

A FRIEND THAT STICKS CLOSER THAN A BROTHER: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RESILIENCE IN BLACK BEREAVED
MOTHERS THAT HAVE LOST A CHILD TO GUN VIOLENCE

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

A FRIEND THAT STICKS CLOSER THAN A BROTHER: A HERMENEUTIC
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF RESILIENCE IN BLACK BEREAVED
MOTHERS

presented by Natilie Williams,

a candidate for the degree of doctor of philosophy,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

We made it! My name may be the one on the degree, but it has taken a village to help me get here to this point. I pray that this degree shows every little Black girl that greatness can be theirs. I pray that this dissertation and degree shows them that the only dream too hard to reach is the one that we do not take the time to dream.

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ABSTRACT

Despite literature considering the impact of child loss on parents, communication scholars have yet to examine the resilience of bereaved Black mothers. Specifically, this present study examined the role of Black sisterhood and spirituality as tools of resilience for 15 Black bereaved mothers that have lost a child to gun violence. Semi-structured interviews were combined with hermeneutic phenomenology, the communication theory of resilience, and the strong Black woman collective theory. Results revealed that Black bereaved mothers used interpersonal and spiritual relationships to grapple with the new reality of violent child loss. Black sisterhood offered social support and safe place to discuss grief. Spirituality allowed participants to admit being angry with God. Spirituality also offered divine encounters for participants to interact with their deceased child. The communication theory of resilience highlighted how participants often used social media groups to commune with other mothers that were suffering from child loss. Social media groups appeared as an extended communication network that many participants found extremely beneficial.

Key words: Black mothers, bereavement, gun violence, resilience, strong Black woman

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Gun Violence as a Social Issue

Gun violence is an important social issue that disproportionately affects underserved communities, especially in major cities with a higher Black population. The University of Chicago Crime Lab (2016) tracks gun violence across the U.S. According to 2016 data, the major cities that ranked highest in gun-related homicides include New York, Los Angeles, Houston, Philadelphia, and Chicago with 2.3, 5.3, 10.6, 14.7, and 25.1 gun homicides per 100,000 residents, respectively. Chicago, as the third-largest city in the U.S. but with the highest rate of gun violence, showcases with particular focus how gun violence disproportionately affects Black families. Chicago gun homicides in 2016 were nearly double the rate of the next highest city, with 25.1 vs. 14.7 homicides per 100,000 residents in Chicago as compared to Philadelphia. From 2019-2020, the South and West side neighborhoods of Chicago experienced the most dramatic increase in homicide violence, with some neighborhoods documenting an 80% increase (Chicago Police Department, 2020). These neighborhoods have mostly Black residents. Not surprisingly, then, the majority of Chicago gun violence victims are Black. Specifically, Black people make up about 30% of the Chicago population, but Blacks comprised 80% of homicide victims in 2020 (Chicago Police Department, 2020).

Chicago statistics bring focus to the disproportionate problem of gun violence in Black communities that pervades Black communities across the nation. Gun violence in underserved Black communities is particularly problematic, given that these neighborhoods already grapple with systemic racism that results in lower-income, fewer mental health resources, and lower graduation rates. As gun violence is present in some

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underserved communities, critical race theory (CRT) can be used to better explain the defunding of communities of color because of racism, thus causing violence in many of these communities. CRT acknowledges that race is embedded in the very fiber of American society. Therefore, critical race theory considers the experiences of Black people and examines the integration and outcome of racism across education, real estate, healthcare, politics, and even residential communities. Critical race theory seeks to tell the stories of people of color and outlines many of the lived experiences of Black families (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The theory also describes how people of color have lived oppressive experiences related to race, gender, and class. Lastly, CTR seeks to eradicate injustice and mistreatment towards people of color (Creswell, 2014). As CTR addresses injustice with focus on the social construction of race and oppression, the theory recommends that systems and structures improve treatment towards oppressed people. The rate of gun violence and the need for resources in underserved communities can expand the hardship of bereavement.

In the aftermath of gun violence, family members and friends grieve the loss of the victim. Perhaps most profound in this grief is the experience of parental bereavement. Child loss constitutes a trauma that alters bereaved parents' identity, family structure, and emotional stability (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). Child loss due to gun-related homicide is an even greater sorrow given the untimely, unexpected, and violent nature of the child's death (Bailey et al., 2013). This violent cause of death can be devastating to families, including parents of the deceased.

The present study, guided by the communication theory of resilience (Buzznell, 2018) and the strong Black women collective theory (SBWCT; Davis, 2019) aims to shed

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light on the resilience that sustains Black bereaved mothers after losing a child to gun violence. The death of a child can take an emotional toll on parents and prompts parents to draw upon resilience processes to bolster their mental, emotional, and physical health after loss. The present study draws from resilience theorizing and integrates CTR and SBWCT to articulate more specifically how resilience may be unique to the Black mother experience. For Black mothers, spirituality and sisterhood may be particularly important tools to help mothers cope. Both resilience processes constitute communicative relationships that act as a protective mechanism against the overall detriment of gun violence in the lives of Black bereaved mothers. Thus, it is important to emphasize these processes in research on Black mothers' resilience after losing a child to gun violence.

Relationships can be essential in providing social support that prompts emotional, spiritual, and mental comfort in times of crisis. These relationships can be identified as physical interactions through sisterhood or even as spiritual relationships with a divine power that is overall beneficial to Black bereaved mothers. It is important to understand the unique resilience of Black bereaved mothers in order to indicate that this resilience may not mirror that of bereaved mothers of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The proposed study acknowledges the hardship that gun violence causes in the lives of Black bereaved moms, signaling a need to be resilient and seek sources of resilience. Toward this end, the following sections review research on Black mothers and associated strength-based stereotypes, trauma stemming from child loss, theoretical frameworks important to Black bereaved mother experiences, and an explanation of the benefits of the study.

Black Mothers and the Strong Black Woman Stereotype

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Black mothers, as an integral and foundational part of Black communities, fulfill the mothering role against the backdrop of the long-standing concept of the strong Black woman. The strong Black woman concept posits that Black women are inherently resilient and can endure difficult situations with limited expressed and experienced impact (Nelson et al., 2016). The notion of the strong Black women can be traced back to slavery when Black women were mistreated but still expected to not show distress, even in times of mental and physical anguish (Scott, 2017). According to Scott (2017), since slavery, Black women have been burdened with an expectation to endure difficulty by remaining silently strong. The concept of the strong Black woman is longstanding and provides insight into the experiences of Black women, as well as the expectations placed on this population by outsiders.

Black motherhood is embedded in the strong black mother stereotype. Black women, including Black mothers, are pillars of the Black community, often serving their communities by lending their own mothering abilities to other families (Collins, 2000). Collins explains that Black mothers often put the needs of others in front of the needs of their own. Scott (2017) confirms that Black mothers are perceived as the “backbone of the Black community” (p. 21). Black mothers may take on multiple roles in their households and outside areas, increasing the likelihood of enduring high stress (McAdoo, 2007).

As pillars of communities, Black mothers have become representatives of strength in wake of difficulty. At the same time, the strong black woman stereotype is problematic because it places an undue burden on Black women to endure hardship and quietly suffer (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). This stereotype can promote a lack of self-care in Black

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women. Viewing the strong black woman stereotype through the lens of stigma provides additional insight into the potential difficulties of this archetype for Black women's mental and physical health.

Strong Black Woman as Stigma

The ideology of the strong Black women continues as a stigmatized identity shaping Black women's experiences today. Stigma literature connects to the strong Black women concept and can be used to explain how Black women handle the title and expectation of being a "strong Black woman". Black women's identification with the strong Black women's stereotype is mixed (Nelson et al., 2016). Of the 30 Black women interviewed for their study, Nelson and colleagues found that 23% of the Black women rejected the title of being a strong Black woman. These participants refused to celebrate unrealistic expectations of strength. However, the remaining 77% of participants enthusiastically accepted the title of being a strong Black woman and took pride in others expecting these women to constantly exude strength. Those who accepted the title mentioned that the title made them feel empowered and independent. The stigma management techniques of *denying* or *accepting* the strong Black woman stereotype can be used to explain the range of Black women's responses to this archetype (Meisenbach, 2010). There is no one universal method of expressing and embodying strength and difficulty as a Black woman.

The decision to accept or deny the strong Black women archetype can cause division or connection among Black women, further stigmatizing Black women's experiences. At times, stigma can bring people together. For example, Rusch et al. (2009) found that support groups for the stigmatized can lead to less secrecy surround the stigma

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because the stigmatized feel a level of comfort being around those that share a stigma. In this way, the strong black woman stereotype can provide a collective experience for Black women in which the hardship of the stereotype is shared. At the same time, resistance to the stereotype increases the potential of internal division among Black women displaying resilience. Resultingly, “strong” Black women may judge other Black women as “weak” for expressing difficulty and asking for help. Perceived judgment for resisting the strong Black woman stereotype may impede some from expressing difficulty in the face of hardship, further reifying the stereotype among Black women. The expectation of strength can be passed down across generations. Stigma not only causes division amongst the stigmatized, but it can also negatively impact those that are in relationship with the stigmatized (Zhu et al., 2017). Black women are stigmatized, and then young Black women often inherit the stigma because they are associated with the stigma of strength that will mature with age.

In this way, a relationship with the stigmatized becomes a source of stigma known as a courtesy stigma (O’Shay-Wallace, 2019). Courtesy stigma has implications for the Black community. Younger Black girls who grow up in households that celebrate the strong Black women concept often uphold the courtesy stigma and later experience the actual stigma in adulthood. The households of origin are responsible for cultivating the concept of the strong Black women that the young women are presented. Black women are taught in their households that resilience is a necessity for Black women.

Regardless of whether women opt to deny or accept the title of being a strong Black woman, the expectation of strength can lead to resentment, isolation, and psychological distress (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005). The strength itself can be a positive

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thing in the lives of those that use the strength to persevere. However, the stigma of strength and constant expectation of strength can create a hardship for Black women who may not be afforded the proper time and opportunity to embrace the difficulty or distress of losing a child. The strong Black woman stereotype can be particularly limiting in the case of child bereavement. Black mothers experience the trauma of losing a child in the context of the expectation of strength in Black women. Therefore, the next section will review the trauma of losing a child.

Trauma of Losing a Child

Losing a child is an unparalleled trauma for parents, prompting feelings and experiences of “loss and devastation” (Toller, 2011, p. 17). The devastating emotional impact is worthy of further academic research because the experience prompts parents to find sources of strength and resilience to endure their loss. The purpose of the present study is to expand research to consider the experience of child bereavement in marginalized communities which lack access to resources helpful for coping with loss.

The trauma of losing a child to gun violence is a complex “social experience that is confounded by race, stigma, and blame” (Bailey et al., 2013, p. 339). Gun-related homicide is sudden, untimely, and violent in nature. Losing a child to gun violence provides an additional layer of stress to the trauma of child bereavement, which weakens the resilience of the Black bereaved mother and negatively affects the coping process. Having research that gives voice to the trauma of child gun-related homicide will provide credible information on how community resources and community members can better serve these mothers.

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It is useful to maintain safe spaces for Black bereaved mothers as a collective that may feel stigmatized due to gun violence being the cause of death of their child. This collectivity of Black women breeds community and creates a culture of sisterhood. Black sisterhood offers the opportunity for other Black women to gain the comfortability to explore and explain their connection to the strong Black woman concept. The upcoming section will describe Black sisterhood and the power of its collectivity.

Spirituality and Sisterhood for Black Mothers and as a Coping Tool

Toller (2011) reveals the useful role of supportive communication in the coping process of bereaved parents, while Giannini (2011) provides insight into effective conversational themes that assist bereaved parents. Both scholars assert that support and supportive communication can be essential in the healing process for bereaved parents. Bereaved parents need safe spaces to openly grieve and gain support (McBride and Toller, 2011). However, this research may not be able to speak to the experiences of bereaved Black mothers because the overwhelming majority of participants are white, excluding the experiences of Black mothers.

Given the profound toll of losing a child, it is important to investigate the resilience components that Black mothers use to cope, given that resilience for Black mothers may look different as compared to white counterparts. Specifically, spirituality and sisterhood are two important tools used in the Black community. Spirituality is a powerful force in the lives of many Black families, especially when spirituality is used as a lens of hopefulness during adversity. McAdoo (2007) explains that spirituality for many Black families is historical and generational in nature, with much of the spiritual maintenance being encouraged and cultivated by Black women, especially Black

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mothers. Richardson (2002) acknowledges that spirituality has a pivotal role in the resilience of Black bereaved mothers.

Similarly, social support is key in the resilience journey of bereaved parents. For Black mothers, sisterhood is a foundational source of social support. Black sisterhood is often a breeding ground for both the strong Black woman concept and resilience. Black sisterhood creates a welcoming environment for Black women to receive comfort and reassurance, especially in times of despair (Davis, 2015). Essentially, Black women, their relationships with other Black women, and the collective strength of Black women have been documented in empirical research. However, this research is in its infancy. Much of the research on friendship, communicative resilience, and coping are mostly focused on white participants. Many of the findings from research using homogenous White samples may have lesser applicability to Black women, including Black mothers. The stories of Black women are missing from child bereavement research. This is an important literature gap that requires researchers to highlight the experiences of Black bereaved mothers. CTR and the SBWCT provide a useful theoretical framework to better understand Black bereaved mothers. Therefore, the next section will review the theoretical framework of the study in greater detail.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience has been the focus of many communication research studies (Houston & Buzzanell, 2020). While there are many definitions of and approaches to resilience research, the communication theory of resilience (CTR) is a particularly good fit for exploring how Black bereaved mothers experience resilience. Buzzanell (2010) is responsible for elaborating on the communicative aspect of resilience within CTR. The

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theory articulates five components that serve as bases of resilience, including: “(a) crafting normalcy, (b) affirming identity anchors, (c) maintaining and using communication networks, (d) putting alternative logics to work, and (e) downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive motions” (p. 1). Each aspect of the theory allows survivors to enact the resilience component that is most beneficial to them. For example, cultivating Black sisterhood as a Black bereaved mother aligns with the areas of the theory that describes the maintenance and utilization of communication networks. Activating positive affirmations through spirituality may connect with the aspect of the theory that outlines how resilience is present when people “put alternative logics to work” (p. 1). CTR highlights the importance of sisterhood and spirituality, but more is needed to articulate the nuances of these resilience processes in Black communities. Thus, the present study integrates the strong Black woman collective theory (SBWCT) with CTR to shed light on Black bereaved mothers’ experiences.

SBWCT is foundational for understanding the role of the collectivity of Black woman in Black sisterhood. The theory posits that Black women have unique language styles that prompt connectivity and group identification. The communal and familial nature of Black sisterhood is a tool of overcoming and generating resilience (Davis, 2019). The theory is relatively new, so it has not been applied to a variety of hardships that would activate resilience processes in Black mothers. Rather, existing SBWCT research tends to focus on experiences of racist oppression. As sisterhood is beneficial in the lives of Black women who face racist microaggressions, one can imagine that sisterhood would be important in the lives of Black women that are grieving the loss of a child. The present study applies SBWCT to Black bereaved mothers’ experiences of

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resilience after child loss to expand the scope of the theory to processes beyond racism support. In doing so, the proposed research brings greater intelligibility to Black mothers' resilience processes.

Benefits of this Study

This study seeks to understand the lived experiences of Black bereaved mothers who have lost a child due to gun violence. Black bereaved mothers are increasingly enduring the loss of a child as gun violence continues to increase in Black communities across the nation (University of Chicago Crime Lab, 2016). Losing a child qualifies as life-altering trauma that often prompts bereaved Black mothers to seek solace in communicative and spiritual relationships in their Black community. This trauma is worthy of further research to understand the role of spirituality and sisterhood in the resilience of Black bereaved mothers.

The unique and specific focus of the current project cultivates increased representation and diversity in communication research. Research has yet to thoroughly inspect and describe the essential essence of Black women's resilience from a communication perspective (Davis, 2015). Expanding communication research to include Black women as main participants will allow the stories of the community of Black women to be told. Currently, communication research tends to utilize homogenous samples of white women. These studies are often generalized to speak for all women. However, there are many instances where the experiences of Black women are not synonymous with the experiences of white women, and Black women have unique experiences and communication styles. For example, Black women use communication to unify and "signify a shared experience of the legacies of colonization, slavery,

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disenfranchisement, and marginalization (Davis, 2015, p. 26). Black women's unique experiences are worthy of communication research.

The notion that communication theories may not apply equally to all racial groups is empirically supported. For example, family communication patterns have unique associations in minority groups. Soliz and Phillips (2018) contrasted associations between conversation orientation and life satisfaction between White and minority groups. Whereas conformity tends to be associated with negative outcomes for individuals and families in homogenous White samples, there was actually a positive relationship between conformity orientation and life satisfaction in minority families. This important finding demonstrates that communication processes may differ between racial groups and compels researchers to consider variations in communication theories based on racial identification. However, too often family communication scholars present study results based on homogenous participant samples as described "normative families" and/or representing all families equally (p. 6). As a result, Soliz and Phillips strongly urge communication researchers to use intentionality to include diverse experiences in research. Instead of repeating the widely popular research limitation that admits a lack of diversity with boilerplate acknowledgments of racial homogeneity, scholars are calling for researchers to "develop a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding" of topics that are related to underrepresented groups. The present study honors the call of Soliz and Phillips and will use qualitative interviews to spotlight Black bereaved mothers. Considering the unique process of the resilience of Black women will add depth to CTR research. Supplementing CTR theorizing with the strong Black women collective theory

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will amplify Black women's experiences and generate new levels of understandings of minority experiences.

Summary

This study assisted in expanding the literature on Black women and their resilience as they endure the loss of a child to a violent death. The communication theory of resilience and strong Black woman collective theory are further developed theoretically as it is applied to a traumatic lived experience of Black women, the death of a child to gun violence. Chapter two will include a review of the literature on the main topics covered in this research study, including: the communication theory of resilience, Black sisterhood, spirituality, and the strong Black woman collective theory. Chapter three will highlight the methods of the study and provide insight on the specific methodology that will be used in the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Death is an inevitable experience that can bring about grief and emotional trauma, causing the bereaved to find solace, relief, and resilience in faith and community. The loss of a child can leave parents with lasting distress and trauma. Toller (2005) reveals that the death of a child can be a major source of emotional pain for parents. The emotional effect of the death of a child is often far-reaching, negatively impacting beyond just one specific area of the lives of parents (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). Parents can endure grief that lasts the entirety of their own lifetime (Rosenblatt, 1996). As parents experience grief, their parental identity is at stake as well.

Essentially, after the loss of a child, bereaved parents may suffer identity issues when much of their identity is placed within their experience of parenthood (Fletcher, 2000). Toller (2008) expresses that bereaved parents have to endure their new loss-centered identity and find ways to manage the identity as best they can. When studying the negotiated identity of 53 bereaved parents, Toller clarifies that bereaved parents may commonly face two identities, including being “a parent without a child to parent” and self-identifying as an outsider and insider (p. 311). In Toller’s study, many parents admit that they actively maintain a relationship with the child beyond the grave, even as parents who are no longer able to physically parent their now-deceased child. Participants disclosed that they create sentimental rituals to commemorate the life of their deceased child, while also cultivating their own parental identity to still feel like an active parent. The loss of a child does more than invoke emotional and mental trauma for parents, it may also cause parents to feel excluded from parental groups since the bereaved can no longer actively parent a deceased child.

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The feelings of being excluded are not without the feelings of being included in certain instances, Toller (2008) further explains that bereaved parents can experience moments of feeling like an outsider when congregating with others. Bereaved parents can also begin to assume that outsiders may judge exactly how parents prefer to deal with the loss of their child. In contrast, bereaved parents can also feel like an insider when communicating with other bereaved parents. The comradery between those that have lost a child can prompt a relationship or “club of grieving insiders that support and comfort each other” (Toller, 2008, p. 314). The contradictory nature of the outsider-insider concept highlights the complexity of the mental and emotional journey that many bereaved parents experience as they grieve and begin to heal.

The healing process looks different for parents as a parental unit, both collectively and individually, underscoring the importance of acknowledging the needs of parents as dyads and individuals. Toller and Braithwaite (2009) studied 37 bereaved parents with the participant representing individual parents and parental dyads, finding that parents, within their own gender and biological sex identification, each have their own method of grieving. The mothers in the study often grieved through crying and having conversations surrounding the child and the child’s death. In contrast, the fathers in the study often grieved by engaging in day-to-day physical activities. As mothers use clear displays of emotion and communication as a tool to grieve, this makes it evident that the grieving process for mothers may be more apparent as compared to dads. This shows the value of using research to further understand more about the tools of grief and resilience in mothers, including Black mothers. The next section will highlight bereavement in Black families.

Bereavement in Black Families

The death of a child is clearly a horrific event with lifelong implications for individuals and families. The outward manifestation of grief differs according to the characteristics and demographics of the parents who have lost a child, such as gender and family composition (Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). An additional confounding characteristic that has received less attention is race. Across the communicative bereavement research, there is a lack of racial diversity in participants. Most of the research is based on Caucasian participants, with little intentional attention directed towards Black people and their experiences with bereavement and grief.

