

H.Y.P.E. (Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged) Media: Empower Youth to Change

Their Community's Narrative

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## **Abstract**

This project explores how black female students can utilize social media in order to influence their community's narrative. It will delve into the complexities of black girls utilizing digital literacies in order to cultivate a community system that affirms their place of being in the world. Through traditional means of ethnographic research such as taking note of observations and keeping documentation as well as utilizing teacher-research methodologies through conducting workshops within the program and receiving direct data from the participants themselves, I seek to understand how these young marginalized individuals in particular can communicate their thoughts and ideas about their experiences in order to facilitate change.

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## Literature Review

### *The Invisibility of Black Girls*

Black girls have faced assault in varying forms of violence in terms of physical as well as emotional (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016). They have also been continuously wronged in the realm of academics as they are attributed labels of being “less than” or are viewed in terms of their “deficits” rather than the intellectual promise they possess (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016). Their stories range from being displayed falsely to being presented in an incomplete form (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016; Muhammad 2015). Scholars have acknowledged the lack of research conducted concerning the literacy of Black girls as well as the invisibility they face in classrooms (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016; Evans-Winters, 2005; Henry, 1998), the various techniques the public media utilizes in order to distort as well as dehumanize them (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015), and the detachment between their own experiences and mandated education programs (Haddix & Muhammad, 2016; Jeffries & Jeffries, 2013). With an understanding of the wrongs that have been committed against Black girls, I can obtain a higher level of comprehension concerning how H.Y.P.E. media operates in opposition, providing Black girls with an alternative educational space that affirms their existence.

### *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies*

State sanctioned schooling has largely operated as an assimilationist/white imperialist project, as students and their families are forced to abandon their languages, literacies, history and culture in order to obtain success within the school system (Alim & Paris 2017). Over time the question of how schooling should function in an ever-evolving pluralistic society has arisen (Alim & Paris, 2017). In response, the pedagogic theory, culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) emerged (Alim & Paris 2017). CSP’s main goal is to encourage and sustain

“linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism” as a key element of education in order to advance positive social change (Alim & Paris, 2017). Culturally sustaining pedagogy operates in settings where education is essential in preserving the cultures of communities that have continuously been negatively affected by schooling. Essentially by presenting schooling as a place for sustaining ways of existence for communities of color as opposed to wiping them out, CSP is acting in response to the variety of ways the school system has continued to function as a cog in the colonial machine (Alim & Paris, 2017). This form of theorization has been formulated in the past as Du Bois (1965) presented the public with the concept of double consciousness or “The sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of other, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on with amused contempt and pity” (pg.35). The goal of CSP is to do the exact opposite. Rather than view communities of color through the lens of the achievement gap, the pedagogy instead looks to affirm these communities' complex and innovative ways of thinking (Alim & Paris, 2017).

Another important element of CSP is comprehending how younger individuals are “enacting race, ethnicity, language, literacy” and how their interaction with culture is constantly changing and shifting in dynamic (Alim & Paris, 2017). Taking this factor in to consideration CSP is a concept that aligns itself with the contemporary belief that culture is dynamic and fluid while simultaneously understanding that the past and present can be viewed as “merging, a continuum, or distinct depending on how young people and their communities live race/ethnicity, language, and culture” (Alim & Paris, 2017). As young individuals continue to establish new, complex, and interconnected systems of self-identification in an environment where “cultural and linguistic recombination” occurs with heavy implications, it is necessary that these pedagogies are able to adapt and address these ever-changing cultural realities (Alim & Paris, 2017). Moreover, for CSP to operate effectively, “collaborative, collective, critical, and loving environments” that act in support of

young marginalized individuals' cultural identities, academic endeavors, and critique of white conformist values need to be promoted (Kinloch, 2017). These types of environments can be cultivated through the use of a newer more positive youth and community development approach known as Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), an approach heavily utilized by H.Y.P.E. Media. YPAR is "based in social justice principles in which young people are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them"(YPAR, 2015, para. 1). In order to better serve the youth and their community, H.Y.P.E. Media embraces both the concept of CSP and YPAR, resulting in a safe and collaborative environment.

