LET IT BREATHE: SOCIAL MEDIA MUSICKING PRACTICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN COPING WITH MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES DURING TRANSBOUNDARY CRISIS

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“When I began this journey, I had no idea all God had in store. After three and a half years of ups, downs, some of the highest highs, and the most profound lows, I find myself in complete awe of the power of God and his never-ending love for little ol’ me. I am grateful for every cold day, every single application of Murphy’s Law, sleepless night, and every single tear shed in pursuit of this great work.

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“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ; just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.”

– Philippians 1:3-8
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LET IT BREATHE: SOCIAL MEDIA MUSICKING PRACTICES AMONG BLACK WOMEN COPING WITH MENTAL HEALTH STRUGGLES DURING TRANSBOUNDARY CRISIS

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ABSTRACT

Wrought with one crisis after another – the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide civil unrest in response to police murders of Black people in the U.S., and a highly volatile election season, the year 2020 arose to the level of what Boin (2019) calls a transboundary crisis – an event that exceeds “geographical, policy, cultural, public-private, and legal boundaries.” This crisis brought with it signs and symptoms of mental health challenges like anxiety and depression for millions of people across the globe who were forced into shelter-in-place orders to keep them safe, but also kept them isolated and longing for interaction with other people outside their homes. In early March, performers and entertainers deployed their talents in a myriad of Cathartic Social Media Experiences (CSMEs), creating brief pockets of joy for themselves and others.

In the U.S., this transboundary had the greatest effect on Black people – especially women – as they accounted for the most deaths and complications from COVID-19, bore the burden of being essential employees, educating their children in addition to being one of the most untreated group of people for depression (Nelson, et al.) and being more susceptible to anxiety disorders (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018; Williams, Beckmann-Mendez, & Turkheimer, 2013).

Using grounded theory analysis of data obtained via twenty-six in-depth interviews, autoethnography, and analysis of the candidates own social media channels,
this cultural study will examine the ways in which Black women, aged 35-45, utilized online musicking practices to cope with symptoms of anxiety and depression during the transboundary crisis of 2020. The findings from this research utilizes the respondents own narratives to describe the state of their mental health prior to and during the transboundary crisis as well as their experiences while participating in CSMEs and offer practical recommendations for use of CSMEs to leverage the tools and strategies that resonate with Black women to maximize the impact of mental health-center communication across new media platforms post transboundary crisis.
Chapter 1 – Introduction

“You say you mean good for me, but you don’t do it. You say you have a plan, but you just don’t go through with it. You say you know the way to go and I should follow. But all of your empty promises leave me hollow.”

– Jill Scott

Background

In this study, I will explore how Black women in the United States – myself included – engage with online musicking (Valverde, 2022) to cope with mental health struggles during a transboundary crisis (Boin, 2019) wrought with unprecedented public health, social, and political ramifications.

On December 31, 2019, while many were preparing to enter into their year of “perfect vision,” the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China was made aware of multiple cases of pneumonia in Wuhan – the Hubei Province – with an unknown cause that showed symptoms including shortness of breath and fever (CDC, 2022; WHO, n.d.). I spent the evening with my two best friends eating and doing our annual ritual of creating our vision boards with hope and optimism for a wonderful new year, totally unaware of the uncertainty, fear, and the stress that awaited us in 2020.

The month of January 2020 marked significant changes in China including the closing of the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan; the activation of the WHO’s Incident Management Support Team at the Country Office, Regional Office, and Headquarters; and outbreak in Wuhan; and confirmation of the disease spreading to Thailand and Japan (WHO, n.d.; CDC, 2022). On January 20, the CDC reported the first laboratory-confirmed case of COVID-19 in the U.S. in Washington State and activated the Emergency Operations Center to respond to the imminent outbreak (2022).
Three days later, Wuhan – a city of about 11 million people – is placed under a lockdown in an effort to slow the outbreak and one day later, the CDC confirmed a second travel-related infection of COVID-19 in Illinois, then three more in Arizona and California bringing the U.S. total number of cases to five (2022). In the days after, the CDC issued a Level 3 Travel Health Notice which advised travelers to avoid “non-essential travel” to China and the U.S. government relocated all of its citizens in Wuhan back to the U.S. and ordered a federal quarantine to the nearly 200 citizens due to the COVID-19 outbreak (2022).