Mothers in Black communities experience child bereavement in unique ways, necessitating a specific research focus. Mothers tend to be family kin keepers in Black communities, caring for biological and informally adopted children throughout many stages of their life (Collins, 2000). Black mothers' care occurs in a sociocultural environment in which Black children and adults are killed at a higher rate than other racial groups due to police brutality and gun violence (University of Chicago Crime Lab, 2016). Thus, Black mothers face child death not only at a higher rate but also through trauma characterized by violence and murder. Black neighborhoods with increased gun violence also grapple with systematic, covert oppression that not only contributes to violence but poses financial and material barriers to coping with traumatic loss. Adding to this burden, Black mothers experience grief while also navigating the stereotype of the strong Black woman which expects that Black women will exhibit resilience even in the face of considerable loss (Bailey et al., 2013).

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Black mothers experience child bereavement more often, as a result of violence, without supportive coping resources, and against the backdrop of the strong Black women stereotype. Communication research on parental bereavement has not taken these unique experiences into account when considering child loss. Thus, there is a need for scholars to intentionally seek to tell the overlooked stories of mothers in the Black community who have lost a child. As bereaved parents are tasked with creating a new reality after the loss of a child, Black bereaved mothers display resilience while using their identity as a strong Black woman to find their new normal. Resilience literature will provide a closer understanding of how Black bereaved mothers find a new normal after losing a child. Resilience literature provides an essential foundation to understand how diverse groups experience and seek resilience. Therefore, the upcoming section will define resilience, explain internal and external labeling of resilience, and discuss sources of resilience.

Resilience

In order to understand resilience, it is important to first define resilience, acknowledge the various ways of displaying resilience, and articulate sources of resilience. Conceptually, resilience in its technical definition honors the ability to acclimate to a new normal after a difficult experience (Masten, 2014). Patterson (2002) considers resilience to align with a multi-step procedure of adjustment in tough times. While furthering the understanding of resilience, Patterson reinforces the notion that resilience is connected to resiliency. Resiliency examines “capacity management” more so as trait (p. 352), while resilience focuses on getting back to a sense of normalcy as a

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process. When coupled together, resilience and resiliency encourage survivors to persist beyond a difficult experience.

Moreover, Buzzanell (2018) asserts that resilience is initiated in response to a “trigger event” (p. 100), indicating that resilience follows the disruptive event. Some stressors may have more lasting effects than others. For example, a job layoff may prompt a different level and amount of stress as compared to generational poverty and community violence. Using poverty and gun violence, as an illustration, both of these qualify as a trigger event. Yet, for some communities, the experience of poverty and gun violence happens more than once, showing that triggering events can be compounded and cause an overload of stress. For example, Walsh (2016) asserts how poverty breeds “internal and external stress,” but also the stigmatized identity of being poor, indicating that resilience can be experienced amongst various groups of social class (p. 297).

When Black bereaved mothers are members of impoverished communities, these mothers can experience grief compounded with poverty. Overloading poverty survivors with additional tasks such as maintaining optimism, managing stress, combating financial insecurity, and navigating community violence are additional triggering events that may surround the traumatic event of child death. Underserved communities that are victims of violence may have reoccurring experiences with poverty and violence, thus kickstarting the innate human reaction of survival. Those in situations that necessitate resilience may find creative ways to survive tough experiences. Walsh (2016) connects resilience to a consistent persistence and ability to maintain resources even in a deficit that may prompt a human desire for survival.

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Finding a means of survival may look different across survivors, including coping and finding solutions to limiting or preventing triggering events from happening in the future. Ford and Ivancic (2020) determined that resilience can introduce survivors to coping. Another aspect of resilience can be found in “problem-focused coping” as an area of resilience that is a solution-oriented examination of the actual problem or trauma (p. 198). Those faced with devastation may be tasked with learning their own stress capacity levels and then finding healthy outlets and areas of support that can serve as a safe space during the process of resilience.

Walsh (2016) describes that survivors can be taught how to “reframe and relabel their stressors” (p. 136). The reframing alters the survivors’ perspective of the stressor or triggering event. The hope is to lessen the stressor by supplementing the stressor with a positive outlook, while simultaneously enduring and acclimating to the effect. By researching Black bereaved mothers, the problem-focused coping may address the specific cause of death of their child. For gun violence, the Black bereaved mothers may begin reasoning the cause of gun violence in their community and may also commit to community work to eradicate the issue.

Understanding how resilience is defined makes it easier to advocate for resilience within marginalized communities, including groups of Black bereaved mothers, that experience poverty and gun violence as triggering events. The next section will review the internal and external labeling of resilience.

Labeling Resilience

Resilience is difficult to formally measure and label across the communication discipline, especially because it can be explicated from both an external and internal

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perspective. Ambiguity surrounds the notion of who gets to determine if an individual is resilient. Outsiders may label someone as resilient without full knowledge of the depth of trauma. However, someone may label themselves as resilient because they are fully aware of their own capacity to cope and rebound after a difficult event.

Resilience is often attributed to the ability to persist despite difficulty or even showing persistence in the midst of difficulty, yet resilience does not erase past hurt. Survivors can still appear to display resilience yet still have underlying trauma. While outsiders may label this same person as resilient, displaying resilience does not automatically make trauma disappear. For example, Walsh (2016) states that the resilience displayed by survivors can be misleading. A survivor can physically appear to operate as normal, but this same survivor can endure mental health issues and experience relationship difficulty with family and romantic partners. In the instance of Black bereaved mothers being perceived as resilient because of doing day-to-day activities, the title of resilience may not account for emotional and mental trauma.

“Perceived resilience” places the ownership on the survivor to recognize their own resilience, limiting the need for outsider confirmation (Ford and Ivancic, 2020, p. 189). The self-assessment within perceived resilience is beneficial to survivors because it allows the survivor to make a declaration about their own ability to persist. In contrast, perceived resilience can lessen the self-assessed resilience of the survivor if the survived trauma has decreased the survivor’s esteem and confidence in their own ability to persist. Therefore, perceived resilience can be problematic when the depth of the trauma is not examined. Ford and Ivancic report how there can be instances of severe trauma that completely diminishes how survivors view themselves and the world around them,

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increasing the chance of survivors experiencing feelings of hopelessness. The legitimacy of resilience may be questioned when it is self-imposed, and resilience may be perceived as more authentic when labeled by outsiders.

Further problematizing resilience is the ambiguity of who decides when resilience is achieved. Ford and Ivancic (2020) assert that the resilience of survivors can be more authentic when the survivors label themselves as being resilient from an internal perspective. Black bereaved mothers may label themselves as resilient because they are aware of their own mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual state even after losing a child. Because the Black bereaved mothers have insider knowledge regarding themselves, the self-imposed label of resilience may be perceived as more credible than if the label was attributed by an outsider. As beneficial as resilience may be during times of difficulty, the perceived authenticity of resilience can be provided from internal and external perspectives.

Now that the internal and external labeling of resilience has been discussed, the next section will review sources of resilience.

Sources of Resilience. Though resilience may be viewed as an intrinsic characteristic, there may be multiple outside factors that contribute to how resilient people may be. Ford and Ivancic (2020) emphasize that support can serve as a source of resilience for survivors, especially when the support acts as a protective barrier in wake of a triggering event. In their research study of those who experienced sexual harassment in the workplace, results highlighted that support prompts resilience when survivors believed their workplace was adamantly against sexual harassment. However, when employed in workplaces that were tolerant of sexual harassment, survivors were

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concerned about repeated future instances of harassment. This indicates that organizational and community support can cultivate resilience and lessen feelings of unsafe vulnerability for those that have experienced trauma. Ford and Ivancic posit that collective support adds value to the understanding of resilience and the perspective of survivors. With the results of the Ford and Ivancic in mind, Black bereaved mothers may fear repeated violence if they occupy violent communities after the death of their own child. Yet, these same mothers may exhibit more resilience if they see community leaders and government organizations working to ensure that no other parents lose a child to gun violence.

In contrast, there are times where collective community support cannot guarantee that a triggering event will not happen again, yet this communal support can lessen the impact of a reoccurring triggering event. Take, for example, resilience after natural disasters. Natural disasters may commonly take place in specific regions during key times of the year, and thus resilience can be highlighted with “disaster preparation activities” (Rice & Jahn, 2020, p. 137). The preparation activities can be molded to fit the parameters of adaptation by outlining how communities work to prepare for future triggering events or natural disasters to take place. The preparation can also be considered as a tool to lessen the impact of the natural disaster. With losing a child to gun violence, most mothers are not prepared for such a tragedy, and there are no preparation activities to assist with enduring such a triggering event. However, community groups may provide social support to bereaved mothers as a way to lessen the impact of grief and trauma.

Community support can extend beyond face-to-face support to include virtual communities. Eddington (2020) acknowledges that resilience can be cultivated through

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an online community for individuals who have unique and specific emotional needs.

Eddington describes online community support as a place that provides its members with conversational encouragement. With the constant innovation of technology, Black bereaved mothers may be able to receive social support in a virtual setting that offers help to meet the specific needs of Black mothers suffering the loss of a child to gun violence. With Eddington's study in mind, online community groups can be an alternative to physical social groups that serve as a source of resilience by offering support in wake of a triggering event. Social support is founded upon helpful communication that aids in the development of those that have experienced trauma.

Furthering the idea of community and collective support for resilience, communication through relationships, including sisterhood, and spirituality are other avenues for resilience. Masten (2014) suggests that religion helps with "coping and resilience" (p. 252). Religion is often a resource for encouragement because religion provides direction on how to live a fulfilling life (Masten, 2014). In addition to religion, Afifi (2018) argues that relationships can either decrease or cultivate stress. The idea is to maintain healthy relationships, whether with a physical person or a higher divine power, for resilience purposes.

Overall, communication and relationships can be the main source of encouragement, helping trauma survivors to be resilient. Resilient people may display and communicate their resilience in a way that differs from those that do not maintain resilience, thus creating an opportunity for scholars to study the communication aspect of resilience, specifically the communication theory of resilience.

Communication Theory of Resilience

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This section will address the role of communication in the experience of resilience. The communication theory of resilience (CTR) is a foundational theory to better understand the convergence of resilience and communication. CTR was created by Buzzanell to emphasize that resilience is relational, communicative, and heavily tied to human collaboration (Houston & Buzzanell, 2020). The theory provides insight on five ways that communication can help cultivate resilience (Scharp et al, 2020). The five proponents of CTR can be intertwined and simultaneously enacted by survivors. According to Buzzanell (2010), the process includes, “(1) crafting normalcy, (2) affirming identity anchors, (3) maintaining and using communication networks, (4) putting alternative logics to work, and (5) downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions, such as hopefulness and self-efficacy” (p. 1). Each process is explained in detail below and then applied to the context of Black bereaved mothers.

The first characteristic of normalcy highlights the usage of language and traditions in order to create a sense of comfort and routine after a triggering event. Normalcy is usually altered by an event or difficult experience. CTR articulates that survivors often desire to find normalcy in the midst of their altered state. In the instance of family trauma, families may attempt to continue routines and habits they had prior to the triggering event, until it soon becomes a norm for family members to make it through difficult situations (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). Relevant to the current study, Black bereaved mothers may seek daily activities that provide nostalgia to a time when their child was alive.

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The second characteristic is identity anchors. This process points to values that are significant to an individual's identity. Buzzanell (2018) reveals that survivors typically hold close to specific aspects of their identity in times of crisis "when explaining who they are for themselves and in relation to others" (p. 4). For example, Buzzanell & Turner (2003) examined resilience related to job loss. Men who lost their jobs held close to their identity of being a father who financially leads the household, even in times of joblessness. Cultivating identity anchors helps to develop resilience and confidence that survivors can withstand the triggering event. Black bereaved mothers may hold close to their identity and confidence as Black women, strong Black women, or members of a specific religious group as a source for strength and encouragement in the face of child loss.

The third aspect is maintaining communication networks. This process is founded on the cultivation of social circles with either in-person communication or social media (Scharp et al., 2020). Black bereaved mothers may cultivate social relationships as a source of resilience. The relationships may be in-person, but they also can be relationships that are initiated and cultivated via social media. Scharp et al. examined parental alienation, parental relational dissolution, and resilience stemming from relationships within a Facebook community. The results showed that alienated parents utilized social media as a communication network to endure and address their difficulties. As Black bereaved mothers attempt to endure the loss of a child, communication networks may be activated and helpful during a time of difficulty as described in Scharp's study on parents estranged from the children. This CTR process might be particularly applicable when applied to collectivist cultures such as the Black community.

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Putting alternative logics to work is the fourth characteristic. Here, survivors reframe their perspective of the triggering events. In the case of familial resilience, Walsh (2016) highlights how reframing alters the survivors' perspective of the stressor or triggering event. Walsh provides examples of families that experience the military deployment of a parent. The family is then encouraged to view the deployed parent as a worthy hero instead of an absent parent. The hope is to lessen the stressor by supplementing the stressor with a positive outlook, while simultaneously enduring and acclimating to the effect. The manner in which survivors chose to display resilience may be largely based on how the survivors actually perceive their triggering event. Black bereaved mothers may find a positive aspect about their own experience of losing a child. Some may use a spiritual lens and say that their child's death was part of God's sovereign plan.

The fifth component, downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions, recognizes that it is of little benefit to focus on past negative experiences. Instead, it is better to focus on triumph despite difficulty. In a study on parental alienation, Scharp et al. (2020) describes this component of CTR as a means to acknowledge tough feelings, but to not allow those feelings to get in the way of optimism. Therefore, this aspect of CTR encourages survivors to eventually decrease the focus of negative feelings and instead place positive thoughts and feelings in high regard. Just as this part of CTR can encourage survivors to lessen their focus on triggering events, the SBWCT has a similar functionality within the collectivity of Black women. Davis (2019) emphasizes that resilience is cultivated when Black women encourage each other to focus on overcoming, thus decreasing the fixation of experienced trauma and

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hardship. Previous CTR literature implies that Black bereaved mothers may benefit greatly from focusing on overcoming, instead of the emotional turmoil and despair caused by the death of the child.

The death of a child is a unique loss that is traumatic in nature, especially when gun violence is the cause of death. CTR gives insight to the resilience processes that are useful in the aftermath of triggering events. The current study seeks to investigate how the community of Black bereaved mothers collectively use any of the processes of the CRT individually and collectively. Thus, the following question is posed:

RQ1: How do Black bereaved mothers use communication theory of resilience processes of (1) crafting normalcy, (2) affirming identity anchors, (3) maintaining and using communication networks, (4) putting alternative logics to work, and (5) downplaying negative feelings while foregrounding positive emotions after losing a child to gun violence?

Unique Resilience of Black Women

CTR seeks to understand resilience-related experiences and has been beneficial to understanding the resilience of community members in times of difficulty, including natural disasters, job loss, and family estrangement (Scharp, Kubler, & Wang, 2020; Rice & Jahn, 2020). Yet, much of the past research with the theory has looked at mostly white participants, negating the reality that cultural groups experience and display resilience in the same way. Resilience looks different across socio-economic status, academic levels, professional backgrounds, religions, biological sex, age, occupation, and even residential location (Houston & Buzzanell, 2020). As a result, expanding CTR through application to minority experiences will provide more information about resilience after a specific

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triggering event. The concept of Black sisterhood and the spirituality of Black communities should be considered during the discussion on the resilience of Black women and CTR concepts. To reconceptualize CTR to account for Black bereaved mothers' experiences, the next section will dive deeper into Black sisterhood and the spirituality of Black communities as important resilience processes within this community.

Black Sisterhood as Support

The following sections describe Black sisterhood, articulate Black sisterhood as voluntary family, and integrate the strong Black woman collective theory with CTR to introduce a more informed understanding of Black sisterhood as a tool of support for bereaved Black mothers. Black sisterhood and support are essential components of the Black community and can become even more beneficial to Black women after a triggering event. Black sisterhood may specifically assist Black bereaved mothers in honoring the life of their deceased child. The loss of a child may cause a Black bereaved mother to increase interactions with Black sisterhood as a source of strength. Giannini (2011) explained that bereaved parents may communicatively use “acknowledgement, compassion, and inclusion” as tools of recovery as displayed by themselves and also received from their own social circles (p. 558). In a qualitative study with five married bereaved couples, Giannini found that acknowledgement is more action-based as a source of social support. The familial and platonic networks of bereaved participants provide acknowledgment by recognizing the life of the deceased child. When bereaved parents seek to continuously honor the life of their deceased child, it also serves as a way to maintain a relationship with their deceased child. The presence of Black sisterhood in

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such a traumatic time may offer much-needed affirming communication that will allow the Black bereaved mothers to feel empowered on their bereavement journey. Social circles are important for bereaved mothers.

Moments of support allow bereaved parents to feel empowered and understood. Giannini (2011) describes that compassion from outsiders provides greater insight into the needs and actions of bereaved parents. Giannini reports that bereaved parents are often in need of a listening ear during their own times of grief. As the social circles listen to the needs of the bereaved parents, these bereaved parents are then able to vocalize exactly the type of support needed from their circle. Lastly, with inclusion as the final tool described as effective for recovery, bereaved parents emphasize the need to feel part of the lives of those around them. Giannini established that as network members take initiative and include bereaved parents in social activities, these bereaved parents feel supported. Giannini's (2011) findings indicate that communication is a viable source of support to promote recovery for bereaved parents attempting to heal after enduring the loss of a child. The support of communication networks aids in the healing and comfort of bereaved parents.

For Black bereaved mothers, the characteristics of support are communicatively constructed within their unique communication patterns (Davis, 2019). Consequently, communication is essential in the grief and healing process. Toller (2011) examines both supportive and unsupportive communication offered by the social circles of bereaved parents. Specific triggering events can warrant the need for widespread supportive communication (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Supportive communication can come in different forms. Toller conveys that social networks can assist bereaved parents with

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completing daily tasks like cooking and cleaning. Another type of social support is enacted when network members provide bereaved parents with stories about the parents' bereaved child. Finally, support groups with other bereaved parents can breed a culture of inclusion and affirmation related to healing and coping. Support can also be cultivated outside of typical face-to-face contact. For example, McBride and Toller (2011) acknowledge the role of online support groups as a resource for positive affirmations. Supportive networks aid in the healing of bereaved parents in a way that offers consideration for the emotional well-being of parents that have experienced loss.

Supportive communication networks also tend to the expected emotional sensitivity of bereaved parents (McBride & Toller, 2011). This form of protection shows concern for the emotional health and self-esteem of bereaved parents. McBride and Toller's study examining facework and communication networks found that networks often verbally assure bereaved parents of high-quality parenting and strength in wake of child loss. This consistent affirmation provides bereaved parents with support and protection as grief is displayed and healing is desired. Just as communication networks provide care and concern for bereaved parents, Black sisterhood may offer similar services that are able to meet the unique needs of Black bereaved mothers. The next section will highlight the family-like, or voluntary kin, nature of Black sisterhood that is beyond a typical interpersonal friendship.

Black Sisterhood as Voluntary Kin. Black sisterhood is comprised of a platonic community of Black women as a familial community, thus expanding the definition of family through the lens of voluntary kin. The consideration of family diversity has widened to include voluntary kin, once referred to as fictive kin. Ganong and Coleman

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(1994) document that the term fictive kin can be perceived as insulting, especially because it implies that these types of relationships are illegitimate. However, using the term voluntary kin implies a form of reciprocated selection (Braithwaite et al., 2010). Black sisterhood is an extension of family-like relationships that are interpersonal in nature, thus qualifying as voluntary kin.

In a qualitative survey of 110 interviews, Braithwaite et al. (2010) articulated four salient forms of voluntary kin relationships: (1) *convenience*, (2) *supplemental*, (3) *substitute*, (4) *extended*. Each of these has the potential to manifest in Black bereaved mothers' unique experiences after the loss of a child. In the context of Black bereaved mothers, a support group for multiple Black bereaved mothers would qualify to be considered as *convenience kin*. Convenience kin comes together for a specific topic or experience that unifies its group members. As some Black bereaved mothers may find themselves in spaces as a minority, having voluntary kin relationships may serve as an additional source of resilience as displayed in the communication theory of resilience. The *supplemental* voluntary kin relationships occur when a non-biological person plays a familial role in addition to a biological or legal family that may still be present. For example, a Black bereaved mother may have biological sisters and a close female friend that they have added in addition to their sisterhood, joining biological and non-biological sisterhood. This shows that supplemental voluntary kin are in addition to family that is already present. Next, *substitute* voluntary kin fills a family missing role caused by an absence of biological or legal kin. Braithwaite et al. (2010) documents that the substitute role often takes place in times of estrangement. This can happen if bereaved parents take on a parental-like relationship with a young person in the absence of the child that has

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passed away. Estrangement or absence can cause a person or even a parental unit to find substitute kin to cultivate a familial role in wake of bereavement. Lastly, the *extended* role happens when non-biologically related families become one family. Braithwaite and colleagues describe this role as groups of separate unrelated families become blended with little recognition or focus on where biological and nonbiological ties end and begin. Families become blended. This is common in Black families that enact the collectivist culture. Black bereaved parents may see extended kin in the familial relationships in their churches, which are commonly referred to as family in the Black community.

