ABSTRACT

GILL, VANDNA KAUR. Moral Identity and Engagement with Racial Issues Among Social Justice-Oriented Emerging Adults on Social Media: A Phenomenological Case Study. (Under the direction of Dr. Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby).

The purpose of this phenomenological case study was to explore how social justice-oriented emerging adults of different races perceive their experiences on social media, how they talk about their engagement with racial issues online, and how this engagement is related to their moral identity. The goals of the study were: (1) to explore the impact of the social media context on either limiting or encouraging moral behaviors online among emerging adults who consider themselves to have strong moral identities; (2) to use the experiences of these emerging adults on social media to provide educators with tools to guide students in combating racism, particularly in terms of challenging colorblind perspectives; and (3) to present social media as a means of facilitating positive moral identity development as well as promoting racial literacy. Nine emerging adults (ages 18-24) on one particular university campus, a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the southeastern U.S., were interviewed and asked to respond to a series of race-related social media posts, including: two Black participants – one female and one male (case 1); four White participants – two females, one genderqueer individual, and one male (case 2); and three minority/multiracial participants – one Hispanic female, one South Asian female, and one multiracial female (case 3). After conducting individual interviews with these nine participants, five of them were purposefully selected for a focus group session on colorblindness, racial climate, and ideas for designing a racial literacy curriculum. Data analysis employed both a phenomenological and a theoretical lens, utilizing the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity and Critical Race Theory, to identify within-case and cross-case themes. Findings indicated that, for some
participants, moral identity played a direct and prominent role in their social media usage, while it played more of an indirect role for others. Emerging adults who exhibited high symbolization of moral identity, specifically through active involvement in social justice organizations, had a greater tendency to engage in race-related conversations on social media, but this one factor did not guarantee their engagement. Situational factors, especially the particular social media context, had the most influence over whether and how they engaged. Additionally, minority and White emerging adults perceived the racial climate at their university in starkly contrasting ways, and their experiences with race-related incidents on social media affected their interactions with students of other races on campus. These findings can be used by university administrators to better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus.
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Moral Identity and Engagement with Racial Issues Among Social Justice-Oriented Emerging Adults on Social Media: A Phenomenological Case Study

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated, first and foremost, to my amazing grandparents, Lakhbir Kaur Bajwa (Vadi Mommy) and Dilip Singh Bajwa (Papa), who always emphasized the importance of education. Papa, though you are no longer here with us, I will always carry with me the life lessons you taught me while I was growing up, most importantly, the value of being an honest, moral, and kind human being. It is because of you that I never give up fighting the good fight, for social justice and for all that I hold dear. Vadi Mommy, thank you for teaching me, as only an educator could, how to learn from every single person I encounter and from all the experiences I have in life. It is because of your sacrifice and hard work as immigrants that all of your grandchildren are where they are today.

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BIOGRAPHY

Vandna Kaur Gill was born in Washington, D.C. and raised in Fairfax Station, Virginia. She is the oldest daughter of Naurang and Madhu Gill, who immigrated to the U.S. from India in the 1970s. After graduating from Flint Hill School, an independent school in Virginia, Vandna completed her B.A. in English with a minor in Biology from the University of Virginia and an M.A. in English with a focus on American Literature from George Washington University.

For four years, Vandna taught English to high school students, whom she still fondly remembers, at Flint Hill School, her alma mater. During her time at Flint Hill, she was also the Community Service Coordinator, organizing service learning opportunities for students. In 2010, she returned to the other side of the classroom to complete an Ed.M. in Human Development and Psychology from Harvard University. While attending Harvard, she interned at Facing History and Ourselves, an educational nonprofit and professional development organization, writing educational materials for high school teachers to use in their classrooms. After this, she briefly left education to be the grant collaboration coordinator for Kiran, a nonprofit organization providing services to South Asian victims of domestic violence, in Raleigh, North Carolina.

While completing her Ph.D. in Educational Psychology at North Carolina State University, Vandna taught Psychology of Adolescent Development and Applied Child Development to undergraduate students. Her research has focused primarily on the moral identity development of emerging adults in relation to social media use and has also included the socio-emotional development of adolescents and emerging adults as well as their resilience, civic engagement, and engagement with racial issues online.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** .................................................................................................................... x

**LIST OF FIGURES** .................................................................................................................. xi

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION** ................................................................................................. 1
  - Background .......................................................................................................................... 1
  - Statement of the Problem ..................................................................................................... 2
  - Purpose of the Study .......................................................................................................... 4
  - Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 5
  - Theoretical Frameworks ..................................................................................................... 5
    - Moral Self-Identity Theory ............................................................................................... 5
    - Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity ....................................................................... 6
    - Critical Race Theory ...................................................................................................... 9
      - CRT and moral development ....................................................................................... 10
      - CRT and colorblindness ............................................................................................ 11
  - Significance of the Study .................................................................................................... 15
  - Definition of Terms .......................................................................................................... 16
    - Social media .................................................................................................................. 16
    - Moral identity .............................................................................................................. 17
    - Emerging adulthood ...................................................................................................... 18
    - Colorblind racism ......................................................................................................... 19
    - Social justice ................................................................................................................ 20
    - Hashtag activism .......................................................................................................... 21
    - Assumptions .................................................................................................................. 21
    - Delimitations ................................................................................................................ 22

**CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE** .......................................................................... 23
  - Social Media Usage and Identity .................................................................................... 23
  - Moral Identity Development Through Social Media .................................................... 25
    - Effects of antisocial media on moral development .................................................... 31
  - Race and Racism on the Internet .................................................................................... 33
  - Racial Attitudes and Social Media Usage ....................................................................... 37
  - Using Social Media to Teach About Race ..................................................................... 41
  - Conclusion ...................................................................................................................... 46

**CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS** ...................................................................................... 48
  - Research Site .................................................................................................................. 51
  - Participants and Sampling ............................................................................................. 51
  - Instruments .................................................................................................................... 52
  - Research Procedures ...................................................................................................... 53
  - Ethical Considerations ..................................................................................................... 54
  - Data Analysis ................................................................................................................ 54
  - Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Bias .......................................................................... 58
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participant Profiles........................................................................................................ 62
Case 1: Black Emerging Adults....................................................................................... 62
  Anthony....................................................................................................................... 62
  Naomi........................................................................................................................ 63
Case 2: White Emerging Adults..................................................................................... 64
  Joanne......................................................................................................................... 64
  Laura.......................................................................................................................... 65
  Nathan......................................................................................................................... 67
  Trevor......................................................................................................................... 68
Case 3: Other Emerging Adults (Minority or Multiracial).............................................. 69
  Isabella....................................................................................................................... 69
  Rizana......................................................................................................................... 69
  Sofia............................................................................................................................ 70

Phenomenological Themes .............................................................................................. 74
Interview and Focus Group Responses........................................................................... 74
  Theme 1: Considering audience before posting and establishing boundaries.............. 74
  Theme 2: Maintaining consistency between online and offline identities.................... 77
  Theme 3: Mediating conversations about race.............................................................. 80
  Theme 4: Recognizing privilege and responsibility to stand up for others.................... 82
  Theme 5: Experiencing frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a heightened sense of
  awareness in online environments............................................................................ 86
  Theme 6: Feeling a sense of urgency to enact change or using your voice in beneficial
  and appropriate ways online.................................................................................... 90
  Theme 7: Membership in social media communities can contribute to positive identity
  development............................................................................................................... 94
  Theme 8: Aiming to understand and adopt alternative perspectives.............................. 95
  Theme 9: Discussing race in the classroom is enlightening, yet also difficult and
  intense....................................................................................................................... 97
  Theme 10: Believing it is important for all college students to understand the concept
  of colorblindness...................................................................................................... 99
  Theme 11: Benefits and challenges of implementing a racial literacy curriculum........... 102
  Theme 12: Minority and White emerging adults perceiving the racial climate at
  their university in starkly contrasting ways................................................................... 112
  Theme 13: White emerging adults are often “nervous of saying the wrong thing” in
  conversations about race, while Black emerging adults recognize that
  “we all have to deal with race”............................................................................ 116
Social Media Post Responses.......................................................................................... 120
  Theme 1: Promoting conversation and tolerance........................................................ 121
  Theme 2: Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement......................................... 121
  Additional responses................................................................................................ 122
  Theme 3: Fighting back: outrage and call to action...................................................... 122
  Additional responses................................................................................................ 123
  Theme 4: Questioning “All Lives Matter”.................................................................... 123
  Theme 2 (continued): Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement....................... 124
  Additional responses................................................................................................ 125
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Study Summary .......................................................................................... 247
Implications .................................................................................................. 247
Study Limitations ....................................................................................... 257
Areas for Future Research .......................................................................... 261

REFERENCES ................................................................................................. 264
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions ................................................................. 279
Appendix B: Focus Group Questions ............................................................. 280
Appendix C: Theoretical Similarities Between Moral Development and Racial Identity Development ................................................................. 285
Appendix D: Solicitation Emails .................................................................... 286
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form for Interview ................................. 288
Appendix F: Participant Consent Form for Focus Group ............................. 290
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Engagement with Race-Related Issues and Related Formulated Meanings................................................................. 55

Table 2. Theme Clusters from First Cycle Coding (In Vivo Codes) with Corresponding Participant Cases................................................................. 56

Table 3. Overview of Participant Profiles with Demographic Information.......................... 73
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Social media post #1. Reprinted from Twitter, by Nish, 2016.......................... 120
Figure 2. Social media post #2. Reprinted from Twitter, by K. Padmore, 2016 .................. 122
Figure 3. Social media post #3. Reprinted from Twitter, by RyanO’polka, 2016............... 123
Figure 4. Social media post #4. Reprinted from Facebook, by S. Smith, 2016.................... 125
Figure 5. Social media post #5. Reprinted from Facebook, by T. Hughes, 2016................. 128
Figure 6. Social media post #6. Reprinted from Twitter, by Straw Lives Matter, 2017 ...... 129
Figure 7. Social media post #7. Reprinted from Twitter, by Vandalena & S. Bailey, 2016 .... 131
Figure 8. Social media post #8. Reprinted from Twitter, by Gendi Parks, 2016.................. 133
Figure 9. The social media context in a social-cognitive framework.............................. 164
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

Although research on social media has only recently begun, social network sites (SNSs) have been impacting adolescents and emerging adults in a variety of ways since their inception, a phenomenon that must be examined critically by educators (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Reid & Boyer, 2013). One of the advantages of using social media in education is that it can provide students and educators with a forum to openly initiate and engage in discussions on difficult topics (e.g., racism, prejudice, societal inequities) that may otherwise get silenced in the classroom. Social media is unique in its capacity to teach about race and racism, in particular, because it allows for an exploration of race beyond the content of the specific online medium to examining who created the content as well as qualities and nuances of the SNS itself (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). Additionally, social media serves as a “laboratory of how discourse on race plays out with very little moderation,” allowing emerging adults to grapple with racial issues in their daily lives (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014, p. 108). Through this familiar context, they can actively engage with and even challenge what they see as well as develop racial literacy (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). However, educators must also consider how anonymity and highly public spaces can impact their students’ moral thinking, and how we can help them become responsible citizens, both online and offline.

According to Coyne, Padilla-Walker, and Howard (2013), research examining media use through a developmental lens will help us understand why emerging adults use different forms of media, how they are using them, and what influence these media have on their development. For example, researchers could collaborate with educators and students to design and study virtual spaces that facilitate discussions and analysis of social media content and creation in a
developmentally appropriate manner, building upon the moral schemas emerging adults have already begun to form offline. To be effective, these discussions and critiques of SNSs must be a collaborative effort, initiated by educators as well as the students themselves, involving input from both minority and White internet users. As Rest et al. (2000) suggest, it is possible that a new conception of morality will emerge from sustained dialogue and shared experiences in online communities.

**Statement of the Problem**

A previously conducted quantitative study (Gill & DeCuir-Gunby, 2017), which informed the development of this qualitative study, provided data supporting the notion that White students who rank high in symbolization, rather than internalization, of moral identity tend to actively engage with racial issues online (see “Theoretical Frameworks” section below for a detailed explanation of these terms). However, the study also revealed that moral identity alone does not generally predict moral action (operationalized as engagement with racial issues on social media). Factors like race, frequency of social media use, and sense of belonging in the social media community all played a role.

Applying the framework of the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity, it was apparent that not only cognitive factors, such as a person’s knowledge base and attitudes (or even moral reasoning), but also situational and sociocultural factors (also known as environmental factors) as well as self-regulatory mechanisms impact a person’s behavior, in this case, their actions on social media. A person’s self-concept and social identity also play a role in their moral behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Additionally, as Hardy and Carlo (2011) suggest, “The nature of these links between moral identity and action is unclear. It could be that moral identity motivates moral action, or that moral action leads people to see themselves in moral terms, or that both are
involved in some dynamic process” (p. 215). This dynamic process (at times bidirectional association) between moral identity and moral action was taken into consideration in this study, specifically in terms of how moral identity impacts social media usage among emerging adults and vice versa.

Given the incredible power of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, YouTube) and emerging adults’ incessant use of these online platforms, we need to be thoughtful as educators about how we are preparing students for these virtual “frontier” spaces that are “rich with promises and risks” (James et al., 2010, p. 221). According to a study conducted by James et al. (2010), many of the participants noted that “digital youth are qualitatively different from older generations in an ethical sense” (p. 228). Moreover, the researchers found that an awareness of the ethical implications of online behavior was often lacking (James et al., 2010). One researcher pointed out that “youth can range from ‘completely delusional’ to ‘hyperaware’ of the potential audiences” and that, generally speaking, young people are “purported to have distinct ethical stances on core issues such as identity, privacy, ownership and authorship, credibility, and participation” (James et al., 2010, p. 228). An educator who participated in this study also noted that “young people frequently assume that all participants share the same ethical codes, even though ethics are rarely explicit online” (James et al., 2010, p. 228).

Participants in a study conducted by Davis, Katz, Santo, and James (2010), specifically 12 teens and 5 adults, who spoke of their online responsibilities, indicated the need to act morally online as one would during in-person interactions. Despite this statement that individuals should transfer their moral thinking from offline spaces to online spaces and treat others respectfully, we find that this is often not the case in terms of actual online behavior, particularly in relation to
racial content online. The influence of the social media context on moral behaviors online among emerging adults with strong moral identities was the central problem being explored in this study.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how social justice-oriented emerging adults of different races perceive their experiences on social media, how they talk about their engagement with racial issues online, and how this engagement is related to their moral identity. The goals were: (1) to explore the impact of the social media context on either limiting or encouraging moral behaviors online among emerging adults who consider themselves to have strong moral identities; (2) to use the experiences of these emerging adults on social media to provide educators with tools to guide students in combating racism, particularly in terms of challenging colorblind perspectives; and (3) to present social media as a means of facilitating positive moral identity development as well as promoting racial literacy.

A phenomenological case study method was utilized, including semi-structured interviews, social media posts (taken from Twitter and Facebook), and a focus group session. These data sources, in conjunction with the theoretical frameworks (described below), were meant to reveal how the participants (i.e., emerging adults on one particular university campus in the southeastern U.S.) are defining, as well as constructing, their moral identities and how they are using social media to engage with racial issues (a proxy for moral behavior). For example, are they using social media to read about incidents involving race? Are they using social media to comment about these incidents? Are they avoiding or actively engaging with racial issues on social media? Are they becoming upset by comments on social media and being moved to act?
Research Questions

The research questions for this study include: (1) How does moral identity impact social media usage among emerging adults? (2) How are emerging adults engaging in race-related conversations on social media? (3) How do emerging adults conceptualize relationships among social media culture, university culture, and the global community? (4) How can educators help students confront and challenge colorblind perspectives on social media? (5) How can the experiences of emerging adults help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus?

Theoretical Frameworks

The primary theoretical framework for this study is the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed, Aquino, & Levy, 2007; Aquino, Freeman, Reed, Lim, & Felps, 2009), which draws on aspects of moral self-identity theory (Blasi, 1980, 1983, 1984). Both of these theoretical models are outlined in the following sections. Moral identity was selected as the specific construct to examine because it serves to elucidate whether and how emerging adults view themselves as moral people and how this identity impacts their moral behaviors.

Moral Self-Identity Theory. Blasi (1980, 1983) bases his theoretical model of moral identity on the idea that moral identity is directly related to moral action and that this relationship is “expressed through the concepts of responsibility (in the sense of strict obligation to act according to one’s judgment) and integrity” (as cited in Blasi, 1984, p. 132). Moral identity varies in its level of centrality to individuals’ self-concepts as well as in its content among individuals or even within individuals over time (Blasi, 1984). As Aquino and Reed (2002) point out, while the self-importance of an individual’s moral identity may change, central to Blasi’s
perspective is that “in the absence of a strong moral identity, the ability to execute complex moral judgments and present moral arguments is not necessarily a required antecedent of moral behavior” (p. 1424). In other words, the relationship between moral thought and moral behavior decreases if being moral is not central to an individual’s self-definition (Blasi, 2004). Moral identity develops to varying degrees in individuals as their responsibility, or “moral compulsion,” leads them to strive towards an ideal self through moral action, allowing for a sense of integrity, or “moral self-consistency” (Blasi, 1984, p. 132). Blasi theorized that moral judgments may predict moral behavior more reliably “when filtered through responsibility judgments based on one’s identity and propelled into action via the tendency toward self-consistency” (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 212).

Individuals who exhibit this sense of moral self-consistency are known as moral exemplars. Studies centered on moral exemplar behavior illustrate the “extensive integration of self and moral goals that adult exemplars experience” (Colby & Damon, 1992). Additionally, these studies show that adolescents who are characterized as moral exemplars have a tendency to use moral terms to describe their self-concept more often than comparison youth (Hart & Fegley, 1995; Reimer, 2003; Reimer, Dewitt Goudelock, & Walker, 2009).

**Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity.** Building on the theoretical perspective of Blasi, the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity proposed by Aquino and Reed (2002), later modified by Lapsley and Narvaez (2004) and Aquino et al. (2009), is centered on the notion that “moral identity can be a basis for social identification that people use to construct their self-definitions” (p. 1423). As such, moral identity operates as “a schema of the moral self that is composed of an associated network of moral traits, scripts, and values” (Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014, p. 1555). Much like other identities, an individual’s moral identity might be
affiliated with “certain beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors…particularly when that identity is highly self-important” (p. 1423). The measure of moral identity developed by Aquino and Reed (2002) has both a private dimension and a public dimension. Specifically, there is symbolization, which is the “degree to which the [moral] traits [e.g., compassion, care, generosity, honesty] are reflected in the respondent’s actions in the world,” and internalization, or the “degree to which the moral traits are central to the self-concept” (p. 1427).

Their studies demonstrated that internalization is “more strongly related to the implicit measure that assesses the strength of association between the moral traits and the self-concept,” while symbolization is “more strongly correlated to those outcomes or measures [with] a self-presentational or public dimension” (Aquino & Reed, 2002, p. 1437). Moral identity can either be activated or suppressed by contextual variables, and it can take on more or less importance over time depending on a person’s experiences and socioemotional maturity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Additionally, it is possible that particular personality traits may also have an impact on the stability of an individual’s moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

Research conducted by Aquino et al. (2009) illustrates how situational factors, such as priming, can moderate the effects of moral identity on moral behaviors. Specifically, they tested their proposed social-cognitive framework through a series of four studies, hypothesizing that “if a situational factor increases the current accessibility of moral identity within the working self-concept, then it strengthens the motivation to act morally” (Aquino et al., 2009, p. 123). Conversely, they hypothesized that “if a situational factor decreases the current accessibility of moral identity, then it weakens the motivation to act morally” (Aquino et al., 2009, p. 123). They also anticipated that the impact of these situational factors would vary depending on how central an individual’s moral identity was to their overall self-concept. They found that when the
accessibility of moral identity decreased due to situational factors (e.g., performance incentives or permission to deceive in order to receive a cash prize), individuals were less motivated to act according to their moral identity, even among those typically high in moral identity (Aquino et al., 2009). The results showed strong support for their proposed social-cognitive framework. The instrument they developed to measure moral identity, the Self-Importance of Moral Identity (SIMI) scale, is “organized around specific traits that have been empirically shown to be associated with what it means to be a moral person,” and they theorized that this trait-based approach for measuring moral identity is “less likely to invoke overlapping identities because it is content specific” (Aquino & Reed, 2002, p. 1425; Reed et al., 2007). Additionally, Aquino and Reed (2002) believe that “moral identity is [one] potential social identity that may be a part of a person’s social self-schema” (p. 1424).

Individuals with a strong moral identity consistently demonstrate concern and respect for the rights and welfare of others (Blasi, 1984; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998), giving them an expansive *circle of moral regard*, which refers to “the psychological boundaries that people draw around all those people they deem worthy of moral consideration” (Smith, Aquino, Koleva, & Graham, 2014, p. 1555). This circle of moral regard, for those with a strong moral identity, extends beyond family members and friends (i.e., in-group members) to acquaintances and even to strangers (i.e., out-group members). In their explanation of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), Graham et al. (2013) address the *binding moral foundations* (i.e., loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/degradation) as binaries that serve as the basis for most systems of morality, whether they be cultural or individual systems. The literature on intergroup conflict promotes the notion that these binding foundations generally contribute to the protection of in-group members at the expense of out-group members (Brewer, 2007; Dovidio & Gaertner,
2010), an idea that has been cited as a rationale for “the preeminence of racial hierarchy in American race relations” due to the “tokenized status and expendable outcomes of the [racial] out-group” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 55). However, Smith et al. (2014) argue that these binding foundations may sometimes be applied to individuals beyond a person’s immediate in-group, proposing that “people with a strong moral identity are motivated to expand the ambit of their moral concern, even if they also have a commitment to the binding foundations” (p. 1555).

Results of the first study they conducted in a series of quantitative studies, using hierarchical regression analysis, supported their prediction that “having a strong moral identity can mitigate the effect of the binding foundations, which otherwise might allow people to justify the use of torture for the sake of protecting their in-group” (Smith et al., 2014, p. 1557).

Critical Race Theory. The secondary theoretical framework for this study is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which focuses on examining race, racism, and power in society in an attempt to transform the relationship among them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). CRT tenets include: (1) racism is ordinary or racial realism, meaning that racism is challenging to address because it is often not acknowledged; (2) interest convergence, or the notion that any progress in civil rights tends to coincide with the self-interest of Whites; (3) intersectionality, or the idea that no individual has only a single identity and the intersections of a person’s identities (e.g., race and gender) must be taken into consideration; (4) white privilege, which relies on Whiteness itself being a form of “property” that is meaningful in a society based on White dominance; and (5) critique of liberalism, which unveils aspects of a system in which equal rights are touted, but not properly implemented (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993). CRT operates on the assumption that racial discrimination will continue to exist as long as those who benefit financially, socially, and psychologically from White supremacy do
not care to relinquish their status in society (Harris & Wallace, 2008; Lopez, 2000; Stevenson, 2014).

According to Stevenson (2014), CRT points out the “dangers of accepting the habitus of racial hegemony in which we reject any subgroup as acceptable members of society unless they agree to reject any images or actions of angry revolution,” yet this rejection appears to be part of the reason why the “narrative of Black human expendability” and the accompanying stress that Black individuals experience because of it persists (p. 79). In an educational context, schools, teachers, and administrators simply cannot afford to turn a blind eye to racial identity politics that promote assimilation for the purpose of minimizing White anxiety (Stevenson, 2014).

**CRT and moral development.** Given that consideration of race is ignored in prominent moral development models (e.g., Kohlberg’s stage model), it is beneficial to use a CRT approach to examine race-related social media posts in conjunction with moral identity since it operates from a perspective of *racial realism*. Employing a CRT lens can provide insight into conceptions of moral identity from the perspective of, for example, a Black female using social media versus that of a White male using social media, taking intersectionality into account. Several studies (Locke & Tucker, 1988; Locke & Zimmerman, 1987; Tucker & Locke, 1986) have found that “the manipulation of the race of the character (e.g., Black instead of no race specified) in moral dilemma research affected moral development, thereby indicating that moral development may have a racial component not originally hypothesized by Kohlberg and others” (Moreland & Leach, 2001, p. 258). Aside from being theoretically linked by sharing similar components and stages, moral development and racial identity development have also been found to be empirically linked (see Appendix C).

Results of a study conducted by Moreland and Leach (2001) with data from 182 African
American undergraduate and graduate students showed a correlation between more developed racial identity attitudes and more developed moral reasoning. Additionally, they were able to confirm their hypothesis that emotionality impacts moral judgments, at least among some African Americans, and that emotion is moderated by racial identity status by identifying a significant negative relationship between less developed racial identity status, i.e., immersion-emersion attitude scores, and moral development, i.e., scores on the Black version of the DIT, or Defining Issues Test (Moreland & Leach, 2001). These results can potentially be explained by the assumption that there is greater stress and anxiety associated with feeling closer to the moral dilemma situation at hand, e.g., being of the same race as the individual depicted in the moral dilemma (Moreland & Leach, 2001; Tucker & Locke, 1986). Hence, strong emotional reactions, such as those associated with a Black participant being in the immersion-emersion status of racial identity development and being presented with a moral dilemma situation involving a Black character rather than a character whose race is not specified may prompt the individual to limit their moral reasoning capabilities (Moreland & Leach, 2001; Rybash, Roodin, & Lonky, 1981). Specifically, the psychological defensiveness that seems to be embedded in the immersion-emersion status can lead the individual in this developmental phase to become engrossed in understanding Black culture while simultaneously feeling angry toward the dominant group (i.e. White individuals) and anxious about adopting a new Black identity (Carter, 1995; Moreland & Leach, 2001).

**CRT and colorblindness.** In addition to offering a new perspective on moral development, CRT provides a basis for understanding colorblindness and its impact on social media users of different races. *Colorblindness* (i.e., colorblind racism) is the belief that “one should treat all persons equally, without regard to their race” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012, p.
158), promoting the notion that race should not play a significant role in social, legal, or political realms when it is actually significant in all those realms (Chon, 2000). While, in theory, colorblindness may seem like a great equalizer, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) point out that it does not do much good. What is dangerous about the colorblind perspective and its association with an “assimilationist vision” is the idea that “race should have no real significance, but instead be limited to the formal categories of white and Black, unconnected to any social, economic, or cultural practice” (Gotanda, 1991, p. 59). When it comes to making progress in race relations, however, “[o]nly aggressive, color-conscious efforts…will do much to ameliorate misery” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 27, italics added). As Stevenson (2014) points out, “Implicit within the concept of colorblindness – or better yet, racial blindness – is an inability to see racial hierarchy and the variety of behavioral and psychological strategies that accompany it” (p. 54). In fact, due to the “mass socialization of racial hierarchy in American society, no one is immune to the notion that ‘Blackness is inferior’” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 54). Colorblindness and the “Black and Brown inferiority and expendability narrative” can “wreak havoc in classrooms from elementary through college education, but it is invisible – what Bourdieu [1990] calls ‘habitus,’ or that which ‘goes without saying’” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 54). As a potential solution, Stevenson (2014) suggests that schools can draw attention to and encourage debate of this narrative.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2002), colorblind racism, “the central racial ideology of the post-civil rights era, has a peculiar style characterized by slipperiness, apparent nonracialism, and ambivalence” (p. 41). Through a discursive analysis of interview data compiled from the Survey of College Students’ Social Attitudes (1997) and the Detroit Area Study (1998), Bonilla-Silva (2002) delineates five stylistic components of colorblind racism:
(1) whites’ avoidance of direct racial language, (2) the central rhetorical strategies or “semantic moves” used by whites to safely express their racial views, (3) the role of projection, (4) the role of diminutives, and (5) how incursions into forbidden issues produce almost total incoherence among many whites. (p. 41)

In terms of picking up on thematically-induced incoherence, analysts “must excavate the rhetorical maze of confusing, apparently ambivalent answers to straight questions” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 42). The three stylistic components that are relevant to data analysis in this particular study are thematically-induced incoherence, diminutives, and rhetorical strategies, each of which are elaborated upon with specific examples below.

Examples of the disclaimers that may be used in responses with thematically-induced incoherence include: “I don’t know, but…,” “Yes and no,” or “I mean, I mean, I don’t know, I mean yes, but I don’t know” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 42). It is important, however, not to “mistake honest ‘I don’t knows’ for rhetorical moves to save face or nervousness for thematically-induced incoherence,” which is why context must be considered (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 42). Diminutives, which are intended to “soften” comments about race that could be considered “racial blows,” may present themselves in examples such as the following: “I am just a little bit against affirmative action” instead of making a statement against affirmative action entirely or “I am just a bit concerned about the welfare of the children” instead of indicating direct opposition to interracial marriage (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 57). Around 50% of the college students in the Survey of Social Attitudes used diminutives in an effort to “cushion their views” on issues like affirmative action and interracial marriage, while less than 25% of Detroit Area Study (DAS) respondents used diminutives in order to “maintain a nonracial image” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, p. 57). Lastly, rhetorical strategies or semantic moves may include phrases like “I’m
not prejudiced, but…” or “Some of my best friends are [Black, Asian, etc.]” in order to preface statements that could be seen as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, pp. 46-47). Other rhetorical strategies may include statements such as “I am not black, so I don’t know” or “Yes and no, but…” when responding to questions about discrimination or trying to downplay racial views by taking both sides on an issue (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, pp. 49-50).

The myth of colorblindness, both online and offline, leads to very real consequences. Daniels (2008) discusses how White liberals often “embrace the belief that any lingering racial differences and racist consequences are rooted in economic class, and therefore are ‘not really’ about racism” (p. 131). This failure, on the part of Whites, to acknowledge race and racism further divides them from racial minorities, who have a completely different perspective on racism and white supremacy (Daniels, 2008). In fact, for most people of color, regardless of their background and circumstances, “living with everyday racism is a shared group experience that is part of the toll society extracted from living in a white-dominated society” (Daniels, 2008, p. 131).

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) offer a critique of liberalism from a CRT perspective, defining liberalism as a political philosophy grounded in the beliefs that “the purpose of government is to maximize liberty” and that the “law should enforce formal equality in treatment” (p. 166). One of the criticisms CRT scholars have of liberalism is that, within the context of the U.S. legal system, “rights are almost always procedural…rather than substantive,” meaning that the system “applauds affording everyone equality of opportunity but resists programs that assure equality of results, such as racial quotas at an elite college or university” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 28). Additionally, rights are often “alienating” in that they separate individuals rather than promoting communities with shared interests, and they nearly
always get “cut back when they conflict with the interests of the powerful,” a phenomenon known as *interest convergence* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 28-29).

Though this study focused primarily on examining colorblindness versus the active acknowledgment of race (i.e., color consciousness) in cyberspace, examples of interest convergence and liberalism (or critique of liberalism), as well as discussions about white privilege and intersectionality can all be seen in race-related posts and interactions among individuals of different races (including participants in this study) on social media. While some emerging adults may be familiar with these CRT concepts, some may not be aware of them at all, and others still may have been taught to regard colorblindness, in particular, in a positive instead of problematic light. Using a CRT framework in conjunction with the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity, this study aimed to explore why emerging adults believe what they do with respect to race relations and to identify whether their interactions with individuals of other races online are manifestations of their moral identities.

**Significance of the Study**

This study has the potential to help both emerging adults and educators in the college context learn to recognize and combat online racial discrimination. Educators will be provided with information about how students are using social media to engage with difficult, emotionally charged issues, as well as tools for building a critical racial literacy curriculum for use in the classroom. Additionally, the study provides data on whether online activism is linked to offline activism. It could also be a stepping-stone for improving racial climate on college campuses and encouraging discussions about social justice issues.
Definition of Terms

While it is critical to know exactly what social media entails in the context of this study, it is equally important to have a working understanding of the concepts of moral identity, emerging adulthood, colorblind racism (i.e., colorblindness), social justice, and hashtag activism. These key concepts and terms are defined below.

**Social media.** *Social media* can be defined as internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content in both a participatory and collaborative manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Vanwynsberghe & Verdegem, 2013). *Social network sites (SNSs)*, a subset of social media, are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). There are hundreds of social network sites focusing on a wide variety of interests and practices, and though their key features are relatively consistent, the cultures of various SNSs can be quite distinct (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). These sites also differ in their inclusion of communication tools like photo sharing, blogging, and mobile connectivity (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), “What makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (p. 211). In fact, when users do make new connections online, they are often with individuals who are offline acquaintances (Haythornthwaite, 2005). SNSs are organized around people rather than interests, and they are “structured as personal (or ‘egocentric’) networks, with the individual at the center of their own community” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 219).
The main feature that is consistent across SNSs is their use of visible profiles displaying a list of friends who are also using that particular site (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). These profiles are “unique pages where one can ‘type oneself into being’” (Sundén, 2003, as cited in Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Unlike other online communication activities, social networking requires the most internet knowledge (Graham & Smith, 2011). Specifically, social networking involves not only communication, but also “the development of content and interest based groups,” which can lead to “virtual cliques [that] can monopolize information leading to disproportionate benefits for the in-group” (Graham & Smith, 2011, p. 193). This particular aspect of internet usage has been widely discussed in the literature on SNSs (Graham & Smith, 2011).

**Moral identity.** Hart et al. (1998) describe moral identity as “a commitment consistent with one’s sense of self to lines of action that promote or protect the welfare of others” (p. 515). Moral identity has also been defined by numerous researchers as a self-regulatory mechanism motivating moral action (Blasi, 1984; Damon & Hart, 1992; Erikson, 1964; Hart et al., 1998) or “a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits” (Aquino & Reed, 2002, p. 1424). Though it is similar to other psychological domains that are characteristic of moral life, moral identity “cannot be reduced to sophisticated moral reasoning, because there are many people capable of the latter whose lives show little evidence of commitment to, or action toward, moral goals” (Hart et al., 1998, p. 515). Neither can moral identity be “reduced to personality traits linked to prosocial behavior such as resilience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, or generativity” because the “relations of these traits to specific lines of action and to the sense of self are indirect and weak” (Hart et al., 1998, p. 515).

Moral identity is a useful construct to consider in studies examining the moral behavior of emerging adults because it has been shown (in correlational studies) to be associated with
such moral actions as donating to charities and altruistic helping (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy, 2006) as well as moral emotions, including feeling guilty after behaving inconsistently with one’s sense of morality (Stets & Carter, 2006). Additionally, moral identity has been linked to concern for out-group members (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy et al., 2010), which is particularly relevant in this study given that emerging adults’ propensity to engage in racial issues and to intervene in instances of cyberbullying are two aspects of their moral behavior that are being explored, both of which may involve out-group members. Lastly, if moral identity is a “consistent predictor” of moral behavior, “it may prove useful in moral education and youth development efforts, leading to deeper and more lasting moral changes in youth [see Youniss & Yates, 1997] than those associated with other approaches” (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 215). These efforts can also be implemented with emerging adults, perhaps as a precursor or follow-up to developing moral education programs for youth and adolescents.

**Emerging adulthood.** Arnett (1998) defines emerging adulthood as a new phase of development being experienced by individuals in their late teens through their mid- to late-twenties in the U.S. and other post-industrial nations. As a distinct period of the life course between adolescence and adulthood, emerging adulthood is a “self-focused age” (Arnett, 2004) during which individuals strive to form independent beliefs, to become financially autonomous, and accept responsibility for their own actions, while simultaneously pursuing higher education and postponing marriage and family commitments (Jensen, 2008; Mayseless & Scharf, 2003). The recognition of this developmental phase in certain cultures may have important implications for moral development research (Jensen, 2008), particularly since it is during this critical time between adolescence and adulthood that a “growing sense of agency and responsibility” is allowing for the “integration of morality and self” (Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 214).
**Colorblind racism.** Colorblindness has framed race relations in the U.S. for decades preceding the rise of the internet. Overt racism has been replaced, in many cases, with a contemporary, covert form of racism, predicated on the notion of *colorblindness*, which “operates under the assumption that color is no longer a structuring force in American society and ‘explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics’” (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, as cited in Kettrey & Laster, 2014, p. 258). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), colorblindness can be defined as the “belief that one should treat all persons equally, without regard to their race” (p. 158). Rist (1974) similarly defined the colorblind perspective, nearly forty years before Delgado and Stefancic, as a “point of view [that] sees racial and ethnic group membership as irrelevant to the ways individuals are treated” (as cited in Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, p. 232). Hence, a recognition of racial and ethnic group membership in making decisions is perceived by those who espouse colorblindness as “illegitimate and likely to either lead to discrimination against the minority group or reverse-discrimination in its favor,” neither of which is seen as desirable (Schofield, 1986, as cited in Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, p. 232).

Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2001) discuss the “central frames” of colorblind racism, which “form an interpretive repertoire from which Whites articulate their views on racial matters” in the post-civil rights era (p. 48). These frames include:

1. abstract liberalism [abstract and decontextualized use of economic (laissez faire) and political (equal opportunity) principles of liberalism to justify the status quo],
2. biologization of culture [interpreting Blacks’ plight as the product of cultural deficiencies],
3. naturalization of racial matters [describing racialized outcomes in neighborhoods, schools, or in choices for mates as natural], and
4. minimization of racism. (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2001, p. 48)
Additionally, they argue that these frames, particularly abstract liberalism, cultural rationale, and naturalization of racial matters have also indirectly affected and blurred how Black individuals interpret racial issues (e.g., school and residential segregation or job discrimination) in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, 2001).

**Social justice.** As a concept that is often cited across numerous disciplines (e.g., education, law, economics, social work, psychology), social justice has a range of referents, but the common elements include a focus on equity and redistribution of resources (Miller et al., 2009). Social justice advocacy involves a commitment to action that will address disparities and ensure the participation of all groups through institutional and societal changes (Miller et al., 2009). Among emerging adults, an interest in becoming involved with social justice advocacy has been found to be predictive of their social justice engagement (Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005; Miller et al., 2009).

According to Miller et al. (2009), who use Bandura’s (1986) social-cognitive theory as a framework and build upon ideas presented by Bandura (1997) in his writings on self-efficacy, another construct known as *social justice self-efficacy* is important to consider when measuring social justice interest and commitment because it affects “(a) the choices a person makes regarding engagement in social justice advocacy, (b) the effort an individual puts forth in advocacy, (c) how long an individual persists in social justice advocacy in the face of obstacles, and (d) how an individual feels about social justice advocacy” (p. 497). Specifically, social justice self-efficacy is a dynamic set of beliefs an individual has about his or her “perceived ability to perform particular tasks across *intrapersonal* [e.g., self-awareness], *interpersonal* [e.g., educating others about social inequity], *community* [e.g. establishing an outreach program], and
political/institutional [e.g., challenging discriminatory policies] domains” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 497).

**Hashtag activism.** According to Crandall and Cunningham (2016), *hashtag activism* occurs when activists “draw attention to a specific cause by using a metadata tag, such as #activism” on social network sites (p. 21). However, as they point out, hashtag activism is controversial because it is uncertain whether this type of activism prompts actual social change (Crandall & Cunningham, 2016). Williams (2015) directly addresses this point by stating that hashtags have become an effective method of not only sharing information, but also of encouraging users of social media to take action. Hashtag activism seems to be especially useful in shining a light on issues that may otherwise get brushed under the rug. For example, hashtags “bring attention to black women’s issues when traditional mainstream media newspaper articles and television stories ignore black women’s concerns as they have for decades” (Williams, 2015, p. 342). In this sense, Twitter can be a powerful tool enabling advocates of particular causes (e.g., anti-violence advocates) to “connect with the public and one another in real time without relying on the traditional news…or the mainstream media’s problematic framing [of these causes]” (Williams, 2015, p. 342).

**Assumptions**

The central assumption of this study was that participants would answer truthfully in their interview and social media post responses, though the risk that people will want to present themselves in a better light always exists, especially given the subject matter of morality and race. To help ensure honest responses, confidentiality was preserved as was the right for participants to withdraw at any time from the study without any ramifications. Another assumption of the study was that emerging adults were being impacted in some way by race-
related posts on social media. This impact could be in the form of an emotional response, an intellectual response, or a political response. Regardless, it was assumed that this impact would lead emerging adults to either actively engage with or to avoid engaging with racial issues online and that this engagement was in some way related to their moral identity.

**Delimitations**

I intentionally chose not to collect data directly through participants’ Facebook or Twitter accounts because I did not want to use deception in this study, nor did I want participants to think I was monitoring their behavior on social media, which I would have essentially been doing in order to conduct the study. Since the information I was trying to obtain could be collected by presenting a series of actual Facebook and Twitter posts to the participants and soliciting their written and oral responses during the interviews, I did not feel it was necessary to add the participants as friends on these social network sites simply to examine their posts and responses in real time. This decision helped me maintain proper distance and reflexivity as a researcher.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature reviewed in this chapter discusses the phenomenon of social media usage in relation to identity development, with a focus on moral identity development. This chapter also includes an overview of race and racism on the internet, an examination of racial attitudes on social media, and possibilities for using social media to teach about race.

Social Media Usage and Identity

Discussing what was emerging technology at the time, Turkle (1995) examines how interactions in cyberspace impact identity development. Referring to a specific type of computer game, Multi-User Domains, or MUDs, she writes, “MUDs put you in virtual spaces in which you are able to navigate, converse, and build…[They are] a new form of community…[in which players] become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” such that “[you] are who you pretend to be” (Turkle, 1995, pp. 11-12). While this may seem disconcerting, this pretense has become a “normal” part of how we now exist in virtual spaces.

Over the past decade, researchers have begun investigating SNSs as sites of identity formation, exploring the impact these SNSs have on the well-being of emerging adults (Tynes & Markoe, 2010). Information listed on SNS profiles, according to Valkenburg et al. (2006), affects how individuals on these sites are viewed by others and how they view themselves. Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, and Walther (2008) similarly illustrate that the number of friends an individual has on Facebook, as well as other sociometric data, leads SNS users to make social judgments about other SNS users. Specifically, their study shows that individuals who have either too few or too many friends on SNSs are perceived more negatively than those who had an optimal number of friends (Tong et al., 2008). How adolescents and emerging adults behave
online can have long-lasting consequences that they may not fully understand as they are blogging, posting photos and videos on SNSs (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube), and interacting with others in virtual worlds (e.g., Second Life) (James et al., 2010). The actions and behaviors of youth (and adults) online over the next decade will undoubtedly present new paradigms for exploring conceptions of personal and interpersonal identities.

Racial identity, in particular, may be impacted by online spaces in ways we have only begun to understand. While “physical markers such as bodies” are not present online, race does exist on the internet (Chon, 2000, p. 439). Additionally, despite early promises that “race would become an antiquated concept” online and create a space where users could resist and overcome marginalization, recent research indicates that “race is highly relevant on the Internet, where it is actively constructed and performed, as well as evaluated by other users” (Kettrey & Laster, 2014, p. 259). Daniels (2012) addresses the role of the internet in racial group identification: “A growing body of research points to the fact that people seek out racial identity and community online. People use the internet to both form and reaffirm individual racial identity and seek out communities based on race and racial understandings of the world” (pp. 698-699). On the other hand, as Tynes, Giang, Williams, and Thompson (2008) argue, racial discrimination online, particularly on SNSs, is associated with depression and anxiety, regardless of SNS users’ background or perceived level of discrimination and stress.

The research of Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002), Baym (2006), and Kendall (2002) illustrates how online identities are typically performed in a way that mirrors offline identities. Though there appears to be a transference of offline marginalization to the online world, scholars view the internet as both a space characterized by white privilege and a space that could be utilized to foster meaningful conversations about race between White and minority
internet users that could eventually end racism (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). The latter point provides hope that the internet has the potential to play a pivotal role in social justice movements.

**Moral Identity Development Through Social Media**

According to the research of Kohlberg (1981), and later supported by the work of Turiel (2006), moral decision-making capacities not only evolve over time, but are also impacted by social contexts and experiences. Moral development theories are currently being applied to the use of the internet and social media. However, until now, most of this research on moral development has focused on moral or ethical decisions made among individuals rather than those made in public spaces online as is the case with interactive media (James et al., 2010). Given this, traditional frameworks of moral development are being revised based on the frequency with which youth use digital media as well as the distinct properties of these media (James et al., 2010). This reframing of moral development in the new digital age will likely have widespread ramifications.

Social network sites like Facebook and Twitter have become an integral part of people’s everyday routines, for better or for worse, and this is especially true for adolescents and emerging adults. According to Turkle (2011), “Anxiety is part of the new connectivity,” as high school and college students find that SNSs have taken over their lives and they cannot put down their phones for fear of missing something, yet this anxiety is rarely directly addressed in conversations about technology (p. 242). Turkle, along with other media researchers (Davis et al., 2010; James et al., 2010), have expressed concerns about how this constant use of social media without processing their impact may be influencing the moral identity development of adolescents and emerging adults. As Turkle (2011) points out, “People say outrageous things,
even when they are not anonymous. These days, on social networks, we see fights that escalate for no apparent reason except that there is no physical presence to exert a modulating force” (pp. 235-236).

Moral identity can either be activated or suppressed by situational or contextual variables, and it can take on more or less importance over time depending on a person’s experiences and socioemotional maturity (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hart et al., 1998). However, for individuals with a strong moral identity, there tends to be a desire to maintain consistency between their perceptions of themselves as moral people (i.e., moral self) and their behaviors (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Blasi, 1984). Can this consistency between moral self and moral actions be maintained in cyberspace?

Suler (2004) points out how anonymity online can create a disinhibition effect, giving individuals the opportunity to separate their online behavior from their offline (real world) behavior and identity (i.e., dissociative anonymity), allowing them a greater degree of freedom to act out and disclose information about themselves online than they normally would in person. Given this dissociation between online and offline identities, the online self becomes a compartmentalized self, which is problematic because, in the case of deviant or hostile behavior, the individual can effectively deflect responsibility, “almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche” (Suler, 2004, p. 322). On the other hand, this disinhibition effect can be benign, rather than toxic, leading individuals to participate in uncharacteristic acts of kindness in their cyberspace interactions, potentially even helping others in ways they would not normally do in face-to-face interactions (Suler, 2004). This compartmentalized self should not be seen as a single disinhibited online self, but rather as a “collection of slightly different constellations of affect, memory, and thought that
surface in and interact with different types of online environments” (Suler, 2004, p. 325).

Essentially, this means that each online setting (e.g., social media, email, blog, video) can present a different perspective on an individual’s identity (Suler, 2004).

A study undertaken by Davis, et al. (2010) analyzed the online conversations of 150 parents, teachers, and teens. Results of this study indicated that adults were more consistent in their patterns of moral and ethical thinking than youth, who demonstrated greater concern for personal consequences of their online actions. The three partner organizations involved in this study were Common Sense Media, the GoodPlay Project, and Global Kids; each of the organizations contributed to the focus dialogues, providing discussion prompts and a forum for online conversation among participating youth and adults. This study illustrates the similarities between developing moral identity in the pre- versus post-social media eras. There is still, as much as ever, a need for adults to model moral and ethical stances for youth, particularly in terms of helping them become responsible digital citizens. Additionally, having adults and youth participate in authentic dialogue is an essential component in helping students develop critical thinking skills, whether it occurs in person or in an online context (Davis et al., 2010).

The findings presented by Davis et al. (2010) are in line with stage theories of moral development, and in fact, the authors reference Kohlberg’s (1981, 1984) stage model, which specifies that there is a steady progression in a person’s moral reasoning abilities, which become increasingly complex from childhood to adulthood. This study demonstrates how youth grapple with and discuss ethical dilemmas in all facets of their lives and across a wide variety of contexts. Educational interventions designed to promote youths’ ethical thinking can be implemented both inside and outside the classroom, and educators should be aware of the interactions that are taking place among their students online, which can impact their moral
identity development. Parents can also play a role in scaffolding these interactions and helping their children navigate the ethics of online life.

Beals and Bers (2009) discuss the unique considerations of designing virtual communities for youth through a developmental lens. The six important aspects they emphasize in designing and researching these virtual worlds include: “(1) purpose, (2) communication, (3) participation, (4) play, (5) artifacts, and (6) rules” (Beals & Bers, 2009, p. 51). A focus on understanding rules, in particular, reflects a child’s moral development in that young children view rules as created and enforced by adults whereas older children learn that rules may be flexible and can even be changed given a consensus among individuals (Beals & Bers, 2009). Adolescents demonstrate cognitive capacity for higher level reasoning, taking multiple perspectives into account when making decisions related to rules (Beals & Bers, 2009). Consequently, virtual worlds should incorporate rules or general guidelines, not only to keep young participants safe, but also to support their moral development as they gradually become adult community members (Beals & Bers, 2009). The primary goal in designing virtual worlds should be providing resources for individuals to create projects that are meaningful to them (Beals & Bers, 2009).

The example of Zora, a virtual city built and inhabited by adolescents, provides a rationale for the development of educational programs that promote civic engagement and make use of new technologies. Bers’ (2008) analysis leads to questions about whether participation in virtual communities directly affects the civic engagement of youth in actual communities and whether general online technologies are sufficient for promoting civic engagement or if there is a need for specifically designed, praxis-based models such as Zora for this purpose. Bers (2008) illustrates the power and possibilities of virtual communities, showing how the internet provides
youth with a safe space to experiment with some of the skills and attitudes needed to become
good citizens. Through these virtual communities, students can learn about political life and
experience the challenges of democratic participation. Bers’ (2008) commentary about virtual
communities connects directly with Kohlberg’s (1984) notion of the *just community*, composed
of members trusted to define constructs of morality and resolve disputes among themselves in
order to contribute to the growth of moral development. The just community is constructivist in
nature with all institutions, rules, and laws originating from dialogue and cooperation among its
members (Kohlberg, 1984).