As the director of media relations at the nation’s largest historically Black university, it was part of my job to help keep the university’s constituents abreast of new information and changes to daily operations on campus. While the virus was spreading rapidly around the world, my colleagues and I were staying abreast of the news and monitoring how close the virus was to reaching us in North Carolina. With more than 12,000 students and 2,000 employees on campus, safety for everyone was of the utmost importance. Since returning from winter break in early January, I was in meetings nearly every day to discuss updates, actions being taken by the state, the University of North Carolina System, my university, and preliminary plans to handle cases on our campus. Then on March 3, Governor Roy Cooper announced that the first case was confirmed in the state (NCDHHS, 2020) and suddenly, the crisis we’d been preparing for became very real to us all.

In my position, I was the liaison between the university and the news media while simultaneously managing a team of writers and the social media manager who maintained all the top-level university accounts that pushed messaging directly to our
students – in essence, we were the university’s crisis communication team, and we were at the very beginning of a crisis. For the next week and a half, we were writing, rewriting, and shaping messages for the university’s website, social media channels, internal emails, and the news media about how we needed everyone’s help to keep us all safe, while planning a live-streamed Q&A session for the university’s constituents for March 17.

As a “recovering” journalist who covered everything from police standoffs to fatal car accidents to protests and mass fights and altercations at high schools, this was the first time in my career where I truly felt endangered when doing my job. Because not much was known about the virus at the time, I found myself growing more and more distrustful of some of the people I spent the most time with and trusted most – my colleagues. I immediately began wearing face masks, incessantly wiping down doorknobs, tables, and other high touch surfaces with Lysol wipes and moving all my meetings to phone, Skype and the emerging Zoom. Prior to this scare, my team and I met face to face as much as possible, a few of us ate lunch together almost daily, and spent time talking to each other all the time. This new threat pushed everyone into their respective offices, behind closed doors. It also pushed me to running a constant loop of my favorite songs to keep calm throughout the workday.

As the number of infected continued to rise in the U.S., people who were asymptomatic began testing positive for COVID-19, passengers and crew of cruise ships were being quarantined and prevented from returning to the U.S. and the CDC began processes of preparation to contain the virus (2022). By mid-March, individual states and the District of Columbia started to implement their individual “stay-at-home” orders which included shutting down schools, restaurants, bars, workplaces, and canceling large
gatherings and public events (CDC, 2022; Mervosh, Lu, & Swales, 2020) leading to various impacts on people’s daily lives including economic and social disruption, as well as behavioral impacts that include spikes in depression, anxiety, and loneliness (Tull, et al., 2020).

Following the March 17 Q&A session, my colleagues and I were dismissed to work from home for the foreseeable future, only coming in if “absolutely necessary.” The following week, Governor Cooper announced a statewide stay-at-home order for 30 days to “slow the spread” of the virus (NCDHHS, 2020-a). This announcement brought me both comfort and angst as I was happy to be “safe at home” but completely nervous about what might be happening “outside.” Thankfully, I had my social media channels to see what was happening with my family and friends, and like always, I had my music.

