally unimportant to African American self-esteem. (Hughes and Demo, 1989 as cited in Okech & Harrington, 2002). It was essential for the Black artists to empower themselves and others who also shared Black identity within their communities to enhance feelings of confidence and ethnic self-esteem. As many artists were a part of close-knit communities, self-esteem was increased and maintained by their supportive communities and peers. It seemed that these Black artists received confidence through their art and support from community in their expressive artwork, which is consistent with literature. Ultimately participants increased feelings of personal self-esteem within their communities. Studies show that personal self-esteem is generated in microprocesses in the black community that are protected from institutional inequality. Racial self-esteem is generated by cultural and interpersonal process that are internal to the black communities (Hughes and Demo, 1989).

Artists participated and described various forms of activism in their art and within their communities. They participated by getting involved with activist related positions, opportunities, and activities to gain pride, confidence, and community in their Black identity. There were efforts to create more Black spaces that they feel more accepted in expressing themselves fully in who they are. This in turn, uplifted themselves and other around them. The salience of black identity and activism is this consistent with current literature in minority groups in activism. Current day research supports how activism can be positive for Black individuals who feel ostracized and excluded from dominant cultures (Hotchkins, 2017). Feelings of belonging, contributing to a bigger picture, feel important. Shows resilience and resistance against white-centered systems, cultures, institutions that make Black individuals feel small, as if they need to conform and mold into more “acceptable” people.

Interview data is consistent with Millones' (1980) model of Black consciousness described to have four stages. The preconscious stage – individuals are not involved in growth along the Black consciousness continuum and have internalized White racist stereotypes. The confrontation stage – Black individuals see White people as enemies and tend to engage in militant rhetoric when discussing racial issues. The internalization stage – Black individuals absorb positive values of being Black and become proud of their ethnic identity. The integration stage – Black individuals are tolerant of other African Americans who are in less adaptive stages and become active in the liberation of themselves and others (Millones, 1980 as cited in Okech & Harrington, 2002). In reference to Millones model of Black consciousness, participants in this study showed stages of internalization and integration especially when participating in activism related activities. Participants became very active in their own liberation and stressed the importance of other Black individuals participating in this liberation through expressive arts activities and non-expressive arts activities. Many expressed comfort and pride in their Black identity. They appeared very empathetic and well-reasoned in advocating for fairness and justice for oppressed people.

Although it was found that activism had more of a positive effect on participants, there were some smaller codes showing that there are some negative effects in participating in activism. This is not to say that activism always has more of a positive effect on Black individuals. It must be mentioned that the lower trend of negative effects of activism can also be because of pressures Black people in America to maintain strength and resilience, and refrain from acknowledging weaknesses and self-concealment. Studies show that self-concealment is particularly relevant to African American college students, as it overlaps with Afrocentric cultural values, such as collective harmony and communalism, as well as a historical



maltreatment of African Americans in the United States (Townes et al., 2009; Wallace & Constantine, 2005 as cited in Masuda et. al, (2012). Although not always mentioned in the data, the responsibility to advocate and support fellow Black peers can become exhausting and overwhelming. With the exception of some participants disclosing the feelings of burnout in supporting their communities, the Black experience described by participants in expressive activities includes activism as a way to access feelings of confidence, strength and power, representation, and community.

### **Quantitative Results - Brief Symptom Inventory**

Table 2 presents the scores for the nine domains of the Brief Symptom Inventory. Each T-score was calculated by gender and are displayed. T scores at or above 60-65 on any scale dimension surpasses non patient norms for mental health related problems. All participants calculated t scores for categories: somatization, obsessive-compulsive, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, global severity index, and positive symptom total made the clinical cut off. Table 2 shows that all participants scored above non patient norms for each scale dimension, with the exception of only half of participants scoring above patient norms for positive symptom distress index. Based on these results, the majority of participants have made the clinical cut off of T60-T65, which indicates that participants show considerable rates of distress especially for a community sample not directly recruited from a clinic or mental health service.

### **General Discussion**

Expressive arts activities have shown to be an effective way for Black individuals to cope with their raw emotions, difficult experiences, and a variety of stressors. The benefits of expressive arts activities in this study can inform future efforts in approaching Black identifying

clients who have an interest in expressive arts with expressive arts activities or therapies. Historically, expressive arts has been a way for Black individuals to express themselves freely, especially within the context of their marginalized identities and communities. With this supporting data on Black identifying artists sampled from the community, it is suspected that expressive arts and creative approaches may be an effective intervention for this specific community. Especially considering the majority of participants meeting the clinical cut off for a variety of mental health issues that should be treated by mental health professionals.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