Another example of extended voluntary kin for Black families is church families (McAdoo, 2007). As Black people are often regarded as maintaining some form of spirituality or religious beliefs, places of worship are connected to this experience with women being integrated into this concept. Attending a certain church for a prolonged amount of time often breeds familial-like relationships. Black Christian churches tend to refer to others in the congregation as “brothers and sisters in Christ”. Unique experiences allow Black people to expand their understanding of family beyond traditional rigid definitions. However, unique experiences that prompt resilience in Black women may cause Black women to add more family members to their community. Yet, many of the voluntary kin relationships that are described by Braithwaite et al. (2010) may not be recognized legally or in a court of law. Reviewing the literature of voluntary kin relationships provides additional insight into the type of communication networks that Black bereaved mothers may hold close to in the loss of a child. Voluntary kin relationships may be described by the need that sparked the relationship or the need that the relationship meets. Understanding voluntary kin in relation to Black bereaved

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mothers expands the purpose and benefits of relationships that are maintained by Black bereaved mothers.

Strong Black Woman Collective Theory

Black women have strength as individual beings, yet the strength is magnified when Black women come together as a sisterhood and community. The strong Black woman collective theory echoes this sentiment in greater detail. The strong Black woman collective theory (SBWCT) has four major components/propositions that explain the theory's connection to the strong Black woman concept (Davis, 2015). Initially, the theory acknowledges that Black women have their own unique language. Davis explains that Black women use unique speech codes when communicating with one another. The theory claims that Black women use these unique speech codes to affirm and reaffirm strength within one another. The theory then mentions that Black women make up the collective nature described in the theory's title. The collective nature is synonymous with the actual sisterhood. Finally, the theory outlines that Black women use individual and collective strength as a tool to address and confront discrimination and oppression from society. The theory can apply to the collective nature that Black sisterhood can offer in times of grief.

The theory's roots address the impact that racial oppression has on the Black sisterhood. Thus, the theory utilizes the interpretative and critical paradigm (Davis, 2015; 2019). When considering the interpretive paradigm, the theory maintains its intention to understand the experiences and strength of Black women, both individually and collectively. The critical nature is apparent as the theory addresses societal structures that discriminate and cause oppression against Black women. In the case of the present study,

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the oppression is formalized as the expectation of strength in Black women. The SBWCT is an important starting point to better understand the value of unity within Black women. This same unity can create places of healing, understanding, and support that may be critical for Black bereaved mothers.

Using the theory to examine Black bereaved mothers expands the realm of focus for the theory outside of its original scope. The SBWCT was first tested in 2019 when Davis and Afifi (2019) used the theory to examine the experiences of Black women who have endured microaggressions caused by white women. The study used mixed methods to better understand the experiences of the understudied population of Black women. A total of 156 Black women participants were sectioned into groups of three, totaling 52 groups each containing three Black women. Davis and Afifi observed as each group talked about their experiences with the microaggressions of white women. After the observation, participants then completed a post-observation study. The findings reported that the strength within the collective groups was a tool that helped individual Black women confront the microaggressions. Importantly, the more Black women participants identified with their fellow group members, the more the collective group identity reaffirmed that group member's individual strength.

However, less group identity was present when the group members focused on the actual microaggressions from white women instead of the strength of the group of Black women who were presently part of the conversation (Davis & Afifi, 2019). This finding suggests that Black women feel able to openly discuss the topic of hardship and oppression. However, as the conversation focuses more so on the wellbeing of the Black women instead of their hardship, Black women are better able to connect with their Black

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sisterhood. Essentially, the SBWCT acknowledges that the experience of Black sisterhood serves as a space for open communication and affirmations.

Black sisterhood may provide encouragement for Black women in instances that are beyond racial microaggressions, including grief related to gun violence. As Black bereaved mothers seek resilience in the communicative relationships with other Black women as a communication network, these bereaved mothers receive a safe space to discuss their triggering event and a place to receive encouragement and reassurance of their identity being anchored in strength. CTR is a helpful supplement to the SBWCT to understand resilience in the experience of Black bereaved mothers, especially when considering communication networks and identity anchors. However, the theory has not been applied to a study that solely incorporates Black participants; the theory is missing cultural diversity in its application. As a result, it is beneficial to initially describe Black sisterhood outside of CTR.

The desire to understand the role of Black sisterhood has prompted the following research question:

RQ2: How do Black bereaved mothers use sisterhood to develop resilience?

Sisterhood is one source of resilience that reaffirms the strength of Black women. Black spirituality will also be examined as a plausible source of resilience. The next section will explain the role of Black spirituality in relation to resilience.

Black Spirituality

Spirituality and religious spaces can be used as a tool of resilience and self-awareness. Many Black people, including Black women, rely on religion, spirituality, and churchgoing as a way to survive and maintain mental and emotional wellness (Mattis,

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2000). Therefore, it is important to understand the historical nature, role, and benefits of black spirituality, as well as the definition of spirituality through the lens of Black women.

Taylor, Chatters, and Levin (2003) assert that places of worship are consistently frequented by Black people. Simply, Black churches across the nation are commonplace for Black people as a source for spiritual sustenance (Barnes, 2006). Black families often uphold their religious beliefs and traditions as a way to cultivate their community within their places of worship. Church families are one example of how Black families create and maintain communal bonds outside of biological family. McAdoo (2007) described church families as a form of extended families that often sprout out of a need and opportunity to pool together resources. As church families maintain a sense of additional family for Black families, especially for Black women, this concept identifies with the idea of voluntary kin. Additionally, church families are also part of communication networks that Buzzanell (2010) describes in the communication theory of resilience.

Religion has been crowned with the responsibility to empower Black families. When considering the historical context of religion in Black families, much of the reliance on religiosity stems from Black people looking to religion as a path to “transform the social and political conditions that impact on the lives of African Americans as a group, whether this involved direct political action, civic projects, health ministries, or educational endeavors” (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2003, p. 20). These same religious spaces also serve as additional places of community for Black families, especially in times of discrimination, oppression, racism. When reviewing the offerings of Black churches to Black communities, Graham (2016) expresses that these churches offer

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“social welfare ventures, such as affordable housing, pre-K through college academies, and building both charitable and financial agencies that help sustain surrounding communities” (p. 109). Frequenting places of worship provide some Black people, including Black women, with relationships and opportunities that extend beyond just having a relationship with a higher power. Mattis et al. (2004) claims that Black churches provide “political, material, and psychological support” (p. 47). Black churches are multidimensional in how they support the members of the congregation. These religious and spiritual spaces have long existed to meet the spiritual and non-spiritual needs of the church communities.

As Black bereaved mothers experience grief, spirituality may be used as an additional source of hope and strength. Triggering events may cause Black people, including Black women, to use spirituality as a coping mechanism (Graham, 2016). As triggering events may cause undue stress and instability, Black people may also use spirituality to counter the instability that tough times may cause (Smith, 2017). Faith and spirituality represent a journey that ebbs and flows in consistency as triggering events may take place. Smith uses the metaphor of comparing faith and spirituality to a rock. The rock represents a constant unmovable fixture that is present in times of great difficulty. Though spirituality and religion may be interpreted and used differently by different Black women, it is still a useful tool for resilience.

Black Women Defining Spirituality. As spirituality may be popular amongst Black people individually and Black families collectively, some Black women have a different understanding of spirituality as compared to religion. It is important to better understand the spirituality of women, specifically Black women because women are more

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common participants in church as compared to men (Mattis et al., 2004). As Black women engage with their own spirituality, continued research will allow scholars to dissect the meaning and use of spirituality within communities of Black women. In two separate, yet similar studies, Mattis (2000) conducted a content analysis with 128 African American women, revealing that African American women defined spirituality as a connection with a higher power through self-awareness connected to purpose and destiny. In the second study using interviews of 28 African American women, Mattis found that the sample provided a description of religion and spirituality as separate, yet conjoined entities. Religion was seen as the introduction to spirituality, with religion as rituals and traditions while spirituality was seen as the intimate and interpersonal relationship their a higher being.

As Black women were tasked with providing their definition of spirituality in the study, a variety of similar answers were provided by participants (Mattis, 2000). More than half the participants revealed that they defined spirituality as “a connection to and/or a belief in a higher external power” (Mattis, 2000, p. 108). Beyond maintaining a connection with a higher being, participants also admitted to the importance of being obedient to their higher being. In addition, Mattis (2000) found that some Black women view spirituality as being self-aware of themselves and cultivating an authentic sense of peace.

The findings of the Mattis (2000) study indicate that though spirituality is not unique to Black women, it is beneficial to Black women. Spirituality allows Black women to succeed despite tough times. When comparing the meaning of spirituality to religion, religion is connected to consistent traditions, while spirituality once again aligns

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with the relational aspect of God. Spirituality is an active choice that encourages Black women to live out positive values every day. Mattis recommends clear steps on how spirituality can be measured, with consideration of how much a person believes, the closeness of a relationship that a person maintains with themselves and their higher power, how obedient a person lives in relation to rules of their higher power, and how well a person adopts the culture and value system of their higher power. This proposed measuring system will require that the owner of the individual spirituality reveal their own level of perceived obedience. As Black women utilize spirituality as a guiding compass after losing a child, the Mattis research highlights that future studies can be used to measure the amount of spirituality that Black women may use. The next section will review how active spirituality can be used as a coping tool in traumatic situations.

Spirituality and Trauma. Spirituality has been previously used by Black people that have experienced a historic trigger event. For example, Lawson and Thomas (2007) provide further insight into the spirituality of older two older Black men and eight older Black women in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The results highlighted four major themes, including “constant divine communication, miracles of faith, inspiration reading, and coping by helping and assisting others” (p. 345). The coping strategy of faith was foundational in participants believing in God to bring their families through the natural disaster. Many of the participants actively read an inspirational text and communicated with their higher power. As the results mentioned communication with a higher power, this aligns with Toller (2011) asserting that communication is key in coping with devastation, even if this communication is with a non-physical divine being. Despite the small sample of participants, this Lawson and Thomas (2007) study documents the many

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ways that Black people rely on faith in times of crisis, including deadly events. This shows how exactly spirituality can be used as a tool of resilience for Black people. This information can serve as a possible foreshadowing of the role of spirituality in the lives of Black bereaved mothers.

Spiritual practices are beneficial, and regularly attending church and maintaining church families can act as a protective measure against the negative mental and physical health ailments (McAdoo, 2007). The loss of a child surely qualifies as a trauma that can negatively impact mental health. Some Black bereaved mothers use spirituality to better understand the death of their child, while also using positive thinking to cope in the same way that the communication theory of resilience highlights the ability to “downplay negative feelings while foreground positive emotion” (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 1). Bailey et al., (2013) mentions that Black bereaved mothers may convince themselves that their child’s death was the manifestation of God’s place for the life of the mother and the child. Johnson, Elbert-Avila, and Tulsy (2005) describe that many Black people believe that God has the final decision concerning life and death, offering themselves hope in the midst of adversity as part of the communication theory of resilience. Maintaining close spirituality is often foundational for the resilience of some Black bereaved mothers (Bailey et al., 2013). Spirituality and religion are tools of elevation and resilience against triggering events, including the experience of losing a child.

The violent death of a child to gun violence can push bereaved parents to use communication processes to hold close to spirituality in order to enact resilience in the midst of trauma. In the context of CTR, spirituality serves as an identity anchor, assists with maintaining communication networks, using alternative logic, and positive forward-

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thinking. As with Black sisterhood, CTR explains resilience and the multipurpose use of Black spirituality. However, Black spirituality is separated out from CTR as a way to not limit the usage of Black spirituality only to the characteristics of CTR. As an identity anchor, and based on specific religious beliefs, spirituality reminds people of their own ability to overcome and persist in an identity based on strength. Spirituality also allows survivors to maintain communicative relationships with their church family while also having a communication-relationship with their high power through prayer and meditation. These same mothers may use spirituality to help them reframe the bereaved experience by viewing the death of their child as part of the plan of their divine power. Spirituality may also provide Black bereaved mothers with the space to be optimistic with their own healing and ability to overcome the loss of a child. Therefore, positioning spirituality as a coping tool encourages the following research question:

RQ 3: How do Black bereaved mothers use spirituality to develop resilience?

Overall, when Black bereaved mothers endure the loss of a child, the loss qualifies as a triggering event that calls for resilience. In the midst of devastation, Black sisterhood and spirituality may assist in building up the resilience of Black bereaved mothers. The present study acknowledges the unique resilience experiences many Black bereaved mothers endure. The communication theory of resilience recognizes the characteristics survivors may activate in order to acclimate to a new normal after experiencing a loss. The SBWCT highlights the strength created through the collectivity of Black women. This study also seeks to understand how the exact parts of CTR are beneficial to Black bereaved mothers who have lost a child to gun violence. This study

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will contribute to literature that allows Black women to tell their own stories about their journey of resilience despite enduring the loss of a child.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

To better understand the experiences of Black bereaved moms who have lost a child to gun violence, this study used qualitative interviews and a hermeneutic phenomenology methodology. With a focus on Black spirituality and sisterhood, this study sought to answer the call of many Black scholars that have requested an increase in research that places a sole focus on Black women (Davis, 2019). Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodology within the research study will allow scholars to gain insight into the lived experiences of the research population.

The purpose of this study was to understand how Black bereaved mothers (BBM) use the communication theory of resilience, spirituality, and sisterhood to cultivate resilience after losing a child to gun violence. There were a total of 15 participant interviews. Saturation was met after 12 interviews, but three additional interviews were done to confirm that saturation was indeed reached. The population sample included 100% Black women that self-identified as BBMs. Of the 15 mothers that served as participants, 14 of the mothers were mothers of deceased sons who died from gun violence; one mother lost a daughter to gun violence. The interviews lasted between 22 minutes and 76 minutes. The interviews resulted in 163 pages of single-spaced pages of transcribed interview text.

Qualitative Methods

Qualitative research is interpretative in nature and considers the notion that reality is socially constructed (Merriam, 2009). From a philosophical perspective, qualitative research aligns with constructivism, which highlights that reality is subjectively created. Merriam (2009) provides further explanation that qualitative research mainly seeks to understand instead of predicting. Holistically, qualitative research is commonly inductive

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and begins with specific instances in order to conclude and provide a rich and detailed explanation. As qualitative research considers the subjectivity of reality construction, phenomenology continues this perspective and provides a strong emphasis on the lived experiences of participants.

Phenomenology

General phenomenology is an approach to research topics that emphasize “emotional, and often tense human experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 26). The experience of losing a child is a deeply emotional topic that is worthy of study. Phenomenology is used to examine past lived experiences and phenomenon (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). When deciding upon a phenomenon related to communication topics, the topics should be contemporary and noteworthy for an audience (Tracy, 2010). The idea of studying Black bereaved moms is modern and even consistent in some neighborhoods.

It is essential to document that phenomenology is more “reflective” in nature as compared to being “introspective” (van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Though introspection is not the main priority, phenomenology does instead seek to provide more clarity for participants to have a clear understanding of themselves. Yet, the reflection of lived experiences is intended to produce data that is thorough and complete. The idea is to take the lived experience and transition it into a written body of work that is indicative of the meaning and portrayal of the experience.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Hermeneutic phenomenology provides the opportunity to understand moments of reflection on past lived experiences. Two separate concepts, hermeneutics, and phenomenology are conjoined for the purpose of scholarly analysis. Smith, Flowers, &

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Larkin (2009) document that hermeneutics is the “theory of interpretation” (p. 21). In its initial creation and utility, hermeneutics was mainly a way of analyzing concepts in the bible. As hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on the lived experience of participants, the interpretative nature of hermeneutic phenomenology is interpretive twice over. For example, the participant interprets their own experience, then the researcher interprets the experience that has been shared by the participant (van Manen, 1990). Hermeneutic phenomenology permits the researcher to bring their own values and identity to the study as the axiological nature becomes a lens of interpretation enacted by the researcher. For example, my identity as a Black woman with experience related to Black sisterhood would provide a lens of interpretation to the lived experience as interpreted by a participant of a study on Black sisterhood.

In contrast, transcendental phenomenology calls for researchers to move beyond their preconceived notions and previous knowledge as it relates to the subject of the study. Transcendental phenomenology looks to describe the lived experience of the participant. Husserl (2013) requests that researchers use bracketing as related to the researchers’ personal values to ensure that the researcher’s perspective is not integrated in the interpretation of the participants’ lived experience. The transcendental perspective strives to provide a description as provided by the participation that is devoid of researcher interpretation. The researcher is encouraged to analyze their own connection and experience with the research topic, researchers then have to set aside any previous beliefs on the topic (Merriam, 2009). With transcendental phenomenology, the interpretation of the lived experience is only interpreted by the actual participant, not involving the researcher’s interpretation as seen in hermeneutic phenomenology.

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Assumptive Stances. When considering the assumptive stances, hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on lived experiences. Ontologically and epistemologically, hermeneutic phenomenology assumes that a true reality does exist, yet the reality is subjective and socially constructed (van Manen, 1990). For example, the participants each have their own reality as related to their subjective grief-filled experiences. Their specific reality is based upon their own realities and environmental factors that are socially constructed around them. There is also the embodiment of post-positivism ideology since there is an overarching truth that is represented for each participant in their reflection of their past. There is limited, if any, overall generalizability with phenomenology since the lived experience is personalized based on each participant. According to Moustakas (1994), the most productive interview questions initially capture details on the participants' experience as related to the phenomenon, as well as how outside entities affected the lived experience. These two initial interview questions afford researchers the opportunity to ask follow-up questions based on information provided by the participant. When considering the research questions, the most productive research questions allow the participants to ascribe their own meaning to their experiences during the qualitative interviews.

Hermeneutic phenomenology calls for deep reflection of lived experiences on behalf of the participant. The participants are typically those that have lived through the referenced lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). However, Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009) proclaim that using hermeneutic phenomenology calls for both the participant and researcher to engage in reflections that are interpretative in nature. The researcher is reflectively engaging the participant and the participant's story as the participants reflect

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while engaging their own story of their lived experiences. Though phenomenology may not have generalizability, the approach does allow for researchers to notice common themes and experiences amongst participants. These commonalities can be used to advocate on behalf of vulnerable populations and urge for wider research to see if the common themes can be found within the lived experiences of those that also identify as members of the same marginalized groups as previous participants.

Participants and Procedures

The population includes Black mothers who have lost a child due to gun violence. The interviews continued until saturation was reached. Saturation was met after 13 interviews; however, two additional interviews were completed to ensure no new information was present. In total, 15 interviews were completed as part of this research project. Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out that for research to obtain the most beneficial amount of information from the study, researchers should cease interviewing additional participants once there is an absence of new information from new participants. The average age for participants were 48.86 years old. For the deceased children, the average age was 20.80 years old. At the time of the interviews, it had been an average of 3.83 years since the death of the deceased child.

Participant Pseudonym	Participant Age	Child's Gender	Child Age at Death	Length of Time Since Death
Trisha	50	Son	23	1 month
Martha	51	Son	17	1 year
Rita	35	Daughter	15	1 year
Patrice	44	Son	22	1 year
Holly	62	Son	26	3 years
Evelyn	44	Son	17	4 months
Shawna	38	Son	15	3 years
Beth	58	Son	20	15 years
Janice	50	Son	17	6 years
Tammy	58	Son	28	13 years

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Dorothy	52	Son	32	3 years
Cathy	50	Son	19	5 months
Keisha	51	Son	15	9 months
Viola	54	Son	21	8 years
Laura	46	Son	25	2 years
	<i>M</i> = 48.86 years old		<i>M</i> = 20.80 years old	<i>M</i> = 3.83 years

Purposeful sampling was used to intentionally seek participants that have a lived experience that aligns with the phenomenon of being a Black bereaved mom. Merriam (2009) asserts that purposeful sampling ensures that participants represent the phenomenon of the study. Participants were initially solicited through a convenience sample and snowball sampling then allowed participants to connect the researcher to additional participants. To ensure that participants align with the phenomenon of being a bereaved Black mother due to gun violence, participants were intentionally recruited. I partnered with a program that offered support groups for bereaved parents in a major US city. This program was sponsored by a local church in that city. The support group was open to bereaved parents with no requirement for members to be parishioners of the church. I provided this organization with information on the research study to disseminate to their members with the intent that interested members would agree to participate in the study.

Additionally, I also joined multiple social media groups targeted toward bereaved parents as a resource to gain participants. I then posted information in the social media groups about the research study and provided my contact information for those that may have been interested in serving as a participant. Only one participant came from the community program for bereaved parents. The rest of the participants came from the social media groups for bereaved parents. Participants from the social media groups were

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encouraged to reach out to other Black bereaved mothers from their network to share information on the study, aligning with snowball sampling. The interviews were audio-recorded and took place over the phone. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that participants were able to provide additional explanations and the researcher was able to pose follow-up questions. The interview protocol was adapted from the model of stress and social support from Cutrona and Russell (1990) and a Toller (2011) measure that examined social support.

Utilizing hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me, the researcher, to be mindful of my own perspective and experiences as related to the research topic. Hermeneutic phenomenology encourages the researcher to engage in reflective thinking of personal experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin (2009). I am a Black woman from a south Chicago neighborhood, an area filled with violence. Therefore, I understand that gun violence in underserved communities can affect the lives of Black families, including Black mothers. However, I am not currently a mother, so my identity as a Black woman does not include motherhood. My personal experience with violence is connected to losing multiple classmates to gun violence during my time in high school. It was common to learn of classmates being gunned down and having grief counselors sent to our school. At some point, I became desensitized to the violence as a teen, but entered adulthood ready to learn more about the far-reaching nature of gun violence.