While more people contracted the virus in the U.S., another public health crisis bubbled just under the surface, thanks to shelter-in-place, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing – mental health and psychosocial consequences (WHO, 2020). Many Americans were experiencing numerous emotional outcomes that included stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, and frustration (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020), as well as loneliness and anxiety (Bentley, 2020). Not unlike other large-scale disasters such as mass shootings, natural disasters, and oil spills, there is an expectation that COVID-19 would show an increase in posttraumatic stress disorder, substance abuse use disorder, and other mental and behavior disorders, domestic violence, and even child abuse (Galea, Merchant & Lurie, 2020), due to the interruption of routines such as going to school and participating in enrichment activities, the loss of jobs, and in some cases, losing the daily escape from abusers during the quarantine.
(Kumar & Nayar, 2020). While there are implications for the individuals and the people close to them while coping with mental health emergencies in times of crises, there are also risks for others. As Cullen, Gulati, & Kelly pointed out, “the population’s psychological reactions play a significant role in shaping the spread of disease and the emotional distress and social disorder during and after the outbreak” (2020).

I understand these struggles well. For years, I have been living with depression and anxiety and in many ways self-medicating the symptoms. Like many young adults (Thomas, 2013), I misused alcohol to treat symptoms of anxiety and depression until I finally sought help in my late 20s while grieving my 12-year-old nephew’s death. It was then that I learned about the benefits of meditation and the effect listening to music has on helping me mitigate my symptoms of both disorders. Eleven years after the fact, I found myself leaning on meditation and listening to music, as well as utilizing my social media channels to combat the stress, fear, confusion, frustration, and the insomnia I was experiencing because of living alone during a stay-at-home order because of a virus we knew virtually nothing about.

In addition, Black Americans were also fighting a familiar public health battle of racial injustice (Bylander, 2015) with the murders of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minnesota, in February, March, and May, respectively (Galea & Abdalla, 2020). On May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, then-officer Derek Chauvin of the Minneapolis Police Department kneeled on the neck of 46-year-old George Floyd for nearly nine minutes in front of a crowd of bystanders – one who recorded the incident – killing him and sparking a wave of protests and civil unrest around the country (Collins, 2022; MPR, n.d.; Galea & Abdalla, 2020).
Incidents like these were nothing new. As a Black woman in her late thirties, I was old enough to remember seeing video of Rodney G. King being beaten by officers from the Los Angeles Police Department, the subsequent trial and exoneration of the officers, and the uprising that followed (Lasley, 1994). Because I was just 8 years old when King was assaulted, I could not yet grasp the weight of the incident or the power of seeing such an event on video. In my adult years, like many of my counterparts, I’ve heard and seen incidents – via social media and news media – on local and national news of Black people in the U.S. being harassed, hunted, assaulted, and in many cases, murdered by police, those who were police adjacent, and people who were acting as vigilantes.

Since 2012, I have heard the audio of George Zimmerman being told not to pursue Trayvon Martin and doing it anyway, resulting in the teen’s murder. I saw video of Eric Garner killed by NYPD, Walter Scott killed by a North Charleston Police officer, the booking photo of Sandra Bland with lifeless eyes, the death of Philando Castile on Facebook in front of his girlfriend and daughter (Demby & Meraji, 2016-present), and so many others. Each time I heard or saw one of these recordings or still photos, it brought about feelings of sadness, fear, and anger. Sadness because life has been lost and many of the victims and their families will never get justice. Fear because I am a Black woman with a Black father, stepfather, brothers, and nephews who could all become hashtags at the whimsy of police or those who are police adjacent. Anger because it makes no sense that this behavior is allowed to continue. And if I am being honest, I feel a bit traumatized, as evidenced by the heart-dropping, stomach sinking feeling I get when I happen to see an officer coming in my direction.
This is a sharp departure from viewing police as friends and protectors when I was a child. My parents all worked in corrections when I was growing up, so, police officers were always in our home, at our dinner table, and present for family gatherings. In the last decade or so, I have been pulled over by police three times, resulting in two tickets, one warning, and a panic attack each time.

**Purpose of the Study**

In this dissertation, I will explore how Black women in the U.S., aged 35-45 – me included – utilized social media, particularly Instagram, and music to cope with symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as the stress of the COVID-19 quarantine and social justice movements in 2020. This is an important issue to investigate as much of the research done about Black women and mental health often fall into the same areas of study – women aged 18-24, the age of onset for many mental health challenges; postpartum; and the ‘Strong Black Woman’ (Castelin & White, 2022) and ‘Black Girl Magic’ (Williams, Williams, & Brown, 2022) tropes.