### *Black Feminist Lens*

Focusing on the interconnectedness of identity we can view black women and girls in terms of the intersectionality they embody. Collins (2000) argues that black women exist in a self-defined position that is located in a "both/and" theoretical location. As discussed by Haddix and Muhammad (2016), Collins (2000) defines Black feminist thought "...as the kinds of knowledge and experiences that Black girls and women bring to their lived experiences...Black women define their standpoint based on the intersection of their consciousness and lived experiences. The dimensions of this epistemology, defined by Collins, include (a) concrete experience as a criterion of meaning, (b) the use of dialogue in assessing knowledge claims, (c) the ethic of caring, and (d) the ethic of personal accountability"(pg.303). In times where black women attempt to display critical thoughts and voice their political opinions, they are viewed as disobedient, disrespectful, and even aggressive (Muhammad & Haddix 2016). Taking a black feminist stance demands for an effective counter-narrating of the scholarly pursuits of Black women and girls (Muhammad & Haddix 2016). Black women and girls have always existed as knowledge producers but

historically their thoughts and opinions have been diminished by the dialogue of a white patriarchal system (Muhammad & Haddix 2016).

In the present day, black women are refusing to accept the claims others have made concerning what being a black woman means (Muhammad & Haddix 2016). They have done this work within collaborative systems of communities. As we begin to think in terms of the intersectionality of the concept of “both/and” we lay down the foundation for community-building (Hooks, 2003). Within these communities it is important that there is a constant awareness of the effort we must put in in order to weaken the socialization that caused us to act in a manner that maintains supremacy (Hooks, 2003). The action of speaking aloud daily affirmations is an advantageous technique when attempting to purge a racially colonized mind of long-engraved impure messages of self-hatred. Speaking the affirmation aloud elevates levels of careful awareness of the influx of white supremacist thinking contained within advertisements, magazines, commercials etc. entering the minds of black women, giving them power break free from those restraints (Hooks, 2003). In past research conducted by Carmen Kynard, environments known as *sista-ciphers* acted as secure digital channels for young black women to engage in collaborative problem-solving and provided them with the opportunity to validate others’ social and cultural literacy processes (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard, 2010). Additionally, these digital *hush harbors*<sup>1</sup> gave an environment that allowed these women to develop critical literacy without being situated under the fixed stare of whiteness (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard, 2010). These students were given the opportunity to discuss advice concerning the presentation of a political stance in classwork, providing comfort when talking about their interactions with microaggressions, and investigating language systems that validate their identities and culture (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard,

<sup>1</sup>Note on the concept of Hush Harbors: “From the Enslavement era through the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill spectacle, African Americans have utilized camouflaged locations, hidden sites, and enclosed places as emancipatory cells where they can come in from the wilderness, untie their tongues, speak the unspoken and sing their own songs to their own selves in their own communities...secular Black spaces and places served as geographies of resistance where countless known and unknown Black bards temporarily escaped the hegemonic gaze of Whiteness to make a world” (Richardson & Jackson, 2004, pg.223).

2010). Possessing an understanding of past research allows me the opportunity to better comprehend the work H.Y.P.E Media is conducting as we share our lives with the girls and respond to life moments in the communal spaces the program provides.

### *Black Girls' Digital Literacies*

The Black girl literacies that exist in digital environment have the ability to be useful and transformative in trying to achieve more humane circumstances for others (Price-Dennis, 2016). Essentially, Black girl's literacies are executed through a variety of mediums and encapsulate a critical stance that promotes proficiency across various genres, platforms, and audiences(Price-Dennis, 2016). The literacy of black girls encourages the juxtaposition of theoretical arrangements to make policies and procedures that diminish the identities of black girls noticeable and accessible for interrogation (Price-Dennis, 2016). Calling upon the conceptual thought process utilized by Price-Dennis (2016), I can draw information from the work of Richardson (2007) in order to better understand Black girls' literary practices and gain an understanding of the everyday verbal and physical challenges Black girls face. Therefore, defining the works of black girls as, "the development of skills and expressive vernacular arts and crafts that help females advance and protect themselves and their loved ones in society" (pg. 329).