Although there is little research supporting the effectiveness of expressive arts therapy for Black identifying individuals, there is enough empirical research, historical context, and Black narratives to support the importance of expressive and creative arts activities for this community. According to the data collected in this study, Black individuals use expressive arts activities as coping mechanisms. Mental health providers can approach Black individuals with a more culturally sensitive framework that addresses the needs of Black individuals who participate in expressive and creative art mediums. With the findings of this study, the researcher hopes that this will promote more interventions specific to Black experience. This is a call to action for mental health providers to provide expressive arts therapies that are low pressure and feel natural to Black identifying clients in using familiar approaches to how they cope with stressful topics. Clinicians can be more aware of who they are serving and how to serve them, in understanding creative and expressive activism in the perspectives of Black individuals. With a inside look of how participants showcase their experiences through their art, professionals can help Black clients navigate coping strategies related to expressive arts. In addition, they can help Black clients maneuver around access barriers that prevent them from receiving services. Lastly, it is

imperative that these creative and expressive interventions be accessible. Although many of the barriers appear related to institutional oppression, money and time constraints posed as a serious problem for participants gaining access to expressive activities.

For all interviews conducted, there was a final exit question of if participants have ever heard of expressive arts therapies and would they ever try it considering their use of expressive arts in their personal lives. All participants expressed interest in receiving the therapies in the futures, and they made sure to list a couple of requirements if they were to receive these services. In light of the participants wishes, this study informs that some Black individuals that use expressive arts activities would prefer to use this method with the help of a mental health professional who shares similar identities with them. Participants hope to seek care from providers who can relate to their intersectional and complex experience of being a Black person with additional identities of gender, sexuality, interests, and more. If providers are unable to identify similarly with patients, it is essential that they are culturally competent in helping Black clients navigate their ethnic identity in relation to how they feel comfortable in expressing themselves. When an individual's clinician is the oppressor, a therapeutic relationship is impossible. White clinicians and expressive therapists need to engage in solidarity work and attempt allyship in self-work by the majority group (Reed, 2018). If not, participants may refrain from seeking services if they feel like they are being misunderstood and unheard (NAMI, 2014). Participants also voiced that they can feel like they can over explain in therapy spaces with white mental health providers. Given the push for Black identifying health providers within the interview data, participants would mostly prefer Black mental health professional who can recognize and empathize with to truly understand them. Hopefully with these implications, Black individuals can feel more comfortable in being vulnerable in mental health related services.

In the thematic trends found, it makes sense that participants found comfort in having therapists of the same race and/or gender. One of the most reported external barriers in the interview data were barriers of racism, elitism, and oppression. If mental health providers share identity of oppressor groups that contribute to external barriers artists face, there may be potential mistrust in the provider (Reed, 2018). Because participants found confidence, self-efficacy, comfort, and relatability within their “Black activism”, it may be a wise recommendation for Black clients to receive expressive arts therapies from a similarly identifying provider. Transcripts support that expressive arts activities and therapies have the potential to create a safe space needed for self-expression, whether through music, writing, dancing, etc. It may also provide a space that through creative processes, Black-identifying people can overcome uncomfortable feelings and experience personal growth with a supportive community, whereas “typical” artistic spaces may fail regarding issues such as censorship, racism, and elitism. In transcripts also showing trends in barriers to expressive such as lack of resources and accessibility, all expressive arts therapies should be made more available and well-known to Black communities overall to increase use of these resources in the future.

As mentioned before, external barriers created much difficulty in participants receiving and engaging with the benefits of expressive arts. These external barriers are very pervasive in nature and may affect the individual’s confidence levels and trust within white-dominated systems or institutions. Consequently, smaller groups of codes that described participants internal barriers to expressive arts activities and therapies were in mentions of some identity conflicts, burnout, loss of pleasure of the arts and/or artist block, loss of confidence, and some mistrust. Internal barriers were hard to identify and not mentioned directly or often in this interview data. Studies in the future should consider effective ways to discover internalized

barriers in Black identifying individuals who use expressive arts activities. With current literature that supports the phenomenon of how oppressive systems and unfair experiences can eat away at the confidence levels of Black individuals in the constant effort to obtain resources that are heavily owned and controlled by oppressive groups, this should be more heavily investigated by future studies. Studies show that institutional inequality has important effects on black self-perceptions. Inequality strongly influences personal efficacy by depriving black of opportunities that would enable them to feel efficacious (Franks and Marolla 1976 as cited in Hughes and Demo, 1989). It is important that Black individuals experience effective performance, especially when discrimination in institutional life can largely limit Black individuals of positions of power, resources, and the best opportunities to experience themselves as powerful and autonomous (Hughes and Demo, 1989). Participants in this study often mentioned how barriers of racism, elitism, and oppression effected their abilities to share and participate in the expressive arts but did not share often how this in return affected their internal perceptions of self or expressive arts related mental health resources. As mentioned by Masuda et. al (2012), mental health stigma, which is widespread in public, is generally associated with negative help-seeking attitudes (Leong & Zachar, 1999; Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005). Mental health stigma has been found to predict the use of mental health services among African Americans (Mishra, Lucksted, Gioia, Barnet, & Baquet, 2009; Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004). Hopefully future studies can further investigate the internal barriers Black individuals face within themselves to better understand a larger picture of difficulties in accessing expressive arts activities and therapies in addition to external barriers.