A 2020 study by the University of the Basque Country in Spain found that women are diagnosed with anxiety and depression twice as much as men (Kuntz), yet Black women are only half as likely to seek the necessary care as their white counterparts (Richards, 2021; Johns Hopkins, n.d.). They “muscle their way through on their own” (Johns Hopkins, n.d.). The most significant barrier to seeking the mental health services they need has been identified as stigma (Satcher, 2001; Ward, Clark, & Heidrick, 2009; Wu, et al., 2017), additional barriers include poor access to care and a lack of awareness or education about mental illness (Ward, Clark, & Heidrick, 2009).
Because Black women are “often pigeonholed as strong caregivers and providers who shoulder others’ burdens,” their own burdens often go unshared or unconsidered leading to rampant stress and burnout (Pappas, 2021). Even when Black women are willing to actively participate in their mental healthcare, they may delay their treatment or withdraw early due to their providers not recognizing or having a working knowledge of their ethnic, cultural, or gender-specific needs (Jones & Ford, 2008) – this is also known as cultural competence. This lack of cultural competence in addition to the aforementioned barriers cause Black women to rely on the informal coping strategies that have remained tried and true for the women who came before them including family, friends, faith, avoidance, and “staying busy” (Ward, Clark, & Heidrich, 2009).

This research will examine the ways in which Black women used those coping strategies in addition to using Instagram and music to survive symptoms of depression and anxiety during the COVID-19 quarantine while simultaneously managing the stress of being essential employees, parenting, and homeschooling, while navigating the fight for social justice.

Preview of Chapters

This dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter one gives a brief overview of the study, a purpose for the study, gaps within the research, and benefits of the examining the subject matter. The second chapter, and the longest, provides a review of the literature that will be broken into three sections – mental health and Black women, social media musicking, and transboundary crisis. Each section will feature subsections to further explain how and why these subjects are important to this study. In the first section, I will
give an overview of depression and anxiety, the disorders’ respective symptoms, and their effects on Black women in the U.S. The second section will explore social media musicking, as defined by Valverde, as well as well as the history and healing power of Black music, social media use and how Black women build community and social solidarity within these spaces, in addition to music practices within social media, specifically on Instagram. In the third and final section, I will explore transboundary crisis, as defined by Boin, that encapsulates the global pandemic of COVID-19, the political polarization of the 2020 election and the continuation of the social movement for Black lives, as well as the budding epidemic of mental health crises and how Black women managed these challenges and developed or expanded their coping strategies.

The third chapter outlines methodology, research questions, and theoretical framework that underpin the study. I employ the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews to discover information using grounded theory, tell stories via narrative inquiry, and the discover phenomena in phenomenological study (Meyers & Newman, 2007). I also utilize autoethnography to explore the similarities and differences of my own experiences to those of my interview subjects. Autoethnography is the act of writing about oneself, selectively choosing aspects and epiphanies while making meaning of those epiphanies as a part of a specific culture, and not merely an observer (Adams, et al., 2017).

Chapter four is the autoethnographic narrative that details my experiences utilizing my own social media posts. The fifth and sixth chapters both analyze interview data gleaned from twenty-six respondents, while chapter seven offers research findings, theoretical and practical implications, as well as directions for further research.
Chapter 2 – Review of Literature

“Drugs and disease have become a way of life to man. To those that can clearly see, this is our hope and dream, that what America needs is more love and peace … Pray for the U.S.A.”

– The Clark Sisters

This chapter will build context about the mood disorder depression, anxiety disorders, and their effects on Black women ages 35-45, as well as offer a clinical definition of coping and exploring how social media musicking and social media have been used as a coping tool for this demographic, and the idea that the intersection of Black music and social media is the Black Public Sphere. Contextual information about social justice demonstrations and COVID-19 will also be outlined as well as a working definition of social media cathartic experience.