### *Fourth Wave Feminism and Social Media Activism, Black Girls Digital Presence*

The *fourth wave* of feminism<sup>2</sup> has been notably distinctive from previously waves largely due to its dependence and use of social media to connect with individuals all over the world resulting in a large interconnected community (Looft, 2017). In terms of activism it has

<sup>2</sup> "The first wave of feminism is generally defined as having lasted between 1840 and 1920, with a main focus on the abolition of slavery and the equality of citizenry. The second wave movement picked up from 1960 to 1988 and focused on greater access to men's spheres – the second wavers fought for women's equal rights to education, workplace equality and reproductive freedom. The third wave, generally understood to have lasted from 1988 to 2010, is composed of a unique cohort of activists who grew up with feminism (the foundations set by the first and second waves) and its impact. Third wavers are known for rejecting the idea of a unified list of values and goals, calling into question the broader universal ideals that allowed the first two waves to find common ground"(Looft, 2017, pg. 894).



also been noted that social media and various online platforms serve as vehicles of empowerment for voices that have long been dismissed by ‘mainstream’ feminism (Kaba et al., 2016). Transgender women, queer women, and women of color are finding alternative ways through the use of social media to embed themselves in the feminist discourse as well as critical conversations that affect their communities directly (Kaba et al., 2016). When discussing people of color in relation to social media and even more specifically black girls, it's important to recognize how they gain power for engaging within it. Black girls are able to use social media in order to participate in the act of self-definition and the reclaiming of their identities (Sealy-Ruiz, 2016). Furthermore, there is the concept of digital kinship to take in to consideration which is defined by Wade (2019) as “a relational practice through which familial ties—with both origin family and chosen family—are established and/or maintained through digital technologies” (pg. 81). Regardless of the various measures white supremacy has taken in order to leave black families in ruins through, slavery, mass incarceration, and inadequate job opportunities family still plays a large role in Black American’s lives (Wade, 2019). One approach Black Americans have utilized in an effort to cultivate families bonds in spite of state violence is through the broadening of how kinship structures are perceived (Wade, 2019). Although communities cannot automatically be denoted as kinships, those who participate within digital communities do possess a feeling of shared experiences that determine how they engage with others and how they prepare these digital spaces to be prime environments for creation of kinship bonds (Wade, 2019). It has been noted that it is essential that black girls are able to have spaces where they feel comfortable, safe and believe that no harm will come to them (Wade, 2019). Digital spaces have the capacity to play a main role in aiding the creation of these fruitful environments (Wade, 2019).

## **Research Methodology**

This project seeks to supplement the body of research concerning how educational methods and subject matter affect young black female students' self-efficacy and how that in turn affects their community.

For this study I worked with Dr. Scott, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh who additionally operates as the lead facilitator of H.Y.P.E. (Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged) Media, a critical literacy digital humanities program that through a series of lessons/program meetings works to equip black high school students with 'new media' skills (e.g., video, social media, etc.) in order to begin to shift the narrative about their neighborhood and tell its story through their own lens. The H.Y.P.E Media program operates under the academic support program, Learn and Earn, which was created in order to supply young individuals from low-income backgrounds who reside in Allegheny County as well as the City of Pittsburgh with important work/career experience. Two weeks before the H.Y.P.E. Media summer session began, I was introduced to the planning team which consisted of two graduate students, an English professor, a Social Work professor, and one undergrad (myself). We immediately began virtually, via the video and audio-conferencing platform Zoom, constructing ideas for lessons and unit programs concerning social issues. This planning process took place throughout the summer session, as we evaluated the possibilities for exploration into issues of gender, race, and equity while utilizing digital tools. Each week we would meet virtually with three black female high school students who attend one of the Pittsburgh public schools located in the Homewood community. During these meetings they shared thoughts on different issues connected to black girlhood and social justice such as black hair, colorism, and mass incarceration. Additionally, we would hold 'Check-ins' and 'Check-outs' with the youth, where each day they would call a H.Y.P.E. Media team member, and the team member would ask questions centered on thoughts,

feelings, and goal-setting for that day. All of these discussion and critical literacy assignments helped them understand how they are positioned within their neighborhood and more largely how they are positioned within the world, ultimately aiding them in gaining the ability to change how they are engaged with by those around them. In this study, I explored how the teaching methods utilized as well as the subject matter conveyed ultimately affects a student's self-confidence and how those levels of confidence determine their ability to execute change within their community through the use of new media' skills. This paper aims to highlight these girls' participation in the creation, development, and evaluation of digital literacies.

### *Research Questions*

In order to sufficiently focus on young black female students' self-efficacy in relation to their ability to create community change through the use of new media I created an overarching question: How can female black students utilize 'new media' in order to change the narrative of their community? I arrived at this question by thinking about how black girls can utilize more recent forms of media in order to take control of how they are perceived and facilitate a digital community of their own creation.

For additional evaluation, I developed the following questions:

1. How are they using 'new media' to communicate their thoughts and ideas about their community in order to facilitate change?
2. How are they using new media amongst themselves in order to present individual forms of self-expression in order to change their self-efficacy and community relationships?
3. How does a black student's self-confidence in their ability to facilitate community change through 'new media' progress overtime? What factors affects those changes?