Although internal barriers did not arise naturally in interview data, topics in “Black activism” did. “Black Activism” enhanced feelings of self-efficacy and confidence levels for

Black identifying individuals in this study. In knowing the supporting data of how this can serve as a protective factor for Black identifying individuals, expressive arts therapies should work to replicate “Black Activism” within mental health resources. Mental health providers may work to create community amongst Black identifying clients, encourage them to use their voice and speak with their peers, and push for collective change of dominant narratives within their expressive art making. Participants’ feelings of cohesion and consonance within “Black Activism” by sharing similar feelings of empowerment and pride formed expressive communities. Black identifying clients expressing their ethnic identity through art mediums can be important for Black wellness.

Lastly, there should be instructions to code for gender fluid and nonbinary folks in Brief Symptom Inventory. Participant 1 was left out of reporting for BSI scores, because there were only T scores for male and female participants. As more people continue to not conform to the binary categories of male and female, there will be a greater need for ways to code for and consider gender fluid identities. Research in the future should push to find ways to analyze BSI raw scores of gender fluid participants to expand the understanding and generalizability of future studies.

### **Limitations and Future Research Directions**

This research thesis idea was developed prior to the pandemic and needed to undergo several changes in order for the research project to still be conducted. Prior to the pandemic, this research project was designed to have in person interviews. Recruitment was only limited to online resources, but the researcher connected with a variety of centers that offered expressive arts activities and clinics that offered expressive arts therapies in the Washington D.C. area. The intention was to recruit Black participants receiving expressive arts therapies or who have

received expressive arts therapies in the past to gain perspective of barriers they needed to overcome to get to services. After many efforts to maintain relationships with interested centers and clinics in the beginning stages of recruitment, partnerships dissipated due to many people being out of office and also having to reform their own clinics and centers to adjust to the new pandemic limitations. Instead of the participants being split between a community sample and a clinical sample like planned, it was decided to recruit through the community in online resources and hold interviews over Zoom. This study had rich data and supported current research, research topics in this study can be further explored by recruiting more Black identifying participants who use general coping mechanisms to see if expressive arts arises from data without expressive arts focus for recruitment, and Black identifying clinical sample recruitment for perspectives on expressive arts therapy barriers they overcame.

#### **Authorship Note:**

Based on the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (2021), authorship implies responsibility and accountability for published work. The first author was responsible for the majority of contributions in conception, design, acquisition, analysis, interpretation, and data collection for the research project. The first author was responsible for drafting the work and revising it critically for important intellectual content. The second author was responsible for helping interpret data and finalizing edits to be published. Non-Author Contributors consisted of two consensus coders to provide perspectives to data analysis.

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**Table 1**

Participant Demographics

<b>Initials</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Primary Occupation</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Insurance information</b>
J.B.	Black and/or African American	genderfluid	Literary intern	College degree/ Higher Education	Full time	Blue cross
N.	Black and/or African American	M	Entrepreneur	Two-year degree or technical diploma	Homemaker/ self employed	n/a
K.	Black and/or African American	M	Cellist / musician	College degree/ Higher Education	student	Blue Cross
J.E	Black and/or African American	M	student	College degree/ Higher Education	student	Cigna
S.	Afro-Caribbean	F	Student and tutor	Attended college or technical school	student	n/a – applied for a new one
L.	Mixed Ethnicity or Race	F	Student	College degree/ Higher Education	Part time (1-34hrs)	Aetna
C.	Black and/or African American	F	Student & Administrative Intern	College degree/ Higher Education	student	Well Fleet
Prof. L	Mixed Ethnicity or Race	F	Writer/ educator	Postgraduate degree	Part time (1-34hrs)	GIC
A.R	Black and/or African American	F	Student	Attended college or technical school	Part time (1-34hrs)	Blue Cross
L.O	Black and/or African American	F	Unemployed	College degree/ Higher Education	Unemployed	Cigna

**Table 2**

Participants Brief Symptom Inventory T scores based on Gender

<b>Initials</b>	<b>Gender</b>	Somatization	Obsessive-Compulsive	Interpersonal Sensitivity	Depression	Anxiety	Hostility	Phobic Anxiety	Paranoid Ideation	Psychoticism	Global Severity Index (GSI)	Positive Symptom Total	Positive Symptom Distress Index
<b>1</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>2</b>	<b>M</b>	80	80	80	80	80	78	78	80	80	80	80	64
<b>3</b>	<b>M</b>	80	80	80	80	80	78	78	80	80	75	80	53
<b>4</b>	<b>M</b>	80	80	80	80	80	78	78	80	80	80	80	80
<b>5</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	80	80	70
<b>6</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	71	80	60
<b>7</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	69	80	54
<b>8</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	69	80	52
<b>9</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	80	78	73
<b>10</b>	<b>F</b>	78	80	78	75	80	80	80	80	80	69	80	52

\*Participant 1 identified as genderfluid and was not coded for neither male nor female for BSI T scores.