Mental Health and Black Women: Coping with the “Black Tax”

While scientists at WHO and the CDC were focused on COVID-19 and its rapid spread around the world, mental health professionals and researchers have been focused on the psychological consequences of the threat of the disease and the subsequent shelter-in-place or lockdown orders. Less than one year into the pandemic, researchers found that the isolation due to lockdowns created a plethora of adverse psychological challenges including anxiety, worry, depression, disinterest, trouble sleeping, and poor general health perceptions (Le & Nguyen, 2020).

In the first year of the pandemic, Black people accounted for most deaths due to complications from the virus across all categories (Ford, Reber, & Reeves, 2020). Witnessing the loss of family and friends, as well as the threat of illness to themselves
and their families and bearing the burden of being essential workers all took a significant
toll on the psyche of Black women in this country resulting in higher levels of stress, fear,
pervasive feelings of hopelessness, desperation, depression, and anxiety (Walton,
Campbell, & Blakey, 2021).

Historically, there is an expectation that Black women will put on a “strong face”
(Walton, Campbell, & Blackey, 2021) and continue to work through their own challenges
while shouldering the responsibility of entire families and communities while their
mental health needs go unmet (Woods-Giscombe, et al., 2016). This practice has come to
be referred by several names including “super woman schema,” (Woods-Giscombe, et
al., 2016), the “strong Black woman” trope (Watson & Hunter, 2015), or the concept of
“Black Girl Magic,” a phrase coined in 2013 by a Washington, D.C. blogger, Cashawn
Thompson. These phrases – refer to Black women’s ability to be able to produce and
excel in the face of daily challenges and enduring the results of patriarchy and sexism, as
well as paying the “Black Tax,” which requires us to bear with the discrimination, micro-
and macroaggressions, or the mistreatment from racism – seem to have become a cloak to
hide the depression and anxiety and even invisibility Black women regularly experience.

Depression

Depression, or depressive disorder (see also: major: or clinical depression), is a
treatable mood disorder that can be triggered by life crises, physical illness, genetics,
chemical changes to the brain, trauma, drug and alcohol misuse, and other factors
(Depression NAMI, n.d.). For many, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic can certainly be
added to the list of stressors as it has brought about life changes like death, the threat of
illness, quarantine, isolation, lost employment and in some cases having to serve as a homeschool educator for children in their care (Mattioli, Sciomer, Maffei, & Gallina, 2020).

The world over, there are more than 264 million people living with depression (Seales, 2021). As a point of reference, there are different types of depression – major depressive disorder (MDD), postpartum, seasonal affective disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and bipolar disorder depression. There are also subtypes of depression that include anxious, melancholic, psychotic, catatonic, and atypical (Seales, 2021).

There are approximately 10 million Americans living with major or clinical depression (Bailey, Mokonogho, & Kumar, 2019). According to a 2003 study, women are likely overrepresented in the reported 2:1 gender ratio of depression (Immerman & Mackey). In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 1 out of 10 women reported symptoms of major depression (2020). Those symptoms may include, but are not limited to, lasting sad, anxious, or empty mood; feeling hopeless or pessimistic; feeling guilty, worthless, or helpless; feeling irritable or restless; loss of interest in hobbies and activities; loss of energy; trouble concentrating, recalling details, and making decisions, and more (Depression Among Women, 2020).

It is important to note that this is not a comprehensive list and depression shows itself differently in different groups. For example, younger adults may present as irritable, complain of weight gain, hypersomnia (excessive sleeping), and a negative outlook on life. Middle-aged adults have more depressive episodes with decreased libido, insomnia, and gastrointestinal issues, while older adults have sadness or grief with a lack of emotions, pain, and in some cases memory problems (Depression NIMH, n.d.).
Depression, and mental illness in general, is just as prevalent in Black communities as it is in white communities, yet Black people are less likely to pursue or remain in treatment (Villines, 2020). Depression can be due to barriers like socioeconomic disparities, i.e. being unable to afford care, stigmas toward mental illness, and health inequalities from providers (Black/African American NAMI, n.d.). For Black women, there are some inequities that lead to the under diagnosis and treatment of mood disorders like depression, and the over diagnosis and treatment of psychotic disorders (Holden, Bradford, Hall, & Belton, 2014). These inequities contribute to biases in the delivery of services, a lack of quality care, and cultural competency when treating Black women (Holden, et al., 2014).