4. If students already possess high levels of self-confidence in their social media capabilities, how was it gained?

### **Research Design**

I utilized the dynamic approach of qualitative research in order to be able to capture complex thoughts, feelings, and opinions from participants.

#### *Qualitative Approach*

As defined by Merriam (2009) qualitative research focuses on “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (pg.14). Butina (2015) acknowledges that several qualities of qualitative research consist of:

- 1) Concentration on grasping participants’ interactions with the goal of fully communicating these experiences;
- 2) The actual researcher is an essential mechanism in collecting data for purpose of evaluation;
- 3) The research methods utilize are conducive of inductive reasoning as opposed to deductive reasoning;
- 4) The material produced is highly descriptive.

Due to these characteristics I believed utilizing qualitative methodologies would be the best approach in capturing the complexities of the ethnographic nature of my research. More specifically, I chose this methodology because I understand that it “can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, pg.11)

I used qualitative research methods and examined data from sources including:

- Check-ins and Check-outs

- Scheduled meetings conducted with participants in order to obtain information concerning their emotions, thoughts, and concepts they have learned as well as goals they have set.
- Social Media Posts
  - H.Y.P.E. Media conducted a social media campaign centered on affirmations. Affirmations are defined by H.Y.P.E. as something positive a group member believes about themselves that helps set the tone for their day. The main goal of these affirmations is to establish a community of positivity around black life and black girlhood. Each week one of the girls was tasked with creating an affirmation post everyday which consisted of a picture of themselves, an affirmation, and a caption that included an explanation for their affirmation along with a call to action urging others to post their affirmations in the comments.
- Group Meetings
  - Lesson Units
    - Lessons were centered on the main two themes of Black Girlhood and Social Justice. Each week the youth were given assignments based on these topics. Assignments included elements of research, critical thinking, and design.
  - Casual/Informal conversations

H.Y.P.E. Media's curriculum design utilizes a discussion-based approach for interactions and that factor allowed my research design to operate successfully. I was able to gain insight into people's interpretation of their own experiences and how they attribute meaning to those experiences as they spoke their thoughts and emotions aloud in a space centered around conversation and communication.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### *Findings Part 1: Utilizing 'Check-outs' in Order to Understand the Impact of Caption-Writing Lesson*

During the first week of H.Y.P.E. media's summer session the focus was put on how to create well-constructed captions. In order to improve their skills, we provided the youth with different tips on how to create well-made captions that attracted as well as informed their audience. The participants were presented with three key essentials to keep in mind while writing a caption:

*Eye Catcher* - Something to draw your audience in. For example, incorporate emojis that will generate interest in your topic.

*Body* - What do you want the audience to know?

*Follow Through* - What do you want them to do now? What hashtags do you need to always include? For example, you can ask followers to take several different actions: Follow us on social media; Leave a comment, Send us an email; Tag 3 friends.

Additionally, utilizing hashtags such as #WEHYPE and #Blackyouth will allow us to gain a larger audience as people searching for content related to those themes will be able to view our posts.

The youth were also provided with a set of assignments for that week. One of the tasks included them doing some research of their own. In the first week we worked with the youth in order to identify their research interest. The resulting topics of choice were black hair, colorism, and mass incarceration. Based on their interest in Black Girlhood and Social Justice, they were then asked to locate a news article, a social media post on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, and lastly an audio or video text (podcast, IG or FB Live, You Tube video) related to their topics. Additionally, in order to reflect on their assignments as well as

their experiences, meetings called ‘Check-outs’ were held. Participants were asked several questions which included:

- What did you learn today?
- What did you produce today?
- What did you get excited about today?

The specific assignment for this day yielded various answers to the check-out questions. There were a few notable responses that focused on the central themes of Blackness and media that I took note of. When asked what they learned today one participant made an interesting observation concerning the community she is a part of and how it is treated by the media, she stated, “A lot of people try to cover up Black owned businesses or anything that a Black person has accomplished. It’s hard finding good things about Black people because it’s overshadowed by things like Black on Black crime or police brutality.” From this quote there is a glimpse into a real-time realization taking place. Through conducting research of her own, the participant is learning about a form of invisibility and forced silencing her community experiencing on different media platforms. It is important that the element of gaining awareness is involved in this process of activism. In order for the youth to change their community narrative they must be aware of the issues contained within the way they are portrayed. A few other noteworthy comments were made during Check-outs, when participants were asked “What they got excited about today?” one participant responded that they found Twitter “interesting” and felt that Black Twitter specifically was a “new and fun environment”. This statement reveals an interesting observation to take note of; when interacting within in an online environment that contains individuals who have to grapple with similar issues, the participants expressed positive emotions such as happiness and excitement. Black Twitter “can be described as a collective of active, primarily African-American Twitter users who have created a virtual community that participates in continuous