Furthermore, I value the sanctity of life, including a high-quality life that does not involve a daily fear of being victimized by gun violence. Gun violence affects families emotionally, spiritually, relationally, and even financially. Sadly, families in low-income neighborhoods are sometimes more commonly affected by gun violence and gun

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homicide. Specifically, when gun violence happens in Black communities, Black mothers are often left to grieve the death of their child, not including if some of these same mothers lose multiple children to gun violence. Black mothers deserve to watch their Black children grow up without the fear of their child being victims of gun violence. Therefore, these experiences, personal identity, and value systems were the unique lens I used during the research to understand the lived experiences of Black bereaved mothers. The next section will review the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were completed, the interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions were reviewed multiple times for coding purposes. The codes assisted in creating any consistent themes present in the data. Smith (1995) asserts that reading the data multiple times is beneficial when analyzing data. Reviewing data with intentional coding allowed for a thematic analysis using an inductive method to code the data and then create general themes that originate from specific information based on the experiences of the participants. Charmaz (2014) explains that coding “means naming segments of the data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 111). The inductive method focuses on specific instances in order to create generalizations (Merriam, 2009). As codes were labeled, similar codes were formulated to showcase themes across the data. For example, multiple participants revealed how their social circles offered physical presence on a more consistent basis after the loss of the participant’s child. Participants offered details on how their social circles may have called them more frequently after the child loss. Codes that described this similar sentiment across participants were coupled together and

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eventually created the theme of *increased relational maintenance* as related to the communication network maintenance process of CTR. In contrast, other participants mentioned a decrease in interactions with their social circles after the participant's child passed. Again, these codes were combined and created the theme of *decreased maintenance* of their communication network within CTR. This same process was used for each of the interview questions based on the three research questions. The themes were used to answer the overarching research of how do Black bereaved moms experience resilience, with a focus on the process of the communication theory of resilience, spirituality, and Black sisterhood. After the data was coded and undergone a thematic analysis, the results then moved into the verification process.

Verification

The results of the study were verified and ensured credibility through member checking and the utilization of rich, thick description. The results of the study were reviewed through member checking to ensure that results reflect the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher provided the findings to participants to ensure that the results reflect the intention and meaning provided by the participants. A total of 15 participants were provided the opportunity to review the abstract and results section. Three of those participants responded and reviewed the abstract and the results section. These participants did not recommend any changes. Meisenbach (2009) utilized member checking when verifying the results and received additional input from participants. The utilization of rich, thick description ensures the results section includes verbatim quotes from participants to accurately reflect the responses and lived experiences of participants

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(Creswell, 2007). Combined, member checking and rich, thick description ensured the trustworthiness of the data.

Summary

Phenomenology is a qualitative methodology that places value on the lived experiences of participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows the researcher to bring their own interpretations to the analysis of the data. When studying marginalized groups, this approach can be used to gather stories that magnify the lived experiences that are synonymous to the voices that are often understudied. This study used semi-structured interviews and hermeneutic phenomenology to understand the lived experiences of Black bereaved moms and how this group experiences resilience.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter will highlight the themes of the results from the analysis of the interviews, focusing on the various aspects of CTR, sisterhood, and spirituality as these BBMs embody resilience after the loss of a child.

Communication Theory of Resilience

The first research question explored how Black bereaved mothers utilize CTR after losing a child to gun violence. The CTR is made up of five tenets that explore how people utilize the theory in hardships that create a need for resilience. The five tenets include: new normal, maintain communication network, identity anchor, downplay negative feelings while foregrounding positive feelings, and alternative logics. Participants used CTR to acknowledge the depth of the pain caused by their child's death. CTR was also used to encourage moms to continue living, even when feelings of despair were largely present in the lives of participants. This section will address each theme and sub-theme related to the tenets of CTR.

New Normal

The new normal component of CTR connects to the routine and habits that are established after a triggering event (Buzzanell, 2010). Four themes coalesced in the current study around the new normal aspect of CTR, describing how BBMs come to endure the new normal of the absence of their deceased child. The reality of their loss prompts experiences expressed in the four related themes including, *a) feeling intense emotions after child loss, b) physical pain due to grief, c) needing to be strong, and d) realigning employment expectations*. The upcoming sections will explain each of the themes in detail.

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Feeling Intense Emotions After Child Loss. As participants attempt to eventually find their resilience, they have a void in their lives that is caused by feeling the daily absence of their deceased child. This daily absence is typically present and can cause anger that stems from losing a child. The anger is directed from participants towards themselves for not being able to protect their child from gun violence and anger towards those responsible for the death. Moments of constant reflection remind the BBM that the child is no longer living, which then creates mental hypothetical situations on how the BBM wishes they would have been able to save their child. Tammy revealed that she hated that she was not there to save her son during the time of his death. Additionally, anger resulted in participants questioning why they are the ones that must experience the loss of a child.

When reflecting upon their child's death, some participants revealed that they maintain some form of anger towards themselves for their child's death because of gun violence. The anger in child loss to gun violence can be associated with the reality that the deceased child is no longer alive, and that reality cannot be changed, no matter how much the BBM wants to physically see their child alive again. For example, Trisha expressed her discontentment through the following statement, "And then angry, even with myself, like, what did I do as a mother to deserve this happening and that my child had to be taken out of here." Questioning the reason for the child's absence to death is enough of a mental and emotional battle to upset some participants that they must endure the loss of their child. Trisha later mentioned that much of her anger was tied to the new reality of her son's death. Trisha admitted, "He's not coming back. And I still, I still can't accept that." Trisha is not alone in her perspective of her deceased child not returning.

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Additionally, this thought process of getting used to the reality of their child's death is a harsh reality to accept, especially when participants put forth effort, love, and care into raising their child, even if the child was an adult at the time of death. Martha shared sentiments that were like Trisha's comments. Martha mentioned:

“I got home the next morning is when, like, it was like really real to me that my son is not her anymore. So I'm like, what do I do now? How do you go in without your child that does nothing to no one?”

As the reality sets in, many participants attempted to reflect on how they could have possibly done something different to protect their child and prevent the murder. Martha continued and shared:

...it's like the whole world is coming down on you and there's nothing you can do about that. There was nothing I can do. To say, where did I go wrong? That I should, I just should have kept him in the house. You know, that you can't just lock up a kid.

It was rather difficult for participants to protect their child from violent death, especially since the actual accident involving gun violence is often unexpected. If the child was underage, participants may have more authority to refuse their child to go certain places that may be unsafe or more prominent for gun violence, but the authority diminishes when the child is an adult. The age of the deceased child does not stop the participants from desiring to save their child from death, especially a violent death attributed to gun violence. As participants expressed anger towards themselves for not being able to protect their child, participants also explained anger towards the person responsible for murdering the participants' child.

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With anger being targeted towards those that may have murdered the participants' child, many participants asserted that their child was undeserving of such a violent death.

Holly emphasized:

I feel like I should have paid more attention, um, to who he has around him. Um, I had my doubts about the person around him that murdered him. Um, but my son, he was like a, you know, he just has such a good heart. He believed everybody. Um, that was his downfall.

Holly was saddened to know that her son was gunned down, but she also knew that the person that murdered her son was a bad influence on her son's life. The anger also stemmed from participants being upset that their child's life was cut short. Another participant, when talking about her 17-year-old son's murder, Janice stated:

I'm just so sad that my son didn't get a chance to live his life... He didn't get a chance to live his life or enjoy his life. He didn't get a chance to walk across the stage and get his diploma.

Janice made it clear that her son was not able to fully take advantage of pivotal life experiences because her son's life was cut short. For these BBMs, the desire to see their child live a long life is shattered once the participant's child was murdered. Cathy mentioned that her son was employed and a genuinely happy person that was not a gang member or someone involved in a lifestyle that associated itself with gun violence.

Overall, whether the murder was intentional or unintentional, each of the participants remained the parents of a deceased child. When feelings of anger are directed towards the responsible shooter, these feelings are present because the child of the participant is no longer present.

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Finally, as anger was expressed, participants also experienced pain that was deeply rooted in missing their child. The clear void and absence of the deceased child cultivated a desire to have the child back. This experience can happen frequently and become engrained in the constant new normal for BBMs's. This daily reminder of child loss often bred anger and discontentment. The following section will review the physical pain that participants associated with the new normal of child loss to gun violence.

Physical Pain Due to Grief. Getting acclimated to the new normal of losing a child to gun violence is a painful grief-filled reality for BBMs that can lead to physical ailments. This same pain of losing a child to gun violence is intangible pain that can have physical manifestations that cause physical sickness, suicide ideation, or death. The intangible pain can manifest mentally and physically, impacting the overall well-being of BBMs.

The pain of losing a child to death can cause such emotional turmoil that some participants can feel physically ill. BBMs experienced grief and worked to accept grief as a reality. In Trisha's description of her pain, she indicated:

It was like somebody literally taking a gun and throwing it in my chest. Like, they're killing me, but I'm still alive, like blowing up my heart, like shooting my heart and it's exploding. But yet I'm still alive because I feel absolutely all the pain.

This quote outlines the magnitude of the pain that can commonly be associated with the death of loved ones. Trisha was extremely close to her son, and they communicated on the phone multiple times a week and shared a love for cooking food. Again, the closeness of the relationship with the child may increase the pain experienced by BBMs. Shawna

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shared that her son was also her best friend because they grew up together since Shawna was a younger age when she birthed her son. Therefore, when describing the loss of her son, Shawna said her grief was compounded as she grieved her mother-son relationship and mother-best friend relationship, classifying her son as her child and best friend. Just as Trisha described the excruciating pain of her son being killed execution-style, other participants, including Evelyn, commented that the death of a child can easily become a “dark place” where BBMs can easily lose the essence of themselves when grieving the loss of a child and even use destructive coping mechanism, including alcohol.

While embracing the experience of child loss due to a violent death, some participants shared that they coped with the stress through alcohol. Using alcohol for comfort can become unhealthy if alcohol is consumed frequently to numb the pain of the loss and the stress that follows a daily reality that their deceased child is no longer physically present on earth. Dorothy admitted to using alcohol to soothe the stress of losing her son, eventually getting to a point of recovery. When sharing about using alcohol as a coping mechanism, Dorothy mentioned:

I began a healthy journey in trying to be strong and not let this get the best of me because I had started drinking a lot and stuff like that. And the day that I got really, really sick, I probably drink a lot, really up to probably eight drinks in one night or so, you know, just going to a bar and here and there and drinking and drinking and drinking and drinking...

Even when intentionally using alcohol to subside the stress, Dorothy acknowledges that drinking was detrimental to her health. In a similar situation with using alcohol as a destressing tool to offset the stress of the experience of a deceased child, another

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participant, Shawna, decided to also rid her grieving process of alcohol. Shawna divulged that she drank as a tool to cope with her son's death, but she eventually stopped drinking and started to find other sources of comfort and joy.

In addition to negative coping mechanisms, as mothers believe that the pain can be felt physically, the reality of child loss to gun violence can cause or exacerbate health issues in participants. Dorothy shared that she developed an eating disorder and alcohol consumption-related sickness because of her son's death. Another mother that was part of the study, Evelyn, shared that she lost 20 pounds within the first month of her son's death. Losing a child can be a painful event that negatively affects the health of BBMs, not including any pre-existing health issues that were present before their child's death.

Similarly, the physical health of BBMs should be taken into consideration as BBMs grieve and cope with the new normal of having lost a child to gun violence. Many of the participants were mindful of the lingering effects of the death of their child, including death because of painfully grieving. It was repeated by multiple participants that they were aware that death could be a result of a harsh grieving process. Evelyn shared, "Dealing with this type of loss... It'll make you feel like you want to die." At some point in the grief journey, the pain of child loss prompted some BBMs to feel as if their own death could be a way to no longer feel the pain of child loss. This pain and desire to die led to past suicide ideation amongst some BBMs.

Furthermore, past suicide ideation was something that multiple participants shared as part of their grieving process as they journeyed to find resilience and strength. Trisha described how dealing with the death of her son led her to act on suicide ideation more than once. Trisha revealed:

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I tried to kill myself twice. Um, I thought once I thought about it, I didn't physically go through with it. But the next day I thought about jumping in front of a bus and killing myself. Um, another time I wanted to literally, I thought about taking pills and, and ends up my life, but I didn't go through with it. Cause I thought, I thought twice about it. And I said, I have three other children and my grandson and family and friends that need me because clearly as God wanted to take me, he would've taken me.

Trisha explained that she had two separate moments where she strongly considered taking her own life, but her friends were able to convince her to not follow through with her plans. The idea of death is not uncommon amongst BBMs. Keisha was another participant that shared her own experience with past suicidal ideation due to her son being murdered. Keisha had planned to die by suicide in morning rush hour traffic, but the day that she has planned to jump into traffic, there was not enough traffic that morning. The oddity of decreased traffic on this day was interpreted by Keisha that she was not meant to be successful in her attempt to take her own life due to the pain of her son's death. Additionally, Rita, another participant, revealed that there are moments where she no longer has a desire to live since her daughter was killed by gun violence. Dealing with the death of a child not only can breed suicide ideation for participants, but it can also cause BBMs to be mindful of how the pain of losing a child can cause overwhelming grief that kills those that are inundated with grief.

Moreover, in processing their experience with child loss to gun violence, the processing prompted a few participants to be mindful of how similar grief and traumatic experiences were to the detriment of other BBMs that they knew. When BBMs spoke on

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the deadly grief of other BBMs, that deadly outcome was explained as a cautionary tale. Essentially, some participants were afraid of turning out like other BBMs that grieved and died because of the grief. Janice explained, “So one of my girlfriends lost her son right after I lost mine, and she home and had a heart attack and died. Wow. It was her only son, and she couldn't take it.” The heartache that is associated with losing a child can overwhelm BBMs to the point of death. This was one of the multiple mentions of participants that were familiar with other BBMs that could not survive the death of their own child. In a conversation on mentorship regarding the participant’s experience with an older BBM, Tammy clarified:

She [Tammy’s mentor] shared about her son that was taken away from her and the boy that took her son away used to change his diapers. I sat and I listened to her. I didn't say anything. I just was listening. Right. You know, grief killed her, that lady ended up dying. Wow, grief.

Having a first-hand experience with watching child loss prompt extreme pain and anguish can be all the encouragement needed for BBMs to find a healthy emotional outlet to assist with guiding BBMs down a healthy journey of grief. Watching other BBMs die from grief was also frightening for other BBMs that once looked to now-deceased BBMs for guidance on how to cope and embrace useful methods of grief.

As BBMs worked to accept grief BBMs, this same grief had a negative effect on the mental and physical well-being of some BBMs. Active grief was difficult as a new normal, as a result, BBMs felt inclined to activate strength to survive grief.

Needing to be Strong. Enduring the death of a child and being used to the child’s absence in everyday life is no easy feat, which often activated a new level of strength in

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BBMs. This forced strength arrived as BBMs felt the *need to be strong*. This strength aligned with the strong Black woman identity. Even as BBMs dealt with extreme grief, many participants had to activate strength, even when they did not want to be strong. Many explained that their strength was rather forced at times, often because the BBMs may have had their own families to be present for, even in the BBM's toughest time of grief. Forced strength can be explained in the Davis (2015; 2019) explanation of the SBWCT, as the theory explains that there are times where Black women exclude strength in trigger events. That same strength can often be detrimental because there are moments where some Black women do not allow themselves to be weak or realistic about their pain.

The requirement of strength as an outcome of unexpected child death posed additional difficulties because participants did not ask to be a BBM. However, with the unchangeable death of their child, many participants felt as if they had no choice in exuding a strength that was difficult to maintain. When asked about her grief and connection to resilience as a BBM, Shawna proclaimed,

“Um, and it becomes like a sisterhood. And, um, the one that you definitely don't want to be a part of, uh, and people do often say, yeah, you're so strong. You're so strong. But I mean, how else could I be if you, if you lose your child, that's the worst thing that could ever happen to someone.

In this statement, Shawna clarified that burying a child due to gun violence is the highest form of tragedy that one can experience. Therefore, after experiencing such tragedy, some BBMs must spring into action to activate a level of strength that may not be fully present. As a result, BBMs may not feel adequately prepared to deal with the violent

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death of their child in conjunction with living within a new normal where their deceased child is no longer alive to maintain a physical presence in the BBM's life.

Likewise, Evelyn maintained that BBMs must acknowledge their loss and use that same strength to continue living, even if the loss breeds an unbearable pain. Evelyn asserted, "Because it's like, you lost a part of yourself, you know, and you have to constantly tell yourself every day, keep going, keep going, keep, keep moving." The forced strength may come from internal conversation and motivation that BBMs must provide for themselves. Other participants echoed similar sentiments when discussing forced strength. Trisha recalled, "Although it was unfair... it can leave you despondent... it was unfortunate. I still had to be resilient and handle the cards that were done my way and still continue to move on." Trisha knew this child loss had the potential to damage her well-being mentally and emotionally. In this statement, Trisha doesn't deny her own reality that her son was violently killed. However, Trisha assured herself that she will continue with her own life, even though her son is no longer living.

Again, this same concept of involuntary strength was repeated by other participants. For example, Rita shared that she often believed that she had no choice in being strong after her daughter was shot and killed. Rita described, "...I feel like I have to be strong at some point, but I don't feel that I'm strong. I feel like I'm weak at times, but I feel like I just have to cope with things." This example from Rita was a great example of how a BBM can honor their true feelings of not having strength, but also believe that there is no choice but to find the strength to cope. Acknowledging their own weakness contrasted with the Strong Black Woman concept as some BBMs in the study willfully admitted that they experienced moments. These participant experiences within

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the new normal illuminated the compulsory strength that can feel involuntary at times for BBMs. Yet, the act of embodying strength, even if it is forced strength, was used as a source of motivation for BBMs to attempt to find peace in their child's absence.

Lastly, the pain of embracing a new normal can cultivate an unhealthy overload of stress, anger, pain, and forced strength in BBMs. Many of these women endured stress because they believed that they had no other choice. Stress was often present when the pain and weight of their new normal was more than what they felt they could withstand. Despite the harsh reality of child death, this same vulnerable population reimagined themselves through their own lens of how they perceived their own strength. In addition to the new normal triggering stress, it also inhibited some participant's ability to perform employment duties. The following section will detail how the new normal of having a deceased child caused participants to realign their employment expectations.

Realigning Employment Expectations. The death of a child to gun violence was heart-wrenching, debilitating, and stressful to the point that BBMs' employment expectations were affected. BBMs reported being either unable to fulfill their work duties at their respective workplaces or using work as a distraction from their grief. Many of the participants revealed that they were delayed in their abilities to complete regular daily tasks because of high-stress levels after losing their child.

In addition to a lower ability to function, many of the participants took time off work, including months-long time away to deal with the new normal of having a deceased child. For example, Martha shared how her son's death wreaked havoc on her life to the point that grocery shopping, during her time away from work, was almost a point of torture because she had to see cereal that her now-deceased son would regularly consume

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when he was alive. Martha took multiple months off work because of difficulty processing her son's death and even as she reassessed her employment, she was still overwhelmed with the reality of her son's death. When describing her pain and its impact on her daily activities, Martha asserted:

I still haven't been back to work yet and it [son's death] has torn my life apart... I don't even know what I'm doing from day to day some days. Cause I'm always thinking about my son... I have no desire to do anything, I don't want to do anything.

As Martha experienced constant memories of her deceased son, these memories also highlighted the new normal of that same absence. Another participant, Patrice, described a similar state of being after losing her son, her firstborn child, to gun violence as well. Patrice explained, "I was off work for six months... It's [death of her son] still a struggle... My new reality was that my son was no longer here with me and that took a toll on the entire family." As BBMs had to process the death of their child, this journey of accepting and living with the new normal and enduring the stress of the death, the processing of the loss becomes a top priority. Another participant, Viola, took one year off from work after the death of her son. With having to prioritize their own well-being and that of their own families, work can sometimes become a lower priority, even if the lower prioritization is unintentional. This type of unexpected death often prompted BBMs to first ensure their own well-being before returning to work.

In contrast, other BBMs experienced similarly high levels of stress but decided to soon return to work. Some of these participants used work as a tool to keep themselves busy and keep their minds off their child's death. Work was also used as a tool to honor

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their deceased child because some participants believed that their child would want them to try and complete daily activities, including returning to work. Holly continued working soon after her son's death and described it as, "I went to work, um, that night after, um, my son was murdered, but I had to keep busy... I can't let my mind wander too much." Here, Holly used work as a tool to combat the grief and take her mind off her son's death.

Overall, BBMs had to experience a new reality that their deceased child no longer has a physical presence, and this new normal can induce stress. As this stress unfolds, many participants were unable to maintain daily activities for some time. Additionally, the stress prompted many of the participants to take time off work, even for extended periods. Yet, some participants worked excessively to not focus on the stress. The next section will analyze how BBMs utilized identity anchors to cultivate resilience in their grief journey.

Identity Anchor

Identity anchors provide context to how those experiencing triggering events may perceive themselves after the event and while seeking resilience (Buzzanell, 2018). Two themes emerged as participants explored their anchored identity. First, participants viewed themselves through the lens of identifying as *strong and Black*, connecting this to the strong Black woman concept. Within the theme of being *strong and Black*, two sub themes emerged, including participants admitting to *weakness* and *affirming their own strength*. Next, participants viewed themselves as a *bereaved mother*. Even as a bereaved mother stricken with grief, participants anchored their identity within in the reassurance that they were loving mothers to their deceased children.