James et al. (2010) explore youth knowledge of digital ethics. They argue that there are
five key issues at stake in digital pursuits: (1) identity, (2) privacy, (3) ownership and authorship,
(4) credibility, and (5) participation. Using evidence from qualitative research (through the
GoodPlay Project at Harvard University) and emerging scholarship on new technologies, the
authors present ways in which youth are redefining these concepts while engaging with digital
media. James et al. (2010) also address how the GoodPlay Project, in conjunction with Project
New Media Literacies, is developing prototypes of interventions to promote ethical thinking and
conduct among youth. The authors discuss both the promises and perils of online activity for
youth, specifically in relation to their moral identity development. They present moral identity
development in online spaces in terms of *schemas*, or working models, youth already have about
ethical considerations and ways in which these schemas are being added to or altered in
significant ways.

Flores and James (2012) distinguish between *moral* and *ethical* thinking in their study
exploring how teens and young adults think about their participation in social media. They define
moral thinking as a combination of the following elements: “(1) awareness that one’s actions
affect known others; (2) a capacity for empathy; and (3) adherence to principles such as fairness, justice, and mutual respect in relation to known others” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 838). They define ethical thinking as a combination of the following elements: “(1) community thinking, or awareness of potential effects of online actions for larger entities; (2) reflection on one’s roles and responsibilities in online and offline communities; and (3) complex perspective-taking, or considering multiple stakeholders implicated in online actions” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 838).

The findings from Flores and James’ (2012) study revealed that consequence thinking was the dominant method of thinking about online behavior with the most frequent targets of consequence thinking (in 75% of all instances) being the participants themselves. Moral thinking was found to be the second most frequent way of thinking about online life with participants focusing on “a circumscribed set of known individuals, such as friends, acquaintances, family members, authority figures, and fellow bloggers or gamers” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 841). Ethical thinking was less prevalent and often inconsistently used (Flores & James, 2012). The most frequently observed form of ethical thinking was an awareness of how online behavior may impact the community – 92% of participants employed community level thinking at least once, yet the targeted communities (those considered by participants) varied (Flores & James, 2012). Lastly, nearly all participants (98%) demonstrated amoral or unethical thinking at least once, including those who were considered to be strong moral or ethical thinkers, and there were also 11 instances of egregious conduct (Flores & James, 2012). One of the most significant findings was that few participants thought consistently about how their online behavior may have ethical implications, indicating that “consistent approaches to online life were rare” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 846). In fact, some participants who exhibited strong ethical thinking in certain online
contexts experienced lapses in other contexts, suggesting that “youth deploy their ethical thinking situationally” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 847).

Another important finding was that youth may not reflect on their online behavior or on the implications of this behavior (Flores & James, 2012). Hence, there may be a disconnect between moral or ethical thinking and behavior online (Colby & Damon, 1992), a preference for self-focused thinking, or both (Flores & James, 2012). They conclude that the “inconsistent use of ethical thinking suggests that certain online contexts may engender greater ‘moral sensitivity’ (Bebeau et al., 1999) while others may coincide with greater ‘disinhibition’ (Suler, 2004)” (Flores & James, 2012, p. 847). In terms of future research, Flores and James (2012) suggest that, in order to understand what fosters or impedes moral and ethical behavior online, it is essential to explore how youth act and interact with one another across online contexts.

**Effects of antisocial media on moral development.** Plaisier and Konijn (2013) conducted a study examining how peer rejection might drive internet users, particularly adolescents and emerging adults, to be drawn to antisocial media content by relying on developmental research on peer rejection as well as research on media effects. Building on the general aggression model (GAM), Plaisier and Konijn (2013) propose a model arguing that adolescents who experience rejection from their peers are prone to negative media effects. Additionally, they argue that these effects are “mediated by increased levels of rejection-based anger and frustration, which impairs adolescents’ moral judgment of such media content” (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013, p. 1165). Plaisier and Konijn (2013) extend and specify relationships (i.e., among emotions, cognition, arousal, and behavior) for adolescents who are attracted to media portraying behaviors that are considered to be antisocial or immoral.
The results of their study indicate that “higher levels of state anger in peer-rejected adolescents induced more tolerable moral judgments of antisocial media content, subsequently instigating a preference for antisocial media content” (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013, p. 1165). In contrast, among the young adults in the study, there were no apparent relationships between peer rejection and preference for antisocial media content (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013). To explain these results, they attribute adolescent use of media containing antisocial behavior to the underdevelopment of their emotion regulation strategies in that adolescents might think that it will help them in dealing with rejection-based feelings of anger and frustration, as a sort of catharsis (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013). However, they believe that further research must be conducted in order to study exactly how certain emotion regulation strategies may affect media use (Plaisier & Konijn, 2013).

In their longitudinal examination of the effectiveness of persuasive storytelling by hate groups online, Lee and Leets (2002) found that messages that were high-narrative and implicit were more persuasive than low-narrative, explicit messages among adolescents immediately after being exposed to them. However, the effects of these types of messages decreased over time, while those that were low-narrative and explicit lasted or even increased over time (Lee & Leets, 2002). They also found that receptivity, or openness to the message being conveyed, interacted with message factors to mediate persuasion (Lee & Leets, 2002). This finding “brings to light the need to be wary of traditional hate tactics” and illustrates how neutral adolescents, those who are neither predisposed to accepting the message at face value nor inclined to immediately reject it, are most vulnerable to the persuasive strategies used by hate groups online as they are most likely to process hate stories peripherally (i.e., without scrutinizing or presenting a counterargument) rather than centrally (Lee & Leets, 2002, p. 950). The following sections
discuss both explicit and implicit strategies used by individuals and hate groups to promulgate their racist messages online, ways in which racism has come to underlie certain forms of cyberbullying, and methods educators can use to help students resist such racist messages.

**Race and Racism on the Internet**

What has racism looked like in the past? What does it look like now? In the post-civil rights era of the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S., new forms of covert racism emerged, taking the place of overt racism, which had become deplorable and was publicly denounced. Dovidio and Gaertner (1986) describe the generally egalitarian, yet ambivalent views of many White Americans on race relations as *aversive racism*. As opposed to the “more traditional” form of racism, aversive racists “sympathize with the victims of past injustice[,] support public policies that, in principle, promote racial equality...identify more generally with a liberal political agenda[,] regard themselves as nonprejudiced...but, almost unavoidably, possess negative feelings and beliefs about blacks” (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986, p. 62).

In terms of how race has been portrayed online, Bleeker (1995) criticizes SimCity, a simulation game, for its “systematic denial of racial conflict as a factor in urban life,” associating riots with “high heat, high crime, and high unemployment” without any mention of race, concluding that “SimCity riots allude to race in a ‘coded’ form that makes race safe” (as cited in Turkle, 1995, p. 73). Additionally, through the “disaggregation of race...the SimCity player is able to construct a ‘benign’ narrative justification for riots, yet ‘the specter’ of race remains, [but] because it is unacknowledged, it is not open to criticism or analysis” (Bleeker, 1995, as cited in Turkle, 1995, p. 73). This example illustrates how race was often ignored and overlooked when the internet first emerged in the 1990s.

Many people have bought into the myth of colorblindness on the internet, which Daniels
(2012) believes warrants a critical examination of Whiteness on the internet. In an article on cyberspace and race, renowned media scholar Henry Jenkins (2002) states:

Like many white liberals, I had viewed the absence of explicit racial markers in cyberspace with some optimism – seeing the emerging ‘virtual communities’ as perhaps our best hope of ever achieving a truly color-blind society. But many of the forum’s minority participants…didn’t experience cyberspace as a place where nobody cared about race. (p. 89)

This dynamic has led to the “burden of noticing race” being placed on minority participants or minority researchers (Daniels, 2012, p. 707).

Overall, academic research on race and racism online illustrates how old forms of racism have made their way into cyberspace along with newer forms that are essentially disguised racist propaganda and are being broadcast in these new social settings, often anonymously (Cleland & Cashmore, 2013; Daniels, 2012; Durrheim, Greener, & Whitehead, 2015; Millward, 2008; Sallaz, 2010). Even in the earliest stages of the internet, this was the case. Daniels (2008) draws attention to this phenomenon in his examination of race, civil rights, and hate speech in the digital era:

At the same time MCI was airing its infamous commercial [click to view] proclaiming “there is no race” on the Internet, some were already practiced at adapting white supremacy to the new online environment, creating Web sites that showcase hate speech along with more sophisticated Web sites that intentionally disguise their hateful purpose. (p. 129)

Specifically, the two types of white supremacy online are (1) overt hate websites that “target individuals or groups, showcase racist propaganda, or offer online community for white
supremacists” and (2) *cloaked* websites that “intentionally seek to deceive the casual Web user” (Daniels, 2008, p. 129). The long history of structural and systemic white supremacy in the U.S. has, unfortunately, prompted racist speech to exist and to reach an even broader audience online (Daniels, 2008). Hate speech online has consequences in real life because it allows for a new venue to harass people of color and women (Daniels, 2008). This can be seen both through the actual content posted on websites as well as through comments offered by anyone who chooses to enter the conversation, so to speak.

The internet is also home to hateful cloaked websites. The techniques used by cloaked website developers include “carefully chosen domain names, deceptive graphic user interface (GUI)[,] and language that is less strident than what appears in overt hate speech online” (Daniels, 2008, p. 138). The existence of cloaked websites, moreso than overt websites, illustrates what modern-day racism looks like and how it has morphed to adapt to societal changes. One example of a cloaked website is [www.martinlutherking.org](http://www.martinlutherking.org), which was created and is maintained by white supremacist, Don Black. Daniels (2008) discusses the dangers of cloaked websites, with a focus on Don Black’s website about Martin Luther King:

> Once at these cloaked sites, it is possible that unsuspecting Web users will find this disorienting. In a series of experiments and interviews, when asked to search for information on Martin Luther King, I discovered that even high-achieving and Internet-savvy adolescents had difficulty deciphering whether this cloaked Web site was a trustworthy source of information about Dr. King. (Daniels, 2008, p. 140)

A high school junior interviewed by Daniels (2008) was asked to assess whether this particular website was a reliable one. This was her response:
It looks good to me. I mean this is just about how people tried to undermine him (referring to a quote on the first page). And, this (referring to the links to the right of the page) just look like his writings, but I can’t tell if these are his writings or writings about him. Oh, and this looks good (clicking on the link, “King’s Dissertation”). I like this because it’s got primary sources. (p. 140)

This example demonstrates just how misleading cloaked websites can be to the casual observer.

More recently, Russian cyber interference during the U.S. presidential election in 2016, particularly their attempts at racial interference on social media through fake news stories (Ohlin, 2017) can be seen as an example of cloaked posts (rather than cloaked websites) on prominent SNSs. With the intention of prompting conflict among American citizens, Russian agents circulated inflammatory posts about race, religion, gun rights, and gay/transgender issues on Facebook that reached 126 million users, while simultaneously posting over 131,000 messages on Twitter and uploading over 1,000 videos on YouTube (Isaac & Shane, 2017; Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017). This has been a wake-up call for the social media giants, now grappling with how their services can be used in a vindictive manner (Isaac & Wakabayashi, 2017).

The blurring of private and public boundaries online creates a space where overt racism, which is typically privately expressed and regarded as taboo, and colorblind racism, which is often publicly expressed and regarded as socially acceptable, can coexist online (Hughey & Daniels, 2013). However, given the prevalence and power of colorblind racism, Kettrey and Laster (2014), among other race and internet scholars (Brock, 2012; Daniels, 2012; Hughey & Daniels, 2013) stress the importance of researchers shifting from an examination of overt racism online (i.e., extremist websites) to an examination of subtle racism as well as racism on websites that do not openly focus on race.
Racial Attitudes and Social Media Usage

According to Tynes and Markoe (2010), it is important to determine the role of colorblind racial attitudes in college students’ responses to online racial discrimination given the pervasiveness of these attitudes. Examining associations between college students’ reactions to racial theme party images on SNSs and colorblind racial attitudes, they discovered there were discrepancies between how students would respond using their “Facebook face,” in a nonconfrontational way that avoided addressing the larger social implications of the photos, and their private reactions to the photos, in which they often acknowledged that the photos were “either stereotypical, racist, or inappropriate” (Tynes & Markoe, 2010, p. 7). Their study highlights how addressing colorblindness may be one effective method of targeting and decreasing racial discrimination online (Tynes & Markoe, 2010). The results of this study also suggest that “the color-blind ideal commonly socialized and valued among European Americans may actually be detrimental to race relations on college campuses” (Tynes & Markoe, 2010, p. 10). Given that research has shown that negative racial attitudes may influence behavior when interacting with individuals of other races (McConnell & Leibold, 2001), educators can play a role in helping students recognize and unlearn colorblindness instead of encouraging it (Pollock, 2009).

In a related study, Freis and Gurung (2013) argue that the uniqueness of online bullying allows for more diverse interventions and strategies. Their work is useful in terms of understanding helping behavior in cyberbullying incidents and how a phenomenon like diffusion of responsibility may be amplified online, yet may also be counteracted in certain situations by anonymity, which may encourage people to intervene (Freis & Gurung, 2013). They found that people are much more likely to use indirect forms of intervention, such as avoiding the
controversial topic, rather than direct forms, such as telling the bully to stop (Freis & Gurung, 2013). These findings align with those of Tynes and Markoe (2010) in that the majority of students used indirect intervention in their responses online, even though they directly conveyed their disgust and shock offline.

In another study conducted by Steinfeldt et al. (2010) examining racism directed towards American Indians in online forums, they found that participants of these forums commented very openly in the anonymity of this particular space, receiving the “benefits of privacy experienced in backstage [i.e., private] settings without the negative social consequences such attitudes would receive in physical front-stage [i.e., public] settings” (p. 369). Furthermore, knowing that American Indians were also active members of this online forum did not seem to deter racist comments (Steinfeldt et al., 2010). The results of this study corroborated previous findings indicating that Native-themed mascots and logos can have a detrimental effect on Native Americans’ psychological well-being, and four core ideas, in particular, stood out: surprise, power and privilege, trivialization, and denigration. Steinfeldt et al. (2010) conclude:

Although some of the online forum comments do utilize the words honor and respect in text, the results of this study indicate that the sentiment underlying and surrounding these comments does not reflect a genuine sense of honor or respect. Instead, the online forum comments convey a sense of entitlement, privilege, power, and even subjugation and oppression…Majority culture participants are defining the reality of American Indians by choosing to honor them on their terms, not on the terms of American Indians. (p. 370)

This study draws attention to the intertwined nature of colorblindness (represented through the core idea of “surprise” – namely, responses along the lines of What? This is a problem? and How
can the nickname be seen as negative?) and white privilege (represented through the core idea of “power and privilege” – namely, responses along the lines of We are being victimized by reverse racism and PC society) (Steinfeldt et al., 2010, p. 365).

Pollock (2009) discusses his experiences with “the ambiguity of daily race talk” as a high school teacher (p. 46). Specifically, he noticed that students spoke of race’s relevance to their relations by both denying its importance and highlighting its importance (Pollock, 2009). As a result, he concluded that, in order to understand the full relevance of race in the lives of students and to improve race relations at the school, students and educators would need to “replace both silence and easy summative statements of race’s relevance or irrelevance with more critical and time-consuming debate on the very complex question of how, exactly, race mattered to varying institutional relationships” (Pollock, 2009, p. 47). Moving beyond a cursory examination of race (what, who, and where) to a more detailed, nuanced examination of race (why and how) is necessary in recognizing and combating colorblind attitudes, which otherwise go unchecked as a “normal” way of addressing racial differences and perpetuating other myths, including the myth of meritocracy. CRT critiques this notion of merit on the grounds that it is “highly contextual” and far from neutral without the “rational and just” distribution of benefits it proclaims to have (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 118, 167).

Through their analysis of 2,000 comments posted to YouTube forums, Kettrey and Laster (2014) make the case that overt and covert (colorblind) racism both can potentially “play roles in designating white spaces on the Web, with the former maintaining the boundaries of what is arguably the World White Web and the latter convoluting conversations about race in a manner that impedes the dismantling of racism” (p. 259). As an example, they discuss the advent of Blackbird, a Web browser that was marketed as a search tool that would cater to the interests of
Black internet users (Kettrey & Laster, 2014). Blackbird received negative reception from both Black and White internet users. Specifically, “Black bloggers were typically critical of Blackbird’s practical utility, whereas white bloggers alleged that the browser was inherently racist. Brock [2011] argues that such an allegation is a product of the invisibility of whiteness in a color-blind culture” (Kettrey & Laster, 2014, p. 260).

In her examination of racial microaggressions as experienced by Latino/a students on college campuses, Minikel-Lacocque (2012) addresses the impact of covert racism, which often comes from well-meaning individuals, and can encompass microinsults, microassaults, and microinvalidations. Sue et al. (2007) define microinsults as “comments that convey rudeness [and] insensitivity…demean[ing] a person’s racial heritage or identity,” microassaults as a “verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior[,] or purposeful discriminatory actions,” and microinvalidations as “comments or behaviors that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color” (as cited in Minikel-Lacocque, 2012, p. 436). All of these types of microaggressions can exist in cyberspace as well, communicating to racial minorities that they are not welcome and do not belong, mirroring the purpose they serve in the real world, mainly through the use of stereotyping, insensitivity, and ignorance, rather than getting stared at, feeling ignored, and being given unpleasant nicknames as Minikel-Lacocque (2012) discusses in her research findings of face-to-face microaggressions.

The internet is often a space where debates about affirmative action and “merit” play out. Minikel-Lacocque (2012) includes comments that were posted online in response to an op-ed on affirmative action policies in a college newspaper: “Being born on the wrong or right side of the tracks does not PREDETERMINE your life. If you PERSONALLY give a damn…you
will find PERSONAL success. The ultimate blame lies with you” (p. 451). Comments like these fail to acknowledge systemic inequalities and convey a deep-seated belief in the flawed notion of meritocracy. As Minikel-Lacocque (2012) points out, “The openly racist comments posted anonymously combine traditionally covert and overt modes of expressing racism. These types of comments [containing racial microaggressions], often reserved for private settings in the past, are [now] in a very public forum” (p. 452). Minikel-Lacocque (2012) argues for certain comments that are classified as “microaggressions” to be called “racialized aggressions” instead, if they are overt and intentional, and she advocates “(a) raising awareness and understanding of racism among majority students, (b) offering a common language with which to talk about racism, and (c) providing a support system to empower students to contest racial microaggressions when they do occur” (pp. 459, 461).

Colorblindness, microaggressions, and white privilege have all played a role in impeding progress in productive conversations on social media about race relations in the U.S. However, resistance and social commentary online, particularly through challenges to the dominant narrative (e.g., using counter-narratives) and hashtag activism on SNSs like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, demonstrate how the cycle can be interrupted. Educators can take the lead in examining how both overt and covert racism function online and in prompting their students to consider the ramifications of posting racist comments as well as envisioning possible ways to resist racism through social justice activism on social media.

**Using Social Media to Teach About Race**

Nakkula and Toshalis (2006) examine racial identity development in the context of a guide for educators of adolescents, pointing out that while it may not be possible to completely overcome our prejudices, it is possible to identify and modify our responses to them, and racial
identity development theory can help with this resocialization process to make us more racially conscious. Specific questions they provide for educators to ask themselves while working with adolescents struggling with and against racial stereotypes include:

1. How do adolescents orient their identities toward one race (or several) as they come to understand that certain contexts marginalize some and privilege others based on racial categories? 2. What is “optimal racial identity development”? What is the end goal? 3. How do youth (and adults) reproduce harmful racial ideas? How do youth (and adults) resist or transcend them? 4. What interventions might inspire a deeper, more integrated, and flexible racial identity? (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006, p. 127)

While these questions can serve as a starting point to teach students about race, the internet adds another layer of complexity to the understanding of race and racism (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). According to Nakagawa and Arzubiaga (2014), social media provides an easily accessible context in which adolescents and emerging adults can learn about issues of race while also challenging them, and they discuss how social media can be used to promote racial literacy and to resist racism. *Racial literacy* can be defined as the “ways in which individuals learn to negotiate and understand race in relation to Whiteness, gender, sexuality, and class, and develop vocabulary and formal concepts with which to discuss race” (Twine, 2010, as cited in Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014, p. 105). Along these lines, Twine (2010) delineates six specific components of racial literacy: (1) realizing racism is a contemporary problem, not simply a historical legacy; (2) understanding that race and racism are mediated by class and gender; (3) recognizing that Whiteness has both cultural and symbolic value in society; (4) knowing that racial identities are learned; (5) adopting a racial vocabulary; and (6) interpreting racial codes and racialized practices.
Racial literacy can be taught both offline (e.g., at home, in the classroom, or through interactions at school) and online (e.g., through forums discussing racial topics or through a critical examination of the content and comments posted on websites, whether or not they explicitly deal with racial topics). According to Stevenson (2014), “The teaching of racial literacy skills protects students from the threat of internalizing negative stereotypes that undermine academic critical thinking, engagement, identity, and achievement” (p. 4). Educators and parents can help children and adolescents develop racial literacy through intentional racial socialization practices, a process that occurs in much the same way as internalization of racial inferiority would, through exposure (Hughes et al., 2006; Rockquemore, Laszloffy, & Noveske, 2006; Stevenson, 2014). Having educators and parents who are properly trained in teaching racial literacy helps to “challenge any racial hierarchy that demonizes the potential of Black culture, intelligence, and civic contribution” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 54; Twine, 2004).

Nakagawa and Arzubiaga (2014) indicate specific questions students can be asked or can ask themselves about social media content and rhetoric to determine whether statements are perpetuating deficit views about groups. Some of these questions include:

Does the text blame the victim(s)? Does the statement oppress a group by, for example, silencing the group? Is pseudoscience (misuse of data or statistics, which are cast to provide an aura of scientific knowledge) used to make statements? Is compensatory education or training proposed to make up for what individuals in the group are lacking (e.g., training to become American)? (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014, p. 107)

Another useful exercise is to have students read aloud a social media post, and then replace the term in the post that is being used to refer to the group with a word that refers to their own group, whether it be in relation to their ethnic, racial, cultural, or national identity – the idea would be to
reflect on how the meaning of the post changed for them with this substitution, employing perspective-taking skills (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014).

Analyzing the production and politics of social media can also be useful in teaching students about race and intersectionality. For example, as Nakagawa and Arzubiaga (2014) point out, it is important to examine and discuss factors like “who has access to the means and knowledge to make and upload videos, who feels entitled to make one's personal thoughts public, and who is viewing and commenting…in relation to class, race, and gender” (p. 106). CRT can be used to provide insight on how race is being addressed online through the rhetoric of “rights” and “property.” Posting or reposting text, videos, or comments on the internet is an inherently political act, whether we choose to view it this way or not.

Though social media can be seen as a reflection of society, it also provides an alternative space for examples of racism and minority counter-narratives to emerge. YouTube, in particular, “provides a fertile context to teach about race, as it is known for racist, sexist, and negative comments from viewers,” especially since videos including “society’s already accepted opinions about race, or politics, are most highly valued, receive the most hits, and thus are the easiest to see” (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014, p. 104; Juhasz, 2008, as cited in Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014, p. 106). Through an examination of YouTube videos and the accompanying comment threads, it becomes apparent not only how microaggressions function, but also how they can generate responses and resistance online.

Examples of such resistance (both productive and counter-productive) can be seen in comments responding to Alexandra Wallace’s “Asians in the Library” [click to view] video post and in the following video responses to Wallace’s post: “Asians in the Library-The guy she saw speaks up” and “Ching Chong! Asians in the Library Song” [click to view]. Unfortunately, as
Nakagawa and Arzubiaga (2014) address, while these videos illustrate powerful challenges to microaggressions, they also reinforce other types of oppression, such as sexism. Nonetheless, these videos are useful in critiquing and complicating the process of resistance to racist posts online (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014).

According to a recent Pew survey (2009), African Americans account for 26% of Twitter users, and they are very active in their involvement on this particular SNS (as cited in Sharma, 2013). Sharma (2013) discusses how racial hashtags, or “Blacktags” as they are known, have the potential to “interrupt the whiteness of the Twitter network” (p. 46). He defines “Blacktags” as a “particular type of hashtag associated with Black Twitter users…because the tag itself and/or its associated content appears to connote ‘Black’ vernacular expression in the form of humour and social commentary” (Sharma, 2013, p. 51). Some examples of popular “Blacktags” include “#cookout; #wordsthatleadtotrouble; #wheniwaslittle; #inappropriatechurchsongs; #ifsantawasblack; #atablackpersonfuneral; #onlyinthehood” (Sharma, 2013, p. 51). The phenomenon of Black Twitter is comprised of these trending Blacktags, which “may originate within a relatively small cluster of highly connected [Black] users,” and rapidly diffuse to other parts of the network through a process Sharma (2013) refers to as “simple contagion,” which mainly entails re-tweeting posts. This notion of “contagion,” or contagious collective behavior, “points to the involvement of other clusters, including other (ethnic) groups” (Sharma, 2013, p. 58). This involvement of other ethnic groups is important in resisting the notion that Blacktags “fit neatly into the stereotypes” of African Americans (Sharma, 2013, p. 58).

Byrne (2008) draws attention to the need for minority adolescents and emerging adults to be able to participate in online spaces that are “more likely to value [their] raced experiences,” which not only teach them that “who they are offline bears as much relevance to who they are
online, but…also teach them that talking about this aspect of social life can help them redress the impact of racism” (p. 33). Additionally, joining and contributing to SNSs can help in “strengthening their cultural identities [and teach] them how to navigate both public and private dimensions of their racial lives, [as well as provide] them access to a more globalized yet unfixed conversation about their community histories” (Byrne, 2008, p. 33).

**Conclusion**

The literature on moral identity and social media usage reveals that, while emerging adults acknowledge morality and ethics in their online behaviors, they actually behave differently in various online contexts. Though some emerging adults struggle with maintaining consistency between their online and offline lives, those who have a strong moral identity demonstrate a desire to maintain this sense of consistency. From an educational perspective, it is important to encourage open and honest dialogue about online behaviors between emerging adults and the adults in their lives, including teachers and parents, in order to facilitate positive moral identity development.

The literature on colorblindness and racism in cyberspace illustrates how the internet has been utilized both to reproduce historical trends mirroring divisions we see in society and to actively resist them. Across the literature, there are common themes of overt racism, covert racism, a lack of racial literacy, and racial microaggressions, but also prominent are themes of group belonging and color consciousness among racial minorities. There appear to be spaces online where internet users feel more comfortable discussing and commenting on race-related issues and other spaces that are hostile, even counter-productive, to such discussions. It remains to be seen where the internet will lead us in terms of race relations, but in its nascent stages, we find that the realities of cyberspace have not quite lived up to expectations. One of those
expectations was that the internet would be a “colorblind” space, which has not only been proven to be incorrect, but also to be undesirable.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

This study addressed the following research questions: (1) How does moral identity impact social media usage among emerging adults? (2) How are emerging adults engaging in race-related conversations on social media? (3) How do emerging adults conceptualize relationships among social media culture, university culture, and the global community? (4) How can educators help students confront and challenge colorblind perspectives on social media? (5) How can the experiences of emerging adults help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus?

To help with case selection and case study design, I referred to case study research guidelines written by Yin (2002, 2009) and Merriam (1998). As defined by Yin (2002), a case is “a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between a phenomenon and context are not clear and the researcher has little control over the phenomenon and context” (p. 13). Merriam (1998) also defines case rather broadly as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Therefore, a case can be, for example, a person, a group, or a policy.

In this study, there were three cases, or subgroups of emerging adults on one particular university campus, specifically, Black emerging adults, White emerging adults, and emerging adults of other races, including minority (e.g., Hispanic or Asian) and/or multiracial students (who were grouped together into one case based on their shared experiences of belonging to racial groups outside of the historically Black/White binary paradigm of race in the U.S.), making this a collective case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that one of the objectives of this study was to provide data that could be useful in designing a critical racial literacy curriculum, it was imperative to include input from emerging adults of different races and
backgrounds. Critical cases were emerging adults who engage in social justice activism on social media. The assumption in choosing to focus on social justice-oriented emerging adults was that they would have a strong moral identity, which would prompt them to engage in greater activism online and offline.

Case study methodology was combined with phenomenology, to make this a phenomenological case study, and semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data source. This combined methodological approach to collecting in-depth responses from the participants allowed for an understanding of the topic of moral identity and race relations online from the everyday perspectives of specific respondent subgroups. According to Seidman (2013), there are four themes that are central to phenomenological interview approaches: (1) “the temporal and transitory nature of human experience,” (2) “subjective understanding” of participants, (3) “lived experience as the foundation of ‘phenomena,’” and (4) “the emphasis on meaning and meaning in context” (pp. 16-18). In relation to the first theme, Seidman (2013) states, “In the process of asking participants to reconstruct and reflect on their experience, researchers using a phenomenological approach ask participants to search again for the essence of their lived experience” (pp. 16-17). Though the actual experience has already become a thing of the past when a participant is being interviewed, it is the hope of coming as close to the “essence” of that experience as possible that guides the researcher in the interview process. The second theme of “subjective understanding” can be explained as an effort to understand an individual’s experience from their perspective (Schutz, 1967; Seidman, 2013). Seidman (2013) explains the third theme as the interviewer focusing on the particulars of the individual’s experience in order to help him or her reconstruct their lived experience. Lastly, in line with the fourth theme, by having the individuals reconstruct their experience as well as reflect on its
meaning, the interviewer prompts them to pay close attention to details and to think about the meaning of their lived experience. Hence, an interview protocol based on a phenomenological approach provides a framework for recreating, in a sense, the “lived experience” of the participants’ social media usage, or their “online lived experience.”

Edmund Husserl (1936, 1954), philosopher and principal founder of phenomenology, coined the term “life-world” (Flick, 2014) to refer to “the world as it is lived, not the world as it is measured, transformed, represented, correlated, categorized, compared, and broken down” (Vagle, 2014, p. 22). Building on the ideas presented by Husserl, van Manen (2001) addresses a hermeneutic (i.e., interpretive or pedagogical) approach to phenomenology: “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal” (p. 18). In order to make the process more manageable in the context of this study, I chose to follow steps for conducting hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis outlined by Colaizzi (1978) including: (1) reading the descriptions, (2) selecting significant statements, (3) formulating meanings, (4) organizing formulated meanings into theme clusters, (5) comprehensively describing the phenomenon, (6) validating the description by each participant.

Vagle (2014) addresses the role of theory in phenomenological studies: “I have suggested that using critical theory in a phenomenological study is fine as long as the researcher remains open to questioning what critical theory assumes and how it might influence how the phenomenon is approached” (p. 73). However, given that human experience is “too complex, too fluid, and too ever-changing,” it cannot be adequately “captured in” or “constrained by” a theory; therefore, in phenomenological research, theories should be applied only after initial data
analysis using emergent coding has been completed (Vagle, 2014, p. 74). Specifically, according to Vagle (2014):

The point of “coming back to” the data using theories is to acknowledge that the work of a researcher is to contribute to ongoing theorizing. In sum, in Husserlian phenomenology, bracketing theories is an important part of early data collection and analysis, but using those same bracketed theories in later analysis to situate the work in particular fields is equally important. (p. 74)

Taking this into account, a solely phenomenological data analysis approach was used in the first phase of this study with the theoretical frameworks of the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity and Critical Race Theory only playing a role in data analysis in the second phase of the study.

Research Site

The location where the study was conducted was a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the southeastern U.S. with 23,847 undergraduate students, 56% of whom were male, 44% female, 73% White, 7% Black, 6% Asian, 4% Hispanic, and 10% Other/Multiracial. This particular university was chosen, in part, because of a race-related social media incident that occurred shortly before the study was conducted. All of the participants in the study were familiar with this incident and the escalation of racial tensions on campus that accompanied it.

Participants and Sampling

In order to identify an initial participant pool of emerging adults (ages 18-25), an invitation was sent via email and social media messages to members of social justice-oriented organizations (using convenience and snowball sampling), identified through organization websites and Facebook group pages. Interested students (23 undergraduate students) were
subsequently asked to complete a demographics questionnaire (i.e., race, age, gender, frequency of social media use, level of involvement in social justice issues on social media/on campus).

Critical case sampling was used to select 16 potential interview participants who were active members of social justice organizations chosen based on responses to the demographics questionnaire and demonstrated by holding leadership positions or by frequent and substantive posts on the organization’s social media site. The 9 participants selected to be interviewed included: 1 Black female, 1 Black male, 1 Hispanic female, 1 South Asian female, 2 White females, 1 White genderqueer participant, 1 multiracial male who identifies as White, and 1 multiracial female. According to Creswell (1998), who recommends 5-25 participants, and Morse (1994), who recommends at least 6 participants, having 9 participants met the criteria in terms of the sample size for a phenomenological study.

After conducting individual interviews with these 9 participants, 5 of them were purposefully selected for a focus group based on how insightful their interview responses were (particularly their responses to questions 14-17 about colorblindness) as well as their willingness and availability to participate in a follow-up session. These focus group participants were asked to respond, individually and collectively, to another series of questions asking about their views on colorblindness, the racial climate on their university campus, and their ideas for designing a racial literacy curriculum (addressing research questions 4 and 5, specifically). They were also prompted to explain their responses to social media posts from the individual interviews.

**Instruments**

Interview questions (Appendix A), focus group questions (Appendix B), and social media posts (included as Figures 1-8 in Chapter 4) served as the sources of data collection for the study. Participants responded to interview questions as well as a purposefully selected series of actual
Twitter and Facebook posts about race and race-related incidents that incorporated the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and/or #AllLivesMatter. These specific hashtags were chosen for their capacity to reveal color consciousness as well as colorblindness among social media users.

A laptop was used to share these social media posts one at a time with participants at the end of their interviews. They were prompted to type their responses in a text box below each post as they would if they were to see the post in their social media newsfeed. These Facebook and Twitter posts were shown to participants in a Google Drive document simulating a social media platform. Then, they were asked to orally comment on what they wrote in their responses. Participant’s comments were recorded and transcribed, but not posted on actual social media sites. During the focus group session, participants were asked to respond, individually and collectively, to another series of questions soliciting their input in designing a racial literacy curriculum. They were also prompted to share and, in some cases, to explain their responses to social media posts from the individual interviews with other focus group participants.

Research Procedures

Each semi-structured interview lasted 45 minutes – 1 hour per participant, and the focus group session lasted approximately 1 hour. The individual interviews and the focus group were conducted in person in reserved rooms at a library on campus over the course of 5 weeks between March – April 2017. Participants were provided with a paper copy of the interview questions that they could follow along with or refer to during the course of the interview. The interviews and the focus group session were recorded using a laptop computer microphone and eXtra Voice Recorder Lite software, and they all were transcribed by the researcher using an online transcription program (transcribe.wreally.com). The transcribed interviews, along with participants’ responses to social media posts, were then imported into Microsoft Word
documents. NVivo software was used to tag and organize codes. Participants’ identities were kept confidential through pseudonyms used in the transcriptions. The interview recordings, transcripts, and the NVivo project were saved on a passcode protected computer in encrypted files using Cryptomator cloud encryption software.

**Ethical Considerations**

Since the study included sensitive subject matter (i.e., reflections on race-related incidents and issues), I was aware that it could cause stress for some participants. In order to protect participants from excess stress, they were given the option to discontinue the study at any time. Additionally, they were given the option of not responding to particular questions if they felt emotionally distressed or unable to do so.

**Data Analysis**

Interview and focus group transcripts were analyzed systematically using a combination of thematic content analysis (guided by phenomenology), the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity (the first theoretical framework), and Critical Race Theory (the second theoretical framework). First, the transcripts were read holistically to get an “overall feeling” for them (Creswell, 2013; Vagle, 2014). Next, inductive coding was used to identify significant statements that illustrated the phenomenon being studied, a process that Moustakas (1994) refers to as “horizonalization.” In the context of this study, significant statements included participants’ perceptions of their experiences on social media and their engagement with racial issues online. These significant statements from the transcripts were then organized in a table (see Table 1) with their formulated meanings (Colaizzi, 1978). *In vivo* codes were created using words from the participants’ statements and grouped into categories, or theme clusters, which were then organized in a separate table (see Table 2) alongside their corresponding cases.
Table 1

Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Engagement with Race-Related Issues and Related Formulated Meanings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Significant Statement</th>
<th>Formulated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I believe I’ve gone past the stage where, if I see a comment, it riles me up, or it makes me want to go out into the world and fight racism…now when I see a comment like that, I say, ok, here goes another one. Great. This is wonderful. But I’ve gotten to a point where I’m willing to accept that this is a part of my everyday society…that this is something I’m gonna have to live with until we beat it…I tend to stay off of social justice matters on social media…simply because those can get a little…first off, they can get a little chaotic…and then they can get a little messy if you don’t have all the facts straight” (Interview with Anthony, Case 1).</td>
<td>Believes race-related comments on social media no longer impact him the way they used to; instead, he has come to terms with the everyday realities of racism; tends to avoid engaging in social justice issues on social media because they can easily spin out of control if all the facts are not presented properly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“So, if there is a race-related issue and it’s going a certain way that is, like, spiraling downwards…I might actually say something. I might be, like, it’s usually not on the topic, it’s more like mediating, kind of…it’s more like…I [implore] you to read what they said and think about it or…you guys are arguing for nothing” (Interview with Trevor, Case 2).</td>
<td>Takes on the role of mediator in race-related conversations on social media (diplomatic stance), promoting perspective-taking and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Yeah, I pretty actively engage…it’s an important thing to talk about. It’s something that…I guess, as far as my morals go, I think…it’s valuable. So, I tend to share that, I guess, in a sense, and yeah…if I have a comment that goes along with that, [I’ll add on to that]…you know, ’cause, like, now on Twitter you can not just retweet something, but you can quote it” (Interview with Joanne, Case 2).</td>
<td>Actively engages with race-related issues on social media – thinks it is important to talk about; she will also sometimes add a comment along with her post or quote another post in her post on Twitter instead of just re-tweeting it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I’m a little bit fuzzy about this because I think it is important…but there needs to be a proper way for people to communicate because you don’t wanna be accidentally offending someone…personally, if there is a race-related issue on social media, I would first look at the other comments and be, like, is this something that I wanna comment on, as in…if it’s something that people will start attacking me for it, then…I’m just gonna avoid it” (Interview with Rizana, Case 3).</td>
<td>Feels it is important to engage in race-related issues on social media, but there is the danger of offending or insulting someone in the process – need to be careful and considerate when doing so; she looks at all the other comments on the post first – if she feels attacked or unsafe, she will avoid engaging altogether (self-protective behavior)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

**Theme Clusters from First Cycle Coding (In Vivo Codes) with Corresponding Participant Cases**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme Cluster</th>
<th>Corresponding Case</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet as a “chaotic” environment</td>
<td>Case 1-3 (All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media as a “convenient” space that makes it easy for people to participate or share their opinions “without much self-awareness”</td>
<td>Case 1-3 (All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acting as a mediator</td>
<td>Cases 2 and 3 (White and Other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to feel “safe” before posting; fear of posting something on social media that could be misinterpreted or put yourself in danger; “fear of being shot by the police”</td>
<td>Cases 1 and 3 (Black and Other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading through all comments before posting</td>
<td>Case 1-3 (All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to “know the context” of a situation before intervening (particularly if it appears hostile) – important not to “make assumptions” – do not “waste energy” on angry or closed-minded people</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Easier to step in” to act and react (criticize or intervene) on social media</td>
<td>Case 1-3 (All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behave the same way and “talk about the same things” online and offline</td>
<td>Case 1-3 (All)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The “severity of the conflict” on social media would dictate whether or not to “jump in and rescue” someone who is being harassed or the target of rude or hateful comments</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need to consider your audience and be “thoughtful about the impact” your words or actions might have on other people online as well as how they might be interpreted</td>
<td>Cases 2 and 3 (White and Other)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decide whether you have “enough experience” or the “authority” to speak on certain matters on social media – think about whether your “opinion really matters” in a given context</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using your voice to “make an impact” or to “spread the word” and encourage action offline</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being “upset” and “frustrated” by race-related comments on social media, “never [as] the victim,” but because people are “perpetuating a stereotype” or “justifying racism” and “recirculating” racist ideas online</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media as a “constant reminder” of what is going on in the world – “feeling of inadequacy” in terms of not being aware enough; “lagging behind” peers and wanting to “catch up” with what is going on politically</td>
<td>Case 2 (White)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being “tired of talking about these issues” on social media – a desire for action instead of just talk</td>
<td>Case 1 (Black)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phenomenological themes that were common among the participants’ transcripts and addressed corresponding research questions were then derived from these categories. Themes were also grouped using *within-case analysis* (e.g., themes common among White emerging adults) followed by *cross-case analysis* (e.g., comparison of themes across the cases: Black emerging adults, White emerging adults, and Other emerging adults who are either multiracial or consider themselves to be minorities) alongside their accompanying interpretations (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenological data analysis concluded with a description of the *essence* of the participants’ social media experiences, both overall and organized by case, based on the meanings and themes derived from first cycle coding.

During second cycle coding, theoretical frameworks were applied to the interview and focus group transcripts using *a priori* codes. Statements that exemplified aspects of moral identity, particularly in conjunction with participants’ experiences with cyberbullying and their engagement with racial issues on social media, were used to find common themes through a social-cognitive lens (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Reed et al., 2007; Aquino et al., 2009), while statements that best illustrated references to or an understanding of CRT tenets were used to find common themes through a CRT lens (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 1993). Specifically, responses were analyzed based on the participants’ level of racial literacy as well as their awareness of colorblindness, interest convergence, intersectionality, microaggressions, and white privilege. Participants’ use of rhetorical strategies or semantic moves (e.g., thematically-induced incoherence and/or diminutives) in discussing racial issues (Bonilla-Silva, 2002) and any references to liberalism or critiques of liberalism as well as the dominant narrative (e.g., instances of empathic fallacy) were also coded and are presented along with other findings in Chapter 4.
Participants’ responses to social media (Facebook and Twitter) posts were also initially analyzed using thematic content analysis. A similar procedure to that described above for interview and focus group analysis was used in the first cycle of inductive coding to draw out phenomenological themes. During second cycle coding, responses were analyzed using the tenets of CRT, mentioned in the paragraph above, as well as Twine’s (2010) components of racial literacy and Nakagawa and Arzubiaga’s (2014) guidelines for analyzing social media content and rhetoric (delineated in Chapter 2).

Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Bias

Delineating researcher bias at the beginning of the study is critical in clarifying for the reader any assumptions, experiences, or prejudices the researcher may have that could impact the inquiry (Merriam, 1988; Creswell, 2013). For phenomenological studies, in particular, it is important for the researcher to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. This is so that the researcher can attempt to set these experiences aside, directing his or her focus entirely toward the experiences of the participants instead, which is known as “bracketing” the researcher out of the study (Creswell, 2013).

In terms of my own experiences with social media, I am not a “digital native,” however, technology has always fascinated me and been an integral part of my life. The internet did not enter my world until 1996 when I was 15 years old. I distinctly remember my parents installing a dial-up modem in our house and connecting, ever-so-slowly and noisily, to the World Wide Web for the very first time. I also remember it being a truly life-changing and momentous occasion. Nearly all of the information I used to make countless trips to the library for or glean from the pages of books and encyclopedias was now literally at my fingertips.
Social media (e.g., MySpace, Friendster, Facebook) was not common until I had already completed college, and it was not ubiquitous until I started teaching high school. In fact, only college students were allowed to join Facebook until this time when access was granted to everyone, including high school students, to create their own Facebook accounts. Given this timeline, though my own moral identity development was not impacted by social media, at least not during my formative years, I do believe my moral identity now impacts how I interact with others on social media and how I engage with race-related issues online. Specifically, I think it is important to be both respectful and vigilant on SNSs. I do not post anything that could be construed as harmful or hateful to others on social media, regardless of how our views may differ. While I do occasionally share posts on racial issues on social media, I do not tend to write original posts, partly because I intentionally limit my time on Facebook, the primary SNS I use on a regular basis, but also because I find it difficult to publicize my thoughts to so many people at once. Hence, my biases revolve around my perspective as a technophile who is personally hesitant about using social media, yet also realizes the impact it can have on an individual’s development, having witnessed the impact of cyberbullying on my high school and college students, as well as the power it holds in promoting social justice movements.

To establish credibility of the study, I used multiple sources of data, including individual interviews, social media posts, and a focus group session, as well as multiple frameworks (see Chapter 2) for analysis to “provide corroborating evidence,” or triangulation of the data (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). During and after each interview as well as the focus group session, I took field notes on the participants’ body language, tone, incoherence (thematically-induced or otherwise), and emotional responses, some of which were included in the transcripts. For reliability, interviews were coded twice using the test-retest method (Gorden, 1992) to ensure
accuracy. Member checks were conducted with the participants to ensure trustworthiness and account for validity of the study. For proper member checking techniques, I relied on a combination of guidelines presented by Creswell (2013) and Stake (1995). The specific steps that were used for member checking included: (1) emailing participants their entire interview transcripts; (2) asking participants if they were satisfied with the way their interview was transcribed and whether there was anything they would like to change or add; (3) providing participants with an excerpt from their interview addressing their engagement in race-related conversations on social media along with my interpretation; (4) asking them if they concurred with my interpretation and to let me know if I had missed or misinterpreted anything in this particular interview segment; (5) providing focus group participants with the entire focus group session transcript; and (6) asking if they were satisfied with the way the focus group session had been transcribed and whether there was anything they would like me to change or add. If the transcripts and the interpretation were accurate, participants simply responded to my email saying so.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings in this chapter is centered around themes assembled from an analysis of the three data sources (i.e., interviews, social media posts, and focus group session) that were used to explore perceptions of social media experiences among emerging adults of different races, to address the guiding research questions, and to contribute to the research literature on moral identity and race relations online by applying social-cognitive and critical theoretical frameworks. Participants in the study were all emerging adults (18-24 years old) who were full-time college students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the southeastern U.S. An overview of the participants in the study is presented in Table 3. Findings were examined across three specific cases, including Black emerging adults (case 1), White emerging adults (case 2), and other emerging adults who are either multiracial or consider themselves to be minorities, e.g., Hispanic or Asian (case 3). Both within-case and cross-case analyses are weaved throughout the findings.

This chapter is organized into three primary segments, beginning with participant profiles, organized alphabetically by case, including demographic information and details about the participants’ social media use, social justice activism, racial identity development, and other relevant background information. Then, I present the phenomenological themes that emerged from an inductive analysis of the interviews, focus group session, and social media post responses. Lastly, I present themes aligned with the research questions, incorporating relevant tenets of both theoretical frameworks, the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity and Critical Race Theory (CRT).
Participant Profiles

Case 1: Black Emerging Adults

Anthony. A somewhat guarded, yet engaging 20-year-old Black junior and STEM major at the university, Anthony identified strongly with the scientific community, which was exemplified by his membership in STEM organizations both on-campus and online, including multiple Facebook groups, holding leadership positions in some of them as well. He mentioned that he aspires to obtain a doctorate in physics in order to pursue a career in STEM. In his interview, he spoke repeatedly about being a Christian and linked his religious beliefs with his morality, emphasizing how selflessness and community service were values that were integral to his moral identity. Anthony’s personal anecdotes in the interview illustrated moments of his racial identity development when he was in the pre-encounter stage (in elementary school), encounter stage (in middle school), immersion-emersion stage (in high school), and on the cusp of the immersion-emersion and internalization stages (currently in college as an emerging adult) (Cross, 1971, 1991).

In the demographics questionnaire he completed prior to the interview, Anthony indicated that he was actively involved with social justice issues on campus and somewhat involved with them on social media. From his comments in the interview, it appeared that he had a high level of social justice self-efficacy that operated at the intersection of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and community domains (Miller et al., 2009; see Chapter 1). Describing how his experiences and personal development shaped his involvement in social justice activism, he credited his mentor at the university, Dr. Singer, who played a pivotal role in “waking him up” to the realization that numerous factors play a role in systemic racism, and they all happen simultaneously.
Though he did not offer many details about it, Anthony referenced how he had been the target of a racist incident on campus a few months prior to the interview and said he had posted about it on his social media page, reported it to the police, and spoken with the media about it as well. This incident involved his car being vandalized, covered in racially suggestive items, and it seemed to directly inform his perspective on addressing race-related issues online. Specifically, he mentioned several times that he was “tired of talking about these issues,” as he had done many times the previous semester, and he expressed a desire to see “more action” instead of just talk. Based on his experiences online, regardless of how many facts are presented, there are still going to be some people who will try to “refute everything,” which can make you “very upset very quickly.”