real-time conversations” (Jones, 2013, pg.2). Participants were given the opportunity to engage in a digital community that allowed for the articulation of issues they themselves are faced with. Additionally, it is worth pointing out the learning aspect of this experience as well. If participants are given the chance to interact with a digital community they enjoy and feel comfortable with, they are then able to facilitate the change/creation of their own community with similar characteristics of safety and comfort.

Another participant when asked what they got excited about that day commented that they “enjoyed looking for attention-grabbing captions”. From this statement I concluded indications towards the desire to implement their newfound knowledge. The participant enjoyed looking for caption ideas that they could utilize in their own social media posts. Once equipped with examples from individuals similar to themselves there is the desire to execute what others have done but in their own manner. Moreover, another participant commented that she found looking up black hair interesting because “whenever you look up unprofessional hairstyles, pretty much shows mostly Black people. Google shows Black people...it was really disrespectful to me. I’m excited to get into that more.” From this instance I drew the observation that researching issues related to themselves and the trials black girls/women must face is intriguing to them as they will be able to present their own take on these issues to the public. Throughout these instances there is a noticeable theme of knowledge gain followed by the desire for direct execution/implementation. Participants gained knowledge in new areas and in certain instances they would experience the desire to take action.

### *Findings Part 2: Collaborative Caption-writing Process*

During the second week of our summer session in one of the group meetings we worked on crafting a social media post that would announce a grant the group had just



received. Each participant was given the task of drafting a caption for the post prior to our meeting. The three drafts are presented below:

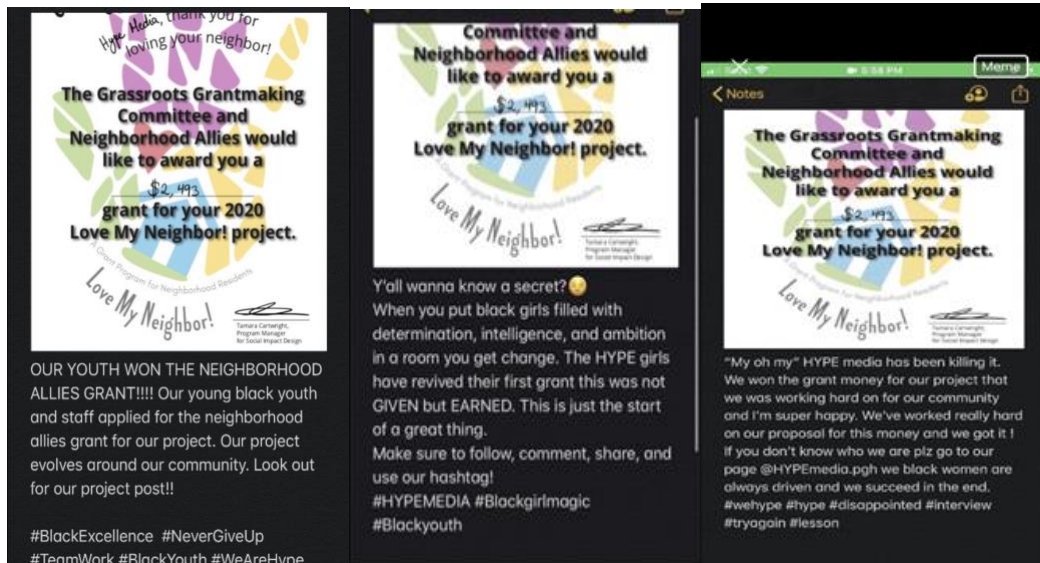
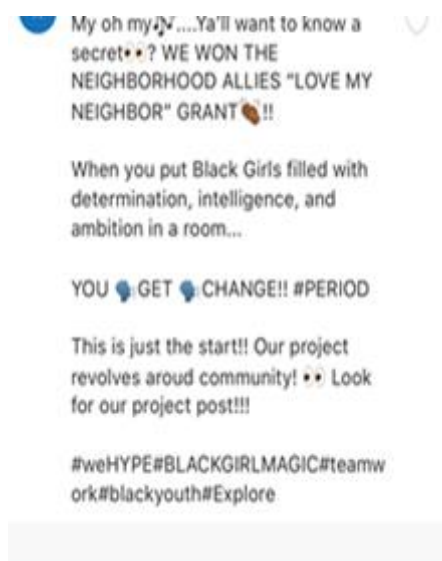