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Strong and Black. Participants in this study experienced instances of exemplifying qualities related to the strong Black women persona, while also even questioning their own strength. The strong Black woman concept perceives that Black women are inherently strong, even during adversity. Two subthemes appeared during analysis, including a) *weak* and b) *affirming strength* as BBMs. Among the participants, it was apparent that strength was desired in their time of sorrow and grief. This strength was often attributed to these mothers, whether participants agreed with the perceived strength from outsiders. Many of the BBMs perceived themselves as weak. In contrast, there were moments where participants embraced their own strength and proudly identified as being strong. The following sections will further explain both subthemes.

Weak. Participants expressed that they were unsure of their own strength at times and sometimes completely denied that they were strong after experiencing child loss, feeling weakness as a state of being. The emotional labor and physical and mental ailments that may accompany the experience of being a BBM often caused participants to be unsure of their own strength. Dorothy shared:

Everybody tells me that I've been doing a lot in life and that was just one of those other things. Um, if people say you are amazing, you're strong, you're this you're that, you know, I don't feel, I don't feel it. I don't see it. It's not who I identify myself with. Not really. I mean, I know it is a part of me, you know, but when I go through life these days, that's not really the way I see myself.

Even after being adorned with compliments, Dorothy refused to view herself in complete strength. This ideology was common against participants. Another study participant, Beth, denied that she was strong because she revealed that her son's death caused such a

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negative shift in her own life, that she no longer felt as if she was living her life. Instead, Beth described her state of being as, just “surviving day to day.” The daily survival that is absent of strength has the potential to cause detriment to the quality of life for BBMs. Even as a BBM, the compliments of others toward BBMs may not be enough for BBMs to see their own strength as a healthy and viable place to anchor their identity.

Likewise, other participants denied their own strength and denied the perceived strength attributed to them by others. The perceived strength was commonly denied because the participants believed that outsiders did not have a holistic view of the grieving process of the participants. Even if participants appeared to others as outwardly stoic and calm after losing a child, but were constantly emotional in private, outsiders were sometimes unable to view and judge those private moments of grief. In consideration of her own strength, Dorothy commented, “I think because I do have a career, I do keep going. I do own my own home... I have a lot of things that are positive on the outside, but in the inside I’m really broken.” As Dorothy shared, outsiders may have a jaded perception of her strength, creating a clear difference in how strength is defined in the aftermath of losing a child.

With this same thought process of questioning personal strength, other participants had similar sentiments. Martha admitted that others repeatedly told Martha that she was strong after the loss of her own child caused her to become a BBM. However, Martha was unable to receive the verbal compliments that identified Martha’s strength. Martha emphasized:

A lot of people view me as strong, but I don’t, I don’t see it. A lot of people say, um, I don’t know how you do it. Like you’re a strong woman. I admire that and

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keep doing it I don't, I don't think it's strong because I am really torn down. I don't know. I don't see me as being strong, but a lot of people tell me that.

The anguish from losing her son limited Martha's ability to see her own strength and it also prohibits her from accepting compliments on her strength. Following Martha's stance on questioning her own strength, another participant, Trisha, repeated comparable views on refuting personal strength as a BBM. In her own explanation, Trisha described:

I hear so much, you're so strong. You're one of the strongest people I've ever met. I couldn't have done this. I don't know what I am... And I don't consider myself strong. I really don't. ...I know that I have strengths, but in this process, in some ways I've had, so, um, in some ways I haven't.

Trisha's acknowledgment of her own strength stands out because she questions her own strength, but also recognizes instances where her strength is present. Yet, even as Trisha admits that she has strength in some moments, she returns to the original claim that she does not view herself as strong.

Taken together, these participant exemplars illustrated that grieving after child loss to gun violence does have an impact, inundating BBMs with moments of experienced weakness and affirmed strength, on how participants view their own strength, even after some of these same participants receive positive strength affirmations from outsiders. The following section will discuss how some participants affirmed their own strength in their identity as a BBM.

Affirmed Strength. The affirming of strength is when participants announced that they viewed themselves as strong and resilient. Even if describing their own perceived moments of weakness, some participants declared that they embodied strength more

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times than weakness and they cherished those moments of strength. When discussing their strength, some participants highlighted key moments they believed portrayed strength. For example, Rita, honored her own strength when she helped with intricate details of her daughter's funeral. According to Rita:

So when my daughter was killed, um, for the funeral, I, I got her dressed. I washed her up, I did her hair and nails. Like, I helped them put her in a casket. Like, I did all that myself. So, a lot of people say that I'm strong from that because a lot of people can't do it.

This example showed that Rita handled the intimate details of her daughter's burial in a way that outsiders may not have been able to understand. Here, Rita handled her deceased daughter's body for funeral preparation, this is a task that other BBMs may not have been able to do in their own experiences with child loss.

In comparison, another participant Shawna acknowledged that she has maintained her resilience, a characteristic that has been part of her identity for past years. Shawna had to then activate this same characteristic in her reality of now being a BBM. Shawna proclaimed:

I would say like, but I've always been a very resilient person where I will want people to understand is that, and this is what I truly believe. I believe that when you lose your child, your child, it is a spiritual thing.

In Shawna's description, she likened her child's death to a spiritual experience, connecting this experience to Shawna's strength. Previous resilience acted as a protective mechanism for Shawna once her son was gunned down. This indicated that maintaining

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resilience before child loss may lower the pain BBMs endure. The affirmed strength of BBMs may stem from maintaining a positive outlook connected to spirituality or faith.

Furthermore, the lens of faith positively affected the way that BBMs see themselves and their own strength. Shawna was not the only participant that credited their relationship with God as the provider of their strength. Janice provided similar insight when she mentioned:

I mean, a lot of peoples. I'm very strong and that everything as if or the people's opinion, you know, but to me, I think it maybe due to Christ walk, uh, 'that's the only reason why I strong, but I will know. I don't know that I'll be without him. I don't know. I just don't know.

Janice affirmed her own strength when she used her faith and spirituality as the lens through which she interpreted whether her own strength was present. The third research question will provide more clarity on the role of spirituality in the resilience of BBMs. Therefore, the next section will review how participants anchored their identity in reassuring themselves of being a loving mother, despite having a deceased child.

Bereaved Mother. The bereavement of child loss did not prohibit participants from still identifying themselves as a mother, even if the deceased child was their only child. The pain of bereavement often caused participants to reflect on their motherhood and find comfort in knowing they parented well. With the gun violence being classified as a violent death, many of the mothers assured themselves and other BBMs of their motherly identity. This assurance maintained that their identity as a BBM did not diminish the valuable role they once played in their deceased child's life. Instead, this assurance allowed BBMs to perceive themselves as effective in motherhood though

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journeying through grief. The BBMs reflected on memorable moments with their deceased child to ensure themselves that were quality mothers, even with now being bereaved. Participants shared key moments that indicated the depth of the love that they had for their deceased child. Rita expressed that she and her deceased daughter were best friends. Rita explained:

My daughter was my best friend, and she was like everything to me. Um, and everybody know like the life that I live with my kids, like if you didn't see my kids, you wouldn't see me. You didn't see me, you wouldn't see my kids. So I was a person that if they can't get in the club, I can't get in. Um, so like everything I did, I did with my kids.

Rita shared that she kept her kids close physically, maybe sharing this information to show that she was a responsible parent that spent quality time with her children. Even with her daughter's violent accidental death at the hand of the daughter's friend, Rita showed that she was a present parent that loved her daughter immensely. Rita's memories with her daughter are intertwined within the identity of being a mother that did effectively parent.

In the same way, another participant, Janice, mentioned that her deceased son loved her deeply and always wanted to care for her financially as an act of love. Janice shared:

He was a go getter always took care of his mommy, and, "Mama, you good? You need some money? Here." He gave me hundreds... And he said, mommy, before I leave this world I'm going to buy you a house... become a millionaire, become a

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billionaire buy you a house. Take care of you for the rest of your life, so you ain't got to work no more. home. Because you work very, very hard.

Janice's son was committed to providing Janice with financial security to show his appreciation. Even as Janice took care of her son when he was alive, her son wanted to return the favor and take care of Janice. For Janice, these kind gestures from her son, before his death, assured her that she and her son maintained a loving mother-son relationship where they cared for each other. Here, Janice saw herself as a mother that was dedicated to her son. As a result, her son wanted to eventually offer financial comfort for Janice as a thank you for parenting him in a committed manner. Janice's self-perception of being a committed mother was affirmed through the love her deceased son maintained towards her in the past.

Further, coupled with their own reassurance, participants may have also received outside assurance that confirmed that the participant and their deceased child did have a loving relationship. This outside assurance confirmed the positive self-perception of their motherhood that many of the mothers desired or maintained. For Trisha, her confirmation of quality motherhood came from close friends of her deceased son. Trisha indicated:

And even like his friends who, um, are my bonus sons, um, they're like, you have no idea how much he loves you and we're going to make sure that we take care of you. It's like, literally, I don't know if he is going to each of them, like you have to take care of my mom.

Even with the deep-rooted pain of losing her son, Trisha found comfort in knowing that her son, before his death, made sure that his friends knew how much he loved his mom. After his death, his friends were able to relay the message back to Trisha as a source of

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encouragement for her. This verbal confirmation affirmed Trisha's previous comment when she referred to her deceased son as her "kindred spirit" when quantifying the closeness that she and her son shared. The connection that Trisha and her son shared was possible because Trisha put forth effort in strengthening her bond with her son. Therefore, even in the son's death, outsiders recognized that Trisha's motherhood had a positive effect on her deceased son prior to his death.

Overall, participants often encouraged themselves as BBMs to affirm that they were valuable mothers to their deceased children. Participants also considered past events as a reference point for the love and enacted moments of service shared between them and their deceased child. Beyond the personal encouragement, outside encouragement also provided consolation in moments of grief after deadly child loss.

Overall, participants anchored their identity in being a *strong Black* woman with attention to *weakness* and *affirmed strength*. Lastly, their identity was anchored in being a *bereaved mother*. These identity anchors provided clarity, transparency, and even comfort. The next section will focus on the themes related to the third aspect of CTR, *maintaining communication networks*.

Maintaining Communication Network

After experiencing a triggering event, it is common for those in need to create, renew, or lessen their interactions with social circles (Buzzanell, 2010). BBMs in the present study experienced changes within their communication network after losing their child. Specifically, participants' communication networks experienced the following: a) *increased maintenance*, b) *decreased maintenance* and c) *expansion through social media groups*. The following section provides a thorough explanation of each of these

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experiences, highlighting the impact of child loss on maintaining a communication network.

Increased Maintenance. Participants often saw an increase in the maintenance of their communication networks. The communication networks included relationships with friends, family, and even mental health professionals. Many of the relationships within the BBM's communication network provided support to participants in critical moments of grief. As previous exemplars detailed, many of the participants experienced emotional and mental anguish after the violent loss of their child. This anguish often diminished the BBMs' ability to function and complete daily activities, thus necessitating the help of the BBM's communication network. When Janice described her relationship with her communication network and its increased maintenance, she proclaimed:

They came over to visit me a lot and they called me alot and stayed with me on the phone, stayed with me over the phone, you know, made sure they kept me, you know, going for me, you know, moving around, you know, take me out to be with family, friends, social events, you know...

Janice's network provided her with their physical presence through outings and phone calls. The presence assisted Janice in her healing. A few participants indicated that their communication network had an increase in maintenance. As network members witnessed the emotional needs of the BBM, the network attempted to be a source of comfort and support for the participants. The physical visits from the network were one way for the network to offer physical support towards the resilience of the BBM in a critical moment of grief.

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In addition to the physical visits and frequent outings, BBMs appreciated having a support system to talk with and share aspects of their grief as a BBM. Dorothy reiterated this as she described the impact of having people to call when grief was present:

The people that were there when I needed to talk, the people that came around and said, are you really okay? They made the biggest difference. People have said, you can call me anytime. You know, those were the people that really made the biggest difference is knowing you have somebody and you didn't have to just sit here and cry by yourself. Oh, you know, for hours even, you know, people that come on and say, let's get out of the house, let's do this. So for me that made the biggest difference because I wasn't at work for, you know, some weeks, you know? Um, and, uh, just having a listener, For me, that was what matters because people can tell you, oh, let me know if you need anything, but really know they're there...

For many BBMs, including Dorothy, it mattered when their network offered for the BBM to call members of the network anytime the BBM was experiencing moments of grief. This offering allowed the BBM to talk and vent about how they are feeling during grief. Here, Dorothy referenced that she took a few weeks off from work when her son died. During this time, she greatly benefitted from her network engaging her in conversation as she needed.

In the same way that the communication maintenance increased, BBMs also utilized professional mental health services to increase maintenance. Some BBMs sought professional help outside of family, friends, and others that may have offered support. Therapy was commonly mentioned amongst participants when talking about their own

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experiences as BBMs. BBMs also recommended therapy when offering advice to other BBMs that recently lost a child to gun violence. For Evelyn, she attended counseling to assist with her grief, as the pandemic of 2020 was underway, counseling became more important. During this time, counseling was one of her only options to seek help amid the worldwide pandemic that closed churches for months at a time. The global pandemic of 2020 negatively affected the grief of BBMs, including those that may have lost their child before or during the pandemic. The isolation of the pandemic may have caused even more negative underlying effects on the BBMs that sought community and healing. Overall, counseling whether in-person or virtual can provide much-needed conversation and tools for necessary healing and resilience. For many of the participants, counseling was seen as a plausible tool to help alleviate the weight of grief.

Furthermore, counseling was beneficial to BBMs seeking those tools to aid in their grief journey, especially when BBMs can see the value in seeking mental health service regarding their child loss. Tammy vocalized her contentment with therapy when she described her counselor as a gift from God. Tammy asserted, “And I used to tell that counselor, I know, God bless you here. I know God put you here.” This illustration acknowledged that counseling, as increased communication network maintenance, can be seen through the lens of faith. When coupled with the presence and usage of friends and family, counseling served as a place of support and comfort during grief as a BBM.

Lastly, increased maintenance was typically connected to the needs and perceived needs of the BBM. The BBM’s needs may have included conversations to talk about their loss and grief, social outings to leave the house, even if for a few hours, or sitting with a mental health professional. Increased interactions with a communication network were

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one way that BBMs received support that aids in the resilience of BBMs. Even as some BBMs in the study experienced increased maintenance with their communication network, some BBMs experienced a decrease in the maintenance of their communication network. The next section will provide further insight on how some BBMs experienced a decrease in communication network maintenance.

Decreased Maintenance. When communication networks experienced a decrease in maintenance, there was usually a decline or absence in the frequency of communication, including the depth of the conversation. The decrease can be attributed to the network not knowing how to address the BBM in the experience of grief. Also, the decrease can be caused by the BBM perceiving her grief as unique and assuming that others will be unable to meet her needs as a BBM. The culmination of these explanations caused faltering in a network's ability to provide support, including communicative interactions, to BBMs.

Some of the participants mentioned that their maintenance decrease may have been attributed to family members and friends not quite knowing what to say or how to handle the BBM in such a grief-stricken experience. Some BBMs experienced encounters with their communication network where they feel misunderstood by others that may not identify as a BBM that has lost a child to gun violence. In Shawna's experience with some of her communication network, some of those in the network had never seen Shawna face such a vicious death in her close family, therefore, they were unsure of how to address her. Shawna shared:

I don't want to say that they [communication network] did [support]. I mean, I feel really bad saying that, but it's true... It was that, that I did not feel like people

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seeing what I was going through. They only, you know, my son was a special kid. And so he was that person for everyone. Like everybody loved him. Um, and so everybody hurts so bad. So they really couldn't give me the support that I felt that I needed. So like my immediate circle became the Lord. Nobody knew what to say. Nobody knew what to say, how to say it, if they should say it. Um, what to do. Um, people have always seen me as this very resilient person. So they see me weak. People just didn't know what to do.

Shawna mentioned that some of her network members experienced their own grief in the loss of Shawna's son. The network's own grief impeded upon their ability to offer support to Shawna or even support in the way that Shawna may have needed. This then caused Shawna to seek refuge in her faith and relationship with God. Finally, Shawna detailed that her own usual strength became a barrier for her in her time of need.

Specifically, Shawna's network became accustomed to seeing her showcasing strength before her son passed, and Shawna's displayed weakness after the loss resulted in the network questioning how to meet Shawna's holistic needs. When members of a communication network were unable to provide support, it often left the BBM without some of the much-needed resources that were described for BBMs in the study that saw an increase in their communication network maintenance.

In addition, a decrease in the communication network maintenance also stemmed from BBMs being concerned about being misunderstood in their grief or belief that their network is uncomfortable with talking about the BBM's child loss. Cathy reiterated this notion:

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I noticed that as far as family and friends, a lot of people, they feel where I'm coming from, but a lot of, they don't want to talk about him or if I bring him up and they like, oh, you're going to make us say it. You know? So to me, I'd like to talk about him because that's keeping his memory going, you know, living his life, you know, and I just don't feel like it's a huge support team from family and friends. And when tragedy hits, a lot of people run or feel like they don't know what to say to you. So they just don't say anything or they don't want to hear it, you know? So at reach strangers and that's how I cope with strangers that understand.

In this example, Cathy mentioned that her network was unable to fully meet her needs for multiple reasons. First, Cathy believed that her network was uncomfortable with holding conversations about her son's death. Yet, talking about her own son's death is one strategy for Cathy to keep her son's legacy alive and garner support from others around her. Lastly, Cathy attributed the lack of maintenance to the silence of the network and the network's lack of desire to hear about the BBM's child loss. As a result, Cathy sought support from strangers she believed would provide support.

Other participants shared similar sentiments when describing the decreased presence of their communication network after the BBM lost their child to gun violence. Holly revealed a similar experience:

When, a mom loses a child, that inner circle is sometimes not there anymore...They aren't your friends afterwards? Um, I didn't have anybody to reach out to me after the loss of my son. Um, I had to connect with, um, a mother's group of, of murdered children.

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Holly's network decided that they no longer wanted a friendship with her after the death of her son. This loss of friendship was troubling to Holly, but Holly refused to go without a communication network to assist with her own grief. Without those members of her own communication network, Holly turned to a mothers' group for added support. This support was made up of other mothers that experienced losing a child to homicide. The decreased maintenance of typical communication networks did not mean that BBMs would gain relationships, instead, some BBMs turned to people outside of the network to still meet the emotional needs of the BBM.

In conclusion, BBMs needed support, but a lack of communication network maintenance was sometimes caused by networks that lacked the emotional intelligence to meet the emotional and communicative needs of BBMs. The lack of emotional intelligence came from network members not being fully aware of the BBM grief process. Therefore, some network members were unable to fully understand or even the needs of a BBM. When a communication network was unable to offer the necessary support to a BBM, this did not eradicate the needs of the BBM, instead, it often caused the BBM to seek other resources and groups to meet the communicative and emotional needs. As a result, technology often became a resource to house virtual groups for BBMs on social media as a commonplace place for BBMs to share experiences. The next section will emphasize how BBM communication networks can expand through social media groups.

Expanded Through Social Media Groups. Some research participants expanded their communication network by joining social media groups that aligned with their identity as BBMs. Since much of the experience of being a BBM can sometimes only be

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fully understood in experience by other BBMs, the need to align with other BBMs can led many BBMs to turn to social media to get acquainted with other mothers with the shared experience of child loss. Social media contains multiple groups for parents that have suffered child loss to various ailments, homicide types, and other causes of death. BBMs joined and sought membership in these various groups with the hopes of interacting with other mothers that understood the grief of child loss. Many participants within this study sought membership in social media groups and shared about the benefits of having access to these groups, meeting mothers from across the country.

Social media was often a highlight for many of the participants when they needed an emotional outlet, including advice on how to pursue justice for their child's murder or advice on how to process their grief. Holly mentioned her involvement in social media groups for bereaved mothers. Holly explained, "I'm in two groups. Um, because that was the only way that I could express myself and get a little bit of a pain out, was to be involved with these two groups." For Holly, these two social media groups for bereaved mothers served as an outlet that aided in Holly's resilience. These groups allowed Holly to expose and release some of the pain she endured as a BBM. Holly provided further explanation about her membership in her social media groups. When elaborating on the value of the social media groups, Holly asserted:

[these groups are] the only way that we can have the strength to help one another is this bond that we have and that's it because we've lost a child, we're the only ones that understand that concept. Um, so we formed a sisterhood, um, because we know what it's like and, um, you know, it's, it's just unexplainable. Yeah. I never thought that I would be in this situation.

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Holly never envisioned herself gaining the identity of a BBM. The death of her child was not something that she believed she would endure. Therefore, this new and heart-wrenching experience was enough to make Holly find solace in the shared experience of child loss, grief, and resilience by way of social media groups that strive to support and unify bereaved mothers, including BBMs. Holly defined the groups as a sisterhood, there is a shared meaning in the experience of being a bereaved mother that only other bereaved mothers would be able to fully understand. The social media groups offered unity through collective experiences and support as the BBMs needed

Likewise, when BBMs felt misunderstood in their grief, social media groups offered support in a way that non-BBMs or non-bereaved mothers cannot. For example, those that do not identify as a BBM may not be able to fully offer the same type of support that another BBM or bereaved mother would be able to offer. This established much of the value of social media groups for BBMs. Cathy emphasized the value of social media groups when she explained:

[the groups include] other women that are going through what I'm going through, who understand my feelings, who can say, I can only imagine they actually going through it, you know, and the support that we get in this group, you know, if someone's feeling down, everyone is like over 200 comments on, hey, you got to pull it through this. You know, we all going through it. You know, people say prayers, people may say, post your kid's picture in the air with wings to it. It's just like really, really very supportive.