**Naomi.** A confident and effusive 22-year-old senior at the university majoring in psychology, Naomi identified first and foremost as a Black woman, though she also spoke of her strong ties to the LGBT community. She addressed her racial identity development as a process of achieving a “balance” between not wanting to be constantly reminded she is Black “for how derogatory it is in some instances” and being proud to be Black because it is “a wonderful thing.” Given that she is light-skinned, though both of her parents are Black, she had trouble fitting in with her peers in school, feeling “stuck in the middle,” not fully accepted by Black or White students. Now, however, as an emerging adult, she seems to be securely in the internalization stage of racial identity development (Cross, 1971, 1991). Naomi was one of the few participants to directly link her personality traits with the strength of her moral identity, mentioning that people notice her “moral fiber” through her honesty, transparency, and ability to admit when she is wrong. In terms of her experiences online, Naomi spoke of being mindful of what she is
posting on social media and how it may impact those reading her posts as well as how it could affect her in the long run (e.g., emotionally or professionally).

In the demographics questionnaire, Naomi indicated that she was very actively involved with social justice issues on campus and somewhat involved with them on social media. Her responses to the interview questions indicated that she had a high level of social justice self-efficacy that took into account all of the domains Miller et al. (2009) mention: intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and political/institutional. The inclusion of this last domain set her apart from Anthony in the sense that she was vocal about challenging racism and discrimination in person (i.e., leading campus organizations and events, speaking directly with university administrators, attending/voicing her concerns at town hall meetings) and online (i.e., active engagement with race-related issues). Addressing the role of her experiences and personal development in her choice to become involved in social justice activism, Naomi focused on her membership in the African American Student Organization at the university over the past couple years as well as going through “personal adversity” as she became hyperaware of her surroundings attending a PWI, including the racial climate on campus, and more cognizant of her own racial identity.

Case 2: White Emerging Adults

Joanne. A soft-spoken, 18-year-old White freshman at the university with an undeclared major, Joanne identified primarily as a Christian. For her, this meant living by the golden rule and considering it her responsibility to take care of others in the community and help them succeed. Similar to Anthony, she associated her morality with her religious beliefs. Joanne also noted that she had just recently started on the journey to understanding her racial identity and
unpacking her white privilege, implying that she is entering the immersion-emersion stage of her racial identity development (Helms, 1992).

In the demographics questionnaire she completed prior to the interview, Joanne indicated that she was somewhat involved with social justice issues on campus and actively involved with them on social media. Describing how her experiences and personal development shaped her activism, she addressed how, early on in high school, she began to notice the extent of disparities present in society, specifically, how there were “people that weren’t as privileged” as she was and how she felt it was imperative to do something about this. From this point onward, her perspective on social justice gradually evolved, mostly through what she saw in the media and in her interactions with friends.

As a turning point in this process, she referenced the spate of police shootings and acts of brutality that resulted in the deaths of numerous Black males over the past few years, 2014-2016 (e.g., Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Walter Scott, Alton Sterling), sparking protests and upheaval in Ferguson, Baltimore, and other cities around the country as well as prompting the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Joanne said it was around this time that she felt inspired to explore systemic inequities and to act against them when “a lot of people stepped up” to incite change. Though she talked about attending some events on campus, she admitted to being more of an activist on social media, which to her meant sticking to your beliefs, while also persuading others to listen and engage. Given this, Joanne’s social justice self-efficacy was most pronounced in the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains and still developing in the community and political/institutional domains (Miller et al., 2009).

Laura. A dynamic, yet slightly reserved 24-year-old White transfer student, economics major, and junior at the university who was older than all of the other participants, Laura
identified strongly as an environmentalist with an inclination to help people through practical and sustainable means. Interestingly, she was the only participant who spoke directly about the impact of a person’s morality relative to their power or status in society, saying that “some people’s morality [is] more heavily weighted than others, like, the more responsibility or power you have, the more important your morality is.” Laura admitted to growing up in a racist household and being biased several times in her interview and the focus group session, but also desperately wanting to learn from people of color how to expose these beliefs and confront racism, placing her in the pseudo-independent stage of racial identity development (Helms, 1992).

In the demographics questionnaire, Laura indicated that she was somewhat involved with social justice issues both on campus and on social media. Addressing the role of her experiences and personal development in becoming interested in social justice activism, she mentioned how a particular training session she completed for an environmental summer program at her previous university (before transferring) was pivotal in introducing her to diverse racial/ethnic perspectives and the concept of intersectionality. It was also the first time she learned about social justice in a formal setting. From that point onward, she has been “continually developing” in order to recognize and attempt to undo her “biased wiring,” though much of this personal development, since she is not a “very loud or openly opinionated person,” has been somewhat passive, occurring in private moments of self-reflection rather than publicly. In the context of social media, this translates to “liking things silently” or sharing meaningful posts. Hence, her social justice self-efficacy was limited to the intrapersonal domain, though she demonstrated potential to cross over into the interpersonal domain in time (Miller et al., 2009).
Nathan. A reflective 21-year-old senior at the university majoring in environmental science, Nathan identified as a White, genderqueer social justice activist (preferred pronouns: he/him), who was proud of his membership in Students for a Democratic Society, yet also adopted an anarchist perspective. For him, morality was very much about being thoughtful and considerate in your words and actions, not only talking the talk, but walking the walk. Nathan demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of colorblindness, white privilege, and systemic racism, but still had a difficult time engaging in certain social media contexts involving race-related conversations, indicating that he quite possibly is in the immersion-emersion stage on the verge of reaching autonomy, but not quite there yet (Helms, 1992).

In the demographics questionnaire, Nathan stated that he was actively involved with social justice issues on campus and somewhat involved with them on social media. Addressing the role of his experiences and personal development in becoming interested in social justice activism, he talked about starting out from an environmentalist perspective in high school when he would read all the books he could get his hands on about environmental issues at the library. Over time, his interest in the environment evolved to a sort of frustration over the state of the environment and the “interests that exist to…keep it that way and make it worse versus the people who are struggling to protect what they have left.” Once he entered college and took classes on the justice side (e.g., environmental justice), he started “learning more about social issues” as well, especially since college allowed him to become “more exposed” to what was going on and “opened [his] perspective a lot.” When he decided to take an African American literature course to satisfy the university’s diversity requirement, the frustration and rage he experienced through the texts got him thinking more about social justice issues and about how much he actually did not know and wanted to learn. This prompted him to join Students for a
Democratic Society where he was able to talk about “social issues and justice issues” with the other group members, and that was how he “transitioned into that side of things.” Nathan’s high level of social justice self-efficacy was most pronounced in the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains and somewhat developed, though still developing, in the community and political/institutional domains (Miller et al., 2009).

**Trevor.** A somewhat conflicted 21-year-old senior at the university majoring in human biology, Trevor, a multiracial South African male (according to the demographics questionnaire), identified as White throughout the interview. Thus, he is included here as the fourth White emerging adult participant. Like Anthony and Joanne, Trevor spoke of how his morals stemmed from a religious upbringing, but did not seem to be quite as religious as they were. Given that he did not entirely embrace his multiracial identity and often looked to people of color to uncover and confront racism, yet also conveyed a nuanced understanding of systemic racism and white privilege, Trevor essentially straddled the pseudo-independence and immersion-emersion stages of racial identity development with one foot in either stage at any given time (Helms, 1992).

In the demographics questionnaire, Trevor indicated that he was actively involved with social justice issues on campus and somewhat involved with them on social media. Addressing the role of his experiences and personal development in becoming interested in social justice activism, he spoke of always having “kind of a radical view” and “social justice view” from middle school onward, informed by his “background in morality,” but indicated that his actual involvement began during the second semester of his freshman year and picking up his sophomore year. Initially, this involvement was more confined to the social media realm (e.g., signing online petitions), but evolved into more activism offline, particularly on campus through his involvement in Students for a Democratic Society, similar to Nathan, combined with online
activism. Hence, Trevor demonstrated a relatively high level of social justice self-efficacy that was developed in the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains, and somewhat developed, but still developing, in the community and political/institutional domains (Miller et al., 2009).

Case 3: Other Emerging Adults (Minority or Multiracial)

Isabella. A spirited 21-year-old junior at the university majoring in textiles, Isabella took pride in her Hispanic heritage, identifying as a political advocate (often representing the Hispanic community in public forums) and social justice activist, making it a point to attend marches, lobbying events, even making appearances at the general assembly, where she spoke with some of the representatives. From the stories she told of her racial identity development in her middle school and high school years, it was clear that she had passed through the assimilation, separation, and marginalization stages and had now reached the integration stage (Berry, 2005).

In the demographics questionnaire, Isabella indicated that she was actively involved with social justice issues on campus and on social media. Addressing the role of her experiences and personal development in becoming interested in social justice activism, she noted that, while she first started noticing racial issues around her (including instances of racism) in middle school, she did not truly become involved until she came to college, and part of the reason why she wanted to do so was that she grew up in a small town where the people were “very closed-minded.” She promised herself that she would not remain in that town or around people with that mindset. Isabella displayed a high level of social justice self-efficacy that spanned all of the domains Miller et al. (2009) mention: intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and political/institutional.

Rizana. A shy 18-year-old freshman at the university with an undeclared major, Rizana identified as a South Asian Muslim. Based on the few stories she told about her personal life in
the interview, it appeared that she had gone through the encounter stage of racial identity
development, grappling with her identity as a member of a group targeted by racism, and was
now in the immersion/emersion stage with the potential to enter the internalization stage, but
being currently prevented from doing so due to her somewhat colorblind perspective (Cross,

In the demographics questionnaire, Rizana indicated that she was actively involved with
social justice issues on campus and somewhat involved with them on social media. Yet, in her
interview, she spoke of how she was only just now starting to become interested in social justice
activism, and that it was difficult for her to express herself in public forums or to discuss
“sensitive issues” in front of large audiences. For her, this included social media “because it’s a
lot easier for people to take it the wrong way and be judgmental about it.” Of all the participants,
she seemed to be the most concerned about offending people or upsetting them, fearing backlash
of any kind. Given this, her level of social justice self-efficacy was limited to the intrapersonal
domain with the possibility of crossing over into the interpersonal domain as she matures (Miller
et al., 2009).

Sofia. A self-assured 21-year-old junior majoring in design, Sofia identified as
multiracial, speaking at length about her family and growing up in the U.S. as the child of
immigrants, her father having emigrated from Italy and her mom from Bahrain. Sofia was one of
the few participants to describe morality as “fluid.” She talked about how her family background
has impacted her perspective on race-related issues in terms of identifying strongly with
immigrants who are being targeted for “taking jobs” and with those from the Middle East who
are being racially profiled and encountering anti-Muslim attitudes. Additionally, she spoke of
being mistaken for being Hispanic and having to deal with people saying racist things to her and
her brother based on this perception. She gave the example of how her mother used to teach her and her siblings Arabic when they were very young, but then they “had to stop learning and couldn’t acknowledge that [they] had that identity anymore because [their] dad was too scared to let [them],” which was shortly before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and when that happened, “it was very much a shut-down.” Based on her personal experiences with race and racism, Sofia seemed to have passed through the categorization stage (with her choices about racial identification being influenced by the actions of her father) to currently be in the enmeshment/denial stage of racial identity development (expressing a certain degree of confusion and denial of differences among racial groups), but very much on the verge of the appreciation (of multiple identities) stage (Poston, 1990).

She also discussed how her experiences growing up, both inside and outside of school, opened her eyes and got her thinking about racial and socioeconomic disparities, particularly in the educational system:

I did have very limited contact with diversity in my daily academic life [at a Catholic school], but then through all my extracurriculars, I was meeting all these different people from all these different schools in different parts of [the city]…and it kind of just confused me, what I was seeing in my really nice school wasn’t what was available for everyone else, and then that kind of…so, these racial issues, in the end, are literally just about misunderstandings and inequality because of the separation…so, they really…they infuriate me…it’s more, like, I’m just baffled. I can’t understand why…I know why we’re still at this point, but I can’t understand why people can’t see that. Like, I know that it’s just been manipulation of society over years and years that there’s just…it changes its target all the time.
In the demographics questionnaire, Sofia indicated that she was somewhat involved with social justice issues on campus and actively involved with them on social media. Addressing the role of her experiences and personal development in becoming interested in social justice activism, she noted that she came from a family of philosophers with both of her older siblings also being very politically active. She spoke of watching them participate in activism as she grew up and wanting to be a “justice warrior” as well, which she definitely tried to do in high school. Then, when she joined college, she joined quite a few organizations (e.g., Students for a Democratic Society) and attended protests (both on and off campus), saying that she is “very in awe of these people” (members of the group) and that she “really enjoy[s] partaking in it” because she feels “valuable” when she does. Recently, she has become “less of an activist in the sense of acting out and more of an activist in the sense of acting in,” and she is trying to find out more information about different causes so that she can participate in change on a “deeper scale.” Now she wants to find ways to “impact people even if it is on a smaller scale” with the intention of having them “pass the message forward if what [she does] help[s] them.” Given this, Sofia demonstrated a high level of social justice self-efficacy, accounting for all of the domains Miller et al. (2009) mention: intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and political/institutional.
Table 3

Overview of Participant Profiles with Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Average Daily Social Media Activity</th>
<th>Most Used Social Media Platform(s)</th>
<th>Involvement with Social Justice Issues on Campus</th>
<th>Involvement with Social Justice Issues on Social Media</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naomi</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Twitter, YouTube</td>
<td>Very Actively Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>45 minutes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White/Multiracial</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
<td>Facebook, Twitter, YouTube</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rizana</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1 hour</td>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Somewhat Involved</td>
<td>Actively Involved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Phenomenological Themes

Phenomenological thematic content analysis of the interviews and focus group session was conducted to address all five research questions. The thirteen phenomenological themes that emerged from this analysis included: (1) Considering audience before posting and establishing boundaries (RQ1); (2) Maintaining consistency between online and offline identities (RQ1); (3) Mediating conversations about race (RQ2); (4) Recognizing privilege and responsibility to stand up for others (RQ2); (5) Experiencing frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a heightened sense of awareness in online environments (RQ2 and RQ3); (6) Feeling a sense of urgency to enact change or using your voice in beneficial and appropriate ways online (RQ2 and RQ3); (7) Membership in social media communities can contribute to positive identity development (RQ3); (8) Aiming to understand and adopt alternative perspectives (RQ3); (9) Discussing race in the classroom is enlightening, yet also difficult and intense (RQ4); (10) Believing it is important for all college students to understand the concept of colorblindness (RQ4); (11) Benefits and challenges of implementing a racial literacy curriculum (RQ4); (12) Minority and White emerging adults perceiving the racial climate at their university in starkly contrasting ways (RQ5); and (13) White emerging adults are often “nervous of saying the wrong thing” in conversations about race, while Black emerging adults recognize that “we all have to deal with race” (RQ5). These themes are presented in this section in order of the research questions as listed above, first for a combined analysis of the interview and focus group responses followed by an analysis of the social media posts.

Interview and Focus Group Responses

Theme 1: Considering audience before posting and establishing boundaries. Across the board, participants (cases 1-3) discussed how they consider their social media audience
before posting online. They displayed an awareness of the impact their social media posts might have on those who read them as well as how their words or actions online might be interpreted by others. Being considerate in social media contexts was the top priority for the majority of participants. Some of them also spoke directly about the importance of establishing boundaries in their interactions online.

When responding to a question about how he governs himself on social media, Nathan (case 2) said, “I try not to just post things without really thinking about how it’s gonna be perceived. Part of that is because tone can be difficult to convey [online], so…I try to be thoughtful about how it might be interpreted differently.” He also talked about how it was important to decide whether he had “enough experience” or the “authority” to speak on certain matters on social media and to think about whether his “opinion really matters” in a given context. In terms of exactly what he is posting, he stated that it needs to be important to him personally and meaningful as well as relevant or something his “wide acquaintance circle might be interested in.” Joanne (case 2) placed value on how people were viewing her and judging her behavior on social media. She gave the example that “if there are 30 people that are reading it,” whatever you post can affect “how they view you after that.”

Laura (case 2) spoke of how she only shares posts about things she feels like she understands and would feel “comfortable” having a “live conversation” about. Additionally, in terms of posting photos of herself online, she tries to be “cognizant” that many women (like her) have body image issues, and she tries to be a “positive role model” for her online audience. Laura discussed how her posts online have changed as she has undergone identity development over the years. Now, she thinks about what she is posting and how much she really needs to share about her personal life with her audience online. She stated, “I’m trying to recognize that I
have boundaries…right now I’m trying to focus more on myself…so it’s kind of like a balance of that, and because of that, like, there is more of an avoidance of social media, too.” She has even blocked or deleted people on social media that she thought would be “toxic” to her presence online. Laura, much like other participants, has learned how to establish boundaries in terms of posting about her personal life, and she knows when to avoid social media entirely.

Similarly, Naomi (case 1) talked about how she now thinks about who her audience will be before she posts about her feelings on social media. Framing her response around personal responsibility, she stated:

I feel that that’s where the control and responsibility has to come in…one thing that I definitely think about before I post on social media [is] who’s gonna see this? What is the level of permanence that this feeling has? Is it so pertinent and so poignant that I need to let the world in on something that I may not want anybody to know about?

In addition to asking herself these particular questions before she posts anything, she also spoke of “being cognizant of what you release to the world” and understanding that “there’s a difference between writing all the things you think down in your diary and putting them on the internet.”

Sofia (case 3) declared that she will just put things out there on social media to test the waters and leave it up to her audience to decide how to take it or not to acknowledge it at all if they so desire: “I guess when I’m posting…it’s kind of like…I’m gonna share this informational video with you. You take it any way you want to, and you can move on with your life if you don’t want to do something about it.” On the other hand, Isabella (case 3) acknowledged that she does not feel as comfortable posting online, particularly in terms of creating original posts, because the large audience on social media can be intimidating. She admitted that she finds it
difficult to make herself vulnerable in an online context and will think many times before releasing something to her social media audience: “I have a harder time knowing what to say, and just because, like, I don’t know how to open up to everyone on the internet.”

**Theme 2: Maintaining consistency between online and offline identities.** All participants (cases 1-3) spoke of how they maintain consistency between their online and offline identities. Most of the participants also indicated that their identity development offline paralleled their identity development online.

Sofia (case 3) discussed how she would behave the same way and “talk about the same things” online and offline. She stated, “I think I treat them both simultaneously because…they’re both part of each other’s world…things I do online don’t differ from things I do in my real life.” Anthony (case 1) conveyed a similar sentiment: “I am the exact same person online as I am offline. If I would not say it to your face, I wouldn’t post it online.” Isabella (case 3) repeated Anthony’s point using nearly the same language: “[If] I were to post it on social media, I would say it in person. If I don’t say something in person, I wouldn’t say that on social media either.” Naomi (case 1) addressed how she pays attention to the posts or ideas she “likes” or shares on social media: “I watch the…kind of things, even the ideas that I like or retweet because whether I said it or not, it’s still a reflection of something that I agree with or something that I endorse.” In her opinion, the way she views the world and how she behaves offline and online are “kinda one and the same.” She stated, “I try to be intentional [in] making my online presence…congruent [with] my actual life,” and later in the interview she reiterated, “I try not to just be an activist, you know, an Angela Davis head [sic] all the time online, but I do try to keep a balance of…what actually moves me online and offline.”
Rizana (case 3) spoke a bit more specifically about aspects of her personality offline reflecting online: “[At] times, I can be friendly and other times I’m a little bit more sheltered, but that reflects in both online/offline [environments].” She spoke about how she initially felt more confident and able to talk to people online instead of in person, but has been able to “find the balance” recently. Hence, certain aspects of her offline identity are reflected online, parallel identities as it were. Similarly, Sofia (case 3) talked about how, as she became “a more assertive person in [her] own life,” she “became more assertive online.” She continued, “Because I used to use zero social media at all, and I was kind of passive and didn’t care much for it. So, now I kind of still have that balance where…I can either be passive or assertive [online].” Sofia indicated that when she feels really strongly about something online, she will share or comment, displaying the assertive side of her personality, but that other times, when she is feeling more passive offline, she will simply glance over posts on social media without reacting or responding.

Laura (case 2) indicated that her online and offline identities were “similar, but not identical” and that, as she became “less social in the real world,” she became “less social on social media as well,” so that specific part of her identity was “mirrored” from the offline world to the online world. Thinking back on her behavior online over the years, Laura stated:

I do [now] think specifically about what I am posting, and that is something that has evolved over the years. Like, at first, as a teenager, I would just…it wasn’t terrible, but…I would post whiny things or just that I had a bad day, but now I kind of try to…it’s personal, to share necessities and, like I said, if it’s something that I have an opinion on, only if I feel like it’s something I feel like I can further speak to.
As seen in Laura’s words, her identity development offline paralleled her identity development online, and modifying her behavior online was a gradual process as she matured offline. Naomi (case 1) also spoke about her maturity offline reflecting online:

For example, when I was younger and a lot of my friends were younger, we would post a lot of what we were feeling at the time on social media, and as an adult, you realize that’s kinda corny…So, there’s kinda a shift, you know, when you go from adolescence to adulthood where you say…it’s not necessarily everyone’s business to know exactly what I’m feeling at that particular moment, and I think that is something that’s rather new in my moral fiber is this kind of privacy and confidentiality…and I think that is…something I’m always thinking about because social media is such an impulse, so as soon as we go through something, we want to talk about it, post a picture, or send some innuendo [sic] out there that’s gonna get the attention of the person that we’re, you know, in our emotions over [sic].

Trevor (case 2) talked about this shift in displaying his identity online in a slightly different way. When reflecting on how he interacted online in the past, he stated, “I definitely had a different identity on the internet. It was definitely a completely distinct identity where I could be literally anyone on the internet. I think, over time, it became, like, more me.” Considering how that change happened, he said, “I think that probably came from just confidence of who I am…just, like, knowing who I am as a person, and that made me, like, I guess that started to combine the two.” Trevor explained this overlap in his identities offline and online as a direct result of his maturity and comfort in his own skin.

Nathan (case 2) discussed how different online media platforms have dictated his behavior and portrayal of his identity online:
[In] some times of my life when I’ve used, like, been on the internet more and played games and stuff that were kind of socially oriented, I would usually take great liberties to just kind of create whatever character I wanted because it was, like, more fictional, but when it comes to social media, I don’t really see much of a distinction.

Nathan was one of the few participants who voluntarily shared his experiences in online contexts other than social media. The fact that he believes there is not much of a distinction between his offline and online identities on social media, in particular, reflects a phenomenon that appears in the literature known as an “anchored” or “onymous” relationship, as opposed to an anonymous one, and unlike anonymous settings (e.g., online games) “in which individuals feel free to be whatever they want to be, the nonymous environment places constraints on the freedom of identity claims” (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1818). The anchoring, in the case of social media (e.g., Facebook) accounts, comes from an identifiable link between the profile page and the true identity of the internet user (i.e., the creator or owner of the profile) that holds that particular individual responsible for what they display or how they behave in that online environment (Zhao et al., 2008).

**Theme 3: Mediating conversations about race.** Across the board (cases 1-3), participants indicated that they viewed the internet as a “chaotic” and lawless environment with “no established rules” or ethical codes of conduct. The lack of “face-to-face” interaction was also mentioned several times in terms of difficulties in identifying tone and intention. This led to participants experiencing roadblocks in trying to have productive conversations about race online, and they conveyed how sometimes anger is the only outcome. White participants (case 2) consistently saw their role in conversations about race online as a sort of intermediary, assessing the level of conflict and determining whether it was worthwhile or safe to step in to deescalate a
situation or to offer their opinion. Black and other minority participants (cases 1 and 3), however, either took on the role of educator/liaison or arbiter/referee in these conversations.

Trevor (case 2) spoke most directly about taking on the role of mediator in race-related conversations on social media. He addressed how he uses a diplomatic stance, promoting perspective-taking and reflection:

So, if there is a race-related issue and it’s going a certain way that is, like, spiraling downwards…I might actually say something. I might be, like, it’s usually not on the topic, it’s more like mediating, kind of…it’s more like…I [implore] you to read what they said and think about it or, like…you guys are arguing for nothing.

Similarly, Nathan (case 2) conveyed how he often acts as a mediator in conversations about race on social media:

[If] I see someone in maybe an argument and I feel like I can provide a helpful way of thinking about something that would maybe clarify something…if I see people arguing, especially if I notice inconsistencies or maybe they’re miscommunicating, like, they’re mischaracterizing the person, I might kind of step in and be like, oh, I think this person is trying to say this. I like to try to sort of, like, step in and facilitate things.

While Nathan spoke of actively engaging in race-related conversations on social media, he also admitted that he only does so if he feels like his voice will be heard and it would be possible to make an impact. He saw his role in these conversations as a mediator, particularly if he notices some type of miscommunication or inconsistencies. If someone is being misjudged, he tries to step in and act as a facilitator to help clarify things to the best of his ability. Much like Trevor, if the individuals involved in the conversation already seem to be angry and closed-minded, he
tends to avoid engaging because he does not want to waste his energy on what will likely be a futile endeavor.

On the other hand, Rizana (case 3) saw her role differently as that of an educator or liaison in conversations about race and religion on social media. She conveyed the need to explain her perspective or speak on behalf of her fellow Muslims, particularly after a string of terrorist attacks:

I’m Muslim…I wear the scarf…because of that, I felt the need to kind of reach out to all my [Instagram] followers, and…I was just kind of like explaining my side of it, kind of like I obviously don’t agree with this because not all of the people on there are Muslim, like they don’t completely understand.

Isabella (case 3) saw her role in conversations about race on social media as more of a referee with the moral high ground, stopping short of engaging in arguments. She stated:

I will…comment on someone’s post whether I agree with them or not just because if I feel like I need to call them out, I will, but I won’t, like, go into a full argument…I just call them out, and they try to start sometimes, I stop. I’m like, you know you did wrong. I’m just gonna leave it there.

This sentiment was echoed by Naomi (case 1) who said, “I do think we have a social responsibility to…at least put the other person in check.” If she feels compelled to enter a conversation about race on social media, she will “respond or add [her] two cents on the situation for other people to take heed.”

**Theme 4: Recognizing privilege and responsibility to stand up for others.** Nearly all participants (cases 1-3), especially White participants (case 2), recognized their privilege and responsibility to stand up for others on social media. However, Black/minority participants
(cases 1 and 3) often expressed concerns regarding their safety in their online interactions, which dictated whether to intervene in instances of cyberbullying or heated conversations about race on social media.

Trevor (case 2) framed his response to a question about whether he would stand up for people who are not family or friends on social media with a statement regarding his white privilege:

I think, depending on a person’s privilege, they have a responsibility to stand up for people who are more oppressed, so because I’m [a] mostly white male, I do have a lot of privilege, I’m gonna stand up. I think that I do have a responsibility to stand up for people who might be marginalized.

Joanne (case 2) also referenced white privilege in her response: “I’m White. I don’t always have a place to really speak about [race-related issues] on my own. What I can really do is…take what others say and learn from that and listen to what people of color are saying.” In identifying her position of privilege, Joanne recognized that it is important to first provide a platform for people of color to voice their concerns in order to learn how she might be useful in the fight against racial injustice, or in her own words, using her “place of privilege” to “help others” who are “less privileged.” Additionally, she indicated that, even though it would be easy to just “scroll past” a cyberbullying incident and not “think about it” or take any responsibility for it, she thinks individuals do have a responsibility to stand up for people who are not family or friends on social media, “to do what you know is right even if you don’t directly know the person…especially if you want to be considered a moral person.” Minority participants also believed that individuals who are privileged or have an advantage in society have the responsibility to stand up for people who are not family or friends on social media. For example, Isabella (case 3) spoke of the
necessity for intervening in instances of cyberbullying if you are able to do so: “No one deserves to be belittled by others, so…like, if you have the advantage or the privilege to be able to stand up to someone, you should.”

Laura (case 2) was the only White participant who spoke openly about deflecting responsibility, or being unable to identify how to intervene in either a cyberbullying incident or in a racial altercation on social media:

I would have to say that the responsibility again is, like…ok, individuals have to stand up for others…that individual, I think, has the responsibility to stand up whenever they feel like they’re an expert in what is being bullied at [sic], so…umm…maybe say…I don’t know, so, let’s say that there was some sort of microracial bullying [sic] that maybe I wouldn’t recognize, not being in that space, but someone else who could recognize that better and would better know how to stand up might have more responsibility in that case.

In Laura’s opinion, an individual’s responsibility to intervene online is proportionate to the degree of expertise (or experience) he or she has on a particular topic (or in a particular space). Here, she gave the example of cyberbullying involving microaggressions that she might not necessarily recognize as a White individual.

Personal safety in online interactions was a primary concern for most Black/minority participants. Only one participant, Sofia (case 3), indicated that it would be “easier to step in” to act and react, either to criticize or to intervene, on social media than in person because of her petite stature, which has prevented her from entering arguments in person as a matter of physical safety. All other minority participants indicated that they constantly have to consider their safety before interacting with others in online spaces.
For example, Isabella (case 3) spoke about the need to “feel safe” before posting on social media. Similarly, Rizana (case 3) discussed engaging in self-protective behavior in race-related conversations online: “I would first look at the other comments and be, like, is this something that I wanna comment on, as in, like, if it’s something that people will start attacking me for it, then…I’m just gonna avoid it.” Naomi (case 1) first talked about safety in the desire to “establish forums for your own environment, so that you can have some security where you are, you know, in the real world versus the cyber world.” She later stated, in relation to social media conversations about race: “I’m not the type of person where I want to put myself in danger trying to…be a crusader for everybody…So, that’s the only thing with the cyberbullying for a complete stranger is…I don’t know…what parties are behind that conversation.” Anthony (case 1) spoke about his fear of posting something on social media that could be misinterpreted or put him or others in a position of danger:

So, when I post on social media, I post with a purpose…last Halloween…I was going as the Black Panther, but I was going as a specific comic book variant where Black Panther was holding guns, and I made a Facebook post saying, hey…this is my Halloween costume, however, I can’t use the guns and have a complete outfit because I have a fear of being shot by the police…I referenced Tamir Rice and said if this 12-year-old kid…playing in the park with one toy gun…was killed in twelve seconds, how fast is a six-foot 20-year-old black guy gonna get shot who’s holding two?…It’s a scary thought, so…I made sure that I posted that just to make certain that people were aware…You know, if someone who is a person of color like me wanted to…have a gun as part of their cosplay…I just want them to be careful…to make certain that they don’t put themselves in the position where…they could have their life taken by the hands of police.
Anthony’s true to life fear of being shot by the police was the most direct indication by any of the Black/minority participants about feeling unsafe or “at risk” on social media. The topic of police brutality and its intersection with online spaces reemerged in comments made by a few other participants (cases 1-3) as well.

Safety took on a slightly different meaning for White participants, namely the need to protect their “own health” by not wasting energy on unproductive conversations. For Nathan (case 2), the “severity of the conflict” on social media would dictate whether or not he would “jump in and rescue” someone who was being harassed or was the target of rude or hateful comments. He specifically spoke of the need to “know the context” of a situation before intervening, particularly if it appears hostile, because it is important not to “make assumptions” or “waste energy” on angry or closed-minded people. For Laura (case 2), it was also important to assess the “severity” of a situation online before intervening. While she admitted she does not see many race-related posts show up on her Facebook newsfeed, when she does, she generally avoids engaging with them to protect her “own health” because she feels “very strongly” about race-related issues, and she finds it “exhausting” to deal with people who are ignorant or do not support “the equality of humans,” which she sees as “unethical” and nonsensical.

**Theme 5: Experiencing frustration, emotional exhaustion, and a heightened sense of awareness in online environments.** Frustration and emotional exhaustion were common sentiments among the participants (cases 1-3), particularly in their experiences with race-related issues and encountering ignorance online. The type of frustration and exhaustion they experienced, however, was tied to their race as well as their unique, personal relationships with social media.
Anthony (case 1) conveyed his strong sense of frustration with people ranting on social media and a genuine desire for action instead of just talk:

I know when to speak. I know when not to speak…’cause I know that a lot of people love to take to social media, love to go on these social [media] rants…I tend not to do that…Because…personally, I’m a little tired of talking…I’m tired of talking about these issues, and I think it’s time for more action than talking…So, last semester, I did a lot of talking…Talk, talk, a lot of different places, but…I’ve been trying to stay away from that because I just want some action…to see where we go this time.

Anthony’s words are particularly telling in terms of his perspective on the usefulness of social media engagement and hashtag activism. In his opinion, posting online is only helpful insofar as it promotes change offline. Additionally, it was clear from his comments throughout the interview that his emotional exhaustion was a product of “racial battle fatigue,” or the psychological, physiological, and emotional symptoms experienced by people of color who are exposed to persistent racial discrimination and/or microaggressions resulting from living in mundane extreme racist environments (Smith, 2004; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006).

Sofia (case 3) had a different perspective on the matter, considering posting or sharing content on social media to be legitimate activism. She stated, “So, a lot of complaints that people have are…oh, all you’re doing is tweeting or posting about it and then you’re not doing anything…but I think even if that’s all you’re doing, you’re still doing something.” While she recognized that it can be “really frustrating where you feel like no one is doing anything” when they are simply posting on social media, she also believed that it is quite possible that “these are the same people 50 years ago that still wouldn’t have been doing anything.” Additionally, Sofia spoke about the experience of being on social media as generally “frustrating” in that you can
only control what you are posting and your comments on other people’s posts online, not the social media environment itself. She specifically discussed becoming frustrated with the double-life of certain friends, who feel like there is a distinction between their online life (“social media life”) and their offline life (“social life”), justifying their refusal to discuss things in a meaningful way by not wanting to “damage their social life by talking about these issues,” which she simply did not understand.

Nathan (case 2) talked about being “upset” and “frustrated” by race-related comments on social media, “never [as] the victim,” but because people are “perpetuating a stereotype” or “justifying racism” and “recirculating” racist ideas online. Similarly, Laura (case 2) spoke of how she shares or re-posts content about social justice issues on social media because she feels “it’s so obvious that we should be socially just that it almost makes [her] a little frustrated or angry.” In her opinion, it is “exhausting to deal with someone who doesn’t agree” that we should all have equal opportunities.

Another type of frustration experienced by some participants in online environments was related to the narrative of “alternative facts” and “fake news” circulating in the current political climate. Other participants focused, instead, on the need to use logic and evidence to challenge ignorance. There was an overarching sentiment of accessibility to information on the internet and social media providing a means to connect with the outside world. However, participants also spoke of the need to “be aware” of the impact of what they post on social media and what they see posted by others.

According to Anthony (case 1), the notion that “facts” have taken on a new meaning dissociated from a scientific basis is not only alarming and perplexing, but also impacts his identity as a scientist:
I believe, with the election of the new president…people have become emboldened about saying more backwards ideas and thoughts online and on social media, and apparently now with this whole…what is it? Post-fact era? [incredulous tone]…Right, yeah, so…with the emergence of alternative facts and this post-fact era, you know…we’re now starting [to] talk about…ideas and opinions that aren’t based in facts, but yet, we still must validate them even though they aren’t based in facts…So, this is just a thing that we’re just gonna have to deal with where the facts don’t matter anymore, and for me, as a scientist, that’s a problem because my world is based in facts. [frustrated tone]

For Laura (case 2), the emergence of “fake news” and the prevalence of re-posted content on social media has led her to become “cynical” and “skeptical” of what she sees online. She stated, “I don’t wanna be another young person that falls for things, so I’m trying to be careful.” Naomi (case 1) lamented the ignorance and disillusionment she sees on social media. She spoke of how it is “very surprising that in the age of information, when you can literally look up anything, people are selectively ignorant” and how “they want to have all these opinions, but have no basis, have no education, and it’s just like…it’s so accessible…just educate yourself.”

On the other hand, Nathan (case 2) recognized that social media is a “convenient” space that makes it easy for people to participate. He spoke of how it is always worth a shot to engage in conversations online when you are equipped with enough facts and you can argue your points logically. Isabella (case 3) addressed how social media is useful in making people “aware of the issues going on.” She pointed out that there are certain important issues, including racial issues, that do not get traditional media coverage sometimes because they are controversial or politically charged. These are exactly the kinds of issues that are now readily and often immediately accessible to the public via social media posts. Isabella also talked about social media being “a
way to spread the word…it’s a way to get people thinking, and that’s what you need. You need people to question things.” Similarly, Joanne (case 2) viewed social media as an effective way to tune in to “different voices,” making her “more aware of what’s going on” around her and outside of her “own little bubble.” Lastly, in terms of awareness being central to online interactions and behaving in a moral or ethical way when using social media, Naomi (case 1) stated, “I think it’s being cognizant of what you release to the world…be mindful of the things that you say and the kind of energy that you’re broadcasting to the world. I think that that’s how you show your moral fiber on social media.” Joanne (case 2) agreed that she tries her best to “be aware” of what she is posting online and whether it could “hurt someone” or cause a “negative impact.”

**Theme 6: Feeling a sense of urgency to enact change or using your voice in beneficial and appropriate ways online.** White participants (case 2), in particular, conveyed feeling a sense of urgency to enact change. Nearly all participants (cases 1-3), however, spoke of using their voices in beneficial and appropriate ways to make an impact online and to encourage action offline.

In response to a question about whether race-related comments on social media affected him, Trevor (case 2) stated, “So, yeah, it does affect me…I think I act, and I already think I am acting, but, I mean, most of the time I just wanna do more anyways.” Joanne (case 2) brought up a similar sentiment when she responded to a follow-up question about exactly what it was about seeing race-related comments on social media that made her want to act: “I guess just realizing and recognizing that there are people that don’t have it always as good as you do, and…the idea of wanting to change that, wanting to help those around you.”
Nathan (case 2) spoke in the most detail and most eloquently about feeling a sense of urgency to enact change. In reflecting on his membership in Students for a Democratic Society, he stated, “[The] reason that I participate…is because it’s important to me to voice my opinions…think of the things that I want to see changed in society, and find ways to take action…instead of relying on…a top-down type of change to happen.” Through comments like this, it became apparent that Nathan was committed to activism, perhaps more so than all the other White emerging adults in the study. He saw social media as a humbling reminder of his relatively insignificant place in the grand scheme of things, expressing a desire to learn more about race-related (and other) issues and to be more politically engaged. In his own words:

It’s pretty much I use Facebook just as it is, and…it’s kind of like a constant reminder [that] there’s so much going on in the world that I’m not aware of. I’m always like…whether it’s about race or it’s something else, like, some scientific discovery or anything, or any time someone posts something, I just start to think, oh, man, there’s so much going on…I’m missing…there’s so much that I’m not even aware of, and it just makes me wanna, like, know all of the things…It’s not so much information overload. It’s a lot of…becoming interested and learning more, and a lot of it is kind of a feeling of inadequacy. I feel like I’m not as aware as I should be.

Nathan also spoke about feeling like he is “lagging behind” his peers when they are “talking about political issues and they’re making all these assumptions based on stuff they [already] know.” He continued, “I’m always catching up on what’s going on. I feel like my view is so small, and there’s so much that I don’t know.”

For Laura (case 2), her membership in social media communities makes her feel “overwhelmed by the state of the world” and like she is “not acting enough.” In trying to
establish boundaries recently in order to focus more on herself, “looking on social media makes [her] feel guilty for making that choice.” She stated, “I wish I was more active on Twitter, and I’m not, and I feel like that is more of a political space than Facebook or Instagram, which is what I use more.” Seeing race-related comments on social media does prompt a desire to take action, yet the action feels inadequate, or in her own words, “it makes me want to act, but I don’t feel like I am.” She reiterated, “I am acting, but that doesn’t feel like acting, like protesting or writing to my congress people feels like acting.”

Some participants (cases 2 and 3) talked about using their voices on social media in beneficial ways that could help promote change by encouraging action offline. According to Sofia (case 3), “race issues are definitely included in the things that [she will] share and try to make people informed about,” first on social media and then also in person. Isabella (case 3) spoke of engaging in social justice issues on social media because of the broader audience she can reach in doing so since the people she “interact[s] with on a daily basis are not necessarily the people on [her] social media.” She sees social media as a “way to spread the word” and “get people thinking.” In her opinion, it is important to get people to “question things” and not just take them at face value. Responding to a question regarding whether she felt it was important to engage in race-related issues on social media, Isabella said, “I think it’s very important. I think it can make people uncomfortable, but sometimes that’s what’s needed to make a change.” While Nathan (case 2) recognized the value in using social media to engage in conversations about race, he mentioned, “I don’t usually just comment on a post to agree with it...I don’t really feel like my voice is needed in that way.” Instead, he felt like he could make more of a difference if he were to use his voice to either clarify certain points or to spread the word about particular issues, especially about issues that he would like to “see changed in society.” He also declared
that he follows up on this by finding “ways to take action” offline in order to be on the front lines of social change.

Other participants (cases 1 and 3) focused more on using their voices in appropriate ways to interact with others on social media and to gauge the tension or climate before offering their opinion or attempting to redirect the conversation. For example, Anthony (case 1) stated, “I would say…make certain that your actions on social media are appropriate to the environment…you’re trying to create.” In his opinion, it is important to “exercise temperance” online: “I mind my own business, and I tend to keep my mouth shut…So, I tend to keep my opinions to myself. I tend not to run off at the mouth.” Naomi (case 1) also spoke about using judgment and consideration when interacting in social media environments in a slightly different way: “So, every time a person logs in and gets on the computer, the goal should not be to find somebody to go attack or find a group of people to attack.” Rizana (case 3) talked about the potential danger of offending or insulting someone and how she is careful and considerate when engaging in race-related conversations on social media:

I think it is important because that is a way to communicate with people all over the world, but there needs to be a proper way for people to communicate because you don’t wanna be accidentally offending someone…so, it is important, but do it in the right manner.

In these comments, Anthony and Rizana reveal a notion of protection, whether by participating in self-protective behavior or attempting to protect others on social media. Similarly, Naomi extends this idea of protection by honing in on the idea of being responsible for one’s behaviors online and providing support for someone who may be feeling attacked rather than being part of the problem by attacking people online.
Theme 7: Membership in social media communities can contribute to positive identity development. Membership in certain social media communities has contributed to positive identity development for some of the participants (cases 1-3). Specifically, it has provided them with a sense of belonging, comfort, and freedom to just be themselves.

Anthony (case 1) spoke at length about his membership in a particular Facebook group, which he credited with being pivotal in his identity development:

So, I’m really proud to be a part of this one Facebook group. It’s called ‘Extraordinary Journey of a Black Nerd Group’…I absolutely love it because it’s a bunch of African American nerds in one place talking about nerd things…And it’s amazing. We talk about comic books, video games, anime, cartoons, superheroes, and what not, and it’s…just wonderful. I love the community…it’s hilarious. People throw shade, and people joke each other. It’s just a great place…yeah, and how that shapes the world I live in…I mean, it just…it makes me more comfortable to be who I am…because I know that I can flow in many different groups, but I feel like being a Black nerd and being in that group just kind of says, ok, you are allowed to be you.

This segment of the interview was when Anthony really came alive and expressed his personality. It was apparent that being a part of this social media community gave him much joy and a sense of purpose. Similarly, Isabella (case 3) thought of her campus organization’s Facebook group page as a space for like-minded individuals, which promotes a sense of trust in her community and gives them all the freedom to post on the group page without consulting each other first. Interestingly, she only seemed to view this in a positive light, as a online community space that promotes collaboration, not as a “siló” or “echo chamber” where the same opinions and posts get circulated and re-circulated. Trevor (case 2) also brought up the positive side to
belonging in social media communities in that they increase exposure to what is going on in the world and have the effect of prompting him to “get out and do something.” He spoke of how social media has been instrumental in helping him develop his identity as an activist.

**Theme 8: Aiming to understand and adopt alternative perspectives.** Across the board, participants (cases 1-3) discussed how they aim to understand and even, in some instances, to adopt alternative perspectives through their interactions online and offline. This particular mindset has been found to be linked with moral identity (Colby & Damon, 1992).

Sofia (case 3) spoke about appreciating and enjoying the variety of perspectives available on social media. Specifically, she discussed how the social media environment allowed her to have a “good understanding of what everybody’s perspective is and all the information behind it.” Similarly, Rizana (case 3) believed her membership in social media communities gave her a window into experiences of people around the world and allowed her to understand different perspectives:

> I would see…my family in Pakistan and how their life is different…also, there’s many different Instagram accounts like Humans of New York and…there’s Muslims of the World, too, and things like that [offer a] different perspective on many different things.

Joanne (case 2) also talked about how her membership in social media communities has led her to expand her horizons, to see beyond her own personal bubble, to be exposed to and to value “different perspectives” and how “interactions between those perspectives happen” as well as to “appreciate diversity a lot more.” For her, perspective-taking is an endeavor that is closely linked with morality: “I think a big aspect of being a moral person…is being able to listen to those that are different than you and understand their struggles, their point of views [sic], being able to, I guess, stand up for them.” When speaking about engaging with race-related issues online, Joanne
focused on the importance of listening and learning from “what people of color are saying,”
instead of inserting herself into these conversations without proper context.

Laura (case 2) expressed a similar sentiment: “I like to be perceived as someone that
won’t blatantly put someone down or object to someone without first trying to understand their
perspective.” Anthony (case 1) also spoke about the importance of perspective-taking: “I
definitely make an honest effort to understand people where they’re at. I might not understand
their exact scenario, but I at least try to get an understanding of where they’re coming from.” He
continued, “I’ve always been able to…kind of visualize myself in another person’s shoes, and so
that really gives me a way to…kind of understand their point of view and not be disrespectful.”
Treating others with respect and dignity in online situations was a key component of social
media interactions for these social justice-oriented emerging adults.

No participant spoke in greater detail about understanding and adopting alternative
perspectives than Nathan (case 2). He indicated that his primary goal in engaging in
conversations, whether they be online or offline, was to learn and grow as a person and to help
the other person learn and grow as well:

I want to become stronger and…I want my views to be stronger, and I want to be better at
arguing my views and adjusting them based on learning new perspectives. I want to be
able to challenge someone whose views I perceive as wrong and either bring them to an
understanding of my view or maybe I understand their view better and I actually change
what I believe.

In another segment of the interview, he also stated that “if there’s some kind of actual argument
based on logic, then I think it’s productive because at least one person in the conversation will
have progressed intellectually.” Here, Nathan epitomizes moral exemplar behavior through
perspective-taking (Colby & Damon, 1992), which will be discussed further in the “Application of Theoretical Frameworks” section.

Theme 9: Discussing race in the classroom is enlightening, yet also difficult and intense. All focus group participants (cases 1-3) addressed how discussing race in the classroom, while it can be a rare occurrence for some, has been an enlightening endeavor and an opportunity to explore intersectionality. At the same time, they noted that these conversations were often difficult, intense, and emotionally exhausting.

Trevor (case 2) had the least experience discussing race in the context of his courses, having “only talked about race in [his] women and gender studies class” and when he was in an “African American studies class for a couple of days.” On the other hand, Naomi (case 1) mentioned several classes in which she had discussed race, having “taken the opportunity to explore most of the race-related classes on campus” given that much of her program of studies has focused on social psychology. She spoke in detail about a course she took called “Race and Interdependence” with a curriculum that addressed “the interdependence [of] race [and] education, jobs, even interactions,” which was presented as a “dyad between two people from two different [racial] groups and what happens in those interactions.”

Nathan (case 2) mentioned discussing race in two rather different course contexts, the first being an African American literature course, which he took for a diversity requirement, and the second being a sociology course called Food and Society, in which race has “come up every once in a while…how it relates to poverty or inequality in the food system or…environmental racism with food production,” which was eye-opening for him in terms of the “intersectional” discussions they had. Laura (case 2) also addressed how a required course was the context in which she was able to discuss race in the classroom: “Yeah, actually, surprisingly…I live in the
ecological village] this semester, and I was required to take a 1-credit class…it was just once a week, and we had a whole class dedicated to talking about race and privilege.” In Isabella’s (case 3) experience, she was placed in a required introductory course based on her ethnic background:

So, when I was a freshman in [the college], if when you’re applying, you put any sort of thing about being multicultural, they automatically put you in this specific class, and it’s like some introduction to [the college], but it’s just, like, a place where you can be with other multicultural students in [the college], and it was really intense because a lot of people would voice their opinions about how they didn’t really feel comfortable in [the college] itself and how some people…well, they wouldn’t actually…experience it, but they would overhear certain things from other students, and it was, like, I don’t know. It was really hard. [sighs]

In another segment of the focus group session, participants (cases 1 and 2) shared their responses to social media post #7 (see Figure 7) from the individual interviews, in which a student mentioned how her professor asked whether people in the class agreed with #BlackLivesMatter or #AllLivesMatter and included her response to it on Twitter. Laura (case 2) initiated the conversation by reading what she wrote in her comment on the post: “Well, for this one…I said, thank you @ that lady, thanked her for doing that ’cause it’s not always easy to talk about, especially in front of a bunch of people…and I, personally, think it’s appropriate to talk about in the classroom…because it’s something that people are experiencing.” Trevor (case 2) agreed with Laura, sharing his own comment and then stating, “I think it would be a good discussion…for any class, probably.” Naomi (case 1) picked up from here by sharing her response to the post and adding some nuance to the focus group conversation:
And so…kinda the same thing that I said with the All Lives Matter thing is that it’s just a counter…it’s just a devil's advocate play. You know…you say “right.” I say “left.” You go up. I go down. And it’s just, like, what you’re doing…you’re not protecting a cause. There was no initiative because if all lives really mattered…it wouldn’t be a reactionary movement. You know what I mean? You wouldn’t have to react to Black Lives Matter if all lives mattered in the first place. You could just advocate for that. Just like, you know, unfortunately everything that people have to pick [sic] for, is a reaction to some sort of oppression, whether it’s women’s issues or anything else, but it’s just, like, [sighs] do I think that the professor…I think it really does depend on the class though…the way the professor just kinda asked, like, “Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter”? [matter of fact tone]. Like, you know, you could’ve got [sic] somebody beat up, you know, doing something like that if it wasn’t in the right context.