Black people are 20% more likely to have serious mental health problems than the general population (Starks, n.d.). Black women are stereotypically defined by the Strong Black Woman and Black Girl Magic tropes or being boxed into the John Henryism style of coping with daily life in which Black women, themselves, and others perceive them to be strong, psychologically invulnerable, and emotionally secure (Bronder, Speight, Witherspoon, & Thomas, 2014; Romero, 2000).

Black Women and Depression

In a 2013 study, Ward, et al. found depression to be the most common mental illness among their sample group of nearly 300 African Americans aged 25-72. Though common, mental illness, especially mood disorders like depression and anxiety, can be often viewed as weakness (Conner, et al., 2010). For those who may not view it as
weakness and have been found to have positive attitudes toward seeking treatment, it does not always translate to actually seeking treatment (Ward, et al., 2013).

Black women tend to report symptoms at higher rates than their white counterparts (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that nearly 10 percent of Black women report that ‘everything is an effort’ in contrast to less than 6 percent of white women (2016). Much of this is due to ‘intersectional oppression’ like racism, sexism, and oppression coupled with, in many cases, social, economic, and political disparities (Erving & Smith, 2021), and the societal and cultural expectations that Black women possess an infinite amount of strength, resilience, and independence, i.e., the Strong Black Woman (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019; Seales, 2021) and #BlackGirlMagic tropes (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017).

Depression in Black women is most often studied among lower-income individuals and characterized by economic strain, life stress (Walton, 2021). Walton’s study studied middle-class Black women who reported having to straddle two worlds – white and Black – and factors like living with chronic disease, disability, and the aforementioned factors contribute to their “mental health outcomes” (2021). The presence of depression and symptoms of depression are linked to an increased risk for poorer physical health morbidity and higher mortality rates among diseases like breast cancer, heart disease, and low birth weight of their children (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017).

According to Nelson, Shahid, and Cardemil, Black women are among the most untreated groups for depression in the U.S. (2020). Because of the generational stigma that depression is a weakness, the act of seeking help for such an ailment is viewed as
less or unacceptable (Seales, 2021; Nelson, et al., 2020). The act of seeking help pushes back on the expectation that Black women are supposed to magically possess some unlimited amount of strength in the face of stress that enables them to mask their emotions in all parts of their lives (Seales, 2021). According to Starks, Black patients are “more likely to receive treatment in emergency and hospital settings and less likely to be offered forms of antidepressant therapy, even when they have access to insurance and financial resources” (n.d.).

Oddly enough, Black women have managed to succeed in spite of the physical and mental health, racial, social, and gender-specific barriers before them, as well as society’s tendency to look to Black women to do the labor of advocacy and community building while simultaneously carrying the responsibility of child-rearing, mentorship, and homemaking, while wearing her strength “like a suit of armor” (Davis & Jones, 2021) leading many in pop culture to refer to these feats as proof of #BlackGirlMagic (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). This is regarded as a celebration of strength, endurance, pain, vulnerability, and triumph, transcending Strong Black Woman ideology to encompass all the facets of being Black and a woman (Ford, 2016). “Magic is about knowing something that others don’t know or refuse to see. When a black woman is successful, and the world refuses to see her blood, sweat, and tears behind the win, what does it look like? Magic. It’s not for them. It’s for us” (Ford, 2016).

Anxiety Disorders

Often depression and anxiety are mentioned together when speaking about mood disorders, however, anxiety