By being involved in the social media groups, Cathy felt supported and understood in her journey of grief and resilience. The social media groups cultivated an environment where

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BBMs shared their honest thoughts and feelings with other women, including Black women, that were ready to serve as a listening ear. Social media groups also provided words of encouragement that were often well-received by BBMs in need. As these relationships are cultivated with the help of technology, some of these relationships even flourished outside of the social media groups.

Additionally, as BBMs are became connected via social media, some of these relationships organically grew into mentorship and even authentic friends. Shawna described a relationship she connected with through a bereaved mother's social media group and how that relationship has grown beyond a social media acquaintance. When describing the relationship, Shawna revealed:

And I met a lady I have not physically ever met her in person. We talk all the time on the phone. We have touched each other's lives in such a way, that I will say that she's one of my very best friends. And I'm so thankful for God, for her. And I don't need to physically know her, but I call her all the time. She calls me all the time.

Despite never meeting in person, Shawna, and a fellow bereaved mother cultivated a platonic friendship that has allowed Shawna's communication network to have expanded due to social media. This relationship provided Shawna with valuable and consistent communicative support. This encounter highlights the role of social media in joining together bereaved mothers, including BBMs, in a way that cultivates organic support and direction for BBMs that may be lacking these essential components or BBMs that desire to maintain a communication network that includes other BBMs in addition to outside friends and family.

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Finally, social media groups were essential providers of support for BBMs in their unique experience of child loss. This type of support was influential and empowering as BBMs sought to foster community amongst themselves in these groups. This support was also a driving force in the resilience of BBMs that had a desire to maintain a process of healthy grief and resilience in child loss. BBMs that participated in bereaved mother social media groups received the comfort of shared experiences and supportive communication with other bereaved mothers. The next section will review how BBM participants utilized the CTR component of downplaying negative feelings and foregrounding positive feelings.

Downplaying Negative Feelings and Foregrounding Positive Emotions

The ability to downplay negative feelings and foreground positive feelings is a strategy to embrace resilience by mentally focusing on some form of upliftment (Buzzanell, 2010). This strategy coalesced in the present study around *meeting the needs of their surviving family*, including their immediate household. For these BBMs, enacting this tenet of CTR shifted focus from solely spending time fixating on child loss. Instead, many participants were mindful of tending to their surviving family, including their living children.

Having surviving children heightened the responsibilities for BBMs. Participant BBMs were aware of how they handled their grief in front of their children. Rita recommended that other BBMs be mindful of how they portray moments of weakness and grief in front of surviving children. Rita mentioned:

And they already lost a sibling. And we, as, as parents can cope more than kids, kids don't know how to really show it. So they would act out in all type of ways.

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And I felt like we really have to be strong with the kids because that's something we do as a parent.

Portraying strength was an act of helping the surviving children process their own grief and showing that the grief can be handled in a way that is healthy for the entire family. BBMs felt they were personally required to be strong for their surviving children and family. This type of strength meant that BBMs may have hidden the depths of their pain to stay strong for their family. However, this thought process often distracted BBMs from having a healthy grieving journey that allowed the BBM to be honest about their feelings and state of well-being.

By contrast, some of the BBMs had to also work harder to embrace their surviving children. The hurt of losing one child was such a burden of grief that participants had to be intentional about showing love and care for their surviving child. Rita affirmed this in her explanation:

Coping is really hard because it's hard to try to be a parent to other kids when you lost a child... So we have to make sure that we still show love to our kids, the kids. And we should, we still showed them, um, that we loved them because when we lose a child, it's hard to love our other kids. But in, in, in the midst of, of that, it makes them dislike us because they feel like that child is the only child that we love because they really sometimes don't understand that losing a child, you know, hurts.

In this example, Rita admitted that it was challenging to show love to surviving child after losing a child. Rita also mentioned that showing a deep hurt and focus on the

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deceased child caused the surviving children to hold a grudge towards the BBM because the surviving children may have believed that the BBM loved the deceased child more.

Therefore, the BBM may then deal with stressors from multiple directions. The BBMs dealt with their own grief and the misunderstandings of surviving children. Often, surviving children believed that the BBMs grief is an indication that the deceased child is loved more than the surviving children, and that is all coupled with the grief of the surviving child. Collectively, these stressors were present while BBMs parented surviving child and still completed daily activities. Rita described some of these stressors in greater detail while highlighting the grief and its impact on her familial structure, including her identity as a BBM and the effect on the surviving children:

And we, we don't, we, well, some parents can't say, we won't agree to it, but we do forget about the kids. And that's something that we can't do because we have to show them love too. Cause you don't know what they are going through either.

Rita admitted that grief can cause a BBM to forget the needs of the surviving children. However, she recommended that BBMs counteract this by showing the surviving children that they are loved. In addition to the expressed love, Rita shared that BBMs must also allow the surviving child to vocalize their own experiences with grief and the effect of grief on the surviving children that are now siblings with a deceased child. Therefore, the BBM was not the only immediate family member grieving.

Alternative Logic

Alternative logic takes place when a survivor of a triggering event takes time to change their thinking pattern or perception of the experience (Buzzanell, 2010). In the current study, BBMs engaged in alternative logic by finding some sort of silver lining in

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the grief journey as related to the murder of their child. Toward this end, BBMs shared the sentiment that their *child is in a better place*.

Specifically, this alternative logic provided some form of hope for BBM as they grieve the loss of their child. Holly provided insight into her perspective on the murder of her son. Holly shared:

I do have, um, sometimes I do, uh, you know, cry, um, whatever, but I know that he's in a better place now than he was before because of his life, the lifestyle that he was living. But, um, he was getting ready to change that lifestyle.

Holly admitted to often crying over the loss of her son, but this sadness was sometimes accompanied by the belief that her deceased son was now in a place post-death that may have been better than the life her son was living when he was alive, a lifestyle that may have been unsafe. However, Holly asserted that before the son's death, the son was adamant about changing his lifestyle to one that would be better for him. Sadly, the son's murder happened before the son could even change his own life around. As a mother, Holly was uncomfortable with her son's lifestyle that often increased the likelihood that he could be a victim of a crime. Her knowledge of her son's lifestyle did not stop Holly from hoping that her son would soon make a change that would potentially decrease the chances of him being victimized. Even with the likelihood of her son being hurt, this did not stop Holly from grieving her son's loss. Other moms mentioned that their child were in heaven and now safe. Holly made similar sentiments, but her sentiments were grounded in her son's literally safety now being manifested as he was no longer present on earth. Holly still utilized alternative logic to perceive the son being in a "better place"

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as an opportunity to change how she perceived the son's death in her own grieving process.

Similarly, another participant, Evelyn, provided insight on this same thought process when detailing her perspective on her son's death. Evelyn believed that her son was in a better place after his death. Evelyn shared:

So it was giving me some peace because I know that he's not here physically, but he's in my heart and I know one day I seen again, um, it gives peace because I don't have to wonder at night anyways or get help. I'll get a phone call and somebody found him somewhere, you know?

Evelyn's perspective was slightly different from Holly's because Evelyn assured herself that she would see her deceased son again after her own future death. This level of thinking is also symbolic of Evelyn's spiritual belief that asserts there is an afterlife after death. This exemplar also noted that Evelyn may have had slight concerns about her son's safety and well-being when the son was living. These concerns were similar those that Holly mentioned. Therefore, with Evelyn being present immediately after the son's murder, she would no longer have to work about the son's safety.

Collectively, Holly and Evelyn both had sons who were involved in a concerning lifestyle that increased the chances of the sons being harmed. Both mothers were aware and fearful for their sons prior to the son's death. In some regard, the deaths relieved these two mothers of their concerns about their son's well-being when alive. Yet, both mothers still grieved the loss of their sons after the death.

In contrast, Trisha's son was a victim of a random violent crime. This left Trisha devastated and confused at how someone could kill her son, a person that was known for

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helping others and being a positive influence. When discussing her son's murder, Trisha responded, "How could this happen to a child that doesn't, that, um, that, that didn't bother and do anything?" Here, Trisha's grief was also intertwined with the reality that her son's safety was never a concern connected to a risky lifestyle. Therefore, alternative logic may be more popular amongst mothers that had previous lifestyle concerns regarding their deceased child.

To conclude, as BBMs used alternative logic, they gained confidence in finding the slightest bit of positivity in their grief experience. For the BBMs in the study, they found some form of relief in knowing that their deceased child would no longer be a source of worry, instead, they found comfort in believing that their child was in a better after-place that was better than living here on earth.

Overall, CTR was used to understand how the five characteristics of CTR were used by BBMs as a source of resilience. All five tenets of CTR were present in the data set. The following section will highlight the second research question that examined how BBMs use sisterhood for resilience.

Sisterhood

In this study, Black sisterhood is categorized as voluntary kin that functions as a family without biological or legal affiliation. Black sisterhood can act as a protective mechanism for its members, shielding them from the full impact of triggering events while also providing member support (Davis, 2015). Therefore, the second research question explored how Black bereaved mothers utilize sisterhood after losing a child to gun violence. Specifically, the question stated, *how do Black bereaved mothers use sisterhood to develop resilience?* When initially describing Black sisterhood, participants

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offered their perspective and definition of sisterhood. Sisterhood was often described as safe places that were made up of trustworthy women that were willing to pray, motivate, and create lasting memories with their fellow Black sisters. In this study, participants used sisterhood to receive support in their grief journey as a BBM. There were two prominent themes in the data that described the role of sisterhood, including *tangible social support* and *emotional support*. The following section will explore the two themes in detail.

Tangible Social Support

As BBMs, many of the participants who identified with the sisterhood, including Black sisterhood, took great pride in the support that was offered to the BBM on behalf of the sisterhood. Tangible social support was a reoccurring theme as participants discussed how their sisterhood was present on the BBM's journey of grief, both immediately after the loss of the BBM's child and even long after the death of the BBM's child. Tangible social support included providing food for the BBM and the BBM's household, assisting the BBM with media interviews for the child's murder, helping with funeral planning, and providing the BBM with tokens of memoriam for the deceased child.

The death of a child typically caused BBMs to have to plan their child's funeral, which often cultivated additional pain as the funeral planning made the child's death a new reality. Many of the participants revealed that they were distraught with the thought of planning their child's funeral, causing their sisterhood to be present during the planning, and in some cases, the sisterhood had to step in and assist with planning. When detailing the role of her sisterhood in providing tangible social support, Cathy mentioned:

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Well, right after it [son's murder] happened, they [sisterhood] all came together. They was bringing food over. Um, they will come into, sit there with shifts on come, just to sit with me when it was time to plan the funeral. Everybody did their part to help, you know, everyone got together and prayed and it was just awesome. You know, the team that I had together. Absolutely. And I think that's all we want is just people to be there. And so when you say be there, what do you mean by that? Just be there shoulder to cry on the ear to listen, um, digital support. And also like my son had a t-shirt line. And when I tell you, I, I see all my friends wearing his shirts that that's just show support right there too, that you guys are not letting his, his memory die. Were you guys aware of his shirts? You guys are coming around and just being here for me? Absolutely.

In Cathy's experience, her sisterhood provided various forms of tangible social support. Cathy's sisterhood supported her as a BBM as Cathy planned her son's funeral. The sisterhood also provided Cathy with food, which made one less concern for Cathy during the immediate grieving and funeral planning. In addition to the food and presence, the sisterhood also showed support by wearing merchandise that Cathy's deceased son has previously created. Collectively, the sisterhood showed up and offered wide support for Cathy during her darkest moment of dealing with burying a child.

However, for another participant, Martha, her sisterhood had to step in and completely plan the funeral of Martha's son. During this period, Martha was unable to plan the funeral because of such high emotional pain over her son's death. Martha recounted the role of her sisterhood:

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Just like the planning, the, um, funeral. I wasn't able to do that. One made sure the repast had the food. Another viewed the body with my daughter. Um, another one set the arrangements, picked out the outfit with the bed. I didn't do anything. And then it, um, just asked me what color they, um, people came for the house. They, um, put the food up, made sure everybody was ok, everybody was okay. Made sure I was okay. Um, took the flowers, talked to the people when I didn't want to talk to the people. Um, once the story was out was, uh, it is breaking news. And I wasn't able to talk to the media, anybody, but I wanted, my son's story to be told they wasn't, a gang banger. And one of my sisters was able to talk [to the media] for me when I couldn't talk. And, um, they just took care of all of that.

In this illustration, Martha's story highlighted the role of a sisterhood committed to the well-being of a BBM that is part of the sisterhood. Martha shared that as a mom, she could not bring herself to plan her son's funeral. Martha's sisterhood not only planned the intricate details of the funeral, but the sisterhood also viewed the son's body as part of the identification process immediately following the son's murder. Even when the son's death made breaking news in her hometown and the media wanted statements from Martha on her teenage son's death, the sisterhood showed up and fielded questions from the media in proxy of Martha. Here, Martha acknowledged the selflessness and pure love that was shown to her by her sisterhood. In the moments when Martha could not bring herself to participate in the funeral arrangements, her sisterhood was relentless in their support. Tangible support is critical for BBMs that experience debilitating grief.

Lastly, another participant, Shawna, reported that her sisterhood's tangible social support came in the form of a commemorative billboard. In celebration of her son's

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heavenly birthday, Shawna wanted to put up a billboard in her hometown as a way to commemorate her son's life. Shawna stated, "I wanted a billboard for his 18th birthday, heavenly birthday. And so I reached out to, I got the billboard in 10 minutes." This sisterhood included other BBMs that Shawna cultivated close relationships with, and this sisterhood eagerly provided the financial support to ensure that Shawna was able to afford her son's billboard. Since this sisterhood included fellow BBMs, this sisterhood was likely able to understand the sentimental meaning of the billboard for Shawna. This group also understood the potential positive impact this billboard would have on Shawna's journey of grief. Sisterhood offered beneficial support that uplifted BBMs in critical moments.

Overall, as tangible social support was provided by sisterhood to the BBMs in the study, this support aided in the resilience of the BBM by helping the BBMs survive. With BBMs, sisterhood became a proxy for survival and stood in the gap created by child loss, prompting resilience. The death of a child, including violent death, is a qualifying event that prompts the support of present sisterhood to meet the tangible social and emotional needs of a BBM. When coupled with the bereaved, the forms of support allowed resilience to be an outcome in the process of bereavement. However, as Black sisterhood met the tangible social needs of BBMs, this sisterhood often meet the emotional needs of BBMs as well. The next section will more provide detail on how Black sisterhood met the emotional needs of participants through emotional support.

Emotional Support

The manifestation of emotional support served as an additional source of comfort for BBMs in the study. The emotional support offered by sisterhood is sometimes manifested

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as the sisterhood being present to stop the stress of bereavement from turning into a dire crisis. Emotional support was shown when the BBMs' sisterhood took responsibility for getting the BBM out of the house as a way to lessen the grief. Often, the sisterhood would check in on the BBMs to ensure that the BBMs were assured that that sisterhood was a resource during the process of grief. The sisterhood also would take turns spending the night with some of the BBMs to ensure that the BBM did not feel lonely nor alone in the BBM's grief. Sisterhood provided BBMs with the time and energy to grieve, again aiding in the resilience of the BBM.

As participants discussed the emotional support from their sisterhood, participants described the sisterhood's support as beneficial to the BBM grieving process. Martha described her sisterhood's emotional support and its impact on her journey of grieving:

Well, they never gave up on me. They always, you know, talk to me, tell me that this isn't you], you know, he would want you to be this way, do that, do that. You gotta get up. You know, they just, they just kept in my ear, yeah, they kept in my ear. And when I wanted to give up all the way here, I would hear their voice. I know one of them would say, why you still in the bed? You gotta get up, you know? So I be like, let me get up, because one of the sisters will be over here. She ain't gonna let me get no rest, gone say I been in the bed all day. So it's not like they would, let me sink in that to a dark place. I was always making sure. Well, I wasn't you know, going backwards.

Martha's sisterhood was relentless in their ability to be present for Martha and the grief that encapsulated Martha's life. This emotional support from the sisterhood was present in the form of consistent conversation. This conversation motivated Martha to not linger

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in the devastating grief that often-caused Martha to be unable to get out of bed on some days. Even in the moments where Martha wanted to give up hope, Martha's sisterhood refused to allow Martha to be overwhelmed by grief. Even in the moments of extreme grief where the sisterhood was not in Martha's immediate presence, Martha could still think back to how her sisterhood would encourage her at that moment. Martha's experience with a caring sisterhood was popular amongst participants that shared about their sisterhood.

Similarly, Evelyn was one of many participants that also identified emotional support provided by a collective sisterhood. Evelyn's sisterhood offered conversation and prayers to ensure that Evelyn was well-supported in the journey of resilience after Evelyn's son was murdered. When discussing the role of her sisterhood in her resilience, Evelyn mentioned:

... they would come here, um, visit, pick me up, pick me up, call me and pray with me. Um, just the texts, you know, just letting me know, thinking of me if they can't actually be here. Um, I don't know. I'm just always able to call on them and they may not be able to just come here and be in my presence, but just, they know that I know that they're there for me, you know? Um, they've, they've all just been great. It's just, I have one friend she does. She's not going to go one day without having some type of contact with me.

Evelyn's narrative illustrated how BBMs can thrive in sisterhood. Evelyn's sisterhood was even sure to let Evelyn know when the sisterhood was thinking of her in grief. Specifically, one of Evelyn's friends made sure to make daily contact with Evelyn to check in on her. The consistency of sisterhood was appreciated by Evelyn, and she

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affirmed that she knew that she could always count on her sisterhood to support her as a BBM.

Sisterhood commonly partnered together to alleviate the grief of BBMs. Members of the sisterhood are aware that grief may be present for the BBM, and as a result, the sisterhood used social outings and quality time as the anthesis for grief. For participant Beth, her sisterhood showed up at her home and insist that Beth accompanied the sisterhood to outside events. Beth described her experience with her family-like sisterhood:

I have a couple of friends that no matter everyday, I wouldn't, I wouldn't go anywhere. Sometimes I wouldn't answer the phone. I wouldn't even open the curtains or open the door. I have to, I had two people in my life that would come in and they, I mean, they were banging on that door. So, I hope they'd be like, we know you in there... And so, they were very persistent about me not drowning myself in this sorrow at that time. And they're still persistent about it now. Like sometimes when, I don't want to go out; They'll say, come on, get up, go get dressed we won't leave until you do so. Yeah. It's those, those friends of mine. We've been friends since we were kids. So that's another thing, you know, we're not just friends, we're like family...

In this illustration, Beth acknowledged that her sisterhood was aware of Beth sometimes not leaving the house because of BBM grief. To combat Beth's grief, the sisterhood would stop by Beth's house and refuse to accept Beth's excuse for not making the day productive. In some moments, the sisterhood forced communication with Beth, just to make sure that Beth was not "drowning" in grief as Beth described. This sisterhood that

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Beth referenced was considered to Beth's family since the sisterhood had been in place since their collective childhood.

When the sisterhood of a BBM provided emotional support for the BBM, this support was figuratively lifesaving for the BBM. The phone calls were just one of many strategies enforced by sisterhoods to check in on the BBM. The sisterhood also served as a resource to discuss any difficulties or progress that the BBM experienced in grief. In addition to phone calls, sisterhood members would take turns sleeping over the BBM's house to ensure that the BBM slept through the night. Staying the night with the BBM was also another way to comfort the BBM in a moment that is figuratively and literally dark and critical. For example, the nighttime is typically a moment that people may spend with very few, it's an intimate moment where true grief can arise. With the sisterhood present in such a late hour of the night, the BBM was securely surrounded to sleep, express grief, and know the sisterhood is committed to serving the BBM. The presence of sisterhood in such a critical moment helped prevent the BBM from falling into a state of despair. Therefore, the help of sisterhood brought about resilience as the outcome of the grief journey.

In summary, Black sisterhood was monumental in the resilience journey for many of the BBMs that participated in the study. BBM utilized their sisterhood for two key reasons, tangible social support, and emotional support and the BBMs were able to activate resilience with the assistance and presence of sisterhood. The tangible social support was present when the sisterhood provided the BBMs with food for weeks at a time, especially immediately after the BBM's child was murdered. The sisterhood also showcased social support by assisting with funeral arrangements, finding creative

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measures to uphold the deceased child's legacy, and serving as a liaison for media personnel when the BBM was unable to speak to the media regarding the deceased child's murder. The overall support of Black sisterhood was a consistent presence for participants that had sisterhood that used intentionality to show support and kindness to the BBM during the tragedy of a murdered child. With sisterhood as a strong source of support and comfort for BBM, this was not the only outlet for supporting BBM. In addition to sisterhood, spirituality served as another source for BBM. The next section will investigate the role of spirituality in the resilience of BBMs.

Spirituality

The third and final research question stated, *how do Black bereaved mothers use spirituality to develop resilience?* This question was posed to understand the role of spirituality in the journey of resilience for BBM. Participants commonly defined spirituality as a relationship with a divine being. As a result, four themes were derived from the data and provided insight into spirituality as a source of a) *strength to endure the hardship*, b) *sensemaking to understand the death*, c) *difficulty through feelings of anger with God*, and d) *comfort through divine experiences*. The following sections will address each theme in detail.