In response to whether it would be appropriate or useful to have a conversation about race like the one mentioned in social media post #7 in a high school setting as opposed to a college setting, Laura said, “Yeah, it would be way impactful in high school, but it’s like the ethics of that.” Naomi agreed: “Because you’re used to dealing with, you know, these kids are wards of their parents. They’re not adults, so just some consent issues there with that kinda thing. Even though they’re old enough to have an opinion on that, but I think that’s kinda when you overstep the boundaries of…you know…the parents.”

**Theme 10: Believing it is important for all college students to understand the concept of colorblindness.** Nearly all focus group participants (cases 1-3) weighed in on colorblindness, believing it to be important for all college students to understand it as a concept and to recognize its various facets and manifestations. According to Trevor (case 2), while there
are “a lot of bad things about it, and there might be a subtle, like, maybe it’s a good thing, but it’s more important that people understand the whole idea behind it, not just one side.” Isabella (case 3) agreed that “colorblindness is a thing,” but she did not think of it as “something necessarily positive.” She elaborated on her reasoning for this: “It’s important to acknowledge culture. It’s important to acknowledge certain characteristics of a person, and to just say that they’re the same doesn’t give them justice.”

Naomi’s (case 1) perspective was that all college students should be educated about colorblindness, particularly given that some of them may never have even been exposed to diverse groups of people before entering college:

I think it is vital that college students understand colorblindness…for the simple fact that a lot of us coming out of high school were products of our environment. So, wherever you were raised…that may have been all of the exposure you had to different cultures or the same culture based on your neighborhood, but college, it’s any and everybody from any and everywhere. So, for some people, this may be the first time they’re seeing Black students, you know, Asian students, multiracial students. For other people, this may not be very new to them, but I think that everybody should kind of have a baseline understanding that the older you get and the more exposure you have to the world, the more likely it is you’re gonna run into people that don’t look like you. So, you have to be mindful of…the social dynamics that are at play, good and bad. So, to be aware that colorblindness exists will help other people not, you know, exhibit it or use it when they’re dealing with people of other races.
Nathan (case 2) spoke of how he thought many people “have kind of arrived at colorblindness as a very shallow solution to racism,” deciding they are going to “try to ignore race and that way they can avoid being racist.” He continued, discussing colorblindness in the college context:

I think when you’re in college, that’s where a lot of your development as becoming an adult in the “real world” happens, and so I think it’s important to realize that that is a thing, but that it’s not a very good solution, like, it’s a very superficial solution, and to be able to progress beyond that while you’re still in a learning environment and your goal is to develop and learn, not just to be, like, in the work force, I guess.

In Nathan’s opinion, emerging adulthood is the appropriate time to examine and challenge colorblind beliefs because it is a phase, free from responsibilities of the “real world,” when individuals can really reflect on who they want to be and what exactly they stand for, to learn and grow instead of just going through the motions of everyday life.

In terms of including colorblindness in college course curricula, Trevor indicated that it would be challenging, particularly in the context of certain courses or disciplines:

I think it’s important, definitely…I don’t know…’cause I’ve taken a lot of science classes, so I could see it being kinda difficult to incorporate that in the curriculum. I mean, I could see how you could, but I definitely think it’s important to kind of challenge colorblind perspectives and highlight race relations because it is an issue. There are some issues in STEM regarding both of that [sic] as well…but yeah, overall, I think definitely that should be something that is considered in doing a curriculum.

Here, Trevor is attempting to take both sides (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). It is possible that he may actually have been influenced in some way by the focus group setting to try to add the perspective of another participant onto his own views.
**Theme 11: Benefits and challenges of implementing a racial literacy curriculum.**

Nearly all focus group participants believed that having a racial literacy curriculum would be beneficial and “more impactful than anything else” in learning to deal with the “social dynamic of college.” However, White participants (case 2) also spoke about how it would be challenging to implement and, therefore, would have to be well-taught, with content that is developmentally appropriate, realistic, and “representative,” not “euphemistic,” as well as pedagogy that uses good examples and meaningful analysis to truly make an impact.

Discussing the potential benefits of a racial literacy curriculum, Nathan (case 2) talked about how such content would be particularly useful if it could be integrated into the curricula of courses college students would already be taking, either for area requirements or otherwise:

There’s a lot of things that are important to know about, but college students just don’t have time to educate themselves, but if it was something they could do as a class, that would be a way to incorporate it into their learning ’cause, like, I think that the African American literature class that I took [in my] first or second semester here, was very eye-opening. It was just a wide range of perspectives from different historical periods and just a lot of new information that I probably would’ve wanted to learn about independently just by doing my own research, but…I probably wouldn’t have just because I wouldn’t have had time, but because I was taking it as a class and I had homework assignments and it was kinda reinforced, I had the opportunity to spend a lot of time learning about it. While Trevor (case 2) agreed that having a racial literacy curriculum would be important, he also brought up some of the challenges in implementing it, including the difficulty of integrating racial literacy in certain courses, such as science classes.
According to Laura (case 2), having a racial literacy curriculum would, “in theory be really amazing for students to have experience with,” but she was “just a little hesitant just on the quality of the content that could be given.” She continued:

They would need to get, definitely, the proper educators or else…’cause, you know, I’ve been in some general education classes here and at my former school before I transferred, and it just is kinda disheartening to see something so important be undervalued by some students because it’s required, so I don’t know the solution around that, but, you know, that being said, just because that might be an issue doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be teaching it, but it’s just something I’m conscious of always.

Laura gave the example of AlcoholEdu at her former university, which was paired with a one-time class for entering freshmen that was led by older students:

It was just so widely ineffective because…the older students didn’t take it seriously at all, like, ‘We know y’all wanna get outta here.’ Like, ‘Whatever, these adults want us to talk about alcohol.’ And so that just totally took the power away from it, and I think that could make it really powerful if you get the right students, but I think that would be easier to do at this [sic] than with alcohol.

Lastly, Nathan spoke about how it would be necessary to “make sure the educator was teaching it well…that it was well put together and everything.”

In terms of the role social media could play in a racial literacy curriculum, some focus group participants thought that it could be helpful in taking a “non-textbook, non-scripted approach” in an academic setting that would be “eye-opening” and “jarring” if the discussion was facilitated properly by asking “critical questions.” Others questioned either the effectiveness of incorporating social media itself or using an online medium to teach racial literacy. However,
they all agreed that having a “mandatory” introduction to the “effects of social media” as a guide for incoming students would be a “smart” idea.

Isabella (case 3) pointed out that “social media would help” facilitate discussion if integrated into a racial literacy curriculum. She referred back to the social media posts presented during the individual interview phase of this study:

Like you did, you would show us certain posts about people and, like, yes, people say certain things, but not everyone is aware of what’s out there, and to make them see that all these posts are being made, it’s kind of like…there are people that actually think that. It’s also eye-opening because if they somehow have ever agreed with some part of it, they’re like…is that really how others feel about what I say?

Laura (case 2) agreed with Isabella, following up by asking, “Who’s the main demographic on social media in general?” and responding, “It’s people our age, and creating this almost…for lack of a better term…army of people that can help educate in this non-formal [sic] way through asking the proper questions and confronting people…when they’re not being racially literate. I just think that that’s really cool.”

Naomi (case 1) spoke from her experience on the first day of class when the professor asked why they were taking her course:

Some kids were like…I mean, it’s a general education course, like, I’m just taking it to [fulfill a requirement]…and I’m like [frustrated tone]…they’re not even aware that it’s Black psychology. There are Black students in here. You know what I’m saying? They’re not even thinking that that could possibly be offensive…and so, I think that…if a professor just posts these [social media] posts [the] first day of class and goes, “How does this make you feel?” Taking that non-textbook, non-scripted approach to something
that...everything’s already scripted...you know, our textbooks are already framed to
display a certain thing. So, if we did integrate that kind of curriculum, it would do a lot of
justice to put it back in the faces of our generation and go...this is the kind of stuff that
you project. How does it make you feel? Are you uncomfortable being in a room full of
people that you might be offending? You know, so I think that that definitely would be
very jarring and get people really, actually, actively educate them rather than them just
trying to take a test, pass a quiz, that kind of thing.

Trevor had his doubts about integrating social media: “So, you’re saying...have, like, social
media, things like this in the curriculum of a course, like, pop up on screen, and then you talk
about them?” To which Naomi responded that, if you really want to educate students about racial
literacy, “it wouldn’t do anything to be euphemistic about it” or to “sugarcoat it.” She continued:
People kind of wanna water down racial issues, and what I got from what [Isabella] was
kind of promoting was that this doesn’t need to be watered down if it ever was created.
You would have to find a way to get people’s attention so that they would actually have
to actively try to respond to situations differently rather than just going, ok, this is how
you treat people ’cause you should already know how to treat people, but we don’t. You
know what I mean?

However, Trevor was still skeptical saying, “Yeah, I just don’t see that as being effective”
because, in his opinion, social media is a platform where you can “say anything,” and he just
could not see a “class curriculum including that...because a lot of people don’t take [social
media] seriously anyway.” On the other hand, he did believe that, if social media could be
integrated properly, it would facilitate discussion at least for “those who are interested.” Overall,
he found it difficult to understand the role that social media might play.
Nathan shared his thoughts on tips for including social media in a racial literacy curriculum:

It would be important to…not just [pick] up anything that…happens to have…someone [saying] something racist on Twitter…but, like, what is it about this that makes it representative of our culture…So, like, (1) selecting really good examples from social media, and then (2) presenting them with some kind of analysis, not just being like oh, here’s a post, what do you think about it?…I mean, maybe initially, but following that up with…depending on the class…like if it was a sociology class…a sociological response or analysis of it. If it was, like, a psychology class, then the psychological sort of perspective on it, but having some kind of analysis, not just presenting it to the students and be like, alright, you decide amongst yourselves what this means and why it’s important, but, like, kind of facilitating it, not just kind of including it without any added content.

Laura also thought this could be effective in terms of social media posts being “paired with a reading or an academic video or something.” While Trevor continued to be skeptical and believed there “wouldn’t really be a shock factor” because “everyone is well aware of what happens on social media,” he did say he agreed with Nathan that having more than just a random Twitter post, perhaps from an “influential person on Twitter,” or a post that had received many “likes” or “favorites” would be “a lot more concrete and…easier to facilitate.”

When asked how they might integrate social media into a racial literacy curriculum if they wanted it to work well, Naomi shared the following response:

I mean, I think the same way professors in the past have used textbook readings, photographs…it’s just a different medium to present. So, you can still present it
academically…blur names [and] any identifiers, but just look at what was said…So, I think…if you were to integrate social media posts, you would do it much the same way…with an analysis…asking, you know, critical questions. Why is this ok? Why do we engage in these behaviors? Because we don’t say these things to each other. We don’t walk around and, you know, have the guts to say a lot of the derogatory things that we say online to people’s faces.

Trevor offered his own suggestion of what he thought might work, combining a few ideas that had already been discussed in the focus group session:

There could be a mandatory…kind of introduction to the damages or the effects of social media ’cause [the university] had an experience with a couple of social media…instances where there was obvious racism behind…Internet doors…And a way I could see, like, this might not be effective, but just having an intro to potential harm that social media can cause and, like, what you say is, like…think before saying and…kind of like a little course on that.

Naomi and Nathan agreed with Trevor that incorporating some type of social media safety or “etiquette” into a racial literacy curriculum could be effective and “smart,” particularly if it was presented as a sort of “guide to using social media responsibly.” According to Trevor, this might work best for incoming freshmen at the beginning of the school year, potentially in the form of “a short video” that would be “mandatory,” and even though “they might not get anything from it…at least they’ll see…they’ll visually know…see what’s happening or listen.” Specifically, Trevor thought this introduction to the effects of social media might include examples of “social media in the past that has been damaging and then testimonies from people who have been affected by it, like, the human factor like [Laura and Naomi] were talking about.”
In terms of using an online module as the means of presenting a racial literacy curriculum, Laura said she thought it was “a bad idea.” Isabella chimed in with “well, online…if it’s required and they don’t care about it, they’re just gonna put random stuff…and then finish it and be over with [it]. They need to actually be forced to discuss it and think about it.” Naomi shared her own experience with an online introductory course she took that taught her and other freshmen things like how to “make a schedule, plan out your week [and] resume writing,” but “nothing about how to deal with the social dynamic of college, which is probably more impactful than anything else because we [already] know how to do homework.” She continued, saying that what many students do not know how to do when they first enter college is “interact as adults without the buffer of administrators and principals and teachers and parents.” So, while she felt like it was necessary to teach students more about these particular things, “doing a module where people are just clicking through” is not the way to do so. Referring to the AlcoholEdu online module that was required for all students to complete, Naomi said:

It was just long and irritating and…kind of cheesy…they could’ve given that to third graders. It was just…cookie cutter and soft. It wasn’t impactful, you know…so, you weren’t like, oh, let me really think about my behaviors going forward. So, if you do wanna do something like that, it may help to give college students…we’re young adults, give us some actual reality. Don’t just kinda go…hey, it’s bad to drink…try not to drink.

You know, ’cause…you’re just gonna ignore that.

Trevor agreed with Naomi saying that, although an online module could theoretically “have a different impact than AlcoholEdu,” it might be best not to use this as the delivery method given that you could just “go through it” without giving it much thought. Lastly, Laura shared some
tips on how an online module could potentially work, even though she would not necessarily recommend it, based on another experience she had with a sexual assault education module:

I had to take that, and I actually was a lot more impressed with that…the videos were, like, so well done…and the two hosts were…just really well-spoken and interesting and human. They were really sensitive, and a lot of what they were saying was targeting the audience. Like, they gave a scenario, and it was like, if you’re walking by two young boys and they’re rating women as they walk by, it is your responsibility to talk to them. I know it might sound like it’s not a big deal, but…you are going to break this up, bit by bit, and just, like…that made me feel more important and like I had more power. So, that one [module] was kind of more effective.

Similar to what they stated in the individual interviews, some focus group participants indicated that a lack of face-to-face interaction on social media creates a sense of distance that impacts how people behave online and how they are perceived by others. They believed that implementing a racial literacy curriculum effectively would mean “adding the human perspective” by having the course in a physical classroom space. This way, students would have to engage with social media posts critically with “emotional pressures” around them rather than being a “Twitter gangster” or just saying whatever they wanted to online without any consequences.

In response to a comment earlier on in the focus group session by Trevor (case 2) regarding the lack of a “shock factor” given that most emerging adults have seen just about everything on social media, Laura (case 2) retorted with “the thing about social media is it’s so isolated…and individualized, and [a] ‘shock factor’ I feel like, could be [included] by adding the human perspective because there will be other people in the room with you” and you will have to
“think really critically about these things that [you] just want to ignore.” She referenced an example from her own experience in an online English class in which the students had to address how they felt about the freedom of speech, particularly on Twitter, and having to read her fellow students’ responses and comment on them led her to realize that “other people aren’t ok with this as well, but we’re just complacent, and just seeing…other people’s emotions on these things was eye-opening.”

Naomi (case 1) agreed with Laura that, in order to truly be effective, any attempt at having a racial literacy curriculum should be in the context of an in-person course, rather than an online one. According to Naomi, “it is different when you are in the classroom setting.” She gave the example of reading a book about the murder of a young Black veteran for her Race and Interdependence class:

That’s a very jarring book for Black people, White people, anyone…you know, because it makes it real. It happened [here], and it happened in the ’70s, you know, and so…the issues with that…we had to write reaction papers to it and read them aloud in class. So…when you can see people in the classroom, and you can see how they’re affected by something, it’s different than when you can just kind of [say] whatever you wanna say [online], and you don’t have anyone to answer to. You don’t have any…emotional pressures around you. It’s just you and the computer…So, what happens when you have to look at it, answer to it, and deal with, you know, face-to-face contact. That’s a whole different paradigm versus just this kind of…online presence of just responding to somebody’s post that you’ve never even seen before.

Other participants appeared to concur with Naomi and Laura in this regard.
Most of the focus group participants (cases 1-3) were either unfamiliar with or struggled to define racial literacy, but they agreed that it involves having a working knowledge of “different people’s backgrounds” and reading “social cues” to guide their behavior in interracial social situations, in other words, having a sense of “cultural competency.” Laura (case 2) and Trevor (case 2) both indicated that they had not heard the term “racial literacy” before. Isabella (case 3) was also unsure of exactly what “racial literacy” meant, but she offered a possible definition: “Maybe, like, how to speak to someone about their culture or their race without offending them? Without making any, like, weird comments?” Trevor also ventured a guess: “I could see it more as, like, reading literature by other races or, like, by a lot of races, or just having…just like, I guess, scholarly experience with different [sorts] of literature.” Naomi (case 1) appeared to be most knowledgeable about the concept. Having become acquainted with racial literacy in one of her social psychology courses, she offered the following explanation:

I think it’s kind of synonymous with cultural competency…So, being racially literate…the same way you read situations, you’re reading how to, you know, the nonverbal cues and the social cues of racial interactions. So, when you’re dealing with people…it’s ok to acknowledge that this is a person of a different race and that there are [sic] certain decorum that you might want to be mindful of when interacting with someone of a different race. Not that you act on stereotype, but just having enough knowledge of different people’s backgrounds to know how to behave in social situations with them.

Naomi’s definition aligned closely with that of Howard Stevenson (2014), who described racial literacy as “the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful social interactions” (p. 4).
Theme 12: Minority and White emerging adults perceiving the racial climate at their university in starkly contrasting ways. All focus group participants acknowledged that the racial climate is tense on a national level, as reflected in social media posts they encountered in this study and otherwise. However, Black/minority (cases 1 and 3) and White (case 2) participants perceived the racial climate at their university in starkly contrasting ways, painting a picture of a campus where some White students do not think that there are “really any problems” and other White students are “missing the point,” choosing to “stay in their own little bubble,” while Black/minority students feel ignored, unsafe, and threatened.

While Nathan (case 2) said he could not “really speak to any specific examples,” he offered the following three-level categorization based on his own experiences and interactions with White friends, family, and acquaintances:

You have the people who are actively racist…and the type of people who would maybe harass someone or make racist jokes to their friends when they think no one is noticing, and then there’s the people who are victims of racism because they’re not White, and then there’s what I would call complacent White people, who are not really actively going out of their way to express racism, but they’re not really aware of the racism that other people are experiencing because maybe they don’t really talk to anyone that experiences it. So, I think it would be important…for people in the category of complacent White people to try harder to listen to people in the category of victims of racism so that they…are more able to engage with and confront people in the category of actively racist.

Nathan also initiated discussion of racial climate at the university in the focus group session by offering the perspective of his White peers on campus:
I think a lot of my friends…who go here, they would probably be like…well, I don’t think that there’s [sic] really any problems. They think that there’s maybe some racist people, like, out there somewhere…in some other place, but they don’t really think there’s any problems because they don’t experience it, and they don’t really talk to anyone who does, so they just don’t know.

Isabella (case 3) portrayed an image of a very different campus environment, primarily from the perspective of her Hispanic peers:

Everyone’s just really tense and scared. Well, not everyone, but people of color are scared. This is our school. We’re supposed to be able to be here, but not everyone feels safe, and the school is actually not doing anything to protect people…there are students that are being harassed. [At an event] hosted by the Latinx organization…we brought up a lot of the things that have happened, like people being spit on, things being written [on the sidewalk], people being yelled at for just walking…how do you feel safe being where you’re supposed to be and where you wanted to go when…racist people, people full of hate, are trying to attack you because of the way that you look? I don’t know.

From the way Isabella described the racial climate, race relations appeared to be in dire circumstances at the university and minority students were legitimately scared for their safety and well-being.

Both Isabella and Naomi (case 1) indicated that they perceive the level of ignorance on campus to be “very high” and that comments from some of their White peers addressing racial climate are often insensitive and do not “make sense.” They also both spoke of feeling overlooked and silenced. Specifically, Naomi stated, “You know, a lot of brown people get ignored on campus…people walk past us a lot, and they don’t say anything. They don’t look in
our direction.” She continued, saying that “human contact is very important,” so “even just looking people in their eye [sic] when you’re talking to them, like, it’s that kind of stuff that let’s people know this person doesn’t even know me, but they respect me as a human being.”

Responding to a question about social media and racial issues on campus, all focus group participants were familiar with a particular racist social media incident that occurred on their university campus. When asked to elaborate, Naomi (case 1) referenced the weak administrative response to the incident, a “passive video” that was also posted on social media, which ended up negatively impacting the racial climate on campus. In Naomi’s words, “Telling everybody that…‘hey, this sucks, but that’s their first amendment right’ was not the right move at all because it totally silenced the…thousands of students that felt threatened, felt uncomfortable, felt upset…and it protected the two or three students that…acted irresponsibly.”

Addressing the university president’s response to the social media incident, Naomi said, “He was so gung ho about responding properly that he did not respond effectively.” She continued:

I actually had the privilege of going to a…round table [discussion where] he was a guest…we were all kinda sitting student, administrator, student, administrator, and he came and sat next to me. We actually had to talk about it…and him [sic] and I were having a conversation about it, and I told him, I said, hey, we’re a sports school…so, if you know anything about sports, you know that if the ball is in your court, you can run the shot clock out, meaning that when that post got volleyed on social media, you could’ve held off your response until you could think of the appropriate thing to say…And so, his whole kinda demeanor was like…you know, you’re right…and I was just like, you have to be mindful that you’re…you are the face of the university. You run
the university…all students pay tuition…you can’t tell…this 5 or 6% that they don’t matter because your 85-90%, you know, a couple people in that population felt the need to say some really ridiculous things. And so, social media kinda put [the university] with their foot in their mouth a little bit just because he felt that he had to respond quickly.

In Naomi’s opinion, these days “everything is so instant” that people “always feel like they have to be a first responder,” but it is important to “still take your human time before you address something via social media because once it’s out there, it’s out there, and it’s no way [sic] to, you know, come back from it…It’s no way to alter it.” The video response that was posted in haste by the president of the university led to “people [being] horribly offended,” and according to Naomi, “social media kind of hit [the university] twice…in a negative way when it came to the issue itself and the handling of it.”

Unfortunately, the response from the administration led to some Black and minority students questioning their place at the university. Naomi spoke about feeling this way in detail:

    So, for me, [this] was the first time I kinda looked at [the university] like…what about all that inclusion and diversity…that you guys advertise on your pretty pamphlets, you know, with multicultural students. What about all of the things that you say? Because even the responses from upper administration were in defense of the people who said it and not the people who were affected by it. So…that really…it tainted my vision of the school that I had been attending, you know, for three years prior to that. It was just like…what are we doing here?

This feeling of not entirely belonging in both online and offline contexts was echoed by other Black and minority participants in the study.
Reflecting on the thoughts she shared when asked to speak at both a town hall meeting and at a protest that followed the social media incident on campus, Naomi stated, “I didn’t even think that things like that were… I figured they were talked about, but I didn’t think that people were still so irresponsible…and so careless in their own behaviors that something like that could get out to social media.” Naomi also spoke candidly about reactions to the protest on campus:

So, when I saw it and everything kinda after that even with, you know, us trying to protest and trying to speak and people kind of walking through the protest and then taking down our signs and putting up other signs. You know, it was just kinda like…you’re missing the point…one thing that I said in my speech during the die-in that we had was that…if this demonstration makes you uncomfortable, it should, and it shouldn’t make you uncomfortable because you’re tired of hearing about it. It should make you uncomfortable because people are dead…there are people that go to your school that look just like the people that are in the ground, and if you can’t understand why that is hurting people, I feel bad for you. But it seems that they could understand because of their rebuttal…if you had a Black Lives Matter [poster] and somebody rips it down…and puts up [a] Blue Lives Matter [poster]…you understand something, you know.

Naomi’s portrayal of the campus racial climate from a very personal perspective was emotionally charged and laced with a disappointed, indignant tone, rather different from the way Nathan described the racial climate using a distant perspective, nearly removing himself entirely from the description.

**Theme 13: White emerging adults are often “nervous of saying the wrong thing” in conversations about race, while Black emerging adults recognize that “we all have to deal**
with race.” While White focus group participants struggled with being “nervous of saying the wrong thing” in conversations about race and had the perception that “no one really thinks about how racist they are” or “if there’s racism” and whether “they’ll experience it” in college, Black and minority participants recognized that “we all have to deal with race” and that college students lack “competency” in interactions with people of other races. They believed college students should be taught to be “mindful” of the “social dynamics that are at play” when they “run into people that don’t look like [them].”

According to Trevor (case 2), while alcohol is “kinda expected” in college, “racism isn’t.” He clarified, “Well, just, everyone has the idea, like, you go to college, you’re gonna drink. I mean, where everyone is drinking, which is true in a way…but, like, no one really thinks about how racist they are or, like, if there’s racism or if they’ll experience it.” Laura (case 2) admitted that, as a White emerging adult, it can sometimes be “easier to ignore” race-related issues or even brush off racism. She stated, “I don’t really feel super racially literate, and I am really nervous of saying the wrong thing, which I know, like, you’re just supposed to get over that.”

From Naomi’s (case 1) perspective, incorporating racial literacy in the college curriculum would be one way to address the nervousness that White students, in particular, may feel in their interactions with students of other races:

I kind of feel like if you have to take two gym classes to graduate…you should probably take a racial literacy class to graduate…the classes that nobody wants to take, you have to take them, but instead of making us take gym…you know, if you wanna go exercise, you can exercise. There’s not really a learning curve with that, but given that we all have to deal with race…I think it’s…so many people have no competency whatsoever when it
comes to dealing with anyone outside of their group, so I feel like they should kinda swap out, you know, the cross-training for maybe some cultural competency.

White focus group participants (case 2) spoke about either feeling a sense of urgency to make a substantial difference through their actions or struggling to fight complacency and discomfort. On the other hand, Black participants (case 1) talked about how White students could be allies in the fight against racism simply by showing up to social justice events, promoting awareness, and practicing what they preach. In Naomi’s (case 1) words, being an ally begins with “common decency.”

Nathan (case 2) talked about many White people he knows who are unaware of “what’s going on ‘cause they’re kind of in their own circle of, like, just White people and people who don’t experience racism, and it’s not that they’re necessarily going out of their way to be racist, but they just are complacent and uneducated.” He lamented the fact that they choose to “stay in their own little bubble” and “don’t really know what’s going on” when they “could be using their voices to bring more awareness to the issues.” In response to Nathan’s comments, Laura (case 2) admitted that she has been somewhat complacent when it comes to race-related issues, which has prevented her from “immersing” herself in different cultures:

I keep saying, oh, I’m gonna go to events at, like, the African American Student Center, but then…there’s just enough of a blockage to make me not go. And, you know, the same thing happens with other events…concerning other things, but I don’t know how to properly incentivize people like me and other people to, go out and be more a part of that. This sentiment of not doing enough to be an activist and feeling somewhat guilty about it came up multiple times in Laura’s comments and seemed to constantly be on her mind, though perhaps
it was partly because she was in a setting (i.e., the focus group) where she was being prompted to think about it.

Naomi drew from her own experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, to address Laura and the other White participants in the focus group. She acknowledged that people often “don’t know what to say [or] what to do, and…sometimes they’re afraid,” and offered her own perspective: “I always kind of try to let people know that…we’re in America…Whiteness is normative, so when you look at people of other races, we just have to adapt. We are raised to just make a way, adapt, figure it out, and engage.” She followed up this statement with a suggestion: “If you are feeling like you don’t really know what to say, you don’t necessarily have to immerse yourself in the culture to feel like you can have an opinion or feel like you can make comments or…talk to other people.” Directly addressing Nathan and Laura’s statements regarding the choice some White people make to stay on the sidelines, ignore what is going on, and simply not engage, Naomi said, “I think sometimes the complacency that…you all talked about, it’s here…it’s in your face…We can’t ignore it…We live it. No matter how educated we are, no matter our socioeconomic status…we live it because we are brown people.” Naomi ended by offering her own opinion on how White students can be effective allies:

You just have to open your eyes, and that’s really it…we don’t necessarily need spokespeople. We need allies…the people that showed up to the protest, they weren’t trying to speak on the [sic] behalf of Black people…there’s enough Black people that can speak for themselves. There’s enough brown people that can advocate for themselves. What they did was they supported…if you feel that you can identify and understand what’s wrong, just be a face in the crowd, and people will notice it. They will respect it, and it will be a mutual understanding of we get it…I think some people want to…stand
on the mountain top, and…sound kinda like Martin Luther King, and it’s like…nobody’s expecting you to do that…[It’s] really just as simple as…show your face, smile at people, wave at people…you don’t have to be a race crusader to just show common decency, and I think that’s where the issue is…that people either do nothing or feel like they have to save the whole race, and there’s stuff in between.

Laura hesitantly agreed with Naomi’s comments: “Yeah. Even though, like, that can feel a little bit passive, but recognizing that [you’re still] making a difference?”

**Social Media Post Responses**

Phenomenological thematic content analysis of the series of social media posts presented to participants at the end of the individual interviews was conducted to provide further insight into the second research question: *How are emerging adults engaging in race-related conversations on social media?* These social media posts elicited responses ranging from complete agreement, acknowledgment, and affirmation to actively challenging the post to no response, hesitant agreement, or silent agreement with the posts. Five themes, in particular, were identified through this inductive analysis: (1) Promoting conversation and tolerance; (2) Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement; (3) Fighting back: outrage and call to action; (4) Questioning “All Lives Matter”; and (5) Challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation. The responses and accompanying phenomenological themes will be presented in conjunction with each of the eight social media posts below.

*Figure 1.* Social media post #1. Reprinted from Twitter, by Nish, 2016, Retrieved from https://twitter.com/bippyfingers/status/777538819994202113.
Theme 1: Promoting conversation and tolerance. The first theme that emerged in response to the first social media post (Figure 1) was that of promoting conversation and tolerance, primarily by suspending judgment and being open-minded. For example, Rizana (case 3) wrote, “Yeah, the BLM [Black Lives Matter] movement is important, but rather than completely judging someone on their stance on it, why not talk about your perspective and get them to understand?” Nathan’s (case 2) response to this post also indicated that he felt simply shutting someone down before hearing them out and attempting to understand their perspective would result in a missed opportunity: “What do you mean? While you’re not obligated to give anyone your time, I think there can be value in striking up a conversation with someone whose views you disagree with, if they’re willing to engage in a respectful dialogue.” Anthony (case 1) felt similarly: “It shouldn’t let you know whether to continue, it just lets you know where they stand. Keep talking.” Lastly, Joanne (case 2) reiterated these sentiments with a focus on promoting change and intellectual growth: “But how are you ever going to change their perception if you won’t even talk to them?”

Theme 2: Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The second theme that emerged in response to the first social media post centered on the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement. As Trevor (case 2) put it:

Black lives matter, although all lives do matter and are important equally, in light of recent events and the police brutality enforced on black communities for hundreds of years, black lives are relevant right now in media and movements. Black lives matter is a movement that emphasises [sic] black lives that are in jeopardy.

His response draws attention to the impact of systemic racism on Black communities as the impetus for the Black Lives Matter Movement. Laura (case 2) took a slightly different angle
when she wrote, “I’ll chime in that I think it’s more important to discuss that #BlackLivesMatter. Let’s continue a conversation about hundreds of years of systematically undervaluing a group of humans based on appearances.” While Laura clearly addresses the necessity and value of the Black Lives Matter Movement, her response indicates a surface level understanding of systemic racism that likely stems from her colorblindness and espousal of abstract liberal ideology. It is interesting to note that Laura focuses solely on “appearances” rather than considering intersectionality of any kind. Also, it us unclear what continuing a conversation might entail.

**Additional responses.** Other responses to the first social media post were either in agreement with the post or challenging it. As an example of the former, Isabella (case 3) wrote, “True. It’s important to know what kind of person you’re associating with.” Sofia’s (case 3) commentary provides an example of the latter: “A good follow up? “So, what’s your definition of feminism?” Finally, Naomi (case 3) also challenged the post, providing food for thought: “Hmm I get it, but what if a black person hits you with ‘AllLivesMatter’?”

**Figure 2.** Social media post #2. Reprinted from Twitter, by K. Padmore, 2016, Retrieved from https://twitter.com/KatPadmore/status/777621799987245056.

**Theme 3: Fighting back: outrage and call to action.** The first theme that emerged in response to the second social media post (Figure 2) was fighting back: outrage and call to action. This ranged from Naomi’s (case 1) succinct response of “Exactly!” to Isabella’s (case 3) commentary demanding reform: “This is why the Black Lives Matter movement is important. Things like this need to be stopped!” Rizana (case 3) expressed subdued anger and disillusionment in her observation, “Justice system is messed up.” Though it was probably not
her intention, Rizana’s words here can be seen as a commentary on colorblindness in the sense that our justice system is not actually “colorblind” as it claims to be (Gotanda, 1991). Sofia (case 3), on the other hand, responded with a blatantly accusatory tone: “It’s what you have to do when you’re an accomplice.”

**Additional responses.** Aside from responses conveying the theme above, Anthony (case 1) responded briefly in acknowledgment with “‘tis a scary reality we live in,” and Laura (case 2) responded with an explanation of sorts: “Unfortunately it happens when all we see is perpetual aggressive and violent imagery of young black men. I wish in media we could better see a more accurate and diverse depiction of this diverse population.” An analysis of Laura’s comment using a CRT lens appears in the “Application of Theoretical Frameworks” section later in this chapter. Lastly, there was no response from three White participants (i.e., Trevor, Joanne, and Nathan), and an additional statement of silent agreement from Nathan (case 2), who wrote the following message beneath the blank text box: “I agree but probably wouldn’t comment or reply.”

![Image of a poster with text: ALL LIVES MATTER]  
*Figure 3. Social media post #3. Reprinted from Twitter, by RyanO’polka, 2016, Retrieved from https://twitter.com/RyanOpolka/status/791243243245170855937*

**Theme 4: Questioning “All Lives Matter.”** The fourth theme that emerged in response to the third social media post (Figure 3) was questioning “All Lives Matter,” meaning that participants expressed some level of agreement with the sentiment behind “All Lives Matter,” however, they also pushed back to encourage the person who shared the Twitter post to reflect
on the meaning of those words in order to shine the spotlight on Black lives. Along these lines, Rizana (case 3) wrote, “All lives do indeed matter, but there’s a lot of prejudice against Blacks in current times, which is why BLM is so important.” Anthony (case 1) concurred: “I completely agree. Can you help me fight for the black lives?” Laura (case 2) took it a step further to offer additional social commentary: “Of course all lives matter! But isn’t it sad when on a daily basis a specific subset of those lives *cough* black lives *cough* is continuously villainized and undervalued?!” Nathan (case 2) had a slightly different approach, attempting to educate the person who posted about the meaning as well as the connotations of “All Lives Matter”:

You may not realize this, but when people say “All Lives Matter,” either they’re missing the point (the point being that, although all lives do matter, black lives are treated with less value, even though they should matter equally) or they’re actively striving to silence the outcry against racial inequality and injustice. I’d hope that’s not your goal here.

Here, Nathan was prompting the person who posted to question “All Lives Matter” as a response to “Black Lives Matter.” Some participants also made an effort to either expose the hypocrisy of people who post the statement “All Lives Matter” on social media or to point out the circumstances that contribute to its circulation online. As an example of the latter, Naomi (case 1) wrote, “Why is the natural instinct for the majority to counter any minority motion or initiative with a motion representing something that has never been threatened?” An example of the former was Sofia’s (case 3) comment, “All lives matter…Until immigrants are at your door seeking sanctuary.”

**Theme 2 (continued): Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement.** The second theme reemerged in response to the third social media post. As Isabella (case 3) put it, “The Black Lives Matter movement isn’t saying that all other lives don’t matter. It’s because black
lives haven’t been important to society that this movement was started in the first place.”

Similarly, Joanne (case 2) wrote, “The thing about #blacklivesmatter is that it’s not saying other lives don’t. It’s an attempt to bring to attention the way black men and women are unjustly treated by police.” Interestingly, Black participants (case 1) were the only ones who did not feel the need to explain the Black Lives Matter Movement in their responses to this post.

**Additional responses.** One White participant, Trevor (case 2), chose not to respond at all to this particular social media post. When prompted to explain why he did not respond, Trevor stated, “All Lives Matter, Black Lives Matter, White Lives Matter, I could, like, explain why Black Lives Matter, but…if there’s just a lot to really talk about, I can’t participate…it just wouldn’t be good [or] helpful.” This explanation indicated, once again, that Trevor saw his role on social media as one of mediation or trying to bring a conversation to some productive conclusion, and if he cannot figure out how to do so, he simply will not respond.

![Social media post #4.](https://www.facebook.com/search/str/sissy+richards+smith+%22i+challenge+everyone+to+boycott%22/stories)

*Figure 4.* Social media post #4. Reprinted from Facebook, by S. Smith, 2016, Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/search/str/sissy+richards+smith+%22i+challenge+everyone+to+boycott%22/stories-keyword/stories-public

**Theme 2 (continued): Importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement.** The second theme reemerged in response to the fourth social media post (Figure 4), specifically in defense of Kaepernick’s actions. All participants were familiar with Colin Kaepernick, a football player who has recently become a controversial figure because of his decision to use his platform to
protest racial injustice in the U.S. by taking a knee during the national anthem and, as this particular post shows, wearing a Black Panther Party shirt to a press conference. Rizana (case 3) demonstrated her defense of Kaepernick by invoking the first amendment: “He has the freedom to wear what he wants – freedom of speech.” Similarly, Trevor (case 2) backed Kaepernick’s rights as a citizen and also focused on the positive impact of his actions: “He’s also done a lot for the community though, I could see him as a hero. I think he’s just standing up for what he thinks is right. I also don’t think anyone would boycott NFL people love football girl!” Isabella (case 3) reiterated that Kaepernick has the right to do what he wants, including protesting and drawing attention to the Black Lives Matter Movement: “There’s nothing wrong with what he did. He’s just showing his beliefs. I bet things would be different if he was white. #blacklivesmatter.”

Along these lines, Nathan (case 2) pointed out that the commentary that was posted in addition to sharing the news story was more a reflection of the character of the person who posted it than Kaepernick’s character: “If Kaepernick’s actions make you uncomfortable or angry, maybe you should examine why oppressed people speaking out against the oppression they face upsets you, a white person unaffected by racial injustice.”

**Theme 5: Challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation.** The fifth theme, which emerged in response to the fourth social media post, was challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation. Anthony (case 1) responded with a simple question: “Could you please expand on your opinion?” On the other hand, Sofia (case 3) challenged the logic of the person who posted by referencing definitions of “racist” and “terrorist,” words that appeared in the post itself: “Definition of ‘racist’: a person who believes in racism, the doctrine that one’s own racial group is superior or that a particular racial group is inferior to the others. Definition of ‘terrorist’: a person who terrorizes or frightens others. Sorry, but what?” Nathan
(case 2) also pointed out flaws in the argument: “Advocating for racial justice doesn’t make you a racist. Criticizing a country doesn’t make you a terrorist. And publicly standing up for something you believe in doesn’t make you an idiot.” Laura (case 2) attempted to appeal directly to the sensibilities of the person who posted in her response: “Sissy, I challenge you to hear this ‘racist terrorist idiot’ speak about his experiences before using such hateful and inflammatory language.” She continued, referencing the hashtag #BoycotttheNFL used in the post, “Also, I agree, let’s protest the NFL for being the patriarchal and gladiator-type ‘non-profit’ that it is! Maybe Kaepernick can start a spin-off NFL.” While this was likely not what Sissy meant by the hashtag at the end of her post, Laura cleverly turned it around to serve her own purpose. Naomi (case 1) responded by challenging logic and demanding an explanation with an indignant tone coming out through the use of all caps in her writing: “Please explain to me how this BLACK MAN, standing up for the injustices of BLACK PEOPLE is racist? Oh because he should just be a good boy and entertain you?”

**Additional responses.** This social media post only engendered no response from one White participant, Joanne. When asked to explain her lack of response, Joanne (case 2) stated, “Because I couldn’t come [frustrated tone]’cause like I said earlier, when we were doing the questions, I don’t like to post anything particularly negative, and I just couldn’t come up with anything that wasn’t snippy…All of it was like how are you gonna call a Black person racist along…and, like, we have, like [frustrated tone], men that have been convicted of rape and abuse in the NFL…or accused…and they do nothing, and everyone’s up in arms about this guy whose kneeling and it’s ridiculous…is my personal opinion, but I had no way of conveying that without coming off as, like, you’re crazy!”
Theme 5 (continued): Challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation.

The fifth theme reemerged in response to the fifth social media post (Figure 5), this time with the variation of taking the post literally and challenging it. Laura’s (case 2) response exemplified this theme: “The asterisk is incorrect. These are not “restrictions” to all lives, but merely groups that we need to help to feel like they matter, because the world as a whole sure as hell works to make them feel like they don’t.” Elaborating on her response to this post at the end of the interview, Laura stated:

So, this one…they were implying that all lives don’t matter, that the lives of, like, some people, these…not these people matter [sic]. So, I wanted to point out to them that…this isn’t a restriction that they feel that it is, but these [people] in particular…have to be helped to feel like they matter because consistently they are made to feel undervalued and like they don’t exist, and I wish that this is something that this person could see.

When she was told that participants have actually interpreted this particular post in the opposite way as a sarcastic statement to imply that the groups of people after the asterisk with the disclaimer “some restrictions apply” are often ignored by those who post the statement “All Lives Matter” on social media, she responded with “Oh, wow,” but then came to understand how it could be interpreted that way.
**Additional responses.** Interestingly, unlike the other social media posts, most of the responses to this particular post were succinct affirmations that reflected agreement instead of responses that could be grouped into themes. This included Rizana’s (case 3) response, “True,” Naomi’s (case 1) response, “Seems legit!,” and Sofia’s (case 3) response, “Preach.” While Isabella (case 3) also agreed with the post, she wrote a longer commentary: “This just proves the point that those that say all lives matter are truly racist and don’t understand the issues.” Additionally, there was one ambiguous response from Anthony (case 1) who simply wrote, “*emoji eyes,*” while there was no response altogether from three White participants, Trevor, Nathan, and Joanne. Similar to his follow-up statements to other social media posts, Nathan (case 2) wrote beneath blank text box: “Probably wouldn’t react to or comment on this post.”

![Twitter post](https://twitter.com/StrawLivesMattr/status/882527857917927424)


**Theme 5 (continued): Challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation.**

Once again, the fifth theme reemerged in response to the sixth social media post (Figure 6), with participants not only challenging the logic of the person who posted, but also responding with sheer befuddlement over the person’s lack of sense. This ranged from Rizana’s (case 3) terse response, “What,” to Naomi’s (case 1) impassioned response, “You diss black lives matter and say blue lives matter, guess ALL lives don’t matter huh?” Sofia (case 3) took a slightly different angle in her response, focusing on the intention of the person who posted: “I hope this is satyr [sic]. If so, much applauded. If not… Someone please pour some bleach on me.” Sofia
corrected herself saying she meant “satire” instead of “satyr” during member checking. Lastly, Anthony (case 1) had two levels to his response. One tweet was written in the actual text box, “If all lives matter, that should include black lives too, right?” while the other, lengthier tweet was written below the text box:

You are wrong on two accounts [sic]. First, you are a hypocrite for rejecting #BlackLivesMatter and replacing it with #AllLivesMatter. If all lives actually matter, that includes black lives also. Second, you reject #BlackLivesMatter with #BlueLivesMatter, meaning that you actually don’t believe that all lives matter and that you have a problem with black lives, thus making you racist.

When asked at the end of his interview why he chose to respond this way, Anthony replied that this was actually one of the social media posts he would not have responded to if he had actually seen it on Twitter. In his follow-up remarks about why this was the case, he stated:

Because…see, the reason why I don’t comment is because I have a lot to say…And when I speak, I want to speak for a long time, and I want to speak with purpose…So, if I find that the energy that I’m putting in is not productive enough for the kind of output that I'm looking for, then I don't put the energy in…But if I thought that this was one of my close friends or, like, this was somebody who I could reach, then I would send that bottom one.

**Theme 3 (continued): Fighting back: outrage and call to action.** The third theme reemerged in response to the sixth social media post in terms of fighting back or putting the person who posted in check. For example, Isabella (case 3) wrote, “Not like that person wanted your follow anyway #blacklivesmatter,” and Laura (case 2) also pushed back with her commentary: “Bleach? Not the healthiest idea. Neither is your loud and unfounded opinion that
black lives don’t matter.” These two responses were the most confrontational and emotionally raw among all of the responses to this particular social media post.

Theme 1 (continued): Promoting conversation and tolerance. The first theme, promoting conversation and tolerance, reemerged in response to the sixth social media post and would again resurface in participants’ responses to the seventh and eighth social media posts. Joanne’s (case 2) words exemplified this theme: “Engaging in conversation with those you don’t agree with can allow both you and the other party to learn and grow. Ignoring those you don’t agree with will only worsen relations between the opposing sides.” For Joanne, this sentiment was paramount and could be seen as a thread throughout her interview and social media post responses.

Additional responses. Much like other social media posts, two White participants, Trevor and Nathan, chose not to respond. However, as he did for his other responses, Nathan (case 2) included an additional statement below the blank text box: “If I didn’t know the person, I wouldn’t bother responding. If I did, I’d ask them what point they were trying to make, before I made any response to their statements.”

Figure 7. Social media post #7. Reprinted from Twitter, by Vandalena & S. Bailey, 2016, Retrieved from https://twitter.com/iamSB3/status/790965563908558848 [Original post deleted]
Theme 5 (continued): Challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation.
The fifth theme reemerged in Rizana’s (case 3) response to the seventh social media post (Figure 7), which challenged the premise and motives of the person who posted: “I don’t think anyone using #AllLivesMatter is trying to purposely suppress the movement but rather don’t have a proper understanding of #BlackLivesMatter.” Rizana’s challenge here was qualitatively different from the challenges or explanations demanded by other participants in response to the social media posts in that she appeared to be defending the #AllLivesMatter supporter.

Theme 1 (continued): Promoting conversation and tolerance. Several participants responded to the seventh social media post with statements that were meant to support and encourage discussions of the hashtags #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter in the classroom. Trevor (case 2) wrote, “Sounds like a good discussion for class. What class was it?” While Trevor’s remark was intentionally neutral, Isabella’s (case 3) commentary revealed that her sympathies lie with the Black Lives Matter Movement: “I hope this discussion helped the professor and others better understand why it’s #blackslivesmatter and not #alllivesmatter.” Laura (case 2) also expressed her endorsement of the Black Lives Matter Movement: “@Vandii_M, thanks for speaking up and educating the class that #AllLivesMatter is only hurting the people who are perpetuating this nonsense, and that we need to be supportive of the BLM movement!” Unlike other participants, Anthony (case 1) specifically addressed morality in his response: “You are correct. Good job. Another good reply would have been that both hashtags are morally correct and now is the time to stand up for black lives.” By suggesting that both hashtags are “morally correct,” Anthony seeks to initiate the conversation from a place of acceptance and tolerance that will, hopefully, help guide All Lives Matter supporters to the realization that the current climate demands that we all “stand up for black lives.”
Additional responses. The remaining responses to this social media post expressed either complete agreement, hesitant agreement, or a sort of silent agreement. Joanne (case 2) simply stated, “Agreed!,” while Naomi (case 1) elaborated on her affirmative response: “Exactly, whole purpose not protecting white people, but rather telling black people they have no right to acknowledge their oppression separate from everyone else.” On the other hand, Sofia’s (case 3) response was one of tentative agreement: “Welp [sic] that was kind of inappropriate for your prof to ask but A+ response.” Lastly, Nathan (case 2) chose not to include a response in the text box, but wrote the following statement below it: “I would ‘like’ Vandalena’s comments but probably wouldn’t say anything.” By indicating that he would “like” the post without writing anything else, Nathan demonstrates the silent agreement that many social media users engage in when they respond to a post in this way.

Figure 8. Social media post #8. Reprinted from Twitter, by Gendi Parks, 2016, Retrieved from http://twitter.com/damnGERDiEhot/status/791011624496799744

Theme 1 (continued): Promoting conversation and tolerance. The final social media post (Figure 8) engendered responses that were aligned with the first theme either in terms of promoting conversation or promoting action in addition to conversation. Those that promoted conversation were rather brief, such as Anthony’s (case 1) one-word response of “Word” and Naomi’s (case 1) similarly succinct response, “Please don’t.” Interestingly, Laura and Joanne, both White participants, felt the need to add a bit more to their statements of affirmation. Laura (case 2) wrote, “And I hope that your voice is heard loud and proud!,” while Joanne (case 2) stated, “Agreed, talking about this is important!” Those that promoted action ranged from
rallying support, such as Trevor’s (case 2) comment “Props to you! Keep fighting!,” to Sofia’s (case 3) response including herself in the fight against racial injustice: “Good. And let’s make a pact to never stop acting, too.” Isabella also encouraged direct action through her response: “Even if it makes people uncomfortable, these issues need to be brought. We cannot expect change if no action is taken.”

**Additional responses.** Lastly, Rizana’s (case 3) response of “100% agree” to this social media post illustrated simple affirmation, and Nathan (case 2) chose, once again, to not respond in the text box itself, but rather beneath it with the following statement: “I would probably retweet this but not say anything in response.”
Application of Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical framework-based analysis of the data sources (i.e., interviews, focus group, and social media posts), applying the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity and Critical Race Theory (CRT), was conducted to address additional facets of all five research questions. The ten themes that emerged from this theoretical analysis included: (1) Restricted circle of moral regard and moral disengagement in online contexts (RQ1); (2) Perspectives on internalization of moral identity determined its role in guiding behavior on social media (RQ1); (3) Higher symbolization of moral identity, along with specific contextual factors, contributed to greater engagement with racial issues online (RQ1 and RQ2); (4) Moral self-consistency impacted how emerging adults engaged in activism offline and online (RQ1 and RQ3); (5) Being a moral person meant being color conscious instead of colorblind in interactions with people of different races (RQ1, RQ2, and RQ4); (6) While White emerging adults acknowledged that racism exists and impacts everyone, Black and minority emerging adults spoke about their own experiences corroborating racial realism (RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4); (7) Providing students with a systemic framework for understanding how race operates in a white-dominated society (RQ4); (8) Guiding students in identifying when and how colorblindness is being used in social media posts and giving them tools to challenge it effectively (RQ4); (9) Incorporating racial literacy as well as discussions about race and racism in the curriculum (RQ2 and RQ4); and (10) Students’ experiences with race-related incidents on social media affected their interactions with students of other races on campus (RQ3 and RQ5). These themes are presented below organized by theoretical framework in order of the research questions as listed above.

**Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity.** Data analysis based on social-cognitive coding began with a general consideration of factors impacting moral identity among emerging
adults (i.e., motives to behave morally as well as situational factors as moderators and the impact they have on the accessibility of moral identity), moral exemplar behavior, as well as the overall developmental impact of social media usage, which will be discussed jointly in this section. However, greater emphasis was placed on the moral identity concepts that were most relevant to the study and were identified more frequently in the data sources (i.e., circle of moral regard, disinhibition effect and moral disengagement online, internalization of moral identity, symbolization of moral identity, and moral self-consistency). Each of these concepts are discussed in-depth in conjunction with the themes presented in separate subsections below.

During the individual interviews, participants were asked what being a moral person meant to them, what they believed to be specific characteristics of moral people (i.e., to provide their own definition of morality), if they believed they embodied any of these characteristics, and whether they would consider morality to be integral to their everyday behavior and/or integral to their identities. In doing so, they also spoke of motives to behave morally. In terms of defining morality and characteristics of moral people, Black emerging adults in the study (case 1) spoke of “being a good person” as well as “telling the truth, being respectful, being kind, being generous” (Anthony) and having a “basic understanding of right and wrong” or a baseline of “how we should interact based on what we would want someone to do to us” even though morality is “somewhat contextual” (Naomi). Additionally, Naomi spoke of moral people as being “transparent,” “honest,” and willing to “admit to wrongdoing.” Most importantly, according to her, moral people “have boundaries,” a point she reiterated throughout the interview. Anthony brought up what he considered to be motives to behave morally; specifically, he believed in “doing the right thing when no one’s looking” or “when the opportunity is presenting itself” and, then, “when people are looking, you set a good example,” but not only
because “you feel obligated to do so.” Citing his own religious background as a Christian, he talked about living “by a code” and knowing that, when he dies, he will “have to stand before God and give a testament for everything” he has done and said. Along these lines, another motive he referenced for behaving morally was this knowledge of Judgment Day: “So, if I cannot stand before God and say, ‘Yes, I did that or yes, I said that,’ I probably shouldn’t be doing it.”

Anthony considered himself to be a moral person and spoke specifically about making an “honest effort to understand people where they’re at” or to understand “where they’re coming from.” As Anthony put it, “I’ve always been able to…kind of visualize myself in another person’s shoes, and so that really gives me a way to…kind of understand their point of view and not be disrespectful.” Naomi expressed a similar sentiment in describing moral characteristics that she believed she had: “I think I’m very well-intended, and I think that I try my best to be as forthcoming as possible.” When asked if he would consider morality to be integral to his everyday behavior and/or integral to his identity, Anthony indicated that, although he considered himself to have a “strong moral identity,” it is not because he has “moral dilemmas every day,” but rather when the issue of morality does surface, “it’s something [he has] to think about” in order to assess how he will respond in an appropriate manner. In response to the same question, Naomi replied, “It’s more subconscious. I feel that when I’m placed in certain situations, that’s when [morality] comes to the forefront.” She continued, “I think that part of my personality allows people to know kinda off gate [sic] where my boundaries are, what kind of person, in essence…they’re dealing with, so I think my moral fiber is pretty strong…and people can identify it.”
White emerging adults in the study (case 2) defined morality as being willing to “listen to those that are different than you and understand their struggles” (Joanne), “meeting everyone at the same level,” and “not treating them differently or allowing your unconscious biases to affect how you interact with [them]” (Laura). They also believed morality meant basing your actions on “rights and wrongs you learn as a child,” which often “transcend international boundaries” (Trevor) or on values that have gradually “developed” and can “evolve over time” as a result of life experiences (Nathan). Nathan’s statement, in particular, echoes the research findings of Kohlberg (1981) and Turiel (2006) mentioned in the literature review (see Chapter 2) regarding the evolution of moral thinking and decision-making over time as a result of formative experiences and social contexts.

Characteristics of moral people, according to White emerging adults, included “integrity” (Joanne), “empathy and compassion,” (Laura), doing “good deeds,” being caring, and “trying to not have a bias” (Trevor). Additionally, both Laura and Nathan specifically emphasized that moral people are “thoughtful” in their statements, conversations, and actions, “especially in situations where they think it’ll have an impact.” Nathan added that moral people also “try to base their decisions off [sic] what they believe is the morally superior choice.

Joanne indicated that she had a strong moral identity and spoke of doing her best to “be aware of situations going on in the world,” particularly racial and LGBT issues, advocating for these and other causes. Like Anthony (case 1), Joanne mentioned her religious upbringing as a primary motive to behave morally. She elaborated on the impact of her Christian principles on her behavior: “A lot of that affects my everyday life, the way I treat people, the way I talk to people. It’s something that I try to kind of, I guess, instill within myself…treat others with respect [and] dignity.” Trevor also spoke of religion as a motive to behave morally: “I know a lot
of my morals are from...a religious background, but are also because that was...what is known to be good.” Another motive to behave morally that he mentioned was his desire to become a doctor, to “sacrifice [himself] to help others.” Trevor attributed his strong moral identity to how he was raised by his mother, and he believed he “might be even a little more altruistic than...the base moral,” which entails going beyond simply being “good to [his] neighbor or other people.”

For Trevor, morality is integral to his everyday behavior in terms of factoring into nearly “every conversation” or “every interaction” he has, in trying not to stereotype people when he first meets them, and in his efforts to “stay very active in social issues and politics.” Though she admitted she is “not perfect” and also has “unconscious bias,” Laura believed she had an “extremely strong moral identity” because of her constant attempts to “recognize whenever [she does] have biased thoughts” and to “expect morality from others,” especially her friends. For Nathan, having an “underlying strong moral identity” did not mean morality was necessarily integral to his everyday behavior, but rather that “most of [his] life decisions” have been based on “what [he] think[s] is the right thing to do.”

According to emerging adults of other races (i.e., Hispanic, Asian, and multiracial) in the study (case 3), moral people have “values” and “standards” that they “don’t compromise” for any reason, “regardless of how it may affect [them]” (Isabella); they do “the right thing,” and when someone does “something wrong,” they “have that feeling in them” alerting them that all is not well, a moral compass of sorts (Rizana). In addition to being “good” people, they also “respect others’ morals without letting them interfere with their own values,” and they “always make sure that whatever [they’re] doing doesn’t harm others” (Sofia). Isabella and Sofia both brought up the point that moral people do not take advantage of others to benefit themselves, “for greed,” or “to move on in life.”
Sofia, who cites her years in Catholic school as a primary influence on her thoughts about morality, if not a direct motive to behave morally, spoke of morals being “fluid” and varying by society, meaning that “religions have their morals, cities have their morals, universities have their morals, and individuals each have their own moral code as well,” however, there is a “standard code of conduct across humanity, and that’s what you need to follow.” She did make a point of saying that she was not personally very religious and that “rather than religion establishing this conduct,” she believed “biology did,” which she explained in the following way: “You have clear morals of…if you kill, it’s gonna come back to you no matter what kind of person or animal you are.” This particular viewpoint appeared to be among her motives to behave morally, as was the notion that one should “respect everybody and love everybody” simply for the sake of doing so. When addressing how morality impacted her own identity, Sofia stated, “I guess one of the biggest things is because my morals are about benefitting others, I spend a lot of time volunteering.” This connection between having a strong moral identity and participating in community service or volunteering work was noted in the literature as well (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy, 2006; Pratt, Arnold, & Lawford, 2009).

Isabella indicated that morality is integral to her everyday behavior in terms of her role as a “student worker” and constantly having to “choose between taking the easy way out or actually genuinely putting in effort” into all of her tasks, including how she “[goes] about getting [her] grades.” She also spoke specifically about working at the cashier’s office: “I have access to all student accounts, and it’s…a lot of information, but I don’t, like, go and look up random people or certain people…and just try to find out everything about them.” For Isabella, having a strong moral identity entailed having a conscience that prevents her from doing anything questionable
or harmful to others as well as being trustworthy and loyal: “When someone is confident enough to tell me something, I don’t use it against them, or I don’t go and talk to other people about it.”

In discussing her moral identity, Rizana stated, “I would like to think that I’m a moral person…that I’m caring and helpful…[and] I make an effort to…be a good person.” She also brought up how morality informs her daily behavior:

Every day you’re going through different situations…whether it’s something as simple as, oh, there’s some trash on the ground, should I pick it up? Or, maybe something more serious where you have a friend in need, and you’re just constantly making decisions, so that would affect, like, just how you go about your everyday life.

For Rizana, motives to behave morally ranged from being environmentally conscious to being loyal and helpful to your friends.

In terms of assessing how situational factors impact the accessibility of moral identity and how they serve as moderators of moral identity on moral behaviors, participants were asked to consider the social media context versus the face-to-face (real world) context in relation to bullying (i.e., immoral behavior) as well as constructive engagement in race-related conversations (i.e., moral behavior) online versus offline. Many of the participants (cases 1-3) spoke of how the context of social media limits the accessibility of moral identity and how accompanying situational factors online moderate (i.e., influence the strength of) the relationship between moral identity and moral behaviors. In some cases, participants excluded themselves from the general population impacted by this phenomenon, while in other cases, they included themselves, pointing out how they can be just as susceptible as anyone else when it comes to interacting in social media environments. These findings align with the literature in that situational factors have been found to profoundly influence an individual’s motivation to behave
morally, often regardless of whether that individual has a strong moral identity or not (Aquino et al., 2009). However, the impact of a particular context (e.g., social media environment) on a person’s moral behaviors may also differ as a result of the relative centrality of the individual’s moral identity to their overall self-concept (Aquino et al., 2009).

Anthony (case 1) was among the participants who believed people are less likely to intervene in cases of bullying on social media (i.e., cyberbullying) compared to face-to-face altercations because they are not “necessarily comfortable with just jumping into the fray [online] and commenting…hey, this is unacceptable…this is not ok.” He emphasized the importance of being upfront about one’s intentions as well as the specific messages one hopes to convey in social media contexts: “If you’re trying to create an environment where that type of behavior doesn’t take place, definitely, you know, state your position on Facebook or however you may choose to do so.” Joanne (case 2) presented a similar argument, stating how the social media context makes it “easier” to “say things that you wouldn’t in person” or to just ignore negative, even harmful posts, but she also made the case for intervening in cyberbullying incidents, citing a sense of responsibility moral people have to do “what you know is right” whether or not you know the people involved. In this statement, Joanne drew on the centrality of her moral identity to her self-concept in order to explain her decision to behave morally on social media regardless of how others may behave.

While Laura (case 2) acknowledged that individuals do generally have a responsibility to stand up for others, she qualified this with a statement about not having this same responsibility in an online context unless you are “some kind of expert” or feel “particularly compelled” to intervene when you witness cyberbullying. She also made it clear that it would “depend on the severity” of the incident because “obviously online there is that increased distance,” which
simply perpetuates the bystander effect, in her opinion. Nathan (case 2) agreed with this sentiment, also citing the “severity of the conflict” as a determining factor in whether he would personally intervene in a cyberbullying incident on social media. He stated:

I don’t really think, like, every time you see someone…saying something that’s rude…you have to jump in and rescue the person that’s offended by it, but I think there’s some cases where someone might be harassing someone or saying hateful things and it’s important to respond to that and show the person who’s being targeted that they’re not alone.

For Nathan, while it may be acceptable to gloss over minor, “rude” incidents here and there on social media, it would be ridiculous and unreasonable to intervene every time you see something questionable online. This speaks somewhat to the emotional desensitization and moral disengagement many of the participants noticed about online environments due, at least in part, to the plethora of inappropriate posts on social media. Rizana (case 3) touched on this in her comment about the internet being an extremely “large place,” making it incredibly difficult to track or govern people’s behavior. Sofia (case 3) also addressed how there are “no clear lines” in terms of ethical standards on social media and that the guidelines that do seem to exist are “constantly being changed,” so you can “argue either way all the time.” As Nathan put it, the social media context makes it “so easy to just post your opinion on anything, even when you don’t necessarily have the authority to say something on it” or to post “without much self-awareness.” On the other hand, Nathan also discussed the importance of engaging and providing moral support when there are clear-cut instances of harassment on social media. Naomi (case 1) concurred with this perspective in her interview, stating how critical it was to convey “a level of support” to those who are affected by harassment on social media, so “they don’t feel totally
isolated.” In fact, all of the participants (cases 1-3), indicated that the most egregious, morally unacceptable behaviors on social media included racism, sexism, being disrespectful toward someone or toward a specific group of people, belittling someone, and/or intentionally offending someone and that these were all red flags for intervening if and when possible.

Even though Naomi said she felt a sense of responsibility to intervene if she were to witness someone being bullied in person and was “close enough to the immoral action,” she drew the line at stepping into an intense cyberbullying situation involving people she did not know because, as she put it, “you don’t really know who’s on the other side of the computer.” She made it clear that she would not want to endanger herself in order to “be a crusader for everybody.” Trevor (case 2) voiced similar concerns, but his primary qualm with becoming involved in online incidents was that anything he says on social media could be “misconstrued.” Talking more specifically about cyberbullying, he believed it was futile to intervene if it takes place in the context of a social media forum with numerous, simultaneous posts from people, but if it were a “directed post” (e.g., targeting one person), he would “definitely want to say something.” In Trevor’s opinion, online battles involving multiple people are usually not the ones you want to be fighting.

Sofia (case 3) was the only participant who believed it would be easier to intervene in cyberbullying as opposed to face-to-face bullying. She provided the following rationale: “I think it’s easier in cyberspace…Just how it’s easier for someone to criticize with a keyboard, it’s so much easier to step in and be, like, ‘Hey, don’t do that,’ when there’s no risk involved.” Sofia also referenced the bystander effect, however, her take on it was different from Laura’s in that she not only acknowledged the presence of bystanders online, but also blamed them for perpetuating cyberbullying saying that they have the “biggest impact of all” because they choose
to ignore what is happening instead of offering a helping hand. She went so far as to say bystanders are “almost worse” than bullies. Sofia also addressed how SNSs are “sites to share,” making it “tricky,” if not inherently impossible, for everyone using them to behave morally at all times. According to her, the only way to behave morally on social media is for each individual to monitor what they choose to share or the comments they make online. Naomi agreed with this particular point in her interview saying that “watching how you promote yourself” and “being mindful of who you’re engaging with” as well as “the kind of language you’re using” is the way to behave morally when using social media.

When considering their level of engagement with race-related issues online versus offline, many of the participants (cases 1-3) spoke of treading lightly and weighing the pros and cons before entering these spaces on social media even though a few of them indicated they were vocal about race-related issues offline (e.g., on campus). Their explanations for doing so varied by case and individual perspectives, however, and were also directly impacted by situational factors. Anthony (case 1) discussed how he is “careful” when deciding whether to engage in conversations about race on social media, and actually prefers to avoid engaging altogether, because it is “not a face-to-face interaction,” so it is difficult to gauge people’s tone or intentions when they post. Sofia (case 3), on the other hand, spoke of the freedom that comes with being “behind the keyboard” instead of face-to-face with someone because in the latter case, according to her, there is a “barrier and masked intention where you don’t wanna say the wrong thing” whereas online “you can easily be, like, oh, no I’m into this, I just don’t want to get too involved.” Here, Sofia notes how social media is a disinhibiting context, allowing for the breaking down of barriers and inhibitions people would otherwise have in person (Suler, 2004). Rizana (case 3) alluded to this disinhibition effect of online environments as well when she
talked about how racist posts on social media affect her, particularly if these posts are made by someone she knows in person: “Then, I’m like, ok, that’s a little upsetting…how many people think that way…Basically, because…then I don’t know how many people around me feel the same way, and it’s like, do I approach them? Do I talk about it?” In this statement, Rizana addresses how her encounters with race-related issues online impact her emotions, her thoughts, and even her sense of trust and behaviors offline.

Laura (case 2) believed people can be “aggressive or unfair on either side” of race-related conversations on social media and that it is sometimes better just to stay out of these conversations for fear of “being seen as insensitive or not understanding,” unless they revolve around local issues with which she has had some personal involvement. Nathan (case 2) also spoke of generally avoiding race-related conversations online, focusing on the importance of considering the particular social media forum and the individuals involved in the conversation, specifically, whether they would be receptive to his thoughts and listen or if they are too “angry” to even consider them, so as not to “waste [his] energy.” For Rizana, it is equally important to consider the particular social media forum and the individuals involved in conversation, similar to Nathan, but she comes from a different place, that of concern for her personal safety rather than whether the encounter would be a waste of her time and energy. Along these lines, she spoke about avoiding “hostile” online environments where someone might “start attacking” her and being drawn to sharing her opinion in “understanding” spaces instead. Lastly, Isabella (case 3) addressed how the social media context is more conducive to re-posting content or adding “something personal” to such content before sharing it rather than coming up with original posts. Her justification for this was that she has “a harder time knowing what to say” and finds it challenging to “open up to everyone on the internet.” While she actively engages with race-
related issues online by commenting on people’s posts whether she agrees or not, she stops short of going into a “full argument,” preferring to simply “call them out” and move on.

Moral exemplar behavior can be characterized by “a tendency to be inspiring to others and thereby to move them to moral action” (Colby & Damon, 1992, p. 315). In a study conducted by Matsuba and Walker (2004), emerging adult moral exemplars involved in social organizations were found to be more advanced in terms of their moral reasoning and identity formation as well as their close relationships and faith development. According to Colby and Damon (1992), who interviewed moral exemplars, an important component of their moral identity development was “a collaborative relationship with people having alternative perspectives,” which prompted an “extended period of transactions between the exemplar and the other person(s)” and an “eventual adoption of the other(s) goals [and strategies for pursuing the new goals], usually modified in a manner that can be coherently integrated into the exemplar’s prior perspective” (p. 173). This particular aspect of moral exemplar behavior was epitomized by Nathan (case 2), who spoke of not only being open to alternative perspectives (as noted in the phenomenological themes section for the individual interviews), but also of potentially integrating them into his own beliefs:

I want to learn more or…challenge someone whose views I see as either incorrect or just kind of lacking, and I think maybe part of it is because I can sort of see in them…where I might have been in the past where I was just kind of uneducated and sort of had a lot of opinions that weren’t really founded…part of it is just because I want to become stronger and…I want my views to be stronger and I wanna be better at arguing my views and adjusting them based on learning new perspectives. I want to be able to challenge someone whose views I perceive as wrong and either bring them to an understanding of
my view or maybe I understand their view better and I actually change what I believe…either way…it’s productive because at least one person in the conversation will have progressed intellectually.

Nathan’s emphasis on developing personally and also encouraging development in others reflects the centrality of his moral identity to his self-concept.

Sofia (case 3) spoke of her own moral identity being influenced by the “really strong morals” of her friends: “Whether they’re religious or not, and even the people that are very religious, even if I can’t agree with them about their fundamental beliefs, I’m in awe of how they can apply it to their morals.” She continued, “I think that morals that I find in other people are what draw me to them, and that’s really important.” In this statement and others throughout her interview, Sofia exhibited characteristics of moral exemplar behavior in terms of the careful cultivation of her close relationships, which evolved from a consideration of their perspectives and a sense of admiration for their convictions (Colby & Damon, 1992). Joanne (case 2) also demonstrated moral exemplar behavior in terms of having “a sense of realistic humility about one’s own importance relative to the world at large” (Colby & Damon, 1992, p. 316). She stated in her interview, “I guess I…do my best to be aware of situations going on in the world, of…racial issues, LGBT issues, kind of trying to advocate for those things, in a sense.”

In the process of addressing whether and how their moral identity impacts their social media usage as well as the existence or lack of ethical standards of conduct online, participants in the study (cases 1-3) conveyed their thoughts on the developmental impact of SNSs. While some participants presented general observations on the topic, others qualified the developmental impact of social media usage as negative, positive, or in some cases, both. Cross-case analysis revealed that, even though quite a few participants felt as though social media usage can be a
double-edged sword, the majority of them also believed that social media’s potential for positive developmental impact outweighed the negative aspects.

Trevor’s (case 2) comments fell in the general category, as he picked up on the bidirectionality of the phenomenon, specifically, that social media usage impacts a person’s development and, at the same time, a person’s developmental status, depending on their age and experience, impacts how they use social media (e.g., how they respond to posts online). Also offering a general observation, Naomi (case 1) emphasized being cognizant of what you are releasing into cyberspace and how you are treating others as well as how individuals are treating each other online and the importance of not relying on social media as an emotional crutch or as a means to “uplift” yourself through instant gratification. Joanne (case 2) not only presented a general commentary, but also touched on the potential for both positive and negative developmental impact when she talked about how social media tests your moral identity and that it is important to stick to your “core beliefs” without rejecting the beliefs of others. According to her, you want to be “civil” instead of resorting to insulting or “degrading” others online, which she has witnessed numerous times.

In terms of the negative developmental impact of social media usage, Anthony (case 1) focused on how social media has given people leeway to participate in unethical, “deplorable” behavior. Along these lines, Sofia (case 3) addressed how social media can have a “damaging” impact on development and that it can sometimes promote a sense of complacency offline, particularly in terms of individuals lacking follow-up or failing to put their words into practice. Isabella (case 3) and Rizana (case 3) both pointed out how certain social media contexts and behaviors make you question people, sometimes prompting you to carry this distrust with you into the “real world.”
Numerous participants pointed out the positive developmental impact of social media usage. This included Isabella (case 3), who spoke of participation in social justice issues on social media as being important to emerging adults’ moral identity development, particularly in getting them to “question things.” Both Isabella (case 3) and Naomi (case 1) expressed the significance of social media providing an outlet for minorities to voice their concerns. Naomi elaborated on this particular aspect of the positive developmental impact of social media saying that social media allows individuals from “underrepresented communities” to “have voices that would be ignored in day-to-day interaction,” to convey what they feel and what they have experienced on their own terms. Naomi also spoke of how her own personal experiences on social media over the years, from adolescence to emerging adulthood, have contributed to her moral identity development in the sense of helping her establish notions of “privacy and confidentiality” as well as “control and responsibility.”

For Nathan (case 2), engaging in social justice issues on social media has given him the opportunity to challenge himself and others, learn new perspectives, as well as develop intellectually and morally. According to Sofia (case 3), engaging in conversations about race on social media is “essential” because the internet has become an integral part of our lives, impacting all of us who use it developmentally in some way or another, and it is “healthier” to be having these conversations instead of avoiding them. Joanne (case 2) emphasized how social media platforms allow for a plethora of “different voices” to emerge, which has allowed her to develop a sense of awareness about and appreciation for “different perspectives” and the “interactions” among those perspectives. She also spoke of how she was personally impacted by social media responses to the police shootings targeting Black men in terms of her own racial identity development and moral development. For Joanne, social media is a good way to “reach a
lot of people at one time,” and SNSs have positively impacted her development as a social justice activist as well, primarily by making it easier to participate and support causes.

**Theme 1: Restricted circle of moral regard and moral disengagement in online contexts.** Individuals who have a narrow circle of moral regard generally only feel connected to or obligated to family, friends, and perhaps fellow citizens, while those with an expansive circle of moral regard include more people and social groups, possibly even all of humanity, within their psychological boundary in terms of connectedness or obligation to assist (Reed & Aquino, 2003). According to Reed and Aquino (2003), “a highly self-important moral identity is associated with an expansive circle of moral regard toward out-group members…and more favorable attitudes toward relief efforts to aid out-group members” (p. 1270). While some participants (cases 1-3) demonstrated an expansive circle of moral regard that was in line with how they spoke about their moral identity, stating that they would help strangers in person, such as intervening when they witness bullying, most indicated that they did have certain boundaries in terms of assisting strangers in online environments, particularly intervening in instances of cyberbullying.

Anthony (case 1) addressed his circle of moral regard in response to a question about how race-related comments on social media affect him: “If they are about somebody that I care about…that’s a different story…you can talk about me…but when you start talking about my mentor, my family members, some of my close friends, my girlfriend, that’s when I start to get upset.” Here, Anthony lists specific people he considers to be within the boundaries of his circle of moral regard. While he did express a certain level of concern for those who are not family or friends in other parts of his interview (e.g., saying he would definitely intervene if he saw someone being bullied), his circle of moral regard, perhaps a bit broader than the average person,
was still relatively limited, especially in online contexts. His concern and accompanying boundaries for this concern were evident in comments like this one: “If I knew the person being cyberbullied, I’d definitely reach out to them, see if I can meet them in person…if they’re a close friend…If I’m distant to them, I'll send them good vibes, but I won’t…invite them anywhere.” He followed this up with a comment about seeing a “complete, total stranger” getting attacked on social media: “I would just say send that person some good vibes or something…saying, like, ‘You’re loved. You’re appreciated. I care about you.’”

Naomi’s (case 1) comments illustrated similar boundaries for her circle of moral regard. Responding to a question about how she would act if she saw someone she did not know being bullied, she stated, “If I’m close enough to the immoral action, and I feel that I can help the situation, even if I can’t help the situation, contact someone who can, then that’s what I’ll do.” In the case of cyberbullying, she said it was “tougher because you don’t really know who’s on the other side of the computer,” and she indicated that it might be wise not to risk her own safety to protect complete strangers online. However, she did address the responsibility she felt we all have to at least say something in instances where someone is being attacked on social media:

I do think we have a social responsibility to…at least put the other person in check. You know, a lot of times on Twitter you’ll see that. So, somebody posts something…Twitter will [sic] automatically hone in on it and weigh in on their responses, and I think what it does in some situations is it allows that person, that stranger [that] you don’t know, that’s being affected, to see a level of support…So, they don’t feel totally isolated and feel, you know, like this is a one-on-one match.

There were a few participants who hoped they would step in if they saw someone being bullied or cyberbullied, but did not seem absolutely certain they would do so and listed potential reasons
for this. For example, Trevor (case 2) indicated that he would “probably” step in if he saw an instance of bullying involving someone he did not personally know. He stated, “Bullying, especially, because I’m physically there, I would definitely try to stop that from happening, or just, like, have a conversation about it.” However, when talking about cyberbullying, he pointed out that it is “a little harder, but…in some cases, [he] would step in, like, cyberbullying, but I know that…anything I might say over the internet can be misconstrued.” For this reason, he said it might be “better to stay out.” He did say it depended on the type of cyberbullying though. For example, “if it’s in a forum, and people are just, like, talking continuously…it would just kind of be lost in translation…but if it was, like, a directed post, [he] would definitely want to say something in those cases.”

Referring to cyberbullying, Rizana (case 3) stated, “So, I want to say that I would help them, but at the same time, I’m like, would I? Because, in the moment, I’m like, oh, they’re fine, it’s not that big of a deal.” She continued, “I think, of course, if someone comes across that, they do have some responsibility…maybe just, if they’re not comfortable themselves being like, standing up for them, like, one-on-one, then…you know, reach out to someone…that could do something about it.” Several times throughout her interview, Rizana talked about the gap between her real self and her ideal self, which was especially apparent in a comment that also illustrated her desire to bridge this gap by expanding her circle of moral regard: “That's something that really bothers me about…myself because…there’s so many other movements that I want to be part of, but…at the same time, I never do, and it’s something that people should, not just things that affect you.”

Like Rizana, Laura (case 2) was unsure of how she would act if she witnessed someone she did not know being bullied, but she was hopeful that she would intervene:
I challenge myself now…if I witness someone being bullied…it obviously depends in what capacity, but…if I see, like, bullying through use of language with another person, I would hope that I would stand up to the person that is bullying, and if not, try and help the person that was bullied after the fact…and then if it was more the physical sort of bullying, I would try to be a witness and contact who…whatever [sic] I would need to.

In terms of cyberbullying, she referenced the bystander effect, calling it “bystander bias,” and said, “It would depend on the severity…online there is that increased distance…so, [if] I thought they were going to self-harm or if it sounded like…abuse [was] happening, then I would step in. If it wasn’t very serious, I probably wouldn’t if it was someone I did not know.” Interestingly, Sofia (case 3) also alluded to the bystander effect, but her take on it was a bit different: “So, I feel like…bystanders have the biggest impact of all because yes, the bullies are gonna bully you, but when you have no one to turn to, that’s when you fall…I think you’re almost worse as a bystander.” Here, we can see how expansive Sofia’s circle of moral regard is in that she takes on the responsibility to help others even when she has no personal connection to them, perhaps in part because she does not want to be seen as a bystander. She also seemed more certain than all of the other participants that she would intervene in instances of bullying and cyberbullying because, as she described it, “I feel like I was that kind of person when it was physical bullying, and cyberbullying is a little bit easier to step into because everyone’s bigger than me, and I don’t have to worry about that [online].”

Joanne (case 2) also demonstrated a fairly expansive circle of moral regard, which appeared to be largely impacted by her strong moral identity. Throughout her interview, she spoke about the importance of not only listening to people who come from different backgrounds in order to understand their perspectives, but also supporting and standing up for them; to
Joanne, this is what being a moral person is all about. When asked how she would respond when witnessing bullying, she said without any hesitation that she would intervene and then proceeded to give a specific example of a time when she did do so: “In middle school, this girl…had a diary that she had brought to school…and some kids found it…and were…playing monkey-in-the-middle with it…[and I] stepped in and took it back and gave it to her.” She was a bit more hesitant, yet still willing to intervene, when discussing instances of cyberbullying:

I guess I would try to step in, too. I think it can be….a little more difficult, I guess, to identify someone…just because sometimes in person, the person being bullied isn’t always willing to fight back whereas sometimes it’s, like, a two-way battle online…But if there were, like, a scenario where it was distinctly, like, one person just unnecessarily attacking the other, then I’d like to think I’d step in.

Disinhibition, or the “weakening of psychological barriers,” appears to be amplified in online environments (Suler, 2004, p. 322). In certain instances, this disinhibition can be toxic, leading to moral disengagement (Bandura, 2015), which may manifest itself as “rude language, harsh criticisms, anger, hatred, even threats” (Suler, 2004, p. 321). Several participants (cases 1-3), in both individual interviews and the focus group session alluded to this phenomenon. In the following passage, focus group participants Trevor (case 2), Nathan (case 2), and Naomi (case 1) discuss disinhibition and moral disengagement as it relates to provocation and trolling on the internet:

Trevor: “Yeah, it’s definitely an ideology. It’s like…this whole, like, internet personality that a lot of people kinda take on.”

Nathan: “Or they feed off, like, getting the attention from the controversy that it causes…because…they don’t care if it harms people.”
Naomi: “Sadistic…”

Trevor: “It’s like an immature…way of talking to people. Like, it gets a rise outta people, and they like that…it’s really strange.”

Naomi: “Yeah, it’s strange.”

Laura (case 2) also addressed trolling in her individual interview when she said, “I hear these people saying, oh, this person is a troll...they’re just making a joke. I don’t think that’s morally or ethically responsible.” Nathan (case 2) discussed how people are more likely to morally disengage in online environments, particularly on social media, since it is “easy to participate…without much self awareness.” In attempting to explain this disinhibition effect on social media, he stated that “there’s plenty of people who don’t care…they’ll say those things anyway, or they’ll say it because it’s considered a problem and they want to kind of stir up some…conflict.”

As Suler (2004) suggests, individuals may choose to “visit the dark world of the Internet – places of pornography, crime, and violence – territory they would never explore in the real world” (p. 321). As an example of this aspect of disinhibition online, Anthony (case 1) stated, “If you’re brave, take a look at a site called 4chan…that’s considered a very dark place on the internet…There are a lot of ideas that are spread there that are not…that I personally don’t agree with…that I don’t believe are ethical.” Anthony also shared his observation that people have become even more disinhibited in their interactions online since Donald Trump became president, often posting “backwards ideas and thoughts” on social media (e.g., sharing racist or bigoted posts). He conveyed his preference for face-to-face interactions over online ones, “simply because when you’re in somebody’s face, you have to address it…if you just walk away, that’s considered rude and disrespectful…but on the internet, if you just kind of walk away,
nobody can really get mad at you.” In terms of his own disengagement online, he said he preferred to “stay off social justice matters on social media,” being “more of an activist offline.” Joanne (case 2) also spoke of disinhibition and moral disengagement online, particularly on social media, where “it’s so much easier to fight with people.” For Joanne, it is definitely “easier to be an activist online…just ’cause it’s one click and you’re done,” whereas “sometimes in person you don’t always hear about events…or you remember after [the fact].”

While she otherwise indicated having a fairly strong moral identity, Laura (case 2) demonstrated signs of moral disengagement in her behavior on social media, which is not uncommon behavior according to the relevant literature (Suler, 2004). This was particularly evident in her statement that individuals do not necessarily have a responsibility to intervene in instances of cyberbullying “unless it [is] really serious” or “you’re some kind of expert or you feel particularly compelled.” For Laura, while it is “important to have conversations about race” on social media, she indicated that these conversations online can become contentious: “I see where it’s helpful…where it's not helpful, and…where people can get aggressive or unfair on either side…So, I don’t really tend to personally post content about race…unless it’s about…a specific local issue that I was personally involved in.” She also talked about her perspective on engaging in social media activism:

It’s so important, so I feel like I have to do something tiny…but then there’s the other hand where I know that acting on social media isn’t really effective anymore…I would say that because…particularly [on] Facebook…we’re edited [sic] to be with people that are only like us, so, like, it just becomes this super-inflated balloon of people with similar opinions, so I just feel like that’s not useful.
Trevor (case 2) also addressed the relative ineffectiveness of social media activism: “You could put a lot of work into, like, fighting stuff online, but it won’t really do it…all the time.”

Even Naomi (case 1), who spoke of engaging with race-related issues on social media more than any of the other participants, expressed a certain degree of moral disengagement online when she said she had to draw the line somewhere so as not to endanger herself by trying to be a “crusader for everybody.” In terms of what can be done to put ethical standards of conduct in place on social media sites, Naomi stated, “I don’t think there is much people can do to completely enforce that without losing, you know, the following that they have because people don’t necessarily want to be controlled and monitored…especially because people have different morals.” She also indicated that she has personally witnessed instances of disinhibition online, whether it be through cyberbullying, trolling, or witnessing people behave in a despicable way that is rather different from how they would act in person. Rizana (case 3) spoke of how it is “easier for people to take [things] the wrong way” and to be judgmental on social media, which is part of the reason why she has decided she is “not gonna take part in that” and will sometimes morally disengage by not participating in race-related conversations or standing up to cyberbullies online. In terms of how she has observed others exhibit disinhibition online, she stated:

I feel like there’s a lot of…I don’t know how to word it, but, like, if someone posts something on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and let’s say someone else is, like, reading it, and they’re with their friends, and they’re like, ‘Oh, this person said this. Haha.’ Like, kind of making fun of them. So, I think that would be, like, immoral, like, kind of talking about them or judging them for something.
According to Sofia (case 3), sometimes you just have to “turn away from” comments on social media posted by people who are “just genuinely ignorant” and “don’t mean any harm.” Even though Sofia talked about being involved with social justice issues offline and recognized that “you can kind of end up being insensitive by saying things, but then not acting,” seeing questionable comments on social media has influenced her own moral disengagement online: “Sometimes when I’m scrolling through my feed and I see something that I can’t understand why it’s there, I just don’t react.” When asked about potential ethical standards of conduct that people might adhere to on social network sites, she responded that she does not think there “really is a way to behave morally when you’re on a sharing site” and that it is “very easy to be very damaging on social media.” She referenced disinhibition and moral disengagement online saying that when you’re “face-to-face with someone…there’s gonna be a barrier and masked intention where you don’t wanna say the wrong thing, whereas…behind the keyboard…you can easily be, like, oh, no I’m into this, I just don’t want to get too involved.”

Similarly, Trevor (case 2) talked about how there is “more confidence to say what you want” online and admitted that even he is “a little bit different on the internet.” While his offline and online identities have come closer to overlapping over time, he says, “I definitely know there was a time, like, pretty recent probably that I would feel more comfortable to just say whatever on the internet.” He also pointed out how the social media environment has led to his own moral disengagement at times:

I only really use Facebook, and rarely do I post politically, but I am involved in groups on Facebook that do get political. So, typically, I don’t try to engage the political conversation online because obviously people have different viewpoints, so I wouldn’t be very engaging…Usually, I really don’t post something that could really, like, engage a
serious conversation. Like, I’m not gonna post something on social media that’ll actually be, like, something you could have a conversation about because it’s just not productive.

This type of disengagement online from an emerging adult who otherwise considers himself to be very moral, even altruistic, is rather telling in terms of the extent to which situational factors affect the accessibility of moral identity on social media.

**Theme 2: Perspectives on internalization of moral identity determined its role in guiding behavior on social media.** While all participants discussed aspects of their moral identities, there were varying degrees to which they considered moral traits to be central to their self-concepts (Aquino & Reed, 2002). In other words, how they internalized morality ranged from thinking about doing the right thing every once in a while in certain situations to considering it to be of the utmost importance and integral to their everyday behavior. These differing perspectives on internalization of moral identity impacted participants’ social media usage. Some participants indicated that their moral identity plays a direct role in guiding their behavior online, whether through curtailing or increasing their presence on social media, and others indicated it may have an indirect role if anything at all.

During the individual interviews, participants were asked if they believed their moral identity led them to think about exactly what they are posting on social media, how they are posting it, and who they are posting to. Nathan (case 2) listed specific ways that his moral identity impacts his social media usage: (1) in terms of *what* he is posting, it needs to be important to him personally and meaningful as well as relevant or interesting to his audience; (2) in terms of *how* he is posting, it will be sharing an article or video on which he will comment about why it was important or meaningful to him or what he agreed or disagreed with; (3) in terms of *who* he is posting to, if he thinks a post is relevant to someone in particular or they
would appreciate it, he sends it directly to that person; otherwise, he considers whether his “wide acquaintance circle” might be interested or find something of value in it before posting. Isabella (case 3) spoke about her moral identity leading her to post more frequently on social media, especially when she “truly believe[s] something.” She also talked about how her moral identity has shaped her perspective of social media as a “way to get people active” and politically engaged. For Rizana (case 3), her moral identity has influenced her to speak out on social media when she feels the need to reach out or to educate others, particularly about Islam.

On the flip side, Anthony (case 1) spoke of his moral identity influencing him to keep his opinions to himself on social media and only posting when he has a particular purpose or “a specific idea that [he wants to] push forward.” Similarly, Sofia (case 3) talked about how her moral identity prevents her from posting much on social media. She thinks it is very easy to be damaging on social media and does her best to not post things that might hurt anyone, considering her social media audience when posting. Naomi (case 1) discussed her moral identity impacting her use of social media in terms of recognizing her boundaries with a growing emphasis on “privacy” and “confidentiality” as well as not resorting to attention-seeking behavior online. The shift in her behavior on social media as she transitioned from adolescence to emerging adulthood involved taking more “control” and “responsibility.” She now thinks about who her audience will be before she posts on social media and asks herself questions about the level of permanence her feelings and her posts will have. Laura (case 2) talked about being “tied” to her moral identity online since she sees her social media presence as “an extension” of herself. Like Naomi, Laura believed her posts online have changed as she has undergone identity development over the years. Now, she thinks about what she is posting and how much she really needs to share about her personal life with her audience online. She only shares things on social
media that she feels like she can “further speak to.” Additionally, she has blocked or deleted people on social media that she thought would be “toxic” to her presence online.

Joanne (case 2) spoke about her moral identity impacting her use of social media in terms of the importance of “being civil” if she is having a conversation or argument with someone online. She believes that “sticking to” your morals means “not resorting to that place” or sinking to the level of having a heated argument online in which people are saying hurtful or hateful things. She is also cognizant of her audience on social media in terms of what she is posting, placing value on how people are viewing her and her behavior online. Trevor (case 2) also discussed how people should be considerate when engaging in conversations on social media, though this rarely seems to happen in his experience. Personally, he reads through all the other comments on a post first before engaging, and if he has not read through all the comments first, he will avoid engaging altogether with the exception of seeing something that is morally reprehensible. He stated, “I don’t think my morality impacts my use of social media…but it does make me think about what I’m gonna post and how I’m posting it and who I’m posting to…because, like, I know people can be offended.”

Internalization of moral identity has been linked to moral behavior (e.g., volunteering and donating) in other studies (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy, 2006). One narrative study, in particular, conducted by Pratt, Arnold, and Lawford (2009), in which “life stories were rated for salience of moral identity (as indicated by things such as concern for the needs and rights of others)” demonstrated that “moral identity was linked to community service involvement and generative concern (a person’s desires, commitments, and actions directed toward making a difference in the world)” (as cited in Hardy & Carlo, 2011, p. 215). However, there appears to be a disconnect between internalization of moral identity and moral behavior in online settings. This
could be due to social media lending itself to a sense of dissociative anonymity – distancing one’s online behavior from one’s “real identity” offline or failing to take responsibility for one’s actions online – and greater disinhibition – feeling uninhibited and able to express oneself more openly or honestly partly due to a disregard for social conventions (Suler, 2004).

Returning to the social-cognitive framework, the social media context can be seen as an additional layer or dimension (between cognitive and environmental factors) that may have the effect of breaking down certain self-regulatory mechanisms that individuals would otherwise employ before acting on their thoughts in a face-to-face interaction (see Figure 9 below). This provides social media users with multiple options: (1) the option of ignoring posts or situations online when they would have otherwise been forced to confront or respond to them in person; (2) the option of responding in a rude, brutally honest, or even hateful way (a phenomenon known as toxic disinhibition); or, conversely, (3) the option to participate in uncharacteristic acts of kindness, generosity, or bravery (a phenomenon known as benign disinhibition) – an example of this would be intervening in a cyberbullying incident to protect the victim or to act as a mediator in the conflict (Suler, 2004). Overall, internalization of moral identity does not appear to be as indicative of moral behavior on social media as symbolization, which is discussed in the following section.
Theme 3: Higher symbolization of moral identity, along with specific contextual factors, contributed to greater engagement with racial issues online. Most participants indicated that it did matter to them, at least somewhat, whether other people thought of them as moral people, though the degree to which this perception impacted them personally varied. However, only some participants spoke at length about how their moral traits are reflected, or symbolized, in their actions or group affiliations, either on campus or off campus. As indicated in the literature, symbolization is the public dimension of moral identity, which differs from internalization, which is the private dimension (Aquino & Reed, 2002). A higher degree of symbolization was generally indicative of greater engagement with race-related issues online among all participants (cases 1-3). However, there were also other contextual factors involved that impacted this engagement, including the participant’s level of racial literacy, comfort with
particular social media platforms, degree of safety in entering the conversation, and potential to contribute to the conversation or to change someone’s mind by offering a new or different perspective, all of which are described below.

Laura (case 2) spoke of how her “social media identity is obviously more curtailed,” and she has noticed that she is “walking this line” where she is “trying to be an authentic person” while still maintaining a professional persona online. Laura pointed out how “publicly” on either her own Facebook wall or that of a friend, which is visible to everyone who has access to them, she only says “certain things,” while “privately,” in a Facebook message to a smaller group of people or face-to-face, she “might say other things.” In terms of how she demonstrates her morality, Laura discussed her choice of major as well as her experiences mentoring, as a resident assistant, camp counselor, and preschool teacher. She indicated that she finally settled on economics as a major because she wanted to “take a more human, moral stance [and] quantitative look at the issues that [she] care[s] about.” In her opinion, being in a position of authority, “when you are looked up to, either seen as a teacher or a mentor” means that “you have a greater responsibility to act morally,” which is something that she finds to be “empowering,” though initially it was somewhat “terrifying.” She also mentioned her membership in the Cultural Exchange Network, taking part in events to help refugees, and contributing to “fundraisers pertaining to social justice” as symbolic representations of her morality. Responding to a question about whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Laura asserted that she does “put a lot of weight in this” because, even though she is opinionated and likes to share her opinions, she also wants to be perceived as understanding and accepting, which entails behaving in a way that she considers to be moral on social media. She thinks it is important for people to engage in conversations about race on social media, but
she does not tend to post content about race or comment on it unless she has some kind of personal involvement with the particular issue or event. Laura also mentioned a lack of racial literacy and not wanting to offend or be seen as insensitive. Overall, Laura seemed to struggle a bit more with maintaining consistency between her online and offline identities than the other participants.

Joanne (case 2) placed value on how people view her and her behavior on social media, and she spoke of being especially cognizant of her audience on social media in terms of what she is posting. In terms of how she tries to behave morally on social media, Joanne stated, “I always try to do things that are…more on the positive end…I’ve come to find…it’s not the way to do that.” In response to whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Joanne stated, “I think it’s important. I don’t think you want anyone thinking of you as immoral…personally, just ’cause it’s something that I, I guess, pride myself on. [Since] it’s something that I consider important, I want that to reflect and be seen by others.” She spoke of demonstrating her morality to others through her membership in religious organizations, such as the on-campus ministry, which allows her to participate in service activities. Additionally, she discussed reading a book called *Being White*, that she described as being about “our place of privilege, how we use that to help others, [and] what does it mean to be a White person.” Educating herself about this particular topic and how she can use her own position of privilege to help others can be seen as a symbolic representation of her morality. Additionally, she pointed out how her involvement in online (hashtag) activism is also representative of her morality: “I think part of being an activist is standing firm in your belief and trying to…persuade others…that’s [why] we have marches and sit-ins is to get people to listen and engage, and I
think that’s part of the point of retweeting…sharing stuff.” She thinks it is important for people to engage in conversations about race on social media, and she actively engages, usually by re-posting content that has already been shared by others, but also by commenting on certain posts.

Discussing how he demonstrates his morality, Nathan (case 2) spoke of his involvement in Students for a Democratic Society on campus, which allows him to take action on the issues that matter to him most. He also talked about being a member of the group STUA, or Students for Animals, which is a group of vegetarian and vegan students advocating for animal rights. Reading books that discuss political issues and help him become “more informed about what’s going on” was another way of symbolizing his morality. In response to whether it mattered to him if people thought of him as a moral person, Nathan professed, “I guess I don’t normally really think of it as mattering to me. Maybe if I knew someone thought I wasn’t a moral person, I might be a little offended, but usually it doesn't really…it’s not super important to me, I guess.”

He believes it is important to engage in race-related issues on social media as a “blanket statement for anyone,” and he usually actively engages, either by sharing posts or by commenting on them, though he will try to assess how heated the conversation is and whether his engagement in it will be valuable.

Like Nathan, Trevor (case 2) also talked about his membership in Students for a Democratic Society as well as his active participation in social and political issues being the primary ways he displays his morality. He elaborated on his involvement in Students for a Democratic Society, stating that he and other members of the organization “take action in certain assemblies of people, like, worker assemblies [and] trying to find ways that people can feel more included in American society.” Additionally, he spoke about how the organization hosts “free markets” to “give stuff to people in need and also reduce waste.” On the academic side, Trevor
indicated that both his major, human biology, and his minors, environmental science and anthropology, factor into demonstrating his morality. He stated:

I want to…establish more sustainable ways of living because the planet is kind of in danger right now…I’m also interested in…other cultures, experiencing that, and I think that just makes you a more open and loving person…I wanted to be a doctor, but right now I’m looking into the Peace Corps, and I might go back to that. I’m also taking an EMT basic course to get certified, and that’s kind of, like, a social service.

In response to whether it mattered to him if people thought of him as a moral person, Trevor asserted, “I don't think it matters…[but] from interacting with them, you would want them to know that you are a moral person. [If] they don't think so, then you might be doing something wrong...but it doesn't really matter if they don't because you can't really control other people's thoughts.” While he generally believes social media is not the best or most productive platform for discussing serious issues, he acknowledges that it can be useful for political movements, particularly through hashtag activism (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter) and protesting (e.g., using Facebook Live to post videos). Personally, he tends to avoid engaging in race-related conversations on social media, though he will share posts on his Facebook timeline or enter the conversation, often for the purpose of mediating, if he feels like it might help in some way.

Rizana (case 3) spoke very briefly about how her involvement in organizations symbolized her morality. Specifically, she discussed her membership in the Muslim Student Association on campus, which hosts various events, as well as Key Club, which she participated in the previous year in high school before starting college. She said, “I was just…always doing these many different volunteer things…that’s something that was just really important to me.” In response to whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Rizana stated,
“I personally think it doesn’t matter as much because if I myself think I am a good person, then that's enough for me to be ok with myself, but if there was someone that came up to me and was like, ‘Oh, I think you’re this...I think you're that,’ then I’d be like, oh, ok...that would hurt a little, but I don’t dwell on the thought of...do people think of me as a good person.” She believes it is important to engage in race-related issues on social media, but there is the danger of offending or insulting someone in the process, so she feels she needs to be careful and considerate when doing so. She will look at all the other comments on the post first, and if they seem hostile, she will avoid engaging altogether, but when she does engage, she will share posts on Instagram (her platform of choice) instead of writing her own.

For Isabella (case 3), her involvement in the campus organization Mis Hermanos is the main way she demonstrates her morality because “one of the biggest things that we like to do is we like to make sure everyone feels included.” She continued, “If something is wrong with one of the members, we help them out, and if we feel like someone is not ok, even though they may say they are...we try to make sure that the people are safe with what is going on.” She spoke in detail about advocating for her beliefs, going “out of [her] way” to attend marches and lobbying events, saying “I think there’s [a lobbying event] Tuesday, and I’m gonna go to that, but then also I’ve been to the general assembly, and I’ve actually spoken to some of the representatives, and...I’ve emailed people before...things like that.” In response to whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Isabella professed, “Yes, because I don’t want people to think that I’m a bad person...I guess the mindset of some people [is that] it shouldn’t matter what others think, but to me, it kind of does.” She feels it is important to engage in race-related conversations on social media because she believes there is a certain level of discomfort required to make a change. She actively engages by commenting on posts whether she agrees or not, even
if it is just for the purpose of calling someone out on their behavior; however, she will stop short
of an argument. She will often re-post content (e.g., retweeting) instead of creating original posts
just to make sure “the message is getting out there.”

Sofia (case 3) discussed how volunteering at homeless shelters and her involvement with
campus organizations like Students for a Democratic Society symbolize her morality,
particularly through her participation in protests. She stated, “I am very in awe of these
people…I enjoy partaking in it…I feel valuable when I partake in it.” Additionally, Sofia spoke
of how, recently, she had learned to approach conflict and “convey it when [she does not] think
something’s right.” She elaborated:

So, rather than just internalizing morals, I guess a way to demonstrate to others is being,
like, what you’re doing is immoral…I don’t know. It sounds so bland, but…I guess I’m
learning now how to demonstrate that to others…Really, it’s just more of establishing a
common ground, being like, you know this is wrong, so why are you doing it?

In response to whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Sofia
asserted, “I wanna say it doesn’t, but I know it does…I want to be setting an example, and I feel
like if I fail, then I’m giving [others] an excuse to mess up, too.” She thinks it is critical to have
conversations about race on social media, but also believes these conversations need to be
accompanied by offline activism. She actively engages with race-related issues on social media,
mostly by sharing posts for the purpose of informing people. If it is one of her friends re-posting
content on social media and a conversation has already been initiated about it, she is “not afraid
to comment,” though she is otherwise hesitant to share her personal opinion in race-related
conversations.
Reflecting on how individuals tend to present themselves on social media, Naomi (case 1) said, “When you’re younger, you are so much more susceptible to trends and trying to sound older” as well as trying to “make yourself more interesting.” She believes that people often use social media to “project what they hope to embody one day, but it isn’t exactly who they are.” While it “might not necessarily be a lie,” younger social media users, in particular, “may [be] a little bigger for their britches, you know, online versus in person.” Here, Naomi uses the metaphor of planting rosebush seeds and envisioning the entire rosebush to represent the disparity that may exist between who people are at the moment (i.e., their offline identity) and who they want to be (i.e., their online identity). In terms of her involvement in campus organizations, she spoke of being cultural affairs chair and later co-president of the African American Cultural Organization, LGBT community member, and “campus queen,” having won a fraternity pageant. In her own words, “everything that I do is all about the uplifting of minorities…the empowerment of women, the empowerment of Black students, the empowerment of all students…I’m very convicted [sic], so anything that I get myself into, I’m very much all about it.” Naomi also talked about how her choice of attending this university versus an HBCU has made her “very aware of [her] surroundings” and how “the things that annoyed [her] about the kids at [her] high school is like times 1,000 in college because [there are] no parameters.” Academically, since she has taken “a lot of racial identity classes,” she is “very big on...how being brown in this world affects...being brown in this world.” In response to whether it mattered to her if people thought of her as a moral person, Naomi stated, “I think it does matter…someone being able to know my true essence and my true intentions allows me to recover from mistakes...when people know who you are at your core, they can give you the benefit of the doubt.” She thinks it is vital, “now, more than ever,” to engage in conversations
about race on social media, and she actively engages in these conversations, never avoiding them. She will often respond to posts or comments on social media with her own perspective on the matter, but thinks it can often be just as effective to re-post (e.g., retweet) content that has already been shared if she feels like she “couldn’t have said it better” herself, while also adding her own take.

Of all the participants, Anthony (case 1) indicated the least symbolization of his moral identity. When asked directly about whether there were particular organizations he belonged to, books he read, classes he took, or extracurricular activities in which he participated that symbolized his morality, he simply said, “No. I keep it to myself,” later adding on, “I use it when it is necessary. I don’t go around flaunting my morality, and I don’t try to impose my morality upon anyone else.” In another segment of the interview, he also stated, “You need to be respectful of everyone's beliefs and religions…but I’m trying to say respectful of everybody’s beliefs that excludes racism…and stuff like that because those things are not ok, not morally acceptable.” In response to whether it mattered to him if people thought of him as a moral person, Anthony proclaimed, “I don't care what people think about me. I know who I am. I know who I belong to. What other people may say or think about me is completely irrelevant…the only person who, in my life, I really have to believe is God.” He believes it is important to be careful when engaging in race-related conversations on social media, particularly because the social media environment provides a free-for-all type of platform for people who have become emboldened by the current political climate. Personally, he prefers to avoid engaging in race-related conversations on social media, particularly because social media allows for people to hide behind their writing. When he does choose to engage in conversations about race on social
Theme 4: Moral self-consistency impacted how emerging adults engaged in activism offline and online. Individuals with strong moral identities strive to maintain consistency between their thoughts and actions in various contexts (Blasi, 1984; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Hardy & Carlo, 2011), in this case, between how they think and behave offline (in person) and online. Blasi (1984) referred to this tendency as “moral self-consistency.” Participants (cases 1-3) demonstrated their moral self-consistency in numerous ways, from how they would behave if they encountered instances of bullying versus cyberbullying to how they engage in activism offline and online.

Some participants illustrated their moral self-consistency when they spoke about the impact of their moral identity on their social media behavior. For example, Laura (case 2) stated, “I very much am tied to my moral identity when on social media because I do see it as an extension of myself.” According to Joanne (case 2), while “everyone has core beliefs that they try to stick to…sometimes online it gets to the point where…you’re calling each other names, and I think part of sticking to…your moral identity is not resorting to that place.” Joanne’s moral self-consistency became rather clear when comparing her comments here to what she said in other parts of her interview, such as this statement about her behavior online versus offline:

I think there’s a lot of overlap. I’d say that I might be slightly more opinionated online, but I’m also pretty opinionated in person, and again…I don’t let it get to the point where I’m name-calling or anything. You know, try to keep to things that express my opinion without degrading others, I think, is important to me, you know…And maybe that’s just moreso online?
Joanne repeatedly spoke of how critical it was to engage in respectful behavior and civil dialogue in both online and offline contexts. Similarly, Naomi (case 1) reiterated being “consistent” in her online and offline behaviors throughout her interview: “I am very intentional in being very consistent…I try to be as live and direct about my social media feeds so there is not any incongruence in…who I present myself to be online and who I actually am in person.” An integral component of this moral self-consistency for Naomi was taking responsibility for what she shares or even likes on social media because she saw it as a “reflection” of herself. Nathan (case 2) also indicated that his social media presence is congruent with his offline presence: “I don’t go out of my way to put all the information about my personality [and] my hobbies [on social media]…if someone knows me in person, then they’ll already know that when they’re interacting with me on social media.”

In terms of intervening in instances of bullying and cyberbullying, Anthony (case 1) stated, “Yes, in both cases, I would definitely step in.” His insistence on behaving the same way in both instances, offline and online, is an indication of his moral self-consistency. Joanne (case 2) had a much longer explanation of her moral self-consistency, which centered on acting in accordance with her sense of responsibility:

I think it would be easier…I think that I would still step in, but I definitely also think it’d be easier to just, like, kind of keep going…’cause it’s easier to be, like, not my job. I mean, you scroll past it…you never see it again…and it’s gone forever. You don’t have to think about it, but at the same time, like, you know that person can be hurting…you did nothing about it. So, to me, I think that you have a responsibility. I mean, especially if you want to be considered a moral person, to do what you know is right even if you don’t directly know the person.
Joanne’s comments here are reflective of the notion of responsibility as moral motivation (Blasi, 1983; Hardy, 2006). As described by Hardy and Carlo (2011), “Before leading to moral action, a moral judgment can pass through a judgment of responsibility such that an action is seen not only as moral but also as something the individual is responsible for doing” (p. 212).

How participants engaged in activism offline and online was also indicative of their moral self-consistency. Isabella (case 3) talked about the similarities between her activism in these two contexts: “I think they’re…very similar because…I will post about certain events that I attend, and I will actually go to the events and do what I believe the purpose of the event was.” Naomi (case 1) similarly spoke of “keep[ing] a balance of…what actually moves [her] online and offline,” and Sofia (case 3) said, “There’s things I’m passionate about, and [those are] the thing[s] I’m gonna discuss in real life and share on my [social] media.” Lastly, Trevor (case 2) conveyed this moral self-consistency in his activism as well: “Yeah, I think I balance the two pretty well, offline and online. Most of my online activity is to perpetuate offline activism.”

**Critical Race Theory.** Within-case and cross-case analysis using a Critical Race Theory lens, organized by themes addressing the research questions, is presented in this section. The CRT concepts (i.e., racial realism, colorblindness, microaggressions, intersectionality, white privilege, interest convergence, critique of liberalism, dominant narrative and empathic fallacy) that were examined and most prevalent among the participants’ responses are embedded within these themes. An analysis of the data sources based on the components of racial literacy identified in the data sources as well as a discussion of rhetorical strategies or semantic moves used by participants to downplay racial views is also included in this section.

**Theme 5: Being a moral person meant being color conscious instead of colorblind in interactions with people of different races.** As mentioned in Chapter 1, colorblindness (i.e.,
colorblind racism) is the belief that people should all be treated equally regardless of their race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and has historically been viewed as a type of “moral” behavior by mainstream (White) society. Participants (cases 1-3) had a wide range of perspectives on colorblindness, but generally agreed that being a moral person actually meant being color conscious instead of colorblind in interactions with people of different races.

According to Joanne (case 2), colorblindness is “something that originally was meant to be…sort of a positive thing, like, ‘I don’t see color,’ but in doing that, you’re also kind of harming people of color ’cause you’re failing to acknowledge that their problems exist because of their color.” In her opinion, adopting a colorblind perspective is “ignorant” because recognizing and verbalizing someone’s race “shouldn’t be a bad thing.” She continued, “Like, me saying…you’re a Black person shouldn’t be a bad thing…you’re Indian, you’re…it should be something to uplift and celebrate each other’s diversity.” According to Joanne, colorblindness “takes away from our diversity, which isn’t a bad thing.” Joanne indicated that color consciousness rather than colorblindness was indicative of moral behavior: “Only after we acknowledge that there are different colors and…people are treated differently because of it can we get to the real root of the issue, but if we keep pretending that…oh, color doesn’t exist…we’re all human…those kind of issues are just gonna…perpetuate.”

Responding to a question about how she moved beyond colorblindness and what this experience was like for her, Joanne said, “I don’t think there’s any specific moment [when it happened]…It’s just as I became more socially aware of…privilege, of, you know, race relations, of police brutality, I…kind of began to realize that…colorblindness is kind of a sham.” For Joanne, moving from colorblindness to color consciousness was a gradual process that happened over the course of many years. Laura (case 2) defined colorblindness as a term used by
someone who has “good intentions, but [is] maybe not fully [aware] of the impacts that being of
different races has on individuals…[it is] mostly…used by more privileged
people…predominantly White people…it’s the idea of trying to not see color and trying to act
the same to everyone.” For Laura, being a moral person did not mean being colorblind in her
interactions with people of different races. She gave a lengthy explanation as to why this was the
case:

So, for me, no…because…I recognize that for me, personally, (1) I grew up in a racially-
charged nation and it’s…founded on racism, so…I know that there’s bias ingrained in
everything; and (2) I know that my parents said very aggressive, racist things in my home
growing up, so I know that, just by default, I have unconscious bias, so I am very
conscious of…any fears or apprehensions that I might have with certain people, and I
face those, and then I try to kind of make myself become uncomfortable if I do feel that
because I want to overturn this programming in my mind that people can be different
when we’re all essentially…have the same needs and, you know, want to interact, and I
want to interact with people.

Speaking of how she moved beyond colorblindness, Laura said that she did so, in part, by
watching a TED talk by an African American woman who was “talking about unconscious
bias…and she was like, ‘I’ve got it. You’ve got it.’ And that’s kind of what really woke me
up…so, now just be like…not feeling guilty about automatic thoughts because everyone has
them…anyway, so that’s how I moved past it.” She also talked about how “many small things
came together” in her personal life to help her move past colorblindness and how she actively
tries to “put [herself] in diverse places where [she] interact[s] with lots of different people.”
Trevor (case 2) defined colorblindness as something that has been “used by people not of color as a way to protect…ideals…but also [has] somewhat of a good intention.” He gave the example of someone saying “I don’t see color. We’re all the same,” which is “kind of, like, heartwarming and true and good…there’s no…badness [sic] about it. Like, you wouldn’t think, wow, that’s bad, but it definitely…has issues though ’cause you have to see color in order to act for people of color.” He continued, speaking in greater detail about how colorblindness is problematic: “Saying I don’t see color would basically mean…you are exploiting your privilege as a person…not [of] color ’cause…you don’t have to see color…colorblindness is…like a selfish kind of thing to me.” While he struggled with actually using the term “White people,” preferring to say things like “people not of color,” Trevor actually expressed a nuanced understanding of his own white privilege, referencing systemic oppression and minorities having no choice but to “see color every day” and deal with the repercussions of white supremacy either through microaggressions or blatant racism.

In terms of whether being a moral person means being colorblind in interactions with people of different races, Trevor said, “I guess no, it would not be moral to be colorblind. You would want to see every race and know that they exist…that way you can fight towards certain causes…No Dakota Access Pipeline…Black Lives Matter…[and] you can fight against Islamophobia.” When asked how he had personally moved beyond colorblindness, he said:

There was definitely a point where I was, like, I don’t see color, and…people aren’t that oppressed…I was naïve, of course, or ignorant. I didn’t really know that much, especially ’cause…we’re from South Africa, my family…my mom grew up in apartheid, so…we kind of came to America, like, oh, it’s supposed to be a good place, like, land of opportunities, so, some of it probably came from that…But there was definitely a point
where I was, like, colorblind, and I definitely remember...saying, like, “All Lives Matter” at one point...maybe sometime in high school...when the whole thing started coming out. And then, like, just learning from people of color, probably, or people who understood better than I did, like, people older than me, who had a better grasp on it...that’s probably how I overcame that kind of thing or moved beyond that. Coming to college, just meeting other people...understanding what All Lives Matter actually means. It’s not just, like...all people are important...it’s, like, Black Lives Matter, specifically, or in the context. It’s just basically like colorblindness.

When asked how he would define colorblindness, Nathan (case 2) talked about how people tend to use colorblindness as a justification of sorts:

I don’t really believe that anyone is actually colorblind...I think it’s something that people try to be sometimes when they think that the best way to relate to people is to try to ignore their race, and I think maybe that’s because some people feel that as long as they acknowledge race, they will somehow automatically be racist, but as long as they just pretend that race isn’t important, then they will just automatically treat everyone the same, but...I have an issue with that just because...you can’t just say that you don’t see race.

Regarding whether or not being a moral person meant being colorblind in interactions with people of different races, Nathan replied, “I would say definitely not.” However, he qualified his statement by saying, “I mean, there could be maybe...some cases where you could maybe argue for it.” He gave the following example: “If you’re hiring people, you don’t wanna think about...their race as part of the reason you should hire them, unless maybe...multicultural student affairs, like, a director or something, then you would want them to maybe be a minority
so that they…are more experienced.” In the end, he went back to his original statement, “I think, in general, being colorblind is not a moral way of interacting with people.”

Nathan did not feel like he had “moved beyond colorblindness” because he was not sure if he had ever really been colorblind. Instead, he talked about arriving at certain realizations about race:

It was more like as I grew up, I started…thinking about people being different based on race, and then kind of later on realizing that I had learned some racist views and…looking at that and thinking about the assumptions I had made and why they were wrong…I think becoming more aware about race sort of looked like realizing that attempting to ignore people’s race to treat them equally isn’t a good way of interacting socially because that could be an important part of someone’s identity.

Nathan spoke about people confronting their own colorblind perspectives by first examining “why they feel motivated to be colorblind.” In his opinion, some people think that, if they acknowledge race, “it means that they’re racist.” He continued by saying that people who feel the “need to pretend race doesn’t exist” should ask themselves “why do they feel like that’s what they should do?” According to Nathan, the response to that question will likely be “because they feel uncomfortable talking about race, so they’d rather just pretend that it’s not an issue.”

Rizana’s (case 3) understanding of colorblindness was fairly rudimentary. She initially thought of it only in the biological context. In her own words, colorblindness meant that “you can’t see actual colors.” After a follow-up question about whether she had heard the term in the context of race, as in overlooking a person’s race, she thought of posts she had seen on Instagram of “a little White kid and a little Black kid sitting together playing” that may be related to the concept of colorblindness: “I was thinking of, like, all those things that I’ve read that are, like,
oh, children aren’t born racist, they grow up to be because that’s just [the] environment they grow up in.” According to Rizana, being a moral person does not mean being colorblind in interactions with people of different races. She gave the following explanation for this: “You shouldn’t be colorblind…being brown is part of my identity. It’s who I am. So, I don’t want someone to…ignore that because it’s a part of me…at the same time you shouldn’t be prejudiced…you shouldn’t let their color affect how you judge [people] or interact with them.” When asked whether she would have considered herself to be colorblind at any point and how she may have moved beyond that colorblindness, Rizana said, “I don’t think I’m colorblind…I accept people of different color…I don’t let their skin color affect how I feel about them, but at the same time, I don’t want to completely ignore who they are.”

Sofia (case 3) thought about colorblindness as “people saying race doesn’t matter because you should love [others] no matter how they are, and then you have people saying race doesn’t matter ’cause it doesn’t exist.” She clarified that she believed colorblindness to be more specifically when people say, “I don’t see that you are this way. I think you’re perfect regardless” or “I don’t see who you are…like, you’re not Black or…we all have…like, this kind of genetics.” When asked about the relationship between colorblindness and morality, Sofia gave a lengthy explanation:

I think that being colorblind can be moral for some people. They can be very proud in the fact that the way society is tagging people doesn’t matter to them, and I think that can be beautiful if you’re looking at it through their eyes, where they’re like, I’m colorblind in the sense that everyone’s equal…but to me, that’s not moral. To me, that’s kind of shoving it aside. I think that what people should be saying is that I see you for who you are, and I think that’s beautiful…especially since what are you implying if they don’t
have the traits that you’re saying they don’t have, then what are they? Are they a copy of you? And then, that’s kind of racist in itself...so, I don’t think that I utilize colorblindness in my morals in interactions with people.

When asked to share some of her personal experiences with colorblindness and the process of moving beyond it, she expressed how she’s “always just been very confused by this whole thing,” giving the following example: “When I was little, I didn’t know what to put for the race box, and so I would just check different boxes every time I took a standardized test until I was twelve because I was just, like, why does it matter? I never checked Caucasian, even though now I know that legally I’m supposed to.” She talked about how she wished she could have just circled “mixed,” but did not have the option to do so. Relating it back to colorblindness, she said, “I don’t know at any point if it was colorblindness. I guess I would say things, as a kid, I don’t get it because I don’t see it, but I think what I had meant was I don’t see why it’s affecting people, not that I don’t see the way people are.” Isabella (case 3) defined colorblindness as “something that people usually would say as to, like, oh, race is not an issue.” However, she also acknowledged that it is “actually bad because race shouldn’t be an issue, but it also shouldn’t be invisible, like, you should see it. It’s something that should be seen, but should not affect the person.” She continued, “Yeah, so people that say that they’re colorblind, like, no...you’re wrong.” Isabella laughed slightly while saying this, as though she knew she shouldn’t be passing judgment on others, but it was clear that she felt strongly about seeing people for who they are and not intentionally ignoring aspects of their racial or cultural identities. In her own words, “You have to acknowledge the race, you have to acknowledge that they’re...they have a different culture, maybe, that they have different morals, that they believe in different
things…but that doesn’t mean that that’s a bad thing.” Isabella shared a personal story about coming to terms with colorblindness:

Okay, so, like, growing up, I always knew I was different…and I, like, was never colorblind, but I really acknowledged it in high school because I was dating this [White] guy who was, like, colorblind, and then it hit me…I was like, no, that’s wrong! And, like, he would prove his point ’cause we would always get into [these] political discussions, but then…the more he talked about it, the more I realized what I really believed in, and colorblindness is an issue.

From Anthony’s (case 1) perspective, “there is no colorblindness, unless you are actually biologically colorblind.” He conveyed a sentiment similar to Isabella about acknowledging someone’s race as a part of who they are: “When I look at you…I’m seeing all of you. I’m also seeing the color of your skin.” He continued:

You look at me…you’re not just seeing me as just a human being. You’re also noticing all of my features…the color of my skin, the texture of my hair, my facial features, and all of this stuff. You notice these things. It’s not that you’re colorblind…you notice these differences, but…you want to ignore…that’s what it means when people say “colorblindness.” They want to ignore the color of your skin. It’s not that they don’t see it. They’re ignoring it.

When asked whether being moral meant being colorblind in interactions with people, Anthony adamantly responded, “Being colorblind does not mean being moral. Being moral includes seeing people as they are…if you look at me, I need you to…recognize and acknowledge the fact that I have brown skin, that I am an African American.” He also spoke about how he does the same with all of his friends, some of whom are “Native American, Hispanic, Black, [and]
White,” saying “I acknowledge that, and I love it. Wonderful.” Anthony shared two memories about recognizing his own colorblindness and becoming color conscious:

When I was in the first grade, one day I came home from school, and my parents asked me, “Hey, [Anthony], are there any other Black kids in your class?” I had no idea what they were talking about…And so, I stopped and I thought about it and I said, “Well, there’s a little brown girl that sits on the other side of the room.” And so, at that moment, they realized that they hadn’t taught me the concept of race, and that was something I believe that they did on purpose because growing up, my childhood best friend was half-Chinese, half-White, and I did not care. Like, nothing was weird…when I truly became conscious of my race was when I was in the seventh grade, and I was sitting in my Algebra I class…I was two steps ahead of where I was supposed to be as far as math is concerned…So, I walked into the class…and I looked around and then realized, oh snap! I’m the only little Black boy in here. That’s kind of when it hit me. Everywhere else, it was just kind of like, oh, I knew I was black, but it just kind of didn’t matter, but it really just hit me when I, you know, walked into that Algebra class. I was the only one.

Here, Anthony identifies his personal enlightenment regarding color consciousness in moments of his childhood and early adolescence that forced him to think about race as a concept and made him feel like a “token” Black kid in the context of school.

Early on in her interview, Naomi (case 1) touched on the concept of colorblindness when she spoke about how it is so important to engage in conversations about race on social media because there are plenty of people who try to deny that racism is still an issue. She spoke from her perspective as a psychology major about colorblindness: “[It’s] cognitive dissonance about the things that…cause discrimination…when someone is colorblind, they typically find all other
reasons to…say that they are…not judging this person because they’re Black…I’m judging them because of this, that, and the third. What colorblindness does is it ignores intersectionality.” In addition to using her positionality as a Black female to inform her definition of colorblindness, acknowledging intersectionality, Naomi also pointed out the contradiction inherent in downplaying one or more of an individual’s identities in order to treat everyone “equally,” demonstrating a critique of liberalism: “So, you know, [when] someone’s colorblind…they say, ‘I don't see color,’ they’re also ignoring all of the other things that come with the color, the culture, the heritage, the food, the music, the experience. It’s not [a] compliment.”

Addressing whether being a moral person meant being colorblind, Naomi stated, “No, I think that that would actually be the opposite. When I meet people of other races and other cultures, I want to interact with them at their level, you know? I think that’s what makes people interesting…is that they’re different.” She mentioned that, while the “lines of communication are a little bit easier” when speaking with other people of color depending on “how culturally aware [they] are,” generally speaking, her morals “don’t have anything to do with how [she] see[s] other races,” and she does not think that colorblindness is a good “moral code.” Naomi prefaced her response to a question about her own experiences with colorblindness and moving beyond it with “I think as children…we’re colorblind to a certain extent, but it’s not a conscious decision…we can identify differences, but we do not label and stereotype as children…unless we are taught to do that.”

**Theme 6: While White emerging adults acknowledged that racism exists and impacts everyone, Black and minority emerging adults spoke about their own experiences corroborating racial realism.**
Racial realism. The notion of racism being ordinary, otherwise known as racial realism, implies that “racial progress is sporadic and that people of color are doomed to experience only infrequent peaks followed by regressions” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 171). For “realists,” in the CRT sense of the word, racism is “a means by which society allocates privilege and status,” not simply “a collection of unfavorable impressions of members of other groups” as it is often thought to be (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 21). While White participants (case 2) acknowledged that racism exists, that it impacts all of us, and that it cannot be ignored, Black (case 1) and minority (case 3) participants spoke in great detail about their own experiences corroborating racial realism.

In their individual interviews, Joanne (case 2) discussed the frequency of police brutality and racially motivated shootings, while Laura (case 2) focused on an awareness of growing up in a “racially charged nation.” Nathan (case 2) also pointed out how people “subconsciously still do things based on racism.” In Trevor’s (case 2) opinion, he is “in a weird spot” because racism does not “personally affect” him given that he is “not a person of color,” but it does affect him in that he is familiar with the “severity of racism in America” and “how deeply ingrained it is in society.” He continued: “I’ve also met people who are racist, and I know people who are willing to actually commit racist acts…so, I mean, I know the background of it and how it is basically institutionalized. So, I have a good idea of, like, everything about it.”

Isabella (case 3) talked about how it was mostly in middle school and high school when she found herself “actually becoming aware of the comments being said or the actions being done” whereas before, in elementary school, “yes, people are being racist, but you don’t realize. You don’t know it’s wrong. It’s when you get older that you start to notice.” Sofia (case 3) addressed racial realism in the following way: “I think the way society is going where…half the
nation thinks that all our racial problems are solved, and the other half thinks there are so many left…that [there are] only new ones unfolding every day…I think…it’s a big thing.” Sofia’s own personal experience with having to give up learning Arabic, which her mother began teaching her as a child, and having to deny the Middle Eastern side of her heritage also spoke to her understanding of racial realism as did her comment that “there’s just so much that needs to be done” about racism on “a fundamental level.”

Throughout her responses to questions in the individual interview and focus group session as well as her responses to the social media posts, Naomi (case 1) referenced racial realism. In her interview, she said, “People are so into being politically correct…and trying to act as though race is not an issue because people aren’t walking around in chains and being whipped and picking cotton, but that’s not the case.” Naomi continued:

You know, you’re sitting in a class [on] American history from [the] 1790[s], and of course all that’s talking about is slavery and this and that, and…you’re maybe one Black person, maybe two Black people in the class, and you have all these other people having all these opinions as if they’re talking about an extinct species…when you hear people talking about things as if they are so foreign…like they happened on another continent, and it happened right here, not that long ago, and you are a descendant of it, it’s very…it pushes you. It drives you, and it makes you go…you know what…it’s not my job to argue, to yell…I’m too educated for that. So, when you get to a certain level of education, it’s your job to then educate others.

Naomi’s emotionally-charged commentary on racial realism provided insight into what it truly feels like for her to experience conversations about race in the classroom as a Black student when they are undertaken without regard for her presence (or the presence of other Black
students) in the room and without proper contextualization that connects racial issues in the past with contemporary racial issues.

Anthony (case 1) framed the discussion of racial realism by talking about his mentor at the university, Dr. Singer, who is well-versed in issues of diversity, and her experiences on social media: “She can have all the facts…and she can present [them], but at the same time, these people…on the other side of the argument saying…racist things…have a way of dragging you into the sinkhole. It’s like a black hole argument.” Anthony believes his interactions with Dr. Singer informed his development as a social justice activist in that she was the one to “wake [him] up” in a sense, not that he was not already aware of many of the issues, but she was able to lay them all out for him so that he was able to realize that “all of these things happen at the exact same time…not just, like…oh, this happened during this time period, this happened during this time, no, all of these are happening now.” In terms of his own experiences encountering racism on social media, Anthony stated:

Ok, so I think I’ve gone through this process in many stages…I believe I’ve gone past the stage where, if I see a comment, it riles me up, or it makes me want to go out into the world and fight racism…now when I see a comment like that, I say, ok, here goes another one. Great. This is wonderful. But I’ve gotten to a point where I’m willing to accept that this is a part of my everyday society…That this is something I’m gonna have to live with until we beat it.

Anthony’s acceptance of racism with resignation operates as a self-defense mechanism of sorts and also aligns with the CRT concept of racial realism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). He attributed another part of his awakening regarding the persistence of racism to learning about the doll test, describing it in the following way:
Where they give all these different kids a Black doll and a White doll… They ask which one is pretty? Which one’s ugly? Which one’s smart? Which one’s stupid? Which one’s the good child? Which one’s the bad child? That one… almost broke me… I was looking at the Black baby, and then they were saying all the bad things about the Black baby, and I said, oh, my goodness… that was me as a kid… and so, that was kind of, like… a shock moment.

In this passage, Anthony addressed how learning about the doll test made him realize all the erroneous negative associations he had made with his own Blackness growing up, how he had even internalized these associations over the years, and how he was still unlearning them. Additionally, this moment confirmed for him the concurrently “ordinary” and insidious nature of racism in our society.

Microaggressions. According to Sue et al. (2007), racial microaggressions are “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). These encounters, which often catch minorities off guard, may go “unnoticed by members of the majority race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 167). Additionally, everyday racism, particularly in the form of microaggressions, can happen anywhere and anytime, even in “safe” spaces (e.g., universities) where individuals might not necessarily think they would encounter racism (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). One of the goals of critical race theorists in education is to understand how minorities experience microaggressions and in what particular form, including visual microaggressions, which can appear in textbooks, film, television, and in the contemporary form of social media (Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2015). Interestingly, in the context of this study, White participants (case 2) referenced the term
*microaggressions* and seemed to be at least somewhat familiar with the concept, while Black (case 1) and minority (case 3) participants mentioned experiences they had that could be considered microaggressions without explicitly using the term.

Trevor (case 2) was one of the White participants who was knowledgeable about microaggressions. In his individual interview, he stated that White people who adopt a colorblind perspective are being selfish in that they are choosing to ignore or downplay the daily affronts encountered by people of color, who “could be aggressed towards or [face] microaggressions.” The behavior Trevor referred to here is an example of a *microinvalidation*, which is a type of microaggression that negates the experiences, thoughts, or feelings of minorities (Sue et al., 2007). Despite his familiarity with microaggressions, in the focus group session, Trevor admitted that he has rarely noticed them personally:

Most of the stuff I see nowadays…in regards to conflict with racial climate is through social media…and that’s just from, like, a few of the groups I attend or friends I have just, like, talk about it, but…there are very few instances where I’ve seen…person-to-person racism or just…well, except, like, microaggressions, but there’s very few instances that I’ve seen of that in person.

Similarly, Laura (case 2) addressed microaggressions in her interview as a type of deprecating or even bullying behavior that she knows exists, yet she might not recognize from her perspective as a White person.

In the focus group session, Isabella (case 3) brought up an incident that occurred on campus, which she interpreted as sheer ignorance: “I always speak Spanish when I’m talking to my parents, and then this girl one time came up to me after I was talking to my dad, and she was like…‘Were you speaking Mexican?’ It’s like…ugh.” This seemingly naïve question clearly
came off as rude and insensitive to Isabella and, insofar as it was demeaning toward her racial identity, can be seen as a microinsult, another type of microaggression (Sue et al., 2007).

Anthony’s (case 1) brush with microaggressive behavior was evident when he shared his perspective on race-related social media comment threads and why he chooses to post original content in these instances:

I feel like when people see what I have to say or what I write on social media…I don’t know what it is, but people feel as though I have a certain level of intelligence and then they wanna challenge my level of intelligence…and I don’t know if that comes from, like, I acknowledge you as an intellectual human being or I think you’re stupid. So, it’s interesting.

Anthony’s perception of having his intelligence simultaneously affirmed and challenged brings up another theme that is prominent in microaggressive encounters known as ascription of intelligence, or “assigning intelligence to a person of color on the basis of their race,” which sends the message that “people of color are generally not as intelligent as Whites” or that it is “unusual for someone of your race to be intelligent” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276).

As a multiracial individual, Sofia (case 3) spoke of how she and her family encountered racism on multiple levels, illustrating the theme of being treated like an alien in your own land (Sue et al., 2007): “My brother and I [were] getting people saying things to us because they think we’re Hispanic. Even that I have to deal with, even though I don’t have any Hispanic blood in me.” She also talked about how her sister would experience “very ignorant and insensitive comments” at school because she looked Middle Eastern. These personal experiences that Sofia shared in her interview were examples of yet another type of microaggression, microassaults, or
attacks, whether verbal or nonverbal, that are intended to discriminate against or to otherwise hurt the victim through name-calling, avoidance, or other actions (Sue et al., 2007).

Intersectionality. From a CRT perspective, intersectionality can take on two meanings, one being that “individuals and classes often have shared or overlapping interests or traits” and the other being that it is important to take into account the various facets, or intersecting components, of an individual (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, etc.) given that no person has a “single, easily stated, unitary identity” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 165, 10). While White participants (case 2) referenced intersectionality in a somewhat distant way, often not considering the multiple aspects of their own identities, Black and minority (cases 1 and 3) participants discussed intersectionality either as it related to their own lives or in the context of broader social justice movements.

Nathan (case 2) spoke of how intersectionality was a topic that had been addressed in a couple of his classes, for example, in recognizing the intersections of race, poverty, and inequality in relation to food production, distribution, and access in the U.S. He seemed to have a solid grasp of intersectionality as a concept, talking about how he had come to recognize that ignoring a person’s race, even if it was with the intention of treating everyone equally, was akin to denying a part of their identity. However, unlike some of the other participants, he did not feel it was relevant to bring up the intersectional nature of his own identities as a White genderqueer individual who considers himself to be an anarchist. He kept his discussion of intersectionality at arm’s length throughout the interview and the focus group session.

In her training to become an resident assistant (RA), Laura (case 2) had the opportunity to learn about intersectionality as it pertained to mentoring incoming freshmen and becoming aware of the different identities and unique experiences they bring with them to college. Like Laura,
Sofia (case 3) also referenced intersectionality in the context of her RA training, but she took it one step further in her explanation, discussing how she had come to understand the role of intersectionality in social justice movements because of a conversation she had with her peers at one of their training events. Specifically, she talked about the importance of leveraging intersectionality in enacting social change:

I mean, we can win the fight alone, but we shouldn’t have to…different movements in the past have paved way for the next, but they were hindered by the people in the movements not helping each other. So, for example, if…there’s a woman that’s fighting [in] the Civil Rights Movement, and African Americans have fought against the Women’s Suffrage Movement, you know, it just doesn’t make sense to me to have this distinction, and I can understand, you don’t have to believe everything…but there are some fights that need to be fought together.

On the other hand, Naomi (case 1) addressed the intersectional nature of her own lived experience as a liberal Black woman who is a member of the LGBT community and a student-athlete. In her opinion, the different facets of individuals’ identities should not only be recognized, but should also be celebrated; however, she did point out that striking a balance between them, especially when you are young, can be difficult at times:

I know for me, personally…it’s a balancing act because…looking the way that I look, I’m not the blackest looking person, but I am Black. Both of my parents are Black. But yet, I have sandy hair, my eyes are green, my skin is light. So, for me, that was always a tough thing because the White kids knew I wasn’t White and then the Black kids weren’t sure. So, I was kinda stuck in the middle because of pigment, and moving beyond that is, like I said, it’s a balance because, for me, it was always like…I like not necessarily
having to constantly be reminded that I’m Black for how derogatory it is in some
instances…I like being just [Naomi] to most people, but I like identifying as a Black
woman. I think it’s a wonderful thing, so it’s tough because it’s like…you don’t wanna
be too Black, too Afrocentric…but you also don’t want to bash your heritage…so you
just kinda coast under the radar.

Here, Naomi talks about the struggle to come to terms with her racial identity, especially given
that Whiteness is considered to be “the norm” in the U.S.

_White privilege._ According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), white privilege refers to the
many “social advantages [and] benefits…that come with being a member of the dominant race”
(p. 87). Some of these privileges include being able to avoid interacting with people of other
races, being able to rent or buy a house wherever desired, and seeing themselves reflected on
television and in school curriculum (McIntosh, 1990). White people benefit from a “system of
favors, exchanges, and courtesies from which outsiders of color are frequently excluded,” such
as preferential treatment of White students by teachers or advantages for White candidates in
being considered and hired for jobs, whether it be through “quiet networking” or assumptions
about Black or minority candidates that can be prompted by something as simple as seeing their
“unusual” names on résumés (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 88). However, all of this is usually
masked by a narrative that White people adopt in which they “do not see themselves as having a
race, but as being, simply, people,” in other words, they “do not believe that they think and
reason from a white viewpoint, but from a universally valid one” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012,
pp. 87-88). Many will even deny that they benefit from white privilege.

In the context of this study, most of the White participants, who were social justice-
oriented, demonstrated a familiarity with the concept of white privilege if not a deeper
understanding of their own white privilege. However, some of them struggled to reconcile their white privilege with their desire for societal change. Laura (case 2) admittedly had the most basic understanding of her white privilege. In her interview, she referenced how colorblindness is generally used by White people as a way of enacting their privilege by choosing “not to see color” with the intention of, and sometimes under the guise of, treating everyone the same.

Laura’s perspective on white privilege was reflected in her own experience on social media in which she does not even see many posts about race-related issues given the “editing” of her Facebook feed, and the few things she does see on Facebook posted by her friends who do “talk about race explicitly,” do not necessarily compel her to “actively comment.” In another segment of her interview, Laura spoke of how she felt like “it’s so obvious that we should be socially just that it almost makes [her] a little frustrated or angry,” yet she still invoked her white privilege when she talked about choosing to avoid race-related conversations because they can be “so overwhelming and negative” that she has to try to protect her “own health,” simultaneously feeling guilty for not engaging enough. She also talked candidly about how, “as a White person, it’s easy to just interact with other White people,” and while this is “not [her] intention” since she tries “for it not to be that way,” it does happen more often than she would like. Additionally, Laura confessed that, even though she has “probably seen” instances of colorblind racism on social media, she often does not “consciously store it.” In terms of the process of becoming a social justice activist, she said, “I’m not a very loud or openly opinionated person…so, most of my work has been kind of…silently with myself or…liking things silently.”

Joanne (case 2) referenced a specific book she was reading called Being White about white privilege, or in her own words, what it “mean[s] to be a White person” and “how we can use that kind of standing to help those that are, you know, I don’t wanna say ‘less than,’” but,
like…less privileged…not like ‘less,’ but you know what I mean.” While Joanne seemed to have an emerging knowledge about her white privilege through her readings and experiences, which came out in other segments of my interview with her, some of her words revealed a “white savior” or messiah complex. This was not readily apparent in my interviews with any of the other White participants, but stood out to me in my brief interaction with Joanne. She did recognize how, as a White person, it was not her place to speak about certain issues affecting minorities, but rather to “listen to what people of color are saying” and to “learn from that.” Acknowledging her own privilege has helped her realize that “there are people that don’t have it always as good as you do” and that she wanted “to change that” because it is “an important issue to address.” In her opinion, it is critical for White emerging adults like herself to not only recognize their privilege, but also to participate in events on campus that demonstrate solidarity with their non-White peers.

Nathan (case 2) spoke of his frustration toward White people who perpetuate stereotypes or try to otherwise justify racism, yet he also admitted that, because he is “never the victim” of racist comments, he is “not as upset as [he] maybe would be if [he] were.” Though Nathan is often “not really aware of things going on unless [he sees] them posted…on social media,” which is an indication of his own white privilege, he does believe it is “very important” to engage with race-related issues on social media as a “blanket statement for anyone.” More than the other White participants, Nathan spoke in an indirect manner about white privilege, mostly by referencing examples of the White people he knows rather than using personal examples. In these examples of his White family, friends, or acquaintances, he talked about how they will deny or refuse to recognize their privilege, for example, by touting their own resolve and merit in
getting a job in places where it is “hard to get a job,” ignoring how discrimination may also factor into the equation for Black people and other minorities.

Trevor (case 2) demonstrated a more advanced knowledge of his white privilege compared to Laura, Joanne, and Nathan. Not only did he openly admit to the boundless privilege he had as a white male, but he also spoke about the “responsibility” he felt he had to stand up for those who are marginalized. He talked about how adopting a colorblind perspective is a way of “exploiting” white privilege, a figurative slap in the face to any “person of color who has to see color every day, who sees their color and knows they’re systematically oppressed” and face racism on a daily basis. Trevor’s perspective-taking abilities were apparent in his words here and throughout his interview.

Black and minority participants also referenced white privilege in their interviews in terms of how they saw it manifested in their own experiences, both inside and outside of school. Anthony (case 1) talked about specific moments in which he came to realize the role of white privilege in systemic oppression. One of these moments was during the summer after his freshman year of college when he worked with Freedom Schools, an initiative of the Children’s Defense Fund, where he learned more about the school-to-prison pipeline:

I’ll never forget this. They told me that these private prison companies have an algorithm that can determine whether a young Black boy is going to jail by the time he is in the third grade…and I said, oh, my goodness…how in the world…like, there is a mathematical equation that dictates this phenomenon, and I couldn't believe it, and so that...what that meant for me was there is a power structure and a system that is designed for me to fail…all of this just kind of said, ok, something needs to be done about this because, as I said, if I were to see somebody being bullied, I’d wanna step in and remove
that person from the environment…I said I wouldn’t stop the aggressor, but if I can’t remove the person from the environment, then I have to stop the aggressor…I can’t remove…all these people from this environment, so I have to stop the aggressor.

In this particular comment, Anthony uses the aggressor (bully) and victim dynamic as a metaphor for the need to identify and fight back against white privilege.

According to Sofia (case 3), the Black Lives Matter Movement is “an extension of the Civil Rights Movement” that operates in direct opposition to white privilege in an effort to shine the light on racism and systemic oppression. She also spoke about how racism in this country has “change[d] its target” over the years and how white privilege has impacted her family directly: “Italians were despised when my dad moved here. Like, they were shunned. He couldn’t sit with certain groups that were also considered lesser because he was less than them. But now saying that I’m half-Italian is the coolest.” While she recognized the power of education in bringing about possible solutions, she also observed that “there’s people out there that don’t want everyone to be educated…they want us fighting each other.”

**Theme 7: Providing students with a systemic framework for understanding how race operates in a white-dominated society.** The first step in helping students confront racism online and offline, particularly through combatting colorblindness, is for educators to provide students with a systemic framework for understanding how race operates in a white-dominated society. From a CRT perspective, this might include familiarizing students with the concepts of interest convergence, critique of liberalism, and the dominant narrative (including empathic fallacy), as well as rhetorical strategies or semantic moves used to downplay racial views. All of these tenets and the ways in which they appeared in the data sources are presented in separate subsections below.
Interest convergence. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), interest convergence is the idea that “the majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits its interest to do so” (p. 165). As Bell (1980) points out, “It is clear that racial equality is not deemed legitimate by large segments of the American people, at least to the extent it threatens to impair the societal status of whites” (p. 523). Hence, “racial remedies may instead be outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites” (Bell, 1980, p. 523). Examples of interest convergence, through participants’ familiarity with the concept, their personal experiences, or their observations came up in the individual interviews and social media post responses.

Isabella (case 3) and Naomi (case 1) both referenced interest convergence, or lack thereof (i.e., interest divergence), in the media. Isabella talked about how she relied on social media to make her aware of race-related issues, in particular. In response to whether she could become as aware from watching the news on television or reading newspapers, she stated, “I feel like it wouldn’t be as much because the [traditional] media doesn’t cover everything that is really out there, and if something is really messed up, they might not want to be involved, so they won’t talk about it.” In other words, when the mainstream media does not stand to gain anything from reporting on race-related incidents (i.e., the interests of those trying to advance social justice causes and those involved with media outlets/media audiences diverge), these incidents will not appear on television or in the newspapers. However, they do frequently appear on social media (e.g., the recent spate of racially charged police shootings that appeared on Facebook Live, a live video streaming service offered by the SNS).
Naomi took a different angle, speaking about cultural appropriation in the media as an example of interest convergence in terms of Black artists bringing in money for record labels and White teenagers/emerging adults listening to hip hop in order to seem cool:

So, it is upsetting because, especially when there’s this contrast between…you know, there’s race-related topics and then cultural appropriation, so it’s like this juxtaposition between do you like Black people or you don’t like Black people? I’m confused because…if you don’t, then leave all of it…stop picking the pieces that you want to identify with or want to take ownership of because you like it…ok? It’s…African, in essence…it’s everything Black is hip hop, but because it is a business and because people like it…it’s supposed to be everyone’s music…everyone should be able to listen to it…And thinking that I have a Black friend or I listen to hip hop or, you know, I wear Jordans or whatever cultural mainstream things that Black people have made popular, they feel that if they, you know, partake in that, then they’re not prejudiced or that they don’t exhibit any bigotry.

In her statement, Naomi exposes and critiques the prominent role interest convergence plays in the media and in American culture, more broadly speaking. Interestingly, while Sofia (case 3) also offered a critique of interest convergence in her response to social media post #3, “All lives matter…Until immigrants are at your door seeking sanctuary,” pointing out the hypocrisy of All Lives Matter supporters, in segments of her interview, she acknowledged the influential role interest convergence can play in advancing social justice causes. Specifically, she spoke of how “different movements in the past have paved way for the next, but they were hindered by the people in the movements not helping each other.” She continued, “So, for example, if…there’s a woman that’s fighting [in] the Civil Rights Movement, and African Americans have fought
against the Women’s Suffrage Movement, you know, it just doesn’t make sense to me to have this distinction.” Similarly, in his response to social media post #3 (see Figure 3), “I completely agree. Can you help me fight for the black lives?,” Anthony (case 1) leveraged interest convergence to garner support from allies in the fight for racial justice.

Joanne’s (case 2) response to social media post #6 (see Figure 6) referenced interest convergence as well as interest divergence in a rather general sense. She pointed out how people, White people in this case, tend to avoid those who are different from them or have opposing views, while also stating the importance of “engaging in conversation” with those same people because it can allow them to “learn and grow.” In her response to social media post #4 (see Figure 4), Naomi (case 1) adamantly condemned the philosophy behind interest convergence: “Please explain to me how this BLACK MAN, standing up for the injustices of BLACK PEOPLE is racist? Oh because he should just be a good boy and entertain you?” Lastly, Rizana’s response to social media post #2, “Justice system is messed up,” essentially conveyed the sentiment that nothing has changed or will drastically change in our justice system without interest convergence. This particular quotation from Rizana also demonstrated a critique of liberalism (see following section) in the sense that the justice system, which is supposed to be impartial and fair, according to the liberal ideals the U.S. was founded upon, is clearly not functioning the way it was intended to for all of its citizens.

Critique of liberalism. Peller (1990) points out how “integrationist” ideology, which “locates racial oppression in the social structure of prejudice and stereotype based on skin color” and associates progress with “the transcendence of a racial consciousness,” has actually been detrimental to racial justice movements in that it has relegated race consciousness to the margins “beyond the good sense of enlightened American culture” (p. 760). This ideology, predicated on
the “deep-rooted assumptions of cultural universality and neutrality,” which is often adopted by progressive, liberal Whites in the U.S., promotes equal rights and opportunity on a surface level, but effectively “obscures the ways that we might contribute to a meaningful transformation of race relations” (Peller, 1990, p. 762). The “cautious, incremental quality” of liberalism is a point of contention for CRT scholars, who believe that the systemic nature of racism requires drastic changes, “otherwise the system merely swallows up the small improvements” and “everything goes back to the way it was” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 63-64).

Participants in this study touched on various aspects of liberalism and how it informs racial issues in this country, some agreeing with it and some critiquing it. In her interview, Laura (case 2) referenced racial issues as something she feels “very strongly about,” and continued:

I feel like not supporting the equality of humans is just unethical and doesn’t make any sense, so it is exhausting to deal with someone who doesn’t agree with that…So, that’s kind of one reason why I don’t engage…but also…I know that I am biased, and I know that I don’t have all of the information, so I’m also a little fearful of being seen as insensitive or not understanding. So, I just avoid it.

Interestingly, while Laura acknowledged that she does post about social justice issues online, she admitted she is afraid to comment about racial issues, in particular, because she does not feel well-informed about them and does not want to be seen as “insensitive.” As a White female, she seems to have internalized colorblindness as a strategy for not engaging in conversations about race, at least in open, highly public forums, which was apparent throughout her interview and in the focus group session. The excerpt from Laura’s interview included above indicates how she is also using her belief in abstract liberalism to justify her lack of engagement. However, her
knowledge of being biased and admitting to a lack of racial literacy does point to a desire to become better informed in terms of how to become an ally in the fight against racial injustice.

Nathan (case 2), on the other hand, conveyed his sentiments on liberalism in a slightly different way when addressing the role of colorblindness in social media interactions:

I often see people try to use the idea of being colorblind as an excuse to not care about racial inequality. So, someone will complain about how they were affected by poverty and unemployment because of their race or, like, discrimination, and then someone who is White will say, “Oh, well, where I live, it’s really hard to get a job.” As if because they’re White and they solved that problem, that it somehow means that there’s no such thing as inequality. So, I guess, people will…kind of like the whole #AllLivesMatter thing where someone will complain about some injustice that’s happening and someone will say, “Well, you know, of course you should have rights, but we should all have rights,” and they’re completely missing the point that they already have rights, that people are complaining because there’s inequality. So, it’s sort of like saying, oh, if we just ignore the problem…it’ll go away on its own, which is kind of the opposite of how that works.

Here, Nathan critiques liberal ideology by pointing out the logical fallacies in the arguments presented by White people who defend colorblindness, particularly by circulating the hashtag #AllLivesMatter.

Anthony (case 1) conveyed a sense of frustration with liberals’ tendency to simply pay lip service to social justice issues. When discussing how people often post on social media to convey their discontent, thinking that is good enough, he stated in an exasperated tone, “I’m tired of talking about these issues, and I think it’s time for more action than talking.” Similarly, Sofia
(case 3) indicated how she prefers not to use labels like “liberal” because, as she put it, “I know if…I even say I have liberal ideologies, people are gonna immediately assume, oh, you believe this about abortion…you believe this about feminism, and all these things.” This sentiment of not wanting to be put in a box, even while identifying with liberal ideologies, demonstrates Sofia’s critique of liberalism in the sense that she recognizes how discussions laced with political agendas and assumptions without adequate action to back them up can be counterproductive in the fight for social justice.

According to Naomi (case 1), liberal ideologies that tout equality and universality while still allowing people to pick and choose which issues are their issues to either support or tackle are disingenuous. She pointed out how “welfare, poverty, [and] drugs” are often seen as “Black issues” instead of “universal issues.” In her opinion, “freedom is not universal,” and neither is “common decency.” Moreover, many liberals often refuse to see the discrepancy between their ideological support for equal opportunity and their actions or, in some cases, lack of action, which actually serve to maintain systemic racism and inequality.

*Dominant narrative and empathic fallacy.* According to Delgado (1989), “The dominant group [in-group] creates its own stories [that] remind it of its identity in relation to out-groups [providing] it with a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (p. 2412). The resulting stock story or overarching master narrative, reflecting the interests of the dominant group, permeates all levels of society as the narrative that is most widely circulated and believed. In an effort to resist this master narrative and for the purpose of “psychic self-preservation” as well as lessening feelings of subordination, out-group members devise counter-narratives that can be mutually beneficial for both the teller, in a therapeutic way, and for the listener, “morally and epistemologically” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436).
In their discussion of counter-narratives, Delgado and Stefancic (2012) present the following questions and explanations from a CRT perspective:

How can there be such divergent stories? Why do they not reconcile? To the first question, critical race theory answers, “experience.” People of different races have radically different experiences as they go through life…To the second, it answers that empathy is in short supply. (p. 47)

They go on to define a CRT concept known as empathic fallacy, which is the “mistaken belief that sweeping social reform can be accomplished through speech and incremental victories within the system,” or “the belief that one can change a narrative by merely offering another, better one – that the reader’s or listener’s empathy will quickly and reliably take over” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 161, 33). In order to be truly effective, counter-narratives, like any social justice initiative or reform effort, must be artfully constructed in order to “jar the comfortable dominant complacency” in ways that include the dominant group and prompt them to voluntarily enter the conversation, recognize and evaluate their complicity in the system, or act on behalf of marginalized groups (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438); see Bell’s 1992 counter-narrative “The Space Traders”).

In his interview, Nathan’s (case 2) well-intentioned comments reveal how empathic fallacy operates in a white-dominated society:

I just get angry when I see people promoting harmful and hateful views, and I just want to discourage them from doing that, and I guess I hope that even if I don’t really discourage that person by explaining to them why they shouldn’t say things like that, I can maybe, like…I think there’s kind of…this sort of secondary thing that goes on where, like, if you see someone saying something hateful or maybe using racist logic and you
confront them publicly, that person might not change their mind, but other people who might have read their post and thought, oh, that makes sense…like, oh, I guess racial inequality isn’t that much of a problem, and then they see a comment explaining why the post was wrong, and they’re like, oh, actually, this post is wrong. I shouldn’t listen to this. So, I don’t…again, it’s kind of just like an idea…like, I kind of believe that that’s how it works, but I don’t know if it’s actually effective or not, but I still…I feel like maybe if there’s some chance that it’s helpful, why not?

Rizana’s (case 3) response to social media post #7 (see Figure 7), “I don’t think anyone using #AllLivesMatter is trying to purposely suppress the movement but rather don’t have a proper understanding of #BlackLivesMatter,” illustrates how even out-group members can be impacted by the stock narrative about race relations in the U.S. Contrary to Rizana’s comment about #AllLivesMatter supporters not actively attempting to suppress the Black Lives Matter Movement, some participants in the study indicated that this is, indeed, the primary purpose of the #AllLivesMatter hashtag. For example, social media post #3 (see Figure 3) prompted Nathan (case 2) to point out how #AllLivesMatter supporters are either “missing the point” or “actively striving to silence the outcry against racial inequality and injustice,” represented by the Black Lives Matter Movement. The same social media post also led Naomi (case 1) to ask, “Why is the natural instinct for the majority to counter any minority motion or initiative with a motion representing something that has never been threatened?” Along the same lines, Isabella (case 3) reacted to social media post #5 (see Figure 5) by stating how the post simply “proves the point that those that say all lives matter are truly racist and don’t understand the issues.”

Other participants indicated that, while they would not personally use #AllLivesMatter in their Twitter or Facebook posts, they would either express their disagreement with the individual
who used the hashtag in their post, though not in a forceful way, or leverage the sentiment behind it to advocate for Black lives. Laura (case 2) explained her response to social media post #3 (see Figure 3) in the focus group session as trying to “take the same tone” to get through to this particular Twitter user, though she normally would not respond to a post like this because it “feels ineffective.” As a follow-up to Laura’s comment in the focus group session, Trevor (case 2) stated that, while he did not respond to this particular social media post during his individual interview, had he responded, he would have probably said something that would “educate him, maybe in the same way [Laura] did” by informing him “why it’s not all lives matter, and if the response was…negative, then so be it.” He continued, “I don’t think I would’ve pushed it. But he is a kid, so, I mean, I could see, like…the naïveté.” Here, Trevor was also factoring in his assumptions about the age and identity of the individual who posted based on the photo that preceded the post and accompanying Twitter handle as well as giving this person the benefit of the doubt because of these assumptions. Anthony’s (case 1) response to the same social media post (i.e., “I completely agree. Can you help me fight for the black lives?”) used the leveraging strategy to tap into the empathy of the individual who posted in an attempt to recruit an ally, in a sense, without really rocking the boat, revealing empathic fallacy once again.

Viewing SNSs from slightly different angles, Trevor and Naomi both emphasized the significance of social media as a tool of resistance, allowing for counter-narratives to emerge in a way that was not possible before the digital age. According to Trevor, “Social media is a platform that a lot of political groups use…Black Lives Matter uses it…and it is a crucial part of society…a lot of people use videos now and…Facebook Live has become an important thing for protesting, so it is…important in those cases.” While Trevor indicated that he is often hesitant about how productive social media interactions can really be, he did admit that if they can spark
“actual, good conversation,” then they can be effective in prompting change. In contrast, Naomi was adamant in her belief that social media has opened doors for minorities to share their counterstories and engage in resistance:

I think what it allows underrepresented communities to do that, you know…a person not of color may walk past this person and not even think that they’re educated and not even think that they have any thought process, but that person can go home on the computer and go, actually, this is what I’ve experienced, this is what I feel is going on, so it allows so many other people to have voices that would be ignored in day-to-day interaction.

Because most people aren’t gonna seek that discomfort face-to-face.

In addition to commenting on the power of social media to mobilize minority communities, Naomi also personally used narrative in both her individual interview and the focus group session to convey the necessity of resistance movements like Black Lives Matter and to counter the stock narrative of “All Lives Matter.” Using metaphor, Naomi artfully compared the Black Lives Matter Movement to a short person trying to see over a fence in the explanation of her response to social media post #3, mentioned earlier in this section:

So…imagine, like, Black Lives Matter being this very, very short person…and there’s a fence, right? And All Lives Matter and the majority is this person that is 6’7,” right? The fence is only 5’ tall, ok? Black Lives Matter is that short person going…I’m not tall enough…can’t see over the fence, and they go and they get a ladder, and they prop themselves up to see over the fence, to have the same view that the majority already has. The majority goes…uh [exasperated sigh], you got a ladder? So, they go and get a taller ladder…and they stand on top of that, and it’s like…you’re 6’7”…you’ve always been able to see over the fence. Why do you need a ladder? Because I have one? But I
need one! So, All Lives Matter negates the idea that Black lives matter 'cause when I talk to my friends about Black Lives Matter, we often say the hashtag should have been #BlackLivesMatterToo because that’s what Black Lives Matter is saying.

Naomi also used the analogy below to continue her critique of All Lives Matter and the faulty reasoning behind equal treatment when it comes to race in this country (e.g., the basis for such concepts as reverse racism):

So, I don’t like when someone feels like…if you skin your knee and you cry and everyone is coming to your aid, you know, because you’ve torn your skin, and the next person gets a paper cut and wants the same kind of help…it’s like…well, I broke my leg. Why do you need the same level of attention to a paper cut? Just go put a Band-Aid on it.

Naomi continued her counter-argument using another apt analogy:

It’s like, well, you know, in a neighborhood full of pristine houses, mine is on fire. You gonna call the fire truck to put out the fire…you know, the house with no fire, or you gonna call the fire truck to put out the house with the fire? So, that’s kind of why I had that opinion ’cause it immediately just makes me go…they’re totally ignoring the point.

*Rhetorical strategies or semantic moves to downplay racial views.* While all participants in the study considered themselves to be social-justice oriented, particularly in terms of supporting or fighting for racial justice, some of them (mostly White participants) still used certain rhetorical strategies, or semantic moves, in their responses, conveying a certain degree of discomfort in responding to race-related questions and social media posts. Aside from general rhetorical strategies, often in the form of phrases preceding statements that could possibly be interpreted as racist or through attempts to downplay racial views, there were also examples of
thematically-induced incoherence and diminutives in the data sources (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; see Chapter 1).

In certain instances, White participants (case 2) would use the rhetorical strategy of taking both sides on a racial issue. For example, in her interview, Laura stated, “I think it is important to have conversations about race…as for on social media…I see where it’s helpful, and I see where it’s not helpful, and I see where people can get aggressive or unfair on either side…So, I don’t really tend to personally post content about race.” Trevor also used this particular rhetorical strategy in his interview when discussing his tendency to mediate conversations about race on social media, essentially taking both sides: “I might be, like, it’s usually not on the topic, it’s more like mediating, kind of…it’s more like…I [implore] you to read what they said and think about it or, like…you guys are arguing for nothing.” In the same segment of his interview, Trevor also admitted to using the semantic move of avoiding direct comments about race: “But usually I do avoid entering the conversation, unless I just feel like I need to say something that might help the conversation.” In her interview, Laura also spoke of her tendency to avoid entering conversations about race on social media:

Umm…so, I don’t really see them [race-related posts] that much because I mostly use Facebook, and I feel like I guess in my circle, like, ’cause I know Facebook is really good at now editing it down to only like a few people, so I guess those few people that I see don’t talk about race explicitly, and when they do, I don’t feel compelled to actively comment…umm…or share, mostly for, like, my own health.

Here, Laura justifies her lack of engagement with race-related issues online and distances herself from the possibility of being seen as racist by presenting the argument that Facebook is editing her newsfeed to the point that posts about race do not even show up. However, she also admits
that this may be, in part, due to her online friend circle (i.e., the people she has specifically chosen to connect with on Facebook). She also taps into her white privilege in this particular comment in having the option to ignore conversations about race for the sake of her “own health.”

In the following focus group excerpt, Trevor and Laura discussed their reactions to social media post #3 (Figure 3), revealing yet another example of a rhetorical strategy on their part:

Trevor: “Umm…if I was to respond, I probably would’ve seen his picture and been like that looks like a 10-year-old kid, right?”

Laura: “Yeah, right.” [laughs]

Trevor: “And I would’ve, like, probably said something like…try to educate him, maybe in the same way you [Laura] did. Just tell him why it’s not all lives matter, and if the response was, like, negative, then so be it, but…I don’t think I would’ve pushed it. But he is a kid, so, I mean, I could see, like…the naïveté.”

By making excuses for the person who posted, giving him a pass for his incendiary post because of assumptions they made about his age from his profile photo, Trevor and Laura not only tried to downplay racial views by taking his perspective, they also took into account contextual factors of the social network site (i.e., Twitter) that most of the other participants (cases 1 and 3) did not consider or factor into their responses to the post.

In the social media post responses, the semantic move of avoidance came up more often than any other rhetorical strategy. The most obvious instances of avoiding direct comments about race or racism came up in the lack of responses by both Trevor and Nathan. While Trevor did not make as much of an effort to clarify his choice to skip certain social media posts, Nathan did include comments beneath the blank reply boxes, such as these ones: “If I didn’t know the
person, I wouldn’t bother responding. If I did, I’d ask them what point they were trying to make, before I made any response to their statement” (post #6) and “I would ‘like’ Vandalena’s comments but probably wouldn’t say anything” (post #7).

The next most common rhetorical strategy utilized in the responses to social media posts was that of deflecting responsibility or shifting the focus, in conjunction with avoidance, which had the effect of downplaying participants’ racial views. This was apparent in quite a few of the social media post responses, such as Trevor’s response to post #7, “Sounds like a good discussion for class. What class was it?,” as well as Laura’s response to post #8, “And I hope that your voice is heard loud and proud!” and Joanne’s response to the same post, “Agreed, talking about this is important!” In addition to avoiding addressing the topic of race directly, all of these responses deflect responsibility in some way. Laura’s response, for instance, does so in the sense that she affirms the sentiments of the person who posted without actually indicating that she would be an ally in the fight against racism. Joanne’s response is similar in that she also focuses on talking about race-related issues instead of acting to address them. This is problematic in that it points to a trend among White emerging adults to assume a cursory role in racial justice movements, particularly in online settings. Laura confirmed this viewpoint when she states, in response to social media post #2, “Unfortunately it happens when all we see is perpetual aggressive and violent imagery of young black men. I wish in media we could better see a more accurate and diverse depiction of this diverse population,” shifting the topic to media representations of Black men rather than engaging in a discussion about systemic racism, downplaying racial issues once again.

In her response to post #6, Joanne identifies a lack of interest convergence (i.e., interest divergence) as one of the reasons why this avoidance of important conversations about race
occurs: “Engaging in conversation with those you don’t agree with can allow both you and the other party to learn and grow. Ignoring those you don’t agree with will only worsen relations between the opposing sides.” While she promoted open dialogue in this statement, Joanne also acknowledged that it is much easier to ignore individuals who do not have a similar perspective, made even easier by social media platforms that operate, at least partly, on the premise of showing you what you want to see.

Perhaps most surprisingly, one of the minority participants (case 3), Rizana, seemed to fall for the rhetorical strategy of using the “AllLivesMatter” hashtag as a reflection of colorblind ideology. This can be seen in her response to social media post #7: “I don’t think anyone using #AllLivesMatter is trying to purposely suppress the movement but rather don’t have a proper understanding of #BlackLivesMatter.” In other words, she did not recognize that #AllLivesMatter is a rhetorical strategy in itself, though other participants (including White participants) did pick up on this. Perhaps the colorblind mentality and the rhetorical strategies used to justify this mentality have become so ingrained in our culture that they inform the perspective of not only White emerging adults, but also that of Black and other minority and multiracial emerging adults in their online (and offline) race relations.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, diminutives are a stylistic component of colorblindness meant to “soften” comments about race that could be interpreted in a negative light by using phrases like “just a little bit” instead of being completely direct about one’s racial views or with the intention of presenting a “nonracial image” (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Laura (case 2) was the only participant in the study whose use of diminutives (in conjunction with other rhetorical strategies) stood out. In response to a question regarding how she responds to race-related issues on social media and whether (or not) she actively engages in conversations about race online,
Laura stated, “I know that I am biased, and I know that I don’t have all of the information, so I’m also a little fearful of being seen as insensitive or not understanding. So, I just avoid it.” By saying she is “a little fearful” of being perceived as insensitive regarding racial issues, Laura uses a diminutive to justify her lack of engagement on social media and to present a “race neutral” façade. Her concluding sentence, “So, I just avoid it,” is also an example of a rhetorical strategy in terms of downplaying her own role or complicity in systemic racism and using her white privilege to avoid participating in the conversation about race.

Laura also utilized diminutives in the focus group session when responding to a question about whether it would be useful to have a racial literacy curriculum that educators could use in their classrooms:

I just wanna say I do agree that this would, like, in theory be really amazing for students to have experience with, but I’m just a little hesitant just on the quality of the content that could be given. They would need to get, definitely, the proper educators or else…’cause, you know, I’ve been in some general education classes here and at my former school before I transferred, and it just is kinda disheartening to see something so important be undervalued by some students because it’s required, so I don’t know the solution around that, but, you know, that being said, just because that might be an issue doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be teaching it, but it’s just something I’m conscious of always.

By saying she is “just a little hesitant” about the potential content that would be included in a racial literacy curriculum and that it “just is kinda disheartening” when important issues like race are not taken seriously by students, she attempts to distance herself from the conversation as well as any potential solutions (e.g., “I don’t know the solution…”). At the same time, Laura uses the rhetorical strategy of taking both sides on the issue, both at the beginning (e.g., “I do
agree…but…) and at the end of the passage (e.g., “doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be teaching it, but…) so as not to appear opposed to the concept of a racial literacy curriculum, which would “in theory,” be “amazing” for students, as she points out.

The final semantic move used exclusively by White participants (case 2) in the study was thematically-induced incoherence. This was evident in comments made by Joanne, Nathan, and Trevor in their individual interviews as well as the focus group comments of Trevor and Laura. According to Bonilla-Silva (2002), thematically-induced incoherence includes any type of statement that conveys noticeable discomfort with the topic of race, such that the individual has trouble putting together a coherent sentence (e.g., “I mean, I mean, I don’t know, I mean yes, but I don’t know”). In her interview, Joanne expressed this incoherence on a few occasions. The first instance was in relation to learning more about her own white privilege and how it impacts the symbolization of her moral identity:

I have a book that I’ve been meaning to read called Being White, and it’s about our place of privilege, how we use that to help others, what does it mean to be a White person, and how does that…you know…How can we use that kind of standing to help those that are, you know, I don’t wanna say “less than,” but, like…Privileged…less privileged…not like “less,” but you know what I mean…

The other two instances were in relation to colorblindness, in terms of how she would define it and the role it plays in social media interactions. In attempting to define colorblindness, Joanne stated:

Umm…I think it’s important to…’cause, like, it also kind of insinuates that, like, if you do see color, you might see color less than…you know? Like, me saying, like, you’re a Black person shouldn’t be a bad thing…you’re Indian, you’re…it should be something to
uplift and celebrate each other’s diversity, and colorblindness is, like, kinda…I guess ignorant, in a sense.

When asked to speak about any experiences she has personally had with colorblindness on social media, Joanne said:

I think the people that are, like, “I don’t see race,” actually everyone is saying…but I guess I don’t know, like, in what instances I would, like, see that expressed unless it was someone saying that explicitly, which I have seen…Umm…when talking about, like, race relations and stuff like that, it tends to be, like, a defense people make…is what I most often see.

Like Joanne, Trevor repeatedly demonstrated thematically-induced incoherence. In response to a question about how important he thought it was to engage in race-related conversations on social media and whether he shared original content for these posts, Trevor commented, “I do, like, write some political posts, or I guess…focus on conversations about race…umm…I don’t know if I, like, write conversations [sic] about race…I might…post something myself; but usually I might…share something relating to, like, real issues going on.”

Here, Trevor fumbled with his words saying things like he does write political posts, which are sometimes about race, but that he also does not often write original posts about race, tending to share other people’s posts instead, while also clearing his throat and rummaging through his paper copy of the interview questions (as noted in the interview transcript). In another segment of his interview, responding to whether race-related comments or racist posts on social media personally affected him, Trevor shared his views at length:

Alright, so…race-related comments on social media do affect me, I think. Umm…it they’re inherently racist or just, like…if I know someone to be racist or prejudiced and
they post something racist or prejudiced, I’m not as upset because I’m just, like, it is expected. Umm...but it’s...well, it’s always upsetting, umm...that they would post something like that or share something like that. Umm...yeah, so, I guess I’m, like, in a weird spot because it doesn’t personally affect me, like, ’cause I’m not a person of color, umm...but it does affect me because I know the, like, umm...severity of racism in America and just, like, how deeply ingrained it is in society, and I’ve also met people who are racist, and I know people who are willing to actually commit racist acts, so...umm...so, I mean, I know the background of it and how it is basically institutionalized. So, I have a good idea of, like, everything about it. So, yeah, it does affect me on social media, and umm...yeah, it does make me want to act, and I already think I am acting, but, I mean, most of the time I just wanna do more anyways, so...umm...yeah.

Aside from over-using “umm,” “like,” “so,” and “yeah,” which already displayed his discomfort and incoherence, Trevor flipped between indicating that it is “always upsetting” for him to see racist posts on social media to expressing how it is more upsetting to see a racist post when it comes from someone he did not expect would post it. He also goes back and forth between saying that racist posts do not affect him personally since he is “not a person of color” and that they do affect him because he knows the “severity of racism in America” and he has a “good idea” of “everything about it,” which is certainly a sweeping generalization to make.

Trevor’s thematically-induced incoherence was also evident in some of his focus group statements. For example, in response to a question about the role of social media in designing a racial literacy curriculum and the challenges of incorporating social media effectively in a classroom setting, Trevor said, “Umm...just, like, social media is…I don’t know. You can say anything on it, and at the end of the day…I don’t know. It’s hard to see a class curriculum
including that…because a lot of people don’t take it seriously anyway.” In responding to another focus group question about whether social media integration could work in certain classroom settings, Trevor commented, “I mean, I could see it, like, in my head if it was to happen, and I’m sure it would facilitate discussion…to those who are interested, but…I don’t know. I guess it’s just harder for me to grasp…the role that social media might play.” Lastly, when asked about the experiences he has personally had that inform his view of the racial climate on campus during the focus group session, Trevor stated:

I was actually gonna say most of the stuff I see nowadays is…in regards to conflict with racial climate is through social media. Umm…and that’s just from, like, a few of the groups I attend or friends I have just, like, talk about it, but umm…there are very few instances where I’ve seen, like…person-to-person racism or just, like…well, except, like, microaggressions, but there’s very few instances that I’ve seen of that in person-to-person [sic]. But a few of the social media stuff [sic] I’ve seen, like…umm…well…I guess, like, people enforcing kind of ignorant things…umm…like the “Catch Me Outside Girl.” That was, like, something that this group I was in talked about.

Nathan also expressed thematically-induced incoherence (italicized text below) in his interview, though not as frequently as Joanne or Trevor. In response to a question about how he moved beyond colorblindness and what this experience was like for him, Nathan explained:

I think becoming more aware about race sort of looked like realizing that attempting to ignore people’s race to treat them equally isn’t a good way of interacting socially because that could be an important part of someone’s identity, and you can’t…I think you should…I’m trying not to say “you,” but I have a bad habit of saying “you” when I say “one” in general, but people should look at why they feel motivated to be colorblind. I
think people feel uncomfortable about acknowledging race because they think that if they do, that it means that they’re racist. Umm...I think it's important to kind of, umm...like, yeah, if someone feels like they need to pretend race doesn't exist, why do they feel like that's what they should do? And it's probably...it might be because they feel uncomfortable talking about race, so they'd rather just pretend that it's not an issue.

Nathan’s thematically-induced incoherence in this passage is actually rather self-reflective, and interestingly, ironic in that he is himself somewhat uncomfortable talking about race when he is trying to make a point about people being uncomfortable talking about race.

In an exchange among the focus group participants about their responses to social media post #3 (see Figure 3), Laura followed up on Naomi’s commentary regarding her response to the post (“Why is the natural instinct for the majority to counter any minority motion or initiative with a motion representing something that has never been threatened?”) with the following statement:

I wanna say that your response was, like, really eloquent and academic, and I love that. And I just hate...that’s always how I want to respond, but just...the fact that, like, it just takes so little effort to send out this tweet. I just...I get a little bit disheartened, umm...so, it’s cool that you responded that way. I kind of responded in, like, I talked about this last time [referring to the individual interview], umm, how on social media I feel like there has to be some sort of humor when you respond, so I responded with “Of course all lives matter! But isn’t it sad when on a daily basis a specific subset of those lives *cough* black lives *cough* is continuously villainized and undervalued?!” So, I tried to, like...I don’t know...take the same tone, umm...‘cause I just...it just...everything feels ineffective,
so normally I don't respond to posts like this or any posts really because I feel like it's ineffective, but, you know, I had to for this, so I did.

In her concluding sentence (italicized above), Laura displays thematically-induced incoherence, not only by saying things like “I don’t know” and repeating words like “just” and “ineffective,” but also by conveying an overall sense of resignation when approaching race-related posts or conversations on social media. This was also apparent in the diminutive she included in this passage (“I get a little bit disheartened”), the fact that she felt the need to incorporate humor, and the inclusion of a rhetorical strategy (“that’s always how I want to respond, but…”), which demonstrated her discomfort in addressing the topic of race in addition to her preferred tactic of avoidance. Finally, in response to a focus group question about how she would describe the current racial climate on campus, Laura commented:

I’m aware of these things, umm… but, you know… whatever… all the reasons, like… the whole government situation right now is really depressing, and it’s easier to ignore it, but anyway, so… one thing that I feel is like… and this kinda goes back to the very first questions… is I don’t really feel super racially literate, and I am really nervous of saying the wrong thing, which I know, like, you’re just supposed to get over that and, umm… immerse yourself in different culture[s].

As was apparent in her words and even in her non-verbal expressions (noted throughout the interview and focus group transcripts), Laura, perhaps moreso than any of the other participants, particularly the White participants, was definitely uncomfortable discussing race, yet at the same time, wanted to do her best to push through that discomfort to grow as a person and to develop her racial literacy skills.
Theme 8: Guiding students in identifying when and how colorblindness is being used in social media posts and giving them tools to challenge it effectively. Participants’ comments regarding instances they may have seen of colorblindness in social media posts provided insight into how emerging adults of different races perceive (or fail to perceive) colorblindness in online spaces. These particular social media experiences, presented below, can be used to inform how teachers guide students in identifying colorblindness online and the tools they can provide them to challenge it effectively.

The first example is taken from Joanne’s (case 2) commentary on how colorblindness tends to appear on social media:

I think the people that are, like, “I don’t see race,” actually everyone is saying…but I guess I don’t know, like, in what instances I would…see that expressed unless it was someone saying that explicitly, which I have seen…when talking about, like, race relations and stuff like that, it tends to be…a defense people make…is what I most often see…replies to maybe tweets…if there’s a conversation going on with friends and stuff about police brutality and, like, you know, some people not having the same privilege, and people are like, “Whoa, whoa, whoa…I treat everyone the same.”

Learning from Joanne’s experience, teachers can educate their students about colorblindness being used as a “defense” against appearing racist or to deny the widespread impact of systemic racism.

While admitting that she did not “really feel like a trusting source” to talk about the role of colorblindness on social media, Laura (case 2) stated:

I will say…the first thing that comes to mind is obviously #AllLivesMatter in response to #BlackLivesMatter…and the thing is, like, with a lot of these things, I hear them
second-hand. Like, I’ll read a news article about the Twitter backlash of #AllLivesMatter, but I won’t necessarily see it for myself.

Laura’s comments can be used to frame a classroom discussion of the hashtags #AllLivesMatter and #BlackLivesMatter in terms of the contexts in which students have seen them on social media and what meaning they attach to them. One question that teachers could ask students is:

How does the way they encounter these hashtags on social media affect how they are processing and interpreting them?

In terms of any experiences he may have had with colorblindness on social media, Trevor (case 2) spoke in detail about how #AllLivesMatter is the “result of colorblindness” or a “counter-argument” to #BlackLivesMatter, which is “kind of crappy if you think about it,” yet also has “that good intention sometimes.” He elaborated on his opinion:

All Lives Matter, all these people they matter, too, but in the context of Black Lives Matter, they’re the ones who are being killed on the streets every day, and their political movement is what is important right now, so…people who don’t understand that, or people who have colorblindness, on social media won’t really understand the Black Lives Matter Movement, and they might see it as selfish. If no one ever explains it to them, they really won’t get it, unless they get more exposure, which is something that I have trouble with on social media because everyone’s…telling you you’re wrong, but no one’s telling you why you’re wrong…only a few people are willing to have the conversations on what is actually the reason behind a lot of it. And there are, like, if you look on Facebook, there are, like, top comments of people saying why it’s Black Lives Matter, and people will like and share that, so…there [are] definitely people who understand it…So, I mean, if they look any further, they might see that, and that might help them.
Trevor laments how colorblindness persists online (particularly through #AllLivesMatter) because people are not willing to have meaningful discussions about the reasoning behind their views (e.g., the true purpose of #BlackLivesMatter). On the other hand, he indicates that it is possible to find explanations if you look hard enough, but of course this requires extra effort. One way to address this would be to have teachers prompt students to discuss their reactions to #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter, as informed by their own personal experiences with them in social media environments, and then to locate as well as share and critique any online explanations of they can find of these hashtags.

Addressing the role colorblindness might play in social media interactions, Rizana (case 3) stated, “I don’t think I’ve come across any colorblindness. I guess because I didn’t know the term, so I wasn’t thinking about it much, but I haven’t come across it on social media.” Given this, she still felt colorblindness “must play some sort of role” because “it’s just such an important thing where people try…I understand when people are trying to be colorblind, they have the right intentions…but sometimes, you know, you don’t wanna do it too much ’cause you don’t wanna offend someone.” When asked if she could come up with an example, she said:

I’ve come across those things where it’s like…recently there was this whole thing about the Black girls, like, the number of them going missing…and then there was…I saw something that was like, oh, but White girls are going missing, too, and that’s kind of like, ok…it happens everywhere, but you know, it’s significant numbers and stuff.

In this example, Rizana demonstrates how she is still grappling with understanding the consequences of colorblind perspectives in society. Educators may find that many of their students are similarly struggling with the concept of colorblindness and how it manifests itself in everyday interactions. In these cases, it would be beneficial to offer a general definition of
colorblindness and a few examples (either online or offline) that could provide a context for them.

Sofia (case 3) also seemed to struggle in coming up with examples of colorblindness on social media. The closest she came to this was the following statement:

The only thing I could say is…I think that my friends that see themselves as colorblind, or my friends that [pretty much] see themselves as that ultimate kind of colorblind, which is the way I kind of feel, where it’s like why does it matter…act very differently than…when it comes to each other as well as from other kind of perceptions where people think it matters, or…I guess really it’s just people who have that opinion act differently on social media…is really all I can think…in regards to race issues.

Sofia’s background and her confusion regarding her own race growing up appeared to factor into her beliefs on colorblindness, which were different from other minority and Black participants with the exception of Rizana. Drawing from Sofia’s experiences as a multiracial emerging adult, educators may want to help students explore their own racial identities in order to address how their perceptions of race may factor into their ideas about colorblindness and how they view colorblind posts on social media as a result.

Isabella’s (case 3) take on the role of colorblindness in social media interactions, was rather different from Sofia’s:

It does play a role because, you know, people who…are colorblind, they will make statements about it, how race is not an issue…they will make posts about it. They will share videos. There’s this video about Morgan Freeman, and then they’re like, “If Morgan Freeman, who is a black man, can say colorblindness is a thing, then why does everyone else disagree with him?” I was like, that doesn’t make sense…that’s one
person. You’re saying colorblindness, but you’re also attaching his race to it. So, what does that tell you?

Isabella’s personal experiences and identity development clearly informed her views on colorblindness and equipped her with the skills to recognize and combat colorblind perspectives, both online and offline. The firsthand experiences and cultural knowledge of minority students can certainly be used by educators to inform discussions about colorblindness on social media as long as they are not singled out or made to feel like the token minority in the classroom.

Anthony (case 1) gave the following response when asked how he has witnessed colorblindness in social media interactions:

No one on social media is truly colorblind. People claim that they’re colorblind on social media all the time, but they’re actually not. They will claim that they don’t see race, but they fail to realize that race is simply the color of one’s skin as defined by our society…you really can’t have an interaction with colorblindness. I think that’s more or less somebody just kind of pretending…their way of trying to not be racist, and it’s a little upsetting because I want you to look me in my face and acknowledge that I’m a Black man and be cool with that.

Anthony reiterated the point that no one is actually colorblind throughout his interview, but he addressed how it was easier to see through people’s colorblindness in online interactions. Similar to Joanne, Anthony referenced how colorblindness on social media is often used as a type of façade or defense mechanism, a way for individuals to “pretend” that they are not or could never truly be racist. Based on Anthony’s statement, educators can encourage students to delve deeper into the reasons why some people feel the need to be colorblind in both social media and face-to-face interracial encounters.
Lastly, Naomi (case 1) spoke at length about the connection between colorblindness and cultural appropriation, which she often sees displayed on SNSs like Facebook:

I think that that’s where colorblindness plays a role…for example, hip hop is…supposed to be everyone’s music, and how can you say it’s Black? Everyone should be able to listen to it, however, racism, discrimination, economic disparities, lack of education, lack of upward mobility…these issues are supposed to be “Black issues,” right?…So, I think when you experience colorblindness…people do not want to see where there’s a disconnect, when they’re picking the things…that [don’t] make them feel like a racist even though they still promote institutions and systems that promote racism and discrimination.

Naomi’s commentary can be used by educators to reveal to their students how colorblindness and hypocrisy are often intertwined. As an example, they can present the phenomenon of cultural appropriation, as Naomi did here, and ask students for their opinions on colorblindness in the consumption of media, specifically in reference to hip hop music.

Theme 9: Incorporating racial literacy as well as discussions about race and racism in the curriculum. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, becoming racially literate involves developing an understanding of how race operates in society in relation to Whiteness, acquiring familiarity with the formal concepts as well as the vocabulary needed to discuss race, and learning how to respond to and resist racism (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014; Twine, 2010). By familiarizing themselves with the levels of racial literacy presented in the emerging adults’ recognition of the components noted below, particularly in their analysis of social media posts, educators can come up with ideas for how best to incorporate racial literacy in conjunction with discussions of race and racism in their own classrooms. It is important for students to understand that racial literacy
can be learned and that having the proper vocabulary to discuss race is critical in having productive discussions about race, in forming meaningful relationships with individuals of different races, and in actively and effectively resisting racism.

Specific components of racial literacy that were identified and coded most frequently in the data sources, primarily the social media post responses and the accompanying explanations of them in the individual interviews, included: (1) recognizing victim blaming; (2) understanding the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness; (3) employing perspective-taking skills; (4) interpreting racial codes and racialized practices; (5) determining if statements are promoting deficit views (e.g., oppressing or silencing a particular group); (6) critiquing the production and politics of media (e.g., issues of access to means and knowledge, who feels entitled to publicize their thoughts, who is viewing and commenting); (7) being able to communicate effectively about race (i.e., having a racial vocabulary); and (8) acknowledging racism as a contemporary problem and either resisting it personally or encouraging resistance (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014; Twine, 2010).

Participants in this study demonstrated varying degrees of racial literacy. Rizana (case 3) and Laura (case 2) revealed a minimal, though emergent, level of racial literacy, while Joanne (case 2) and Trevor (case 2) appeared to be moderately racially literate. Nathan (case 2), Anthony (case 1), and Sofia (case 3) were more advanced in their racial literacy; however, the most racially literate participants were Isabella (case 3) and Naomi (case 1). Examples illustrating the participants’ awareness about racial issues and their grasp of racial literacy are presented below.

Throughout her interview, Rizana, who also happened to be the youngest participant in the study (age 18), aside from Joanne (age 18), conveyed a surface level understanding of race
relations and lack of racial literacy that demonstrated her own colorblindness. For example, her response to social media post #7 (see Figure 7), “I don’t think anyone using #AllLivesMatter is trying to purposely suppress the movement but rather don’t have a proper understanding of #BlackLivesMatter,” reveals her inclination to accept #AllLivesMatter at face value as an innocuous reflection of colorblind ideology rather than challenging its latent message or intended purpose. This was an interesting finding given that Rizana identifies as a racial and religious minority, pointing out how simply being a minority in this country does not automatically mean you have a greater understanding of systemic racism or how it impacts Black individuals differently from other minorities. Additionally, much of this awareness about race and race relations comes with age, experience (e.g., the people and incidents encountered throughout one’s lifespan), and education on the topic.

Rizana was able to recognize statements that oppressed or silenced a particular group, and she seemed to have a cursory understanding of the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness. This was evident in her response to social media post #2 (see Figure 2): “Justice system is messed up.” Here, Rizana reveals a level of distrust in the justice system, yet she does not attempt to tease this out further or provide any explanation such as the notion that our justice system is not actually “colorblind,” as it claims to be (Gotanda, 1991), with “justice” meaning something quite different for White citizens compared to Black citizens. In fact, if she did arrive at this conclusion, it would conflict with her own comforting belief in colorblindness. While she acknowledged racism as a contemporary problem, particularly in her response to social media post #3 (see Figure 3) – “All lives do indeed matter, but there’s a lot of prejudice against Blacks in current times, which is why BLM is so important” – there was no indication of her resisting it
personally or even encouraging resistance among others. When asked to comment on her response at the end of her interview, Rizana stated:

I think there’s a lot of ignorance…I don’t mean that in a negative way because a lot of people don’t realize the prejudice because, you know…Black people, they go through that prejudice every day…So, I think just talking to them [All Lives Matter supporters]…about their own perspective because I’ve heard so many people that have actually, like, been…someone has talked to them, so they’re like, “Oh, I get it now.” Because there’s a lot of times…if someone’s coming to this person and is, like, attacking them, then they’re gonna support All Lives Matter even more.

In her explanation, it is evident that Rizana has embraced the notion that attempting to adopt the perspective of an #AllLivesMatter supporter and offering an alternate explanation of #BlackLivesMatter in private instead of confronting the individual publicly (e.g., in a social media forum), as Nathan also pointed out, will lead to a change of heart (i.e., empathic fallacy). Whether intentionally or not, throughout her interview, Rizana justified the behavior of #AllLivesMatter supporters by taking their perspective while simultaneously paying lip service to the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement (e.g., her response of “100% agree” to social media post #8 about BLM, police brutality, and stereotype threats as well as writing “True” in response to social media post #5 about #AllLivesMatter not applying to minority groups).

Laura’s developing sense of racial literacy was evident in her interview, particularly in her responses to the social media posts. To her credit, in the follow-up focus group session, she acknowledged, “I don’t really feel super racially literate,” expressing a desire to become more racially literate. Laura seemed to understand, at least in part, the cultural and symbolic value of
Whiteness, acknowledged racism to be a contemporary problem, attempted to encourage resistance against racism, critiqued the production and politics of media, and recognized victim blaming. However, she struggled in employing perspective-taking skills, interpreting racial codes/racialized practices, communicating effectively about race without promoting deficit views, and personally resisting racism through her own actions.

In her response to social media post #1 (see Figure 1), which she interpreted somewhat differently from most other participants, Laura wrote that she thinks it is “more important to discuss that #BlackLivesMatter” compared to #AllLivesMatter in order to “continue a conversation about hundreds of years of systematically undervaluing a group of humans based on appearances.” Here, Laura demonstrates a surface level understanding of systemic racism that highlights her liberal ideology (i.e., abstract liberalism). By simply focusing on “appearances” in relation to equality, she ignores issues of intersectionality. In other words, what role do overlapping factors like gender, sexuality, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status play in discrimination, power structures, and racial politics? Also, it is unclear exactly what “continuing a conversation” entails in Laura’s statement.

Responding to social media post #2 (see Figure 2) about how the police officers involved in the death of Freddie Gray were acquitted, Laura stated, “Unfortunately it happens when all we see is perpetual aggressive and violent imagery of young black men. I wish in media we could better see a more accurate and diverse depiction of this diverse population.” In this statement, Laura avoids directly addressing systemic racism and, instead, attempts to critique media representations of Black men. However, in doing so, she rehashes deficit views and stereotypes about Black masculinity in a white-dominated society, specifically, the portrayal of Black men as “out of control, wild, uncivilized, natural-born predators” (hooks, 2003, p. 44). Laura again
referenced this Black male trope in her response to social media post #3 (see Figure 3) stating, “Of course all lives matter! But isn’t it sad when on a daily basis a specific subset of those lives *cough* black lives *cough* is continuously villainized and undervalued?!”

While Laura picked up on victim blaming in her response to social media post #4 (see Figure 4) when she challenged the person who posted to “hear this ‘racist terrorist idiot’ speak about his experiences before using such hateful and inflammatory language,” her perspective-taking skills seemed a bit lacking in her follow-up comment, “I agree, let’s protest the NFL for being the patriarchal and gladiator-type ‘non-profit’ that it is! Maybe Kaepernick can start a spin-off NFL.” Instead of attempting to delve deeper into Kaepernick’s potential motivation in wearing a Black Panther Party shirt to a press conference (not to mention the national controversy about his kneeling during the national anthem) and the implications of the white female Facebook user calling him a “racist terrorist idiot” as a result, Laura reinterprets the post to be what she wants it to be, a commentary on sexism (not referenced in the original post) rather than racism. On the other hand, she did encourage resistance against racism in her response to social media post #7 (see Figure 7): “Thanks for speaking up and educating the class that #AllLivesMatter is only hurting the people who are perpetuating this nonsense, and that we need to be supportive of the BLM movement!”

Joanne’s developing understanding of race and racism as well as her moderate level of racial literacy was apparent in her interview and in her responses to the social media posts. Specifically, her response to social media post #3 (see Figure 3) – “The thing about #blacklivesmatter is that it’s not saying other lives don’t. It’s an attempt to bring to attention the way black men and women are unjustly treated by police” – demonstrated her awareness of racism as a contemporary problem in addition to her ability to interpret racial codes and
racialized practices and to recognize the oppression or silencing of a particular group, in this case, Black men and women. Her reaction to social media post #7 and the accompanying comment thread (see Figure 7), a simple “Agreed!” and her response to post #8 (see Figure 8), “Agreed, talking about this is important!,” reiterated her acknowledgement of racism as a contemporary problem as well as the suppression and silencing of #BlackLivesMatter supporters through the use of #AllLivesMatter. Additionally, the latter two responses picked up on Joanne’s color consciousness, her awareness of structural racism, and her recognition of the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness while also critiquing the production and politics of media, particularly the right of minorities to publicize thoughts on social media as a reaction to the entitlement of #AllLivesMatter supporters in publicizing their opinions online. In terms of employing perspective-taking skills, Joanne promoted the need for conversation that would allow both parties to “learn and grow” instead of simply ignoring or silencing the opposing side. 

Lastly, in her interview, she elaborated on the production and politics of media, especially promoting widespread access to means and knowledge by discussing how re-posted content, though it is not original, can often be “more effective just ’cause it already has so many ‘likes’ and shares.”

Trevor, similar to Joanne, conveyed a working knowledge of race and racism as well as a moderate degree of racial literacy throughout his interview and in select social media post responses. It is important to keep in mind that Trevor chose not to respond at all to four of these posts. His lack of response to these posts is also very telling. In response to social media post #1 (see Figure 1), Trevor wrote:

Black lives matter, although all lives do matter and are important equally, in light of recent events and the police brutality enforced on black communities for hundreds of
years, black lives are relevant right now in media and movements. Black lives matter is a movement that emphasises [sic] black lives that are in jeopardy.

This demonstrates his awareness of racism as a contemporary problem, recognizing racialized practices in their historical context, and touches on the politics of media as well as the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, but falls short of encouraging resistance or critiquing systemic racism or how race-related incidents are portrayed in the media. Here, Trevor resorts to a simplified explanation of Black Lives Matter as “a movement that emphasises black lives that are in jeopardy,” while also acknowledging the perspective of All Lives Matter supporters by including the phrase “although all lives do matter and are important equally.” In his response to social media post #4 (see Figure 4), commenting on how Kaepernick has “done a lot for the community” and that he could “see him as a hero” since he is “just standing up for what he thinks is right,” Trevor employs perspective-taking skills in attempting to understand Kaepernick’s motivation in protesting (i.e., standing up for a group that is being oppressed and silenced). He is also subtly criticizing the entitlement (and what seems to be white privilege) of the person who shared this particular post in publicizing her thoughts, while simultaneously bashing Kaepernick for publicizing his. Lastly, his responses to social media post #7 (see Figure 7), “Sounds like a good discussion for class. What class was it?” and post #8, “Props to you! Keep fighting!” convey a surface level recognition of the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement that keeps it at arms length in the sense of his lack of personal investment or desire to get deeply involved in race-related issues.

While it was evident throughout his interview that Nathan had a more advanced level of racial literacy, he still chose to leave the reply boxes beneath five of the social media posts blank, writing beneath them such comments as “I agree but probably wouldn’t comment or reply” (post
#2) and “Probably wouldn’t react to or comment on this post” (post #5). He also mentioned that he would either “like” or “retweet” posts #7-8, “but not say anything in response,” and beneath another blank reply box (post #6), he wrote, “If I didn’t know the person, I wouldn’t bother responding. If I did, I’d ask them what point they were trying to make, before I made any response to their statements.”

Nathan’s responses to the other social media posts were rather elaborate, however. For example, in his response to social media post #1 (see Figure 1), he stated, “What do you mean? While you’re not obligated to give anyone your time, I think there can be value in striking up a conversation with someone whose views you disagree with, if they’re willing to engage in a respectful dialogue.” Here, Nathan does not take a definitive stance in the #BlackLivesMatter versus #AllLivesMatter debate, stressing the importance of employing perspective-taking skills instead, particularly when engaging in race-related conversations. In his response to social media post #3, Nathan not only acknowledged racism as a contemporary problem, picking up on the racial codes, white privilege, and victim blaming behind #AllLivesMatter (made all the more evident by the inclusion of “White Lives Matter” in this post), he also recognized the silencing of Black Lives Matter advocates by All Lives Matter supporters and called out the person who posted, encouraging resistance against racial injustice through reflection that requires a certain degree of discomfort and the questioning of a pervasive colorblind mentality. Nathan’s full response to post #3 is included below:

You may not realize this, but when people say “All Lives Matter,” either they’re missing the point (the point being that, although all lives do matter, black lives are treated with less value, even though they should matter equally) or they’re actively striving to silence the outcry against racial inequality and injustice. I’d hope that’s not your goal here.
Nathan also demonstrated his racial literacy in his response to social media post #4, in which he identified the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, critiqued the production and politics of media, specifically by recognizing the entitlement of the person who posted in publicizing her thoughts while ignoring the right of Kaepernick, as a Black man, to do so, and being able to communicate effectively about race (i.e., having a racial vocabulary). In his response, he wrote:

> Advocating for racial justice doesn’t make you a racist. Criticizing a country doesn’t make you a terrorist. And publicly standing up for something you believe in doesn’t make you an idiot. If Kaepernick’s actions make you uncomfortable or angry, maybe you should examine why oppressed people speaking out against the oppression they face upsets you, a white person unaffected by racial injustice, so much...

Lastly, Nathan pointed out how he is more likely to share a post about race-related issues on social media rather than “re-writing the post,” especially if it is “from a viewpoint that [he does not] personally represent, like, someone of a different race or culture posting about something that’s troubling to them [or] affects them.” As his reasoning, he stated simply, “I don’t wanna speak for them.”

Anthony was relatively on par with Nathan in terms of how he conveyed his level of racial literacy, though at times he seemed to have more personal insight and, at other times, he was more restrained in his social media post responses, indicating how he would likely limit his online participation in a public forum about race-related topics. Much like Nathan, Anthony placed an emphasis on employing perspective-taking skills and engaging in respectful dialogue in his social media post responses, such as his responses to post #1, “It shouldn’t let you know whether to continue, it just lets you know where they stand. Keep talking,” and post #4, “Could you please expand on your opinion?,” while also recognizing racism to be a contemporary
problem in his responses to post #3, “I completely agree. Can you help me fight for the black lives?” and post #2, “’tis a scary reality we live in.” Interestingly, while his response to post #6 was also relatively short, “If all lives matter, that should include black lives too, right?,” he wrote beneath this a much longer message, which he explained in his interview was how he truly felt about the post and would want to convey to the person who posted if there were no character limit on Twitter:

You are wrong on two accounts. First, you are a hypocrite for rejecting #BlackLivesMatter and replacing it with #AllLivesMatter. If all lives actually matter, that includes black lives also. Second, you reject #BlackLivesMatter with #BlueLivesMatter, meaning that you actually don’t believe that all lives matter and that you have a problem with black lives, thus making you racist.

In this extended response, he revealed quite a few components of racial literacy beyond acknowledging racism as a contemporary problem, including recognizing victim blaming, understanding the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness and the entitlement of the person who posted in conveying these sentiments, determining that the statement was promoting deficit views and silencing Black lives, interpreting racial codes, as well as having an adequate racial vocabulary to communicate effectively about race.

Anthony’s subdued response to post #7, while still incorporating some of the very same elements of racial literacy mentioned above, took on a slightly different tone: “You are correct. Good job. Another good reply would have been that both hashtags are morally correct and now is the time to stand up for black lives.” He did not elaborate on why he considered both hashtags (i.e., #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter) to be “morally correct,” which was surprising given his breakdown of the meaning behind the hashtags following his response to post #6. His
response to post #7 is also telling in that it seems to convey some colorblindness on his part, which is contrary to his comment about colorblindness not existing in his interview. A common theme among the majority of Anthony’s social media post responses, often rather succinctly conveying simple agreement (e.g., “Word” as his response to social media post #8) was that he would often stop short of resisting racism personally or encouraging resistance. One explanation for this that he discussed in his interview was that he was tired of talking and fighting without seeing any substantial changes, which can be seen as an example of “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, 2004).

Similar to Nathan and Anthony, Sofia exhibited a relatively advanced level of racial literacy in her responses to the social media posts, in particular. In nearly all of her responses, Sofia acknowledged racism as a contemporary problem. Her response to social media post #2, “It’s what you have to do when you’re an accomplice,” also indicated her ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practices (within the justice system specifically), as did her overtly political response to social media posts #3, “All lives matter…Until immigrants are at your door seeking sanctuary.” The latter response illustrated her ability to employ perspective-taking skills, to understand the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, and to recognize victim blaming as well as the oppression and silencing of a particular group (i.e., immigrants). In her response to social media post #4, Sofia critiqued media representations of Kaepernick as a “threatening” Black male by questioning the entitlement of the person who posted in publicizing her thoughts, delineating the definitions of “racist” and “terrorist” in order to counter her use of these words and to establish terminology that would lead to more effective communication about race rather than unfounded hostility. The silencing of #BlackLivesMatter supporters in social media post #6 led her to state, rather sarcastically, “I hope this is satire. If so, much applauded. If
not…Someone please pour some bleach on me,” indicating her qualms with the use of #AllLivesMatter and, more broadly speaking, the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness (i.e., white privilege and entitlement). Lastly, Sofia’s response to social media post #8, “Good. And let’s make a pact to never stop acting, too,” took her concerns one step further by indicating her own personal commitment to resist racial injustice as well as a call to action in encouraging others to resist.

Isabella was among the most racially literate participants. Her advanced level of racial literacy was apparent throughout her interview, especially in her responses to the social media posts. She acknowledged racism as a contemporary problem in all of her responses, and quite a few posts also prompted her to either declare her own personal resistance to racism or to encourage resistance among others. This can be seen in her responses to post #2, “This is why the Black Lives Matter movement is important. Things like this need to be stopped!” and post #8, “Even if it makes people uncomfortable, these issues need to be brought. We cannot expect change if no action is taken.” The latter response was an example of a minority participant in the study demanding action instead of just talk, and it illustrated Isabella’s ability to communicate effectively about race, promoting the notion that discomfort is necessary for meaningful change. Her response to post #6, “Not like that person wanted your follow anyway #blacklivesmatter” not only encouraged resistance, but also set the stage for a counter-narrative to emerge through hashtag activism. In this particular response, she also critiqued the production and politics of media, directly challenging the entitlement of the person who posted in attempting to usurp and shift the focus of the narrative.

Additionally, in her response to post #2 (see above) and in her response to post #7, “I hope this discussion helped the professor and others better understand why it’s #blacklivesmatter
and not #alllivesmatter,” Isabella was able to interpret racialized practices, both in the justice system and in the media, and recognize victim blaming as well as the oppression and silencing of Black individuals. She consistently employed perspective-taking skills and demonstrated an understanding of the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, which is reflected in her responses to post #4, “There’s nothing wrong with what he did. He’s just showing his beliefs. I bet things would be different if he was white. #blacklivesmatter” and to post #3, “The Black Lives Matter movement isn’t saying that all other lives don’t matter. It’s because black lives haven’t been important to society that this movement was started in the first place.” Here, Isabella illustrates her ability to effectively communicate about race and to highlight issues of access to means and knowledge, who feels entitled to publicize their thoughts, and who is viewing and commenting on social media posts. She defended Kaepernick’s actions in her response to post #4 (see above), pointing out how his right to protest, as a Black man, was being denied and, once again, encouraging resistance against racial injustice. Lastly, her response to post #5, “This just proves the point that those that say all lives matter are truly racist and don’t understand the issues,” reiterated her racial literacy skills, with a recognition of the racial subtext behind #AllLivesMatter (i.e., the silencing of multiple minority groups), white privilege (i.e., the symbolic value of Whiteness), and a vociferous critique of the politics of media, specifically, social media users who hide behind #AllLivesMatter to avoid conversations about race or cover up their racism.

The participant who was the most well-versed in racial literacy was Naomi. While a few of her responses to the social media posts were rather succinct, such as “Exactly!” in response to post #2, “Seems legit!” in response to post #5, and “Please don’t!” in response to post #8, her words still conveyed the recognition of racism as a contemporary problem and even encouraged
resistance to racism (in her last response). Her responses to post #2 and post #5 also picked up on the oppression and silencing of Black individuals as well as other minority groups, and the latter response also demonstrated her understanding of cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness while subtly critiquing the exclusionary politics behind the use of #AllLivesMatter. Naomi’s response to social media post #4, “Please explain to me how this BLACK MAN, standing up for the injustices of BLACK PEOPLE is racist? Oh because he should just be a good boy and entertain you?,” was not only lengthier, but also more emphatic.

Here, she hit on several components of racial literacy, including interpreting racial codes and racialized practices that serve to oppress or silence Black individuals, recognizing victim blaming, understanding the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, and acknowledging racism as a contemporary problem. Additionally, she shed light on the production and politics of media, specifically sports media, in terms of expectations about the role of (Black) athletes as entertainers who should keep their views to themselves as well as challenging the entitlement of (White) sports fans in publicizing their thoughts on social media (i.e., calling Kaepernick a “racist terrorist idiot” for supporting a cause and standing up for his beliefs). In her responses to post #6, “You diss black lives matter and say blue lives matter, guess ALL lives don’t matter huh?” and post #7, “Exactly, whole purpose not protecting white people, but rather telling black people they have no right to acknowledge their oppression separate from everyone else,” Naomi once again interpreted #AllLivesMatter as racial code, exposing the hypocrisy behind the hashtag and drawing attention to what she considers to be the purpose of #AllLivesMatter, the oppression and silencing of Black individuals. In these particular responses, she also exposed white privilege, recognized victim blaming, and challenged the entitlement of #AllLivesMatter supporters in commenting on race-related issues on social media.
Overall, Naomi demonstrated that she had a solid racial vocabulary, being able to communicate rather effectively about race. This was also apparent in her interview and in the focus group session, particularly the extensive commentary she provided on her response to post #3, “Why is the natural instinct for the majority to counter any minority motion or initiative with a motion representing something that has never been threatened?,” which touched on many of the same aspects of racial literacy as those mentioned above (i.e., understanding the cultural and symbolic value of Whiteness, interpreting racial codes and racialized practices, recognizing victim blaming as well as the oppression/silencing of a particular group, and critiquing the production and politics of media). In her interview, Naomi explained her response to this particular social media post:

Any time anyone does anything pro-Black, White people automatically assume it’s anti-White, and it’s not…it’s not about oppressing White people, that’s not even possible to do…It’s about…we’ve been oppressed. We have worth. We matter. Because it’s not an assumption. It’s not assumed. Our government doesn’t assume it because look how they act. Our police don’t assume it because look how they act. Our education systems don’t assume it because of how they treat us. Why can’t y’all see that there’s a glaring disparity between what Black people get, in general, and what White people are afforded, even the terms “get” versus “afforded,” “get” versus “inherited,” “get” versus “came here with.” Freedom was y’all’s [sic] birthright. We weren’t even people for 300 years.

Naomi elaborated further on her response to social media post #3 in the focus group session:

And so, basically, what that means for me is that the All Lives Matter thing…when I first saw it, I was just kinda like…I just thought it was a counter-intuitive movement, and I feel like anytime somebody says it, it’s nullifying the idea that…ok, if all lives matter,
why would there need to be a distinction made? And you’re missing the point of the distinction being made. It’s not Black Lives Matter exclusively. It’s really Black Lives Matter, too. Because it’s not assumed that Black lives matter. It’s not assumed LGBTQ lives matter. It’s not assumed Muslim lives matter. So, it’s based on the displays and the attitudes and the stereotypes and the way our society frames and treats minorities, and my thing is…that when you go All Lives Matter, it’s like that’s a nice idea. They do. But who are you telling that to? You’re telling that to the people that are being oppressed. You’re not telling that to the people doing the oppressing. So, for me, it’s like when somebody goes…White lives matter and Black lives matter…in the eyes of what? Not the law. Not the criminal justice system. Not the educational system. Not the economy. So, when people say that, it’s like…you’re not…you’re saying it out of discomfort. You’re putting up a picket out of no, you can’t say Black Lives Matter…no, you can’t fight, you know? You can’t fight for that because what are you saying about the rest of us.

Naomi’s comments about #AllLivesMatter being informed by attitudes and stereotypes regarding minorities in the U.S. instead of actually promoting the notion of equal rights for all, which is supposedly embedded in our institutions and laws, can be used by educators to frame discussions about the importance of understanding systemic racism. Without this critical foundation (also addressed in theme 7), attempting to teach racial literacy skills would not be terribly effective.

**Theme 10: Students’ experiences with race-related incidents on social media affected their interactions with students of other races on campus.** While some of the emerging adults in the study (cases 1 and 3) spoke of their personal experiences with race-related incidents on social media directly impacting the way they viewed or interacted with students of other races on
campus (e.g., Naomi, Rizana, and Sofia), others (case 2) referenced the indirect impact of race-related social media occurrences on the behavior of their peers as well as the overall racial climate at the university (e.g., Trevor and Nathan). In their comments, Trevor and Nathan utilized rhetorical strategies for the purpose of downplaying either their own racial views or those of others they knew.

Observing confrontations online, including racist and bigoted attacks, has made Naomi (case 1) question the people she has day-to-day interactions with offline:

Once you come offline and you interact with other people, you’re wondering…’cause you don’t follow everyone that you interact with and half the people that you do see these interactions with, you probably don’t follow…But when you go back to your classroom or to your work environment…you kinda look around and go…I wonder if the people that I’m around think the same things or have similar ideologies.

Rizana (case 3) expressed a similar sentiment about the disparity between people’s behavior online versus offline: “Sometimes I [will] come across something, and it’s someone that I know in person, but then I see, like, online they’re saying something, and I’m like, oh, I never realized they thought that way.”

Like Naomi and Rizana, Sofia (case 3) addressed her reaction to the discrepancy she has noticed between online and offline behavior among her friends and acquaintances:

I guess it’s very eye-opening to see the things that people are able to say, comment on, or share when it’s on a, like, a broadcasting scale. So, like, these people I never talk to or people that I think I know like sisters are broadcasting these things, and…it doesn’t help me understand them better as people…it adds a new layer of understanding to who they are, kind of like their social media mask instead of their day-to-day mask.
Sofia’s use of the phrase “social media mask” is reminiscent of the term “Facebook face,” which Tynes and Markoe (2010) used to label the discrepancies they saw between how college students in their study reacted to racist photos on social media versus how they responded to the same photos in person.

In response to a focus group question about his experiences informing his view of the racial climate on campus, Trevor spoke of being a member of a Black campus organization in prefacing statements that could be seen as racist, including racial codes and racially-charged language, while also attempting to downplay racial views by, once again, taking both sides. The following passage is Trevor’s explanation of conversations the group members had about the “Catch Me Outside Girl” [click to view]:

It’s just…this White teenager girl…it’s so weird, but she just…I guess a lot of people consider it, like, ghetto…or will use the term “ghetto”…or “ratchet,” I don’t know, just terms like that…and she’s just, like, really disrespectful to her mom and, like, doesn’t care about anything. I guess, like, another stereotype would be “White trash”…but…a lot of people saw that as…kinda like “Black qualities,” and a group I attend…they talked about it a lot, and me, personally, I’m like…well, in my head, I’m like who cares? This is some…idiot on social media getting way more attention than she needs, which they all know, but they obviously, as an African American or Black person, you can’t really ignore those kinda things, so…I mean, it makes sense that they talk about it…but it was just brought up and how, like, that’s not…a lot of people in the group just said this is not Black culture, and I agree and just…so, a lot of stuff that I have seen is just, like, through social media or something that happens to happen on the internet that people talk about that somehow traces it’s way back into [the university].
Trevor’s perspective on the social media phenomenon of the “Catch Me Outside Girl” was rather dismissive, yet it clearly offended Black students and impacted the way students of different races viewed each other on campus, especially given the prevalence of racial stereotypes online.

Nathan took a slightly different approach from Trevor in the focus group session by distancing himself from (instead of affiliating himself with) a particular university group that has an online forum where offensive, at times racist, comments are posted. His argument was basically that he did not personally know what was going on, but he had been told by other students who follow the group’s social media page. In attempting to explain how individuals in this group behave, he stated:

They just like to see people fight on the internet because maybe they’re not personally harmed by the thoughts that are expressed, and so…they don’t take it seriously. They just enjoy watching people argue on Facebook because maybe they don’t have any stake in what’s said being harmful to them, and I think maybe, like, I don’t really use that group at all, but just based off [sic] what people say and, like you [referring to comments by Trevor] said, with the internet, in general, with shit posting and stuff like that, I think there’s often a vibe of, like, saying really racist or xenophobic or sexist…like really offensive things for the sake of…it’s almost like in a spirit of making fun of yourself. But people will say, like, oh, I was just joking…like, I don’t actually believe that, and they think that that excuses it. They’re like…people who say really cringy [sic] things on purpose to be funny, and then think that because they were just joking, it’s ok, but it’s still, like, really…they’re repeating really hurtful sentiments.

In this passage, Nathan discussed how the students who belong to this group use the rhetorical strategy of saying they are “just joking” to excuse inappropriate, racist, and even harmful
behavior. This racist and harmful behavior, according to Nathan, is not confined to the social media environment as it has a tendency to impact how students of different races view and interact with each other offline, particularly on campus.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Study Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how social justice-oriented emerging adults of different races perceive their experiences on social media, how they talk about their engagement with racial issues online, and how this engagement is related to their moral identity. The following research questions guided this inquiry: (1) How does moral identity impact social media usage among emerging adults? (2) How are emerging adults engaging in race-related conversations on social media? (3) How do emerging adults conceptualize relationships among social media culture, university culture, and the global community? (4) How can educators help students confront and challenge colorblind perspectives on social media? (5) How can the experiences of emerging adults help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus? The study employed a combination of phenomenology and case study methodology to address these questions from the perspectives of social justice-oriented emerging adults of different races, i.e., Black emerging adults (case 1), White emerging adults (case 2), and emerging adults of other races, including minority (e.g., Hispanic or Asian) and/or multiracial students (case 3).

A cross-case phenomenological analysis of all the data sources illustrated that the “essence,” or common meaning, for all emerging adults in this study (cases 1-3) in terms of how they perceived their experiences on social media revolved around the absence of ethical standards of conduct (creating a sense of chaos), safety concerns in heated online interactions, the prevalence of “alternative facts” and “fake news” circulating online, as well as the lack of face-to-face interaction (leading to difficulties in detecting tone and intention). On the other hand, they also addressed the advantages of having readily accessible information on the
internet, viewing social media as a vehicle for broadening their horizons. They all considered their audience before posting on social media and established some type of boundaries in their online interactions. Maintaining consistency between their online and offline identities was also of critical importance to all of them, and they perceived their identity development online as mirroring their identity development offline. Lastly, they spoke of their membership in particular social media communities as contributing to positive identity development, whether directly or indirectly.

Across cases, some of the emerging adults in the study saw direct links between social media culture, university culture, and the global community. This was evident in the way they spoke about social media as a gateway to understanding what is going on in the world and in acquiring a global perspective. Others saw social media as a type of mirror that was simply reflecting and amplifying their own perspectives and those of individuals who think like them or live in similar circumstances. Yet another perspective on social media presented it as a sort of “alternate reality” that one could only expose oneself to or process in small doses.

How participants discussed their membership in social media communities in relation to their view of the world and their place in it was particularly telling. The majority of emerging adults in the study addressed how being involved in social media communities has made them more aware of what is going on in the world, particularly in terms of helping them stay in touch with important issues on both a local and global scale and being exposed to controversial or sensitive topics that might not otherwise be covered by mainstream media outlets. Quite a few of them also touched on how social media shapes individuals’ worldviews and has allowed them to appreciate diverse perspectives (e.g., giving them insight into how people live around the world compared to their own lives in the U.S.), particularly since SNSs may be the sole contact some
individuals have with the rest of the world outside of their immediate communities. Social media can also add a “new layer of understanding” to who people are, how they really feel or how they act when they are wearing their “social media mask” (i.e., the things people will say or share when it’s on a “broadcasting scale”).

Those who stressed the negative aspects of their social media community membership focused on how it made them feel “forlorn,” “overwhelmed by the state of the world,” “scared for the future,” and/or “depressed.” Some emphasized their personal “guilt” for not focusing enough on their personal lives offline (cultivating relationships at the university and in the greater community instead) as well as their “inadequacy” in “lagging behind” peers in terms of being politically aware or “not acting enough.” They harped on their view being “so small” with so much out there that they did not know about and how sometimes being bombarded with everything going on at their university, in the local community, and in the global community simultaneously can be mentally “taxing” and often takes a toll on individuals, particularly adolescents and emerging adults. For some, their membership in social media communities has led them to limit their time on SNSs or avoid them as they try to establish more concrete boundaries and achieve more of a balance among different aspects and realms of their lives. For others, it was important to also recognize the benefits of SNSs in motivating people to “get out and do something” about the issues that they feel are most critical and that social media can also be a window into the beauty and generosity present in the world.

Those who stressed the positive aspects of their social media community membership focused on how it made them feel more comfortable being who they are (i.e., showing their “true selves”). This sentiment sometimes carried over into their lives offline as well (e.g., relationships with peers at the university). They emphasized how this online community membership is very
much aligned with their membership in offline (on campus/off campus) communities in that they mostly tend to interact with people they know offline in online communities. Additionally, they mentioned that how they view the world and how they interact in it (on various levels) are strongly linked.

As far as addressing race in social media contexts was concerned, the “essence,” or common meaning, for all participants (cases 1-3) was characterized by feelings of emotional intensity and exhaustion, typically followed by the desire to enact change or to use their voices in beneficial and appropriate ways to make an impact online and encourage action offline. Cross-case analysis (of the social media posts, in particular) also revealed an emphasis on the notion of suspending judgment to promote conversation and tolerance, pushing back to encourage self-reflection and to shine the spotlight on Black lives, exposing the hypocrisy of people who post the statement “All Lives Matter” on social media or pointing out the circumstances that contribute to its circulation online, and challenging logic and motives or asking for an explanation. Within-case phenomenological analysis revealed that this meaning was different for emerging adults in the various cases, however. For Black (case 1) and minority (case 3) emerging adults, the current racial climate was of pressing concern given that they felt scared and unsafe on campus following recent social media incidents and their fallout offline. For White emerging adults (case 2), emphasizing the importance of the Black Lives Matter Movement (also expressed by case 3 participants), the struggle to use their privilege and voice in a productive way, combating complacency among their peers, and attempting to be true activists and allies in the fight for racial justice took precedence.

Finally, in terms of how their engagement in conversations about race was related to their moral identity, most participants (cases 1-3) either felt it was important to engage in some way,
generally speaking, or felt personally compelled to enter the conversation. However, the nature of their engagement varied by case. White participants (case 2) perceived their role as an intermediary in these conversations, whether it be by offering their opinion or by attempting to deescalate a situation. On the other hand, Black and other minority participants (cases 1 and 3), took on the role of educator/liaison or arbiter/referee in these conversations and consistently expressed outrage and a call to action in their responses to the social media posts. Morality also factored into their engagement in conversations about race in that all participants, in some way, conveyed the need to be aware of how their posts or comments on social media could negatively impact or even hurt others and to do their best to make sure this did not happen.

Data analysis conducted using the framework of the Social Cognitive Model of Moral Identity demonstrated that the social media context often serves to modify or constrain the moral behaviors of emerging adults who otherwise have strong moral identities, sometimes even limiting or preventing their social justice efforts online. While most participants (cases 1-3) noted that social media can lead to emotional desensitization and moral disengagement online (toxic disinhibition), others (case 3) noted that the nature of the social media environment (not face-to-face) allowed for greater involvement in moral behaviors online (benign disinhibition). However, they all agreed that racism, sexism, being disrespectful, belittling someone, and/or intentionally offending someone were morally inexcusable behaviors in online (and offline) settings.

For some participants, moral identity played a direct and prominent role in their social media usage, given that they viewed their social media presence as a sort of extension of themselves (e.g., leading them to increase or decrease their presence on SNSs, prompting them to consider their audience before posting, and helping them decide whether to intervene in or to
restrain themselves from intervening in cyberbullying incidents). Other participants indicated
that their moral identity played more of an indirect, though still important, role in their social
media usage (e.g., reminding them to be respectful and civil instead of resorting to saying
harmful or hateful things, to exercise restraint by acknowledging boundaries, and to do their best
not to offend or upset others online). More specifically, cross-case social-cognitive analysis
illustrated that moral identity impacts social media usage among emerging adults (cases 1-3) in
the following ways: (1) establishing boundaries in terms of intervening in cyberbullying
incidents involving strangers (restricted circle of moral regard online); (2) differing perspectives
on internalization of moral identity (e.g., exactly how they internalized moral identity and how
central it was to their everyday behavior) determined whether it played a direct or indirect role in
guiding their behavior on social media; (3) higher levels of symbolization of moral identity were,
for the most part, indicative of greater engagement with racial issues online, yet there were other
contextual factors that played a role (e.g., the inherent nature of social media making it difficult
to identify a person’s tone and expressions, participant’s level of racial literacy, comfort with
particular social media platforms, degree of safety in entering the conversation, and potential to
contribute to the conversation); and (4) moral self-consistency impacted how participants
engaged in activism online and offline (e.g., posting about social justice events they plan on
attending or have attended, to supplement their offline activism, or being passionate and vocal
about the same issues online and offline, maintaining a balance in their activist efforts).

Data analysis conducted using a Critical Race Theory lens revealed that participants had
a wide range of perspectives on colorblindness. One group of participants (cases 2 and 3) saw
colorblindness as being a multifaceted concept that could be interpreted in both a positive and
negative light. They described it as a term that could be used by someone with “good intentions”
(usually a person exercising or “exploiting” white privilege), but naïve in being unaware of the impact being colorblind or enacting colorblind policies may have on people of color or selfish in choosing to ignore the impact in order to “protect” certain “ideals.” Some of these participants even went so far as to say the concept of colorblindness, in theory, because of its equalizing intention in “trying to act the same to everyone” could be seen as endearing, “heartwarming and true and good,” yet they also recognized the underlying issues with colorblindness given that “you have to see color in order to act for people of color” and that you are essentially “harming people of color” because you are “failing to acknowledge their problems exist because of their color.” Most participants in this group seemed to agree that there is an ignorance to colorblindness in the sense that it “takes away from our diversity,” which should be valued and celebrated instead of downplayed. Another group of participants (cases 1-3) had a different take on colorblindness, seeing it only in a negative light or as a type of “cognitive dissonance” and emphasizing how no one is actually “colorblind.” They spoke of how everyone notices differences among people, including the color of their skin, but those who claim to be “colorblind” are simply choosing to ignore race or using it as a strategy to feel like they are not racist by supposedly treating everyone the same.

In terms of moving beyond colorblindness or recognizing its existence and confronting it, many of the emerging adults in the study (cases 1-3) indicated that there was not necessarily one particular moment when this happened. It was more like a series of moments, a gradual process of becoming “socially aware” of privilege and race relations that happened over time, sometimes over the course of many years, when they came to realize that colorblindness was a “kind of sham,” that they had learned and internalized racist views based on assumptions that were fundamentally incorrect (case 2), or that they felt either confused, alienated, or like the “token”
minority in certain situations (cases 1 and 3). For others (case 2), they remembered a particular time in their lives when they were definitely colorblind, even saying or using the hashtag #AllLivesMatter, which they now consider to be their naïve or ignorant phase, compared to when they had an awakening of sorts (e.g., learning from people of color or people who understood better) that allowed them to move beyond colorblindness, often sometime in high school, with experiences in college helping to solidify this new perspective on colorblindness.

All participants in the focus group conveyed the importance of college students learning about colorblindness and its impact on both White students and students of color, whether it be for the purpose of understanding the “whole idea behind it, not just one side” (case 2), emphasizing its prevalence as “a very shallow solution to racism” (case 2), or to simply be aware that it exists in order to make individuals think twice before using it as a filter in their interactions with people of other races (case 1). The reasoning they gave for addressing colorblindness in an educational context ranged from guiding students in appreciating the importance of acknowledging individuals’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds because to “just say that they’re the same doesn’t give them justice” (case 3) to being “mindful of the social dynamics that are at play, good and bad” (case 1). Participants spoke of how college is ideal for delving into and potentially progressing beyond colorblindness given that emerging adulthood is a time when beliefs are still being solidified and the college setting provides a sheltered environment of sorts where the goal is to “develop and learn.”

Discussing whether and how colorblindness plays a role in social media interactions as well as any of their own experiences with colorblindness on social media, most participants stated that they have encountered it, specifically through colorblind individuals posting about how “race is not an issue” and sharing videos that defend their point of view (case 3). Some
referenced #AllLivesMatter as a response or counter-argument to #BlackLivesMatter and as a prominent example of colorblindness on social media. Others spoke of people using colorblindness online as a type of “defense,” an “excuse to not care about racial inequality,” or an attempt to not be racist, and basically just hiding behind colorblindness to ignore race (cases 1 and 2).

Combining both frameworks illustrated that, across cases (cases 1-3), emerging adults with stronger moral identity components (i.e., circle of moral regard, symbolization of moral identity, moral self-consistency) did tend to engage with racial issues on social media more frequently and in more substantial ways than those whose moral identity was not as central to their self-concept. These particular emerging adults were also more likely to be involved with social justice activism online and offline. However, situational factors (i.e., specific aspects of social media contexts) always took precedence in emerging adults’ decisions to engage or not to engage online. Additionally, while White participants (case 2) acknowledged that racism exists and impacts all of us in some way, Black (case 1) and minority (case 3) participants went far beyond mere acknowledgement to speak in great detail about their own experiences corroborating racial realism.

A cross-case analysis revealed that all participants, in one way or another, believed that being colorblind is not a moral way of interacting with people of different races. They also indicated that differences should be celebrated, and if you want to fight for social justice, particularly racial justice, you cannot afford to be colorblind. You have to see people as they are and acknowledge race as an integral part of someone’s identity, recognizing that “people are treated differently because of [their race]” in order to “get to the real root of the issue” because as
long as we “keep pretending” that “color doesn’t exist” and using statements like “we’re all human,” racial discrimination will continue to exist.

Suggestions that were made by the participants about how educators could actually implement a racial literacy curriculum that could potentially incorporate social media included: (1) embedding racial issues and racial literacy skills into units that will already be covered (e.g., a unit on contemporary issues in a multicultural education or psychology course) or adding supplementary content to existing units in courses (e.g., a unit on social media in a course focused on race or gender studies); (2) selecting examples of social media posts that are illustrative (e.g., representing a particular cultural phenomenon), not just random posts, and presenting them alongside a meaningful analysis (potentially paired with an academic reading or video) that is properly facilitated by the instructor, not just left to the students to interpret entirely on their own, and appropriate to the nature of the course (e.g., incorporating sociological principles in a response or analysis if it is a sociology course); (3) asking students to respond to critical questions in relation to the chosen social media posts in person (prompting a degree of accountability) instead of just responding online (e.g., “Why is this ok?” or “Why do we engage in these behaviors?”); (4) having a mandatory introduction to the impact of social media (including its potentially harmful effects) for incoming college freshmen or a “guide to using social media responsibly” that could include short videos with testimonies from people who have been affected by racist or otherwise disparaging social media posts or exchanges, adding a much-needed “human factor”; and (5) making sure that any online course or module addressing race is also paired with in-person discussions where students can share their thoughts and process their emotions in a group setting (giving them some “actual reality”) instead of just “clicking through”
to finish without truly thinking about what it all means or how to change their behaviors going forward.

The emerging adults of color in this study (cases 1 and 3) described the racial climate at their university as “tense,” lacking “interracial communication,” and characterized by a “high level” of ignorance, while White emerging adults (case 2) spoke of their White friends at the university as being “complacent” or simply unaware of what is going on (e.g., the problems their Black and minority peers are facing on the same campus) because they choose to stay in their “own circle of just White people and people who don’t experience racism.” Referencing a specific racist incident (attacking the Black Lives Matter Movement) that happened on campus, participants felt that the administration went out of their way to defend the two culprits (White students) instead of the numerous other students (Black students) who were affected by it. By hastily making a comment about the students’ first amendment rights, even though they were clearly being irresponsible, inappropriate, and hateful, this social media post directly from the administration “silenced” and “offended” all the students who “felt threatened, felt uncomfortable, felt upset” by the incident. As a result, social media “hit [the university] twice…in a negative way when it came to the issue itself and the handling of it.”

**Implications**

The goals of the study were: (1) to explore the impact of the social media context on either limiting or encouraging moral behaviors online among emerging adults who consider themselves to have strong moral identities; (2) to use the experiences of these emerging adults on social media to provide educators with tools to guide students in combating racism, particularly in terms of challenging colorblind perspectives; and (3) to present social media as a means of facilitating positive moral identity development as well as promoting racial literacy. One of the
clear implications of this study, given that even some social justice-oriented emerging adults do not necessarily have a grasp on how to process and understand the impact of racism as well as how race functions as a concept (primarily in relation to Whiteness) in our society, is that students need to be taught racial literacy and how to examine race relations through a critical lens.

It is important for educators and parents to help students develop a vocabulary they can use to discuss race instead of ignoring or downplaying its presence as is the case with colorblind attitudes (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014). Twine’s (2010) components of racial literacy (e.g., interpreting racial codes, the symbolic value of Whiteness, the intersectionality of gender and class with race and racism) can be applied to a social media context and integrated into the curriculum of college classes focusing on such issues as race, social justice, and multicultural education. A discussion of moral identity and what it means to be moral can also be addressed at the post-secondary level, both in the classroom setting and in student groups or organizations on college campuses.

Rather than shying away from social media in the classroom, teachers should embrace its educational value, utilizing it as a teaching tool by engaging in discussions with students about how this technology is changing their interactions with the world around them and how it can be used to effectively promote social justice activism. Additionally, educators can promote active engagement in moral actions online (e.g., intervening in instances of racism or cyberbullying on SNSs) among students, which, in conjunction with their moral actions offline (e.g., volunteering, civic engagement, social justice activism) has the potential to facilitate positive moral identity development in emerging adults. In terms of implications for emerging adults, they can play an active role in their own racial literacy education by paying close attention to what their peers are
posting on SNSs in terms of race-related issues, instead of avoiding such posts. Social justice-oriented emerging adults, like the individuals in this study, can also advocate for racial literacy to be included either in an introductory course, or “guide to using social media responsibly” (as the participants suggested), for college students that incorporates both the beneficial and harmful impact of social media. They should also consider how they are personally using SNSs and how their behavior online is either aligning with or diverging from their behavior offline.

Specific aspects of CRT analysis of emerging adults’ experiences with race on social media that can be utilized in devising strategies for educators to help students confront and challenge colorblind perspectives on social media include: (1) guiding students in identifying when colorblindness is being used in posts on social media as a type of defense or in an attempt to deny the existence of white privilege and/or to downplay racial inequalities (e.g., using #AllLivesMatter as a colorblind response to #BlackLivesMatter); (2) encouraging discussions about the reasoning behind their views, including the purpose of #BlackLivesMatter; (3) asking them to consider the “editing” of their SNS newsfeeds (e.g., if they are only seeing posts they agree with, prompting them to think about why this might be the case, or asking them how often they see posts about race pop up on their feeds and whether these posts convey a variety of perspectives or not); (4) having students analyze whether (and how often) they notice microaggressions on social media; (5) identifying instances of cultural appropriation on social media and analyzing them in the context of colorblindness.

More generally, educators can help students by valuing and validating their personal experiences with race and racism, particularly Black and minority students, drawing from these students’ wealth of cultural knowledge and socioemotional intelligence to help guide them in coming up with lessons to address colorblindness in online and offline settings. Educators can
also draw attention to the way race-related incidents are portrayed in the media and provide their students with the tools to critique this portrayal. Given that SNSs are being used not simply for social purposes, but also for political purposes, educators can prompt their students to take note of social media in current events and the role SNSs can play in empowering and, conversely, in manipulating the public, depending on who is using this media and for what end.

CRT analysis was also useful in addressing how the experiences of emerging adults in this study can help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus. For example, students discussed how their experiences (both first-hand and second-hand) with microaggressions, colorblindness, and race-related incidents on social media, particularly those that involved their university peers, affected their interactions with students of other races on campus (directly and indirectly). Black and minority students (cases 1 and 3) also spoke of how they felt uncomfortable, ignored, and even harassed on campus. None of these occurrences should go unaddressed by administrators, especially when they can impact students, psychologically and academically. From the way participants in the focus group portrayed it, university administrators often seem to be rather oblivious to the racial climate on campus until some type of egregious incident brings it to their attention.

How can administrators become more attuned to the racial climate at their university? In order to address students’ concerns, particularly their safety concerns, administrators might begin by familiarizing themselves with CRT concepts such as racial realism, colorblindness, intersectionality, and white privilege (especially in the context of a PWI). It would be useful to integrate these concepts into mandatory on-going training for both administrators and educators, perhaps at the beginning of each academic year. Administrators could also hold racial climate
town hall meetings on a regular basis to assess the state of race relations among their students. According to the emerging adults in this study, administrators must make all their students feel valued in their university community, and this may mean making a special effort to understand and address the concerns of their Black and minority students. Additionally, they need to do all they can to make students feel safe and protected, emphasizing the types of behavior that simply will not be tolerated on campus. Lastly, when racist incidents do occur on campus, administrators should begin with a sincere apology to the victimized or most directly impacted students, and follow through with concrete solutions (e.g., school policies) that can be implemented to prevent future incidents from happening.

**Study Limitations**

While the sample for this study was fairly diverse in terms of race and gender, it was only comprised of students attending one particular university; therefore, it was not representative of all emerging adults, especially in terms of socioeconomic status (SES). Given that SES does tend to play a role in social media use, not examining SES directly in this study is a limitation in that the results do not reflect social media use among the general population of emerging adults in the U.S. For an even more nuanced study, additional interviews as well as follow-up interviews could have been conducted with participants representing each of the cases and potentially also included more populations (e.g., Native Americans).

Additionally, not actually using Facebook or Twitter as the forum for examining how participants either post or respond to posts about race-related issues may have limited the accuracy of the results, at least for the social media post responses as a data source, given that this exercise was not actually taking place in cyberspace where the participants would likely feel more comfortable sharing their honest thoughts and opinions. Lastly, these posts, though they
were actual social media posts, reference race-related incidents that happened a while ago, which may have altered participants’ perceptions of them. It would be ideal to examine responses “immediately following being confronted with discriminatory behavior,” as Tynes and Markoe (2010) suggest, but that is rather difficult to put into practice (p. 3).

**Areas for Future Research**

In terms of future research, it would be useful to build upon the findings of this study to explore how emerging adults from a range of demographic backgrounds, including a variety of SES levels, in multiple contexts, rather than just within one university, are engaging with and emotionally responding to racial issues on social media. The study could also be expanded to include adolescents instead of just focusing on emerging adults, which would provide an additional dimension of analysis into the development of patterns of moral and ethical thinking in online environments and how youth become responsible digital citizens. Researching how adolescents and emerging adults engage in virtual worlds, particularly in terms of creating and interacting in online communities, can also provide insight into how their moral schemas develop and how they make (or fail to make) connections between their moral thoughts and actions offline and online.

Additional questions to consider for future research include: How do different social media platforms vary in the opportunities they provide for emerging adults to experience moral identity development and a sense of belonging within that particular online community? How might social media platforms be examined as cultural spaces with their own norms, values, and even their own racialized trends of performativity? Lastly, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study examining a cohort of students as they grapple with dilemmas and race-related issues on social media in real time over the course of a few years, particularly during the
transition from high school to college and as they progress through college, which could serve as a barometer of sorts for their moral identity development. A mixed methods study collecting a combination of quantitative data (using social network analysis) and qualitative data (using interviews, observations, and thematic content analysis of social media posts) would also be promising in the insight it could offer.
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Schuster.


APPENDICES
Appendix A: Interview Questions

(RQ1) Moral identity and social media usage:

1. What does being a moral person mean to you? Describe specific characteristics of moral people. Which of these characteristics, if any, do you believe you have? Explain.

2. In what ways, if any, would you consider morality to be integral to your everyday behavior? In other words, would you describe yourself as having a strong moral identity? Why or why not?

3. If you believe you have a strong moral identity, how might you demonstrate this to others? For example, are there particular organizations you belong to, books you read, classes you take, or extracurricular interests you have that reflect or symbolize your morality?

4. Does it matter whether other people think of you as a moral person? Why or why not?

5. How would you respond to a situation in which someone you did not know was being bullied or cyberbullied?

6. What responsibility, if any, do individuals have to help or to stand up for people who are not family or friends on social media?

7. In your opinion, what does it mean to behave in a moral or ethical way when you are using social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)? How do you govern yourself and your behaviors online?

8. Are there ethical standards of conduct, or “ethical codes,” on social media sites that internet users adhere to? If so, what are they? If not, do you think there should be some ethical standards of conduct?
9. In what specific ways, if any, does morality impact your use of social media? Do you believe your moral identity leads you to think about exactly what you are posting on social media, how you are posting it, and who you are posting to (i.e., your audience)?

10. How would you describe your identity online versus offline (in person)? In what ways do these identities overlap, and in what ways are they distinct?

**RQ2) Engaging with race-related issues on social media:**

11. How important do you think it is to engage in conversations about race on social media? When engaging in these conversations, do you tend to re-post content (e.g., “retweeting” posts) or write your own posts? How do you make sense of re-posted versus original content on social media?

12. How do you respond to race-related issues on social media? For example, do you actively engage by commenting on or sharing posts about race-related issues, or do you prefer to avoid entering conversations about race on social media? Explain.

13. In what way, if any, do race-related comments on social media affect you? Do you find such comments to be upsetting? Do they make you want to act to address racism and prejudice? If so, what exactly causes you to become upset or want to act?

**RQ4) Confronting and changing colorblind perspectives:**

14. How would you define “colorblindness”?

15. In your opinion, does being a moral person mean being “colorblind” in your interactions with people of different races? Why or why not?

16. If you do not think of yourself as being “colorblind,” can you describe how you moved beyond “colorblindness” and what this experience was like for you?
17. Do you think “colorblindness” plays a role in social media interactions? What experiences, if any, have you had with “colorblindness” on social media?

(RQ3) Relationships among social media, university, and global communities:

18. How does your membership in social media communities impact the way you see the world and your place in it?

19. When did you become involved in social justice activism? Describe how your experiences and personal development contributed to this process of becoming a social justice activist.

20. Why do you choose to engage in social justice issues on social media?

21. Are you a member of any social media sites affiliated with student organizations at your university or college? How would you describe your membership on these sites?

22. Are you as much of an activist offline, particularly on your college campus, as you are online? Why or why not?

23. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

(RQ4) Confronting and changing colorblind perspectives:

1. In what contexts have you learned about or discussed race in a classroom setting?
2. Are you familiar with the term “colorblindness”? Do you think it is important for all college students to understand this concept? Why or why not?
3. What does being “racially literate” mean to you?
4. Do you think it would be useful to have a racial literacy curriculum that educators could use in a classroom setting to teach students about race and race relations as well as recognizing and challenging colorblind perspectives? Why or why not?
5. What might this racial literacy curriculum look like, and what role might social media play in designing this curriculum?
6. What ideas do you have for integrating social media in a racial literacy curriculum that could be used on your university campus?

(RQ5) Racial climate and addressing racial issues on campus:

7. How would you describe the current racial climate on your university campus? In other words, how do students of different races interact with each other on campus? What are some specific examples that illustrate the racial climate at your university?
8. What experiences have you personally had that inform your view of the racial climate on campus?
9. Has social media played a role in influencing the racial climate on your university campus? If so, in what specific ways?
10. Has your university used social media to address race-related issues and incidents on campus? If so, describe the ways in which social media has been used for this purpose.
11. Is there anything else you would like to add?
Appendix C: Theoretical Similarities Between Moral Development and Racial Identity Development (Moreland & Leach, 2001)

**TABLE 1**

**Similarities Between Moral Development and Racial Identity Theories**

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<th>Construct</th>
<th>Moral Development</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
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<td>Cognitive development</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Cognitive style</td>
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<td>Ego development</td>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>Self-actualization, self-esteem</td>
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<td>Education level</td>
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<td>External self</td>
<td>Preconventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Preconventional (Stage 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared community</td>
<td>Conventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objectivity/openness to others</td>
<td>Postconventional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Solicitation Emails

Email to Potential Participants in Social Justice-Oriented Campus Organizations

Hello, members of [student organization]!

I am a doctoral candidate in Educational Psychology at NC State. Currently, I am researching how moral identity impacts social media usage among emerging adults (ages 18-25). In this particular study, which I am conducting for my dissertation, I am exploring how emerging adults are engaging in race-related conversations on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), how this engagement is related to their moral identity, and how their experiences on social media can help educators and university administrators better understand the racial climate at their university and how to address racial issues on campus.

This study is important because it will provide students, educators, and administrators with information about how emerging adults are using social media to engage with difficult, emotionally charged issues, as well as tools for recognizing and combatting online discrimination and for developing a critical racial literacy curriculum for use in the classroom. Additionally, the study will provide data on whether online activism is linked to offline social justice activism. It could also be a stepping-stone for improving racial climate on college campuses and encouraging discussions about social justice issues. As of yet, not much research has been conducted that explicitly examines the intersections of social media, moral identity development, and social justice education.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study. If you agree to do so, please click on the following link to respond to a brief online demographic questionnaire by this Friday, March 24: https://ncsu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6x2auqGNTCVnDiR. The questionnaire should take no longer than 5 min. to complete. If you are selected, based on your responses to the questionnaire, you will be contacted via email and interviewed at a location on your university campus sometime over the course of the next few weeks. The interview will take approximately 45 min. – 1 hour. A select few participants will be asked to participate in a follow-up focus group session, which will also be conducted at a location on campus. Measures will be taken to ensure your confidentiality during the interview and focus group session.

I would truly appreciate your assistance in making this research project possible. If you have any questions related to the study, please feel free to contact me directly. I can be reached via email at vkgill@ncsu.edu or by phone at [number]. Thank you for your consideration!

Sincerely,

Vanu Gill

Vandna Gill, M.A., Ed.M.
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Psychology
Teacher Education and Learning Sciences
North Carolina State University
Email to Selected Undergraduate Students

Thank you all so much for taking the demographics survey for my dissertation study! You have been selected to participate in the interview phase of the study. Please glance over this Doodle poll, and indicate which days and times would work best for you to take part in a 45 min. interview, which will take place on the [university] campus over the next few weeks, most likely at [the library]. I will update you on the exact location a couple days before the interviews. Please respond by Tuesday, March 28.

Sincerely,

Vanu Gill

Vandna Gill, M.A., Ed.M.
Ph.D. Candidate, Educational Psychology
Teacher Education and Learning Sciences
North Carolina State University
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form for Interview

Title of Study: An Exploration of Moral Identity and Race Relations on Social Media

Principal Investigator: Vandna K. Gill, Ph.D. candidate in Educational Psychology

Faculty Point of Contact: Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. You will be provided with a copy of the signed consent form for your records. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how moral identity impacts social media usage among emerging adults, particularly in terms of how they are engaging in race-related conversations on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). Additionally, the study explores how emerging adults conceptualize relationships among social media culture, university culture, and the global community. Lastly, the study addresses how educators can help students challenge colorblind perspectives on social media and how the experiences of emerging adults can help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

Based on your responses to the demographics questionnaire in the initial phase of this study, you have been selected to participate in a one-on-one interview conducted by the principal investigator. If you decide to participate in this next phase of the study, you will be asked to respond to a series of interview questions about your moral identity, social media usage, and engagement with race-related issues on social media. You will also be asked to respond to a series of Facebook and Twitter posts; your comments will not be posted on actual social media sites. The interview will last 45 min. – 1 hour.
Based on your interview responses, you may also be contacted at a later time to be part of a focus group session addressing racial climate at your university and ways that social media can be used to discuss issues of race in the college classroom.

**Risks:**

Since the study includes potentially sensitive subject matter, it could cause stress for participants. As such, you will have the option to discontinue the study at any time.

**Benefits:**

As a participant, you will be provided with an opportunity to think about your use of social media in relation to race-related issues, as well as your moral identity. You will also be provided with a forum to process your thoughts about the racial climate on your university campus and about race relations more broadly speaking.

**Confidentiality:**

The data collected from the demographics questionnaire (that you completed previously), interviews, and focus group (if you are invited to participate in the focus group) will be stored in password protected files to which only the principal investigator has access. Aside from the demographics questionnaire, all collected data will employ pseudonyms for confidentiality.

**Compensation:**

There will be no compensation provided.

**What if you have questions about this study?**

If you have questions at any time about the study, you may contact the researcher, Vandna Gill, by email at vkgill@ncsu.edu or by phone at [number].

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus, (919) 515-4514.

**Consent to Participate:**

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty.”

Participant’s signature____________________________________ Date _____________________
Investigator's signature____________________________________ Date _____________________
Appendix F: Participant Consent Form for Focus Group

Title of Study: An Exploration of Moral Identity and Race Relations on Social Media

Principal Investigator: Vandna K. Gill, Ph.D., candidate in Educational Psychology

Faculty Point of Contact: Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Teacher Education and Learning Sciences

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate, or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form, you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. You will be provided with a copy of the signed consent form for your records. If, at any time, you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how moral identity impacts social media usage among emerging adults, particularly in terms of how they are engaging in race-related conversations on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, YouTube). Additionally, the study explores how emerging adults conceptualize relationships among social media culture, university culture, and the global community. Lastly, the study addresses how educators can help students challenge colorblind perspectives on social media and how the experiences of emerging adults can help university administrators better understand the racial climate within their university community and how to address racial issues on campus.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

Based on your interview responses in the previous phase of this study, you have been chosen to be part of a focus group session addressing how social media can be used to discuss issues of race in the college classroom. If you decide to participate in the focus group, you will be asked to join 4-9 other participants to respond to a series of questions asking about your views on the racial climate of your university campus and your ideas for designing a racial literacy curriculum. You will also be asked to explain your responses to the social media posts initially presented in the interview phase of the study. The focus group session will last approximately 1 hour.
Risks:

Since the study includes potentially sensitive subject matter, it could cause stress for participants. As such, you will have the option to discontinue the study at any time.

Benefits:

As a participant, you will be provided with an opportunity to think about your use of social media in relation to race-related issues, as well as your moral identity. You will also be provided with a forum to process your thoughts about the racial climate on your university campus and about race relations more broadly speaking.

Confidentiality:

The data collected from the demographics questionnaire (that you completed previously), interviews, and focus group will be stored in password protected files to which only the principal investigator has access. Aside from the demographics questionnaire, all collected data will employ pseudonyms for confidentiality.

Compensation:

There will be no compensation provided.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study, you may contact the researcher, Vandna Gill, by email at vkgill@ncsu.edu or by phone at [number].

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus, (919) 515-4514.

Consent to Participate:

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty.”

Participant's signature_________________________________________ Date _________________

Investigator's signature_________________________________________ Date _________________
Consent Form

I, _________________________ hereby give my permission for Vandna Gill to interview me in a focus group setting and quote my responses in a scholarly research paper. I understand that this research will be submitted as part of a dissertation at North Carolina State University.

I hereby give my permission in the form of my signature below.

Signature_______________________________________ Date______________