Image 1.1

Image 1.2

Image 1.3

We took the time to go over each participant’s Instagram draft post discussing and providing praise for the caption-writing techniques they utilized. We then took sections that we liked from each individually drafted caption and strung each piece together in order to create one final post that would be put up on H.Y.P.E.’s Instagram account. The final draft is presented below:

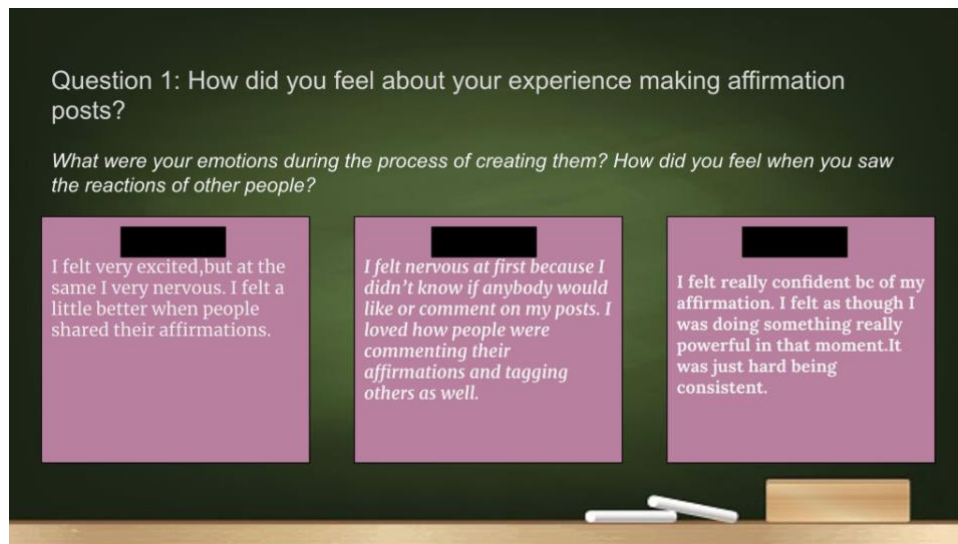


Notice how in Image 1.3 the participant shared with the team the caption-opener “My oh my” which was the title of a song the participants believed would capture the audience's attention. Other members of the team then proceeded to praise the participant for her creativity and commented that the phrase should be put in the final post. Following the review of the post depicted in Image 1.3 we then looked over the post shown in Image 1.4 and discussed how we liked the boldness of the capitalized statement “OUR YOUTH WON THE NEIGHBORHOOD ALLIES GRANT”. However, we felt that if the statement was going to be included in the final draft the “our” should be changed to a “we” because the youth were creating the post rather than a higher entity claiming possession of the youth themselves. Moving on to the post depicted in Image 1.4, the team talked about how we admired the confidence radiating from the statement, “When you put Black Girls filled with determination, intelligence, and ambition in a room you get change”. We then proceeded to make a few minor changes, adding emojis and capitalization for emphasis, and then added the statement to the final draft. From this experience, it's important to take into account the elements of collaboration taking place within this environment. As each participant takes part in this collaborative process their contributions are acknowledged and affirmed. Overtime H.Y.P.E. Media cultivated a space where the girls feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas and the evidence of that effort was prominent during this group meeting. It's important that the girls feel they are being heard and that they are visible. As black female youth their ideas are determining what we post, they are determining how they will be presented to the outside world.

### *Findings Part 3: Social Media Reflection Lesson*

In the third week of the summer session, I facilitated a group lesson that had participants reflect on the social media campaign centered on affirmations that the group was conducting. The lesson was interactive as I asked them reflection questions and they filled in

the boxes with their answers. I additionally asked them to elaborate further on their answers in order to facilitate discussion. It's important to take note of the participants' varying emotional states during the process of creating affirmation posts. Below I have presented a reflection question concerning their emotional status during the process along with comments that further elaborated on the topic:



Screenshot from lesson presentation

*Additional Comments:*

**Alyssa:** Felt good to know people liked her post.

**Tiana:** Enjoyed the interactive element of people in the comments. Felt nervous at first, didn't think anyone would like her post, but thought it was cool to find out that people are listening to them.