Strength to Address Hardship

The divine relationship experienced through spirituality was often described as providing the BBMs with direction, comfort, and resilience that gave them the strength to address hardship on the journey of grief. Trisha described the benefits that were afforded to her because of her spiritual belief and relationship with her higher power:

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I can't even tell you how I'm functioning right now. I don't know. But, but the only thing, the only, the only thing I can tell you is nothing but the grace of God... I also know God has given me if you could provide, put in words, Herculean and Goliath, strength on steroids times a thousand. Wow. That is the only way because I have people looking at me like you just like how they're like, I don't even know how, like how you, even every day, I don't know how I get up and I don't know how I get up and shower. I don't know. But I just know every day I have to get up and if I get up, God will help do the rest. I can't get up without him opening my eyes. But I just know that if I make an attempt to do a little bit, God will help do the rest.

For Trisha, her belief in God allowed her to receive the strength that was given to her by God to replace the absence of strength she could not provide herself. Completing some of her daily tasks was only a result of the strength that God provided her. Trisha was often in shock at how she was able to function, giving honor and credit to God for the strength needed to address her own reality of child loss. Trisha viewed her relationship with God as a bit transactional, stating that her own responsibility is to put forth her best effort of strength and God will provide an additional allotment of strength to meet the gap.

Furthermore, the participant interviews revealed that strength can come from maintaining a relationship with a higher power. Yet, a few participants provided details on how they maintain the relationship to receive that strength. Janice explained her process of maintaining her relationship with her higher power:

It's still helping me just by reading, you know, reading the word, you know, keeping that in, embedded inside my spiritual That's, what's keeping me at a

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standstill there like that. As far as me going out there to, to, to do some things that you know, that it's going to be a tough, they will have me locked up. Yeah. So stand close to him and read my word. Just that's what helping me, staying close to, that word. Say close to his word, saying close to him. Period, fasting and praying and reading. My word is keeping me sustaining me, to being a woman that I am today. And I'm trying to keep the same mind each and every day of my life, trying to stay sane, this can make you snap.

Janice made time to read her bible and mentally fixate on those same biblical teachings. Having access to her relationship with her higher power, coupled with consistent bible readings, Janice attributed this combination to keeping her sane and away from retaliatory actions related to her son's death. Praying and fasting were additional steps that Janice used to maintain a closeness with her higher and receive strength and mental comfort.

Losing a child can be considered one of the most difficult experiences to endure. Viola affirmed this claim when considering her own experience as a BBM, "It is my belief in God helped me really to be to be around because I like I said, this the worst thing that can ever happen to somebody. I don't think nothing else beats that." Viola credited her relationship with God for her livelihood and life after the death of her son. Spirituality strengthened Viola and other BBMs to be able to continue living after losing a child.

Overall, spirituality was frequently perceived as a relationship with a higher power. Within this divine relationship, BBM received strength and comfort that allowed the BBM to face a new day every day. In addition to strength and comfort, spirituality

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also provided BBMs with sensemaking to understand their child's death. The following section will describe the sensemaking abilities of spirituality.

Sensemaking to Understand the Death.

BBMs utilized their own spirituality to grapple with their child's death and make sense of their grief and related experiences. In the same way, spirituality is a source of strength, spirituality also offered BBMs sensemaking through prayer, Bible study, faith, and fasting. BBM turned to spirituality for assurance that their child's death was part of God's plan and had a purpose. This reliance on a higher power provided an answer as to why their child was murdered. BBMs reported resting in the knowledge that God's plan is sovereign. Cathy shared how her relationship with God allowed her to find solace in knowing that God's plan included God being aware of when everyone would die, all part of God's plan. Thus, her son's death was no surprise to God. Cathy elaborated:

I think I just, after that, knowing that God has a plan, God knows the, the end day to everyone and just believe in that, then I knew what he was doing and he gave me an angel and it was his time to go. So that helped me to not be so angry.

Cathy's anger decreased when she relied on her faith in God and her belief in God's benevolence and ability to be all-knowing and all-powerful. Cathy was one of many participants that used spirituality to converse with their higher power on why their child was murdered.

Similarly, Shawna expressed the hurt that resulted from her son being brutally murdered. She shared her hurt with God and in a moment of anguish, she sought God to understand why her son was taken away from her in death. Shawna described:

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Um, my spirituality has always helped me cope by understanding that there is a God and there is a plan and it was already written and I don't know right now, but God, and he, and he reveals these things to you now. He might not do it right then and there right now. Um, but what I will say is in my darkest hour, when I was laying there on the bathroom floor, screaming out to God and ask, they know, why did you take my son?

Shawna revealed that her spirituality was a coping mechanism that allowed her to trust God and his sovereign plan. This theme was repeated amongst multiple participants as they believed that their child's murder was not surprising to God and that God's plan would allow the BBM to eventually endure their new reality of child loss. Even if God did not immediately answer the BBMs' questions surrounding the reasoning for their child's murder, the BBMs' faith caused them to believe that maybe one day, God would provide them with an answer in some form. Shawna continued to describe the explanation that God provided her as related to her son's murder:

... And also with the understanding that my son was a chosen child, that he loaned him to me, that he was here so that he could make a change in the world and I'm supposed to be here so that I'm able to, you know, um, continue you on with that, that vision my son had and the Lord had for him and I'm still here to do his work. And so I, can't not, I cannot that I cannot lay on the bathroom floor too. I can't be depressed. I can't continue to drink. I can continue to, uh, do ecstasy pills. I can continue to feel sorry for myself. I got to the propel myself and allow God to propel me so that other people can see me and understand that, okay, I was out there asleep...And then God touched me to let people know that there is a

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God that loves you no matter what you did or how you did it, but this is your testimony and your, you, you use your testimony so that other people can draw closer to the Lord.

In response to Shawna seeking God for an explanation for her son's death, God also assured Shawna that her son's death was for Shawn's betterment. God assured Shawna that her son was special to God and therefore, God wanted her son and no longer wanted her son to be on earth. Shawna received assurance from God that the death of her son would be part of Shawna's story to share with others to convert people to believe in maintaining a relationship with God. Thus, her son's death would be used to help to cultivate spirituality in the lives of other people.

Moreover, another participant, Tammy, asserted that her own son's death was part of God's will, and that God only loaned the son to Tammy. According to Tammy, her spirituality provided her with this understanding of her son's death:

I'm telling you God talk me through it. He told me this is My will. And when my will is done, there's nothing. Nobody can do about it. I need him. I need him. It was only borrowed to you, but he's really mine.

This assurance from God acted as a sensemaking tool that allowed Tammy to understand that God's will is permanent and in the case of Tammy's son, the son was a gift that God provided to Tammy and God eventually took the gift back, meaning that Tammy's son was not meant to live forever. Many of the BBMs in the study gained an understanding of their child's death, also receiving some sort of comfort simultaneously.

BBMs sought their spirituality for guidance, assurance, and reasoning on their child's death. Sensemaking through spirituality was often achieved through prayer, bible

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readings, fasting, and intentional time spent with a higher being. Even if God did not give the BBM a direct answer on why their child was murdered, some BBMs believed that God still comforted them in their grieving process and assured the BBM of God's omnipotence. When BBMs felt like their world is shattered at the murder of their child, they received some relief by conversing with their deity. However, having a spiritual foundation does not stop BBMs from feeling anger or disappointment that their all-knowing and all-powerful deity allowed the BBM's child to die. The next section will highlight how BBMs used their spirituality to grapple with their anger and disappointment towards their higher power.

Difficulty Through Feelings of Anger with God

Even as BBMs used spirituality for strength, comfort, and sensemaking, spirituality was also a source of difficulty, especially as BBMs experienced feelings of anger towards God. However, by maintaining a relationship with God, these BBMs voiced their anger directly to God, mostly in prayer time or intentional conversations with God. Perceiving God and God's will both as sovereign did not stop BBMs from harboring some disappointment and discontentment towards God for the death of their child. The theme of being upset with God was repeated amongst multiple participants.

Namely, Dorothy stated that she questioned God in the death of her son and vocalized that she was disappointed in God for not saving her son. Dorothy elaborated:

I know that God is important in all this and you know, but for me at the time I was angry at God because I felt like I already suffered enough why that, you know, why did he have to been up there, happened to my son and why didn't God protect him and things like that. I didn't go to church and I still haven't really went back,

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not fully, uh, like I know I should, uh, I have prayed, you know, things like that, you know, uh, come around to know that God has me in like that. But my, erm, I had a lot of anger at first.

Dorothy acknowledged that it was important to her to seek God during her grieving experience. However, she was angry with God because she felt like God had overloaded her with difficult experiences throughout her life, so the death of her son was another tragedy that she did not want to endure. She was honest about her anger but still admitted that prayers to God and faith in God's abilities did not stop her from experiencing anger. As a result of her anger, Dorothy took a break from the church as she processed her anger. Here, Dorothy's anger shifted her communicative interaction with God, though her faith in God was still present.

Likewise, Patrice disclosed that she too experienced being angry with God after her son's murder. Her anger festered in the first year of her son's death. The immediacy of the anger was contributed to the recency of her son's death. Patrice explained:

I will say the first year I like, I questioned God and I was just so upset with him. Uh, uh, I was just so upset and it was like, I really liked like, turn my back. I want to say honestly, and then I, then I thought it started like, uh, uh, I'm trying to see, maybe like after a year I started like talking back with God, but I wasn't for, I wasn't fully like able to like, understand like why he take my son? Um, so honestly I didn't, I didn't like fully understand what happened at well, why he took my son until like this, this January is when I, I had got COVID and I had it so bad. I was in a hospital and, and, um, I thought, I thought it was, you know, I was going to die to be honest, um, because I was, I couldn't breathe and I was in a

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hospital that it was like, I was like, saying my last words. Like, oh my God. And I was like, I know I was trying to, I was wanting to go back to church and I was like, oh, I know we're not supposed to question you, but I need to ask you a question. And the question that I asked them, and, you know, it was why did you take my son? And it was like a voice came to me and was like, um, but I saved you, when it's on, that's when it hit me.

During her period of anger, Patrice refused to converse with God. The pain stemming from her son's death was so magnified, that Patrice allowed the anger to drive a wedge between her and God. However, once Patrice was afflicted with a deadly virus that killed millions worldwide from the 2020 global pandemic, this encounter with death caused Patrice to return to her relationship with God. In what she thought would be her own death, Patrice asked God to provide her with a reason for her son's death. God informed Patrice that though her son died, God spared Patrice. These communicative interactions with God showcased that honesty is part of spirituality in the relationships that some BBMs may maintain with their higher power.

Furthermore, the BBMs' anger was authentic and sometimes far-reaching.

Tammy shared that she struggled in her relationship with God after her son's death and that struggle caused her to want to fight God. Tammy divulged:

That was a battle there. I'm telling you that was a battle there. But I will say this.

If I believe that my arms could have reached up there, I probably would have tried to box him, but I couldn't, you know.

Tammy admitted that she wanted to assault God to get out her anger and hurt because her son was murdered. However, Tammy realized that fighting God was not a real option for

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her, but these feelings just showed the level of her anger and disappointment with God. Tammy's anger was repeated in similar experiences to other BBMs in the study. Another participant, Trisha, disclosed that she had maintained her faith in God for years before her son's death, often read scriptures. Yet, within the first few months after Trisha's son was brutally murdered near Trisha's home, she mentioned her anger towards God was so massive that scriptures were not bringing comfort. Trisha couldn't understand why God would allow her son to be killed.

In conclusion, BBMs experienced anger that was often directed toward their higher being. This anger caused some participants to decrease their regular conversations with their deity and some even completely halted the communication for some time. Some of the anger was immediately after the death of their child, while others experienced anger that lasted beyond the first six months of their child's death. When maintaining spirituality, BBMs were able to be honest about their emotions and discontent. BBMs voiced their disappointment with their higher being for the outcome of the violent act that killed their child. As the BBMs voiced their anger, they also shared that their spirituality was the conduit for them to have a divine experience with their deceased child or God. The experience provided additional comfort and reassurance while grieving their deceased child. The next section will provide further insight into the role of spirituality in the divine experiences of BBMs.

Comfort Through Divine Experience

During the interviews, 100% of the participants revealed that they experienced a divine encounter with their deceased child or higher power. This encounter provided the BBMs comfort in their grief after the death of their child. This divine encounter was often

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mentioned, even though many of the BBMs were not initially asked about the divine experience. The divine experience was not originally part of the interview protocol until multiple BBMs mentioned their divine experience and then it was clear that this divine encounter was commonplace for BBMs.

The divine experiences were opportunities for BBMs to interact with their deceased child and many of the BBMs felt that these interactions were the child's way of letting their mothers know that the child was okay. For example, Martha had a divine experience with her child immediately after having a very emotional day of missing her deceased son. Martha explained:

...When my son passed, when I laid in my bed crying, that someone sat on my bed on the, on the spot where he always sat on my bed when he talked to me. And when I'm looking back, I seen nobody was somebody. I felt the presence as my bed went down. And then another thing that would make me believe is when we released the balloons and we took a picture of the balloon, went up and I got the picture in my phone. And when I looked in the phone to see the face and the face looked like my son. So I'm like, those signs to me are letting me know that he is okay.

Martha's experiences brought her additional comfort in knowing that her deceased son was in a peaceful place in death. The death of Martha's son was crushing and debilitating for Martha, so these two instances provided a sense of calm. Martha later revealed, "I felt like that was a sign from God, you know, letting me know he was ok." In this illustration, Martha attributed these divine experiences as being provided by God to assure her that her deceased son was safe.

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Similarly, another BBM, Beth, dreamt of her deceased son. During the dream, Beth was able to communicatively interact with her son. Beth shared:

When I dream about him. I hear him. I don't know if that's weird or not. He came to me during this, he say, mommy, you got to let go. And I was like, I have let go. I was like, no, you haven't, but I'm okay. And I woke up and looked around and all I could do was cry because again, that was some confirmation to let me know that he loves, okay. He doesn't want me to worry.

For Beth, this dream assured her that her son did not want Beth to stress over his death. The deceased son visited Beth's dream to petition her to not worry or stress, asking her to rid herself of her worries as related to the deceased son. Beth took this dream as her son's way of professing his love and concerns for her holistic well-being. Beth's encounter with her son provided consolation that was both needed and appreciate on behalf of Beth during her grieving journey.

Nonetheless, these divine encounters that were often perceived through a lens of the participants' spirituality, were present with every participant in some form. Evelyn saw a young man that resembled her deceased son, and this experience was confirming for her as well. Evelyn shared:

Wow. I went to the grocery store and by the time I would have to go slow, got what I went for, and as I was coming out, I was walking across my path. Again, he walked straight in front of my car and I took another picture of him. And I was like, oh my goodness. You know, it looks so much like my son and I, every time I see something like that, I only thing I say is, I know he's all right, because it just

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was like, this child is walking across. He's like right in my eyesight, he's walking right in front of my car. He has to be telling me that he's okay.

Evelyn interpreted this experience as her deceased son's way of telling her that he was faring well in the afterlife. As Evelyn endured the harsh reality of seeing her son take his last breath after being murdered in the backyard of their home, Evelyn's spirituality allowed her the opportunity to cross paths with a young man that had an uncanny resemblance to her son. This divine experience helped combat some of the grief that accompanied Evelyn's typical day.

Correspondingly, BBMs in the study also experienced dreams that allowed them to interact with their deceased child. For example, Laura's son visited her in a dream and this dream provided Laura with the confirmation that she needed to make sure that her son's soul was safe. When discussing her experience in her dream, Laura asserted:

Bought my son to me in a dream and he bought him to me he was he was a little he was younger. He was a little boy. And he came up to me and I remember I was sleeping on the couch. And he came to me and he said Ma. It's like he woke me up and he's like, ma, ma, you never had faith in God about me. You know I have faith in God about me and it's like I rose up. And, and he just walked on like into the kitchen like he was kind of get something to eat and then the dream was over, but it was so real, but he wasn't 25 years old. He was like a younger version of my son. And I was like wow, because I was in doubt of my son's salvation with God.

Before her son's death, Laura was often concerned with her son's salvation. She admitted to lacking the faith needed to confirm that her son had a personal relationship with God that may then allow the son to enter heaven after the son passed away. Therefore, even

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after her son's death, Laura's concern was magnified after her son was murdered. The worries about his soul still pained Laura. The divine experience with her son in the dream assured Laura that her son's soul was safe, even in death. The dream seemed to be a collaboration with God and Laura's son, with the sole purpose of showing Laura that her son was well. Laura then shared, "and I just have so much faith in God that my son made it into the kingdom of heaven." The spirituality provided the framework to Laura's perspective of wanting her son to go to heaven after the son's death, as an experience that Laura yearned for her son. The divine experience confirmed the deepest desire that Laura sought for her deceased son, her son did indeed make it to heaven according to her dream.

The divine encounters were a common occurrence all the BBMs experienced. All the BBMs in the study reported that they interacted with their deceased child and/or their higher power in connection to their child's death. These interactions often provided the participants with comfort and confirmation that the deceased child was safe or that the deceased child was with the higher power in the afterlife, all bringing a level of peace for the BBM.

Overall, the results provided details on how Black bereaved mothers use CTR, sisterhood, and spirituality on their journey of resilience. CTR provided the benefits of a new normal, maintaining communication networks, using identity anchors, alternative logic, and downplaying negative emotions, and foregrounding positive emotions. Sisterhood offered a range of support, while spirituality was used as a tool for honesty and comfort as related to the relationship with a higher power. Collectively, these areas of the research provided a greater understanding of how communication and relationships

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maintain a role in the resilience of BBMs that have lost a child to gun violence, which qualifies as a triggering event.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This study used qualitative interviews to understand how BBMs use CTR, sisterhood, and spirituality as tools of resilience after losing a child to gun violence. The results showed how CTR magnified the importance of community and family support for BBMs during times of crisis. The SBWCT revealed that BBMs find solace and comfort in sisterhood during the journey of grief. The SBWCT also highlighted that BBMs can identify their moments of weakness, thus negating the idea that Black women constantly display strength that can be hazardous and problematic when strength is used to deny the reality of a triggering event. With these findings in mind, the rest of this section will provide theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and ideas for future research.

While past literature has described parental bereavement, BBMs have not been the focus of research, therefore, creating an opportunity to center research that focuses solely on the unique population of BBMs.

Theoretical Implications

Communication Theory of Resilience

CTR has been used in prior research to better understand specific groups that have endured unique triggering events (Eddington, 2020). However, the present study applied the theory to Black women as a specific population, with direct attention provided to BBMs, to understand the resilience processes within a minority identity group. This study has now extended CTR as a theoretical framework in its application towards BBMs. In doing so, findings in the present study highlight race and bereavement, with an emphasis on child loss as the type of bereavement.

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Losing a child to gun violence often destroyed the life, well-being, and sometimes the livelihood of many participants. This reality allowed CTR to be used as the foundation to understand the negative mental impact of losing a child. Participants shared their self-perspectives on their strength and resilience after losing a child. This allowed CTR to be the conduit to illuminate how BBMs understand their strength after losing a child. However, status as a BBM is a unique identity that initially is beyond the scope of CTR. Therefore, CTR was supplemented with sisterhood, spirituality, and the SBWCT to understand the experiences of BBMs more fully.

Furthermore, results from the study show that sisterhood, or family-like relationships between Black women, spans across CTR beyond only being a version of a communication network. As a result, the tenets of CTR and sisterhood are interconnected, and the study's results show the connectivity, prompting theoretical expansion. Sisterhood clearly identifies as a communication network. However, for BBMs in the study, sisterhood was a communication network that provided resilience that often aligned with the additional components of CTR. For example, sisterhood often affirmed the identity of participants, aligning with the identity anchor tenet of CTR. Additionally, sisterhood also provided tangible and intangible support during the BBMs' new normal and resulted in the resilience of BBMs during grief, thus aligning with the new normal tenet of CTR. Here, sisterhood was expansive enough to be a more major focus beyond the parameters of being the support that only operated within the communication network tenet. Therefore, CTR acknowledges that sisterhood is a far-reaching communication network that cultivates resilience across multiple tenets of CTR. It is important to recognize the interconnectedness of sisterhood and CTR because

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sisterhood aids in the resilience of BBMs by being multidimensional in its ability to serve BBMs with resilience as an outcome. Just as sisterhood offered support for BBMs for resilience, spirituality operated as a tool of support as well.

Moreover, religion and spirituality were paired with the topic of bereavement to highlight how resilience can also be cultivated through a relationship with a deity. Like the far-reaching nature of sisterhood, spirituality also incorporated multiple tenets of CTR to support BBMs. The over-encompassing nature of spirituality also meant that spirituality would be an object of focus beyond only being categorized as a small part of a CTR tenant. Participants defined spirituality as a transactional relationship with their higher power and this relationship does identify spirituality as part of their communication network. Participants mentioned that they often prayed as a clear time of communication with God, thus adding God to part of the BBMs' communication network. The spiritual relationship helped the BBMs use positive thinking, which aligns with the tenant of CTR that encourages those seeking resilience to foreground positive thoughts. Therefore, spirituality was an expansive and consistent tool in the lives of BBMs. Spirituality qualified to be considered across the multiple tenets of CTR to expand the discipline's understanding of the resilience of BBMs, and the role of spirituality in the lives of BBMs.