**Taylor:** She initially felt very confident and excited about her post, the topic of her post (colorism) was about something she really wanted to talk about, she felt even more confident about her affirmation post after talking with Dr. S and Dr. B. (Fellow H.Y.P.E. team members).

<sup>3</sup> Pseudonyms are used in place of actual names of participants

Two of the participants were initially nervous, however, they felt more encouraged when others expressed their own affirmations. Their levels of comfort improved when there was an evident level of interaction with their audience. The moment there was essentially a visible element of community-building taking place and people were taking notice of their efforts, the girls felt encouraged by it and their feelings of nervousness lessened. In contrast, one participant markedly diverged from that direction, instead she was already confident in her ability to make her posts. It is worth noting that her well-constructed and well-received affirmation post was the reason why H.Y.P.E. Media initially conducted an affirmation social media campaign.

The question concerning their feelings towards other people's affirmation posts highlights themes of transformation/cultivation of a community. There answers are presented below:



Screenshot from lesson presentation

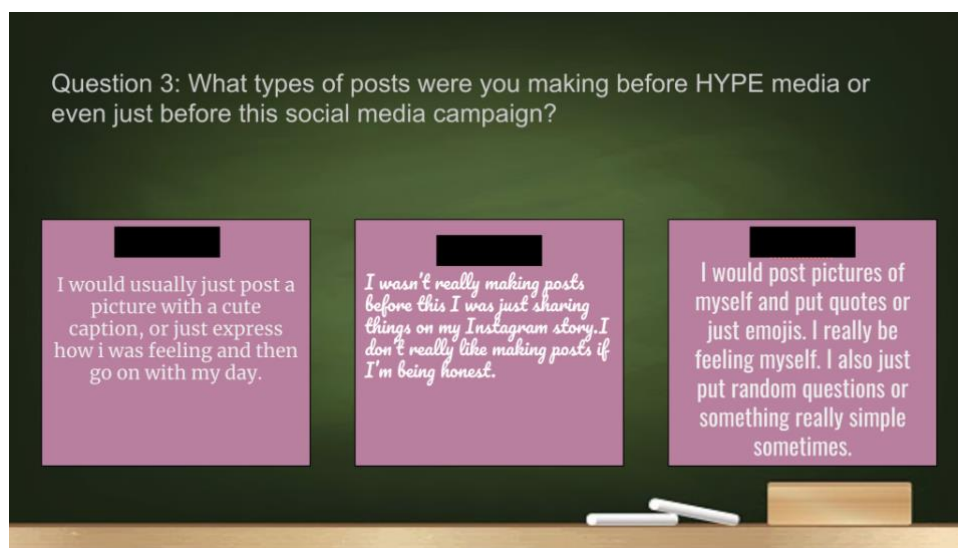
*Additional Comments:*

**Alyssa:** She felt that they were giving people something to think inspiration-wise. They were providing them with a sense of something good, seeing other's posts made her feel good as well.

**Tiana:** She felt that some people need to see how you are feeling that day and also be asked in return. She stated that people are able to express how they are feeling and claimed that when a person is asked how they are feeling each day they are given the opportunity to express themselves and their current emotions.

**Taylor:** She felt that their work was impactful, inspiring people to think positively and say positive things.

The girls were able to take notice of how they were facilitating the transformation and creation of a digital community. They were providing others with a positive, comfortable space for conversation and the act of affirming oneself and identity to take place. On a more personal level, they also were able to note the change in how they use social media amongst themselves:



Screenshot from lesson presentation



Screenshot from lesson presentation

They recognized that they put more meaning and thought into their posts. The skills they have gained throughout this process have allowed them the ability to digitally express their thoughts and emotions in a more thorough and more cultivated manner.

#### *Recommendations for Further Study*

I would suggest further research be conducted concerning several themes contained within Black Girls' Digital Literacy such as community-building, knowledge gain, and activism. I would further explore questions such as "Within a comfortable, supportive environment how can Black girls be equipped with knowledge assets in order to facilitate the creation of their own communities and essentially 'pay it forward'?" Moreover, due to the lack of research conducted in relation to Black Girls' literacies I would encourage the delving into all aspects of the subject. Although research has been conducted in the past about these concepts, reflecting on questions such as "How are these literacies produced?" and "What environments best cultivate these literacies' production?" is always beneficial to gaining a better understanding of the concept.

## Reflection

As a young black girl, I grew up in a predominately white town and a part of me always felt uncomfortable discussing my blackness, the section of my identity that made me feel like I was “other”. I knew that I looked different, but unless it was questions about my hair nobody treated me as such. I didn’t want to stand out, so I tried to make sure I never made my blackness a topic of conversation. As I got older and reached high school age (the age of the girls in my study), discomfort lessened until it was nonexistent. I understood that I was a black girl, I felt comfortable and confident in that fact, but blackness and more specifically black girlhood was never a topic of discussion. It was never talked about or discussed until I took one particular class my junior year, and I wish I could remember the name of it because it was probably one the classes I talked the most in. It was sociology-focused and concentrated on social issues. That class was the first time I was able to talk and write about blackness from my own perspective in a school setting. I was able to talk about my fears, my fears of how the color of my skin and my gender would affect job prospects, how those factors would also affect how law enforcement would treat me, how I now understood the fact that my every movement was analyzed under a critical white gaze. For the first time I was able to speak my truth, loudly and passionately and it didn’t matter if no one cared or no one was listening because honestly it was for me. When I was younger, I bottled up my thoughts and opinions because I didn’t understand them yet myself and I didn’t want to “rock the boat”. However, at first when I was ready, there was never a space in a school setting that seemed appropriate to express them. When we’re younger so much of our time is spent in a school setting with educational programs that adhere to a strict code. They don’t talk about certain topics or the environment never feels malleable enough in nature to talk about certain subject matter. That is why I think alternative routes of education that provide spaces to distribute knowledge that is not normally discussed as well provide alternative forms of expression should be of interest to the public.

When presenting my research to a general audience, I would direct their attention to how important the research I am conducting is for black youth, and even more specifically black female youth. A lot of the time, stories and narratives concerning them are always created from an outside perspective. People take one look them and conjure up their own myths and legends that ultimately determine how they treat young black boys and girls. But what happens when these young individuals are given the tools to tell their own stories, to depict the reality of their situations. How empowering must that be for them? How invigorating? That's really what's at the heart of my project. I aim to supplement the body of research concerning how educational methods and subject matter affect black students' self-efficacy and how that in turn affects their community. Following that discussion point, I would then explain to my audience the purpose of the organization I am working with in order to conduct my research. I would layout the details of how H.Y.P.E. (Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged) Media is a critical literacy, digital humanities program that through a series of lessons/program meetings works to equip black high school students with 'new media' skills (e.g., video, social media, etc.) in order to begin to shift the narrative about their neighborhood and tell its story through their own lens. Moreover, I would establish how the main point of this study is to explore how the teaching methods utilized as well as the subject matter conveyed ultimately affects a student self-confidence and how those levels of confidence determine their ability to execute change within their community through the use of new media skills.

When reflecting on this project, I would like to describe this experience as something pivotal to prospects in my immediate post-undergraduate life. As a rising junior, this is the most impactful "thing" I've done in my college career. I've conducted research in the past, but it was on a smaller, more disconnected scale. This time I was a part of the actual research. I was a part of the H.Y.P.E. team that's going to help young black girls tell their stories



through social media campaigns, podcasting, websites etc. Although I am a researcher, I'm also taking a part in the monumental process of empowerment. Furthermore, I would want to convey how it was important for me, not only as a black woman but as a fellow human being, that my research helped rather than harm the black community. My assisting them to reach an even broader audience illuminates how I acted as a proxy for black female students' experiences and their own interpretations of those experiences.

### *The Impact of COVID-19*

There were challenges I encountered with COVID-19 that did make the research process more difficult. I unfortunately was not able to have interactions with the program participants in-person, however, the video conferencing program, Zoom, was utilized for us to host virtual meetings instead. Additionally, H.Y.P.E. Media's schedule was modified to start at a later date due to the switch to online learning and the trials that came with that process. Moreover, the nonprofits that were partnered with H.Y.P.E. media were experiencing difficulties at this time as well, therefore, H.Y.P.E. Media was also affected which in turn added for the need to push back the starting date. Obtaining technology for the participants so they could take part in the summer session of the program was also an issue that had to be handled. The first order for laptops didn't come through so the participants were later given iPads instead. Overall, COVID-19 did present several issues that the H.Y.P.E. Media team had to take care of; however, we were able to adapt and I was able to continue my study with a few alterations.

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