Likewise, this research study provided insight into how spirituality created divine after-life interactions between BBMs and their deceased child. These same divine experiences enriched the BBMs grief journey. The experiences assured the BBM of the familial love between the BBM and the deceased child. This study identifies spirituality as a conduit for divine experiences. This then moves spirituality beyond just connecting

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with the alternative logics and identity anchor tenets of CTR, and instead, highlights the happening and benefits of divine experiences. As Black communities are historically spiritual, this study aligns CTR and spirituality as a culturally rich asset in the lives of Black women. Here, CTR was used to acknowledge the CTR was also extended as participants discussed their divine experiences as comforting, affirming, and beneficial to their resilience. Thus, extending CTR to include the traumatic experiences of BBMs, widened the scope of how scholars understand the hardship that necessitates resilience. Therefore, including CTR in the conversation of spirituality acknowledged the role of a strong faith system in providing support and cultivating resilience during grief, and cultivating divine experiences.

In addition to spirituality and sisterhood being used to extend CTR, this study also reimagined the communication networks described in CTR and how we come to understand communication networks. Specifically, this study described social media groups as an extension of typical in-person networks. For the BBMs in the study, the social media groups provided community as these mothers possessed a unique experience and identity. The social media groups offered the BBMS a new communication network where members all endured child loss. The uniformity in experiences cultivated a sense of understanding and comradery amongst members of social media groups for BBMs. Participants explained that the social media groups offered a sense of community to help meet emotional needs in times of duress. With CTR as a foundational theory of the study, communication networks were expanded to include social media groups across multiple social media platforms.

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Overall, CTR has been extended in its application to race and unique experiences. Spirituality and sisterhood were two additional characteristics of the study that were used to highlight the unique experiences, identities, and needs of BBMs that have lost a child to gun violence. While CTR was a useful theoretical lens to understand the resilience of Black women, it was also coupled with the SBWCT to provide further insight into the sisterhood and collectivity of Black women, with a specific focus on BBMs. The next section will detail how this study extended the usage of the SBWCT.

Strong Black Woman Collective Theory

The SBWCT theory was coupled with CTR to emphasize the distinct experiences of BBMs, extending the utility of SBWCT beyond its initial focus. This study expanded the theory by highlighting that sisterhood goes beyond a physical in-person community. This study also showed that sisterhood can offer support for triggering events besides racial oppression. In this study, sisterhood was also used to showcase the interplay between the strength and resilience of BBMs. The theory is also expanded as the results highlighted how Black women acknowledged their moments of weakness, instead of downplaying hardship to identify with the stereotypical strong Black woman mantra. Participants were public about their maladaptive coping to signify a lack of strength. For example, there were participants that admitted to using alcohol and marijuana to ease the pain and anguish associated with their grief. Participants framed maladaptive coping as an antithesis to their resilience or a part of the resilience process enduring overwhelming grief. Participants voiced their weak moments, showing that the SBWCT can be applied to instances where Black women can deny inherent dangerous strength. Therefore, the

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SBWCT was a great foundational theory to understand the experiences of BBMs and the role of sisterhood as a tool of resilience.

Though Davis (2015) created the SBWCT to highlight the understudied population of Black women and the collective nature of Black sisterhood, the theory is newer, and many studies have not yet used the theory. However, in past research with Davis and Afifi (2019), these two scholars used the theory to analyze physical groups of Black sisterhood. However, this present study expanded the theory to acknowledge that sisterhood can be within a mediated context through social media. The mediated format still offered emotional and tangible support to those within the sisterhood. Social media groups can operate as an official sisterhood in the same way that physical groups operate and still cultivate family-like bonds between Black women. As Black sisterhood operates to provide support to each other, triggering events typically act as a reason for members of the sisterhood to be more present for each other.

Besides, the theory does account for hardship Black women may endure, often using oppression as the typical triggering event. With oppression typically being the object of focus, the theory outlines how Black sisterhood congregates and offers support as a barrier against the negative impact of oppression. However, this study expanded the theory by including child loss to gun violence as the triggering event. This present study established how sisterhood offers support against the devastation of child loss. The results detailed that BBMs can gain strength from Black sisterhood to cope in times of need, especially when that need is prompted by the trauma of the violent death of a child. The results also indicated the interplay of strength and resilience for BBMs, with strength already serving as an integral part of the SBCWT.

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Furthermore, strength is often attributed to Black women and their ability to endure hardship. As part of the SBWCT, Davis (2015) asserted that Black women gain strength from the collective nature of sisterhood. Davis also asserted that the same strength can be problematic when Black women often encounter the encouragement to deny the reality or impact of hardship, all because Black women are known for being strong. This encouragement sometimes pushed Black women to exude a strength that may be unhealthy and a barrier to proper grief and healing. Davis and Afifi (2019), identified this same experience of unhealthy strength when some of their study participants encouraged the fellow Black woman in the sisterhood group to lessen the focus on experienced hardship because strong Black women can handle difficulty. This then illuminates just how expected strength can be a hazardous barrier to wellness.

In contrast, members of this present study were vocal about their weakness and often denied feeling strong. This current study now embraces a new understanding that triggering events do not have to always cause Black women to deny weakness to embody strength. Instead, hardship, specifically child loss, can also cause BBMs to exude strength in the eyes of others, yet those same BBMs may be unable to agree that their strength is present. This then considers that child loss may damage a BBM's self-perspective on how they maintain strength. As past research may suggest that Black women may overestimate their strength to deny the impact of hardship, this study shows that BBMs may underestimate their strength because of the devastation caused by the violent death of their child (Davis & Afifi, 2019). Despite the SBWCT accounting for the strength of Black women, this present study describes that BBMs may not account for their own strength at times during the grief process.

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Overall, the SBWCT is a newer theory that serves to revolutionize and further expand the understanding of Black women and the role of Black sisterhood. This current study stretches the theory beyond the original intent and instead includes child loss as a circumstance that may not directly tie to discrimination and oppression, even if there is an indirect connection between BBM child loss to discrimination and oppression. The contemporary nature of the theory allows for scholars to provide additional research that unfolds a deeper understanding of the utility of Black sisterhood and an explanation on how Black sisterhood often mirrors biological familial relationships for many Black women.

Communication Theory of Resilience and Strong Black Woman Collective Theory

When coupled together, CTR and SBWCT provide a cohesive foundation to understand how BBMs that have lost a child to gun violence use sisterhood and spirituality as tools of resilience. Conjoining these theories account for how BBMs' strength is cultivated from a self-perspective, as well as with the help of interpersonal, familial, and spiritual relationships and experiences. Much of the BBMs' resilience can be attributed to the help of these same interpersonal relationships that are present along the journey of painful bereavement. Even as Black women are expected to be strong in the face of adversity as described in the strong Black woman concept, combining CTR and SBWCT acknowledges that BBMs may experience weakness. As a result, when BBMs face hardship, they may use sisterhood and spirituality as sources of strength and resilience. This then eliminates the stereotype of consistent inherent strength in Black women and instead recognizes the utility of sisterhood and spirituality in fueling the strength represented in the stereotypical concept.

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Likewise, in moments of tragedy for BBMs, the strength of Black women is not always automatic. There are moments where strength may be acquired from sources of community that are such a cultural source of resilience that those same sources meet multiple criteria in the tenets of CTR. Therefore, conjoining CTR and SBWCT accounts for cultural resilience found in meaningful sources and relationships that may go unaccounted for in research that does not intentionally account for race.

Critical Race Theory

CRT was not a direct theoretical framework, but it does account for many the environmental factors that play a role in the lived experiences of BBMs. As CTR accounts for race, the disproportionate amount of violence and gun homicide in some Black communities can be explained through CRT. The disinvestment in many low-income neighborhoods cultivates violence, environmental racism, low-income, underfunded educations, and even food deserts. These compiled attributes can cause compounded stress for BBMs, even as the Black mothers operate day to day before losing a child. When surrounded by these living conditions prior to becoming bereaved, Black mothers are being inundated with stress factors. Once a Black mother becomes bereaved, in addition to already living with compounded stress, this may impact how BBMs see themselves as related to strength and resiliency.

Furthermore, the experiences of many BBMs are rooted in racist structures. When schools in some Black neighborhoods are intentionally underfunded, this has the potential to increase violence long-term, including gun violence. The lack of affordable housing in some low-income areas can also increase violence. Again, the disproportion of these issues is clearly discriminatory and rooted in power structures unfairly undersupplying

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resources to communities. With some of these issues unfairly plaguing some Black communities that house BBMs, the bereavement can be even more overwhelming. Therefore, the strength that BBMs may show can be perceived as resilience, but this trait of strength does not necessarily push back against the system at work. Without eradicating or addressing these systems, the resilience of BBMs can cause more stress for BBMs that are already overburdened due to bereavement and the environmental factors.

The next section will elaborate on the practical implications of this study.

Practical Implications

Sisterhood

This study provides practical information essential for scholars, practitioners, faith leaders, and community programs that look to serve bereaved families, including BBMs. These same leaders can also use this information to assist those that reside in communities that are underserved and experience high levels of gun violence. BBMs need support in their journey of grief, but the results of the study indicate why BBMs may need holistic support financially, personally, emotionally, physically, and even spiritually. However, the results also indicate why this support is so important. With many participants discussing the negative impact of bereavement, both tangible and intangible related hardships, sisterhood and spirituality played key roles in the resilience of BBMs. Specifically, this section will discuss how the results of the study can be put into practical use as related to spirituality and sisterhood.

Previous research has examined the role of support, often social support, for bereaved parents (Toller, 2011; Giannini, 2011). Results from this previous literature have indicated that social support can benefit bereaved parents by being an outlet for

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physical outings. This present study confirms those same findings when investigating the experiences of BBMs. Sisterhood was indicated to be a lifeline for many participants that struggled with grief. The results indicated that sisterhood provided the BBMs with *tangible social support* and *emotional support*. Collectively, both forms of support had literal and figurative life-saving properties. For example, some participants mentioned that their sisterhood was a key role in why the BBMs did not take their own lives in the past when grief became unbearable. With the support being noted as essential for BBMs, it is also important to understand how that information can be applied for other BBMs and those that may become bereaved in the future.

This study supports the importance of support from the sisterhood that derives from social media. The data shows that social media was used as a tool for participants to cultivate relationships with other BBMs that too needed an outlet to voice concerns and experiences. With sisterhood being such an influential lifeline for BBMs, it is also important for sisterhood members to have the skills and knowledge on how to support BBMs. For example, data indicated that funeral planning is often a source of strife and heartache for many BBMs. Therefore, if the sisterhood is aware, they can first understand the magnitude of the experienced heartache of a BBM that has to consider or enact funeral planning. This awareness can cause sisterhood members, when needed, to take a lead role in assisting the BBM with funeral arrangements for the deceased child. This can alleviate some of the stress that the BBM must endure. In addition to assisting with funeral planning, the data acknowledged that constant communication was another form of support that sisterhood members offered to BBMs. Again, informing sisterhood members of the needs of BBMs can allow the sisterhood to be more precise in the type of

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support they. In addition to sisterhood members being accurate in how they support BBMs, community programs can benefit from this information as well.

Furthermore, the support offered to BBMs through sisterhood can also be replicated by community programs and mental health professionals to provide specialized programming for BBMs. Community programs can use this information to invest in creating social support programs specifically for BBMs and maintain social media groups for these same women. In the same way that participants enjoyed when their sisterhood took them on outside outings, the community programs can invest in trips and travel opportunities for the BBMs to experience peaceful moments of unity with other BBMs. These mothers can come together to support each other and even create annual programs that honor the lives and legacies of their deceased child. As this information is beneficial to community programs, it is also of great use for mental health professionals.

Likewise, mental health professionals should use this study to create more detailed treatment plans that meet the clinical and emotional needs of BBMs. This is beneficial since many participants shared their experiences with past suicide ideation, depression, and adverse childhood experiences. This same information should be shared in college courses and certification programs that serve future mental health professionals and provide continuing education credits to those already in the profession. The objective is to create culturally competent academic literature that highlights BBMs to ensure that mental health professionals have the necessary knowledge to serve BBMs accurately and effectively. In the same way that this study offers practical implications for sisterhood, it also offers implications for spirituality.

Spirituality

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McAdoo (2007) acknowledges that spirituality is a common force in the lives of Black families, especially Black mothers that often act as a comforter and moral compass. The results of this present study revealed that spirituality was greatly supportive and allowed BBMs to voice their anger and still maintain their relationship with their deity. Spirituality also allowed BBMs to have divine experiences that offered comfort.

Moreover, results emphasized how BBMs were honest with God about their discontent and anger regarding child loss. This is important information to share with religious leaders that counsel BBMs so that BBMs are informed that anger is a valid emotional experience. This same information on anger can be used to create faith-based programs that let BBMs know it is ok to be upset with God or a higher power after losing a child. BBMs must be informed that experiencing anger does not make them less of a person of faith. If BBMs shamed themselves for feeling anger towards a deity, this may add extra stress on a BBM that is already overloaded. Yet, faith leaders can provide BBMs with emotional coaching on how to handle the anger and channel that same anger in a productive manner that does not cause long-term destruction. Again, these same faith leaders can teach BBMS how to honor their anger towards their deity but cultivate their relationships with their deity since results showed that spirituality was of immense assistance for BBMs.

This present study provides a better understanding of how BBMs use their spirituality as a source of expressing their emotions. For BBMs, spirituality can serve as a transactional relationship that is deeply intimate. This relationship is built on honesty, transparency, and vulnerability. However, child loss can have an impact, negative and positive, on the relationships that BBMs maintain with their higher power. When

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considering the positive impact of child loss on the spiritual relationship, the loss can prompt BBMs to experience trust, an increase in time spent cultivating spirituality, and an increase in faith. In contrast, the results showed that child loss can negatively impact a BBM's spirituality by prompting feelings of hurt, distrust, disbelief in the deity, decreased faith, and decreased time spent cultivating spirituality. This study highlights that BBMs can voice their emotions and feelings towards their spirituality, even if those feelings may represent a lack of faith for the time being. Spirituality does not discount the feelings and emotions of BBMs. Instead, spirituality allows for BBMs to vocalize their feelings and dispositions and decide how to move forward with their spirituality. Moving forward with spirituality after child loss may also allow BBMs to experience divine experiences that provide security and affirm the after-life well-being of their deceased child.

Just as BBMs experienced anger towards their deity, these mothers also experienced divine experiences with their deity or deceased child as related to child loss. Divine experiences were a salient theme in the data. However, the divine experiences were not originally part of the interview protocol, but multiple BBMs shared their divine experiences without being asked. As a result, this showed that the divine experiences were worthy of further investigation by being added to the protocol to ask other participants. When participants shared about their divine experiences, many of them were a bit hesitant to share because they were worried about being labeled as unrealistic or untrue. However, after sharing their divine experiences, participants were relieved once they were informed that the divine experiences were common amongst other BBMs.

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Additionally, spiritual leaders can encourage BBMs to share the details of their divine experiences. These same leaders can create spaces to honor and celebrate these experiences, which also then celebrate the life and legacy of the deceased child in a meaningful way. Specifically, churches can create ministries and groups for BBMs. In this same manner, these spiritual groups can create opportunities for BBMs to publicly share the details of the experience and how the experience has shaped their identity as BBMs. Spiritual leaders can sometimes transform into church families for BBMs, this personal and spiritual relationship provides spiritual leaders with the authority to serve as part of the support system for BBMs (McAdoo, 2007). With the results of this study, spiritual leaders can assist BBMs with understanding how to interpret these divine experiences.

Overall, spirituality can be monumental for BBMs that maintain such relationships. As a source of comfort, spirituality acts as the vehicle for BBMs to experience divine interactions with their deceased child. With the role of spirituality, spirituality can motivate BBMs to maintain a spiritual relationship and then prompt BBMs to then encourage other BBMs to do the same. When combined, spirituality and sisterhood are two tools of support that assist BBMs with enduring tragedy and staying encouraged. With these benefits in mind, the next section will the limitations of this study.

Limitations

The results of this study reflect the importance of sisterhood and spirituality as supportive avenues for BBMs. However, as participants identify as BBMs, this population has unique characteristics and experiences, which then make the findings less

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generalizable. This information cannot be generalized to apply to all bereaved women or even all bereaved mothers. This study was intentionally and narrowly focused on Black bereaved mothers to highlight the experiences of Black women that identify as mothers that lost a child to gun violence.

Furthermore, when discussing the identity of motherhood, all participants were mothers, even though other members of the family also experienced the devastation of the same loss. This removes the perspective of other family members, only acknowledging the grief experienced by the mothers. All participants were biological mothers, meaning that “othermothers” were not included in the study. Othermothers are those that take on mother roles for those they did not biologically-birth, though still maintaining a family-like relationship, sometimes since birth or childhood of the deceased child. Othermothers assist with mothering and parenting children that are not the mother’s biological children (Collins, 2000). Though othermothering was not a direct part of the study, not including this concept does eliminate the ability to understand the grief experience by other mothers.

Besides the exclusion of othermothering, this present study was conducted during a global pandemic which resulted in many BBMs being physically separated from their places of worship and church families. This means that many of the participants may have placed greater reliance on their independent relationships with their deity, than coping strictly with the help of church families and in-person worship services.

Lastly, many of the participants were recruited from social media, specifically groups that served as a resource for mothers that have lost a child. Thus, this increased the likelihood of participants being active on these topic-specific social media groups. In

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return, this magnifies the role of social media in the resilience journey of BBMs.

Similarly, one participant was recruited from a bereaved parent support group that was affiliated with a local church. This religious affiliation could have affected how the participant perceived and experienced spirituality. Thus, this connection could have increased the likelihood that this participant maintained some type of spirituality. The next section will provide suggestions for future research.

Future Research

This study used CTR and SBWCT to provide insight on how BBMs use spirituality and sisterhood as tools of resilience after losing a child to gun violence. This study has prompted additional recommendations for future research on the effect of child loss on BBMs and related families. The recommendations also include expanding the parental focus to include Black bereaved fathers and surviving siblings, while also championing further research that incorporates CTR and SBWCT.

The results indicated that child loss can negatively affect the mental health of BBMs. Therefore, future research should investigate how child loss to gun violence affects the mental health of BBMS and Black bereaved fathers. This would also even show how this same type of death affects members of a family and household communication. The effects of death are far-reaching beyond affecting just the biological mother. The results of this study sparks interest in learning more about the effects of the same child loss on other members of the family. For example, this specific child loss affects more than just the mother, fathers are also affected by the violent death of a child. Just as mothers and fathers are affected, surviving siblings are affected as well.

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Social media was a clear tool that BBMs used to cultivate community and additional sisterhood. Future research can analyze the exact role of social media in the resilience of BBMs, as well as Black bereaved fathers. In past research, Toller and Braithwaite (2009) revealed that fathers often grieve and still complete daily activities, while mothers were more emotional when displaying grief. Though Toller and Braithwaite (2009) did not have racial diversity in their participant sample, it is imperative to understand exactly how Black fathers grieve. Results described that social media has been used to create safe spaces, especially during a worldwide pandemic. This benefit of social media is worthy of additional research. Specifically, upcoming studies can describe the pandemic's effect on the usage or growth of social media groups for BBM's and Black bereaved fathers.

Studying the grief of household members will allow researchers to better understand how the violent death of a child affects those in the household. In contrast, researchers can continue to extend the SBWCT to move beyond interpersonal communication and include family communication as well. The family communication aspect would acknowledge the sisterhood of Black women being used as a place of solace, encouragement, and direction across diverse life experiences, including positive life experiences.

Lastly, the future of SBWCT research can also lay the foundation of providing literature on the creation and cultivation of Black sisterhood in different settings. For example, the creation and cultivation of Black sisterhood in graduate school, during teenage pregnancies, undergraduate studies, entertainment, politics, and the workplace. Each of these example studies may find that Black women created and cultivated their

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relationships for different purposes. Also, based on the reason for the relational creation and cultivation, researchers may find unique speech codes coupled with collective strength to confront triggering events.

Overall, this study applies CTR and SBWCT to explicitly study Black bereaved mothers, with a focus on child loss as a triggering event that necessitates resilience through sisterhood and spirituality. With a direct focus on race and a triggering event that is not directly racial oppression, both theoretical frameworks are extended and thus creating an opportunity for further expansion through future research. The population of Black bereaved mothers is specific, and the unique characteristics of the population do not allow the study's results to be applied to other bereaved groups. However, the study does provide insight into the experiences of Black bereaved mothers that have lost a child to gun violence, while using spirituality and sisterhood as tools of resilience.

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APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

1. If it applies, How would you describe your resilience after losing a child?
2. If it applies, what steps did you take to find a new normal?
3. If it applies, how did losing a child affect your identity?
4. If it applies, How did losing a child affect your communication network?
5. As you started to heal after the loss of your child, if any, what was the role of your communication network in that process?
6. If it applies, how did you find joy after losing your child?
7. Tell me about your Black sisterhood?
8. How would you describe your sisterhood?
9. How would you describe your sisterhood before the loss of your child?
10. How would you describe your sisterhood after the loss of your child?
11. If it applies, how did your sisterhood support you after losing your child?
12. If it applies, tell me a story about a time your sisterhood was present for you after losing your child?
13. How would you describe your spirituality before the loss of your child?
14. How would you describe your spirituality after the loss of your child?
15. If it applies, how did your spirituality offer support you after losing your child?
16. Tell me a story about a time your spirituality was present for you after losing your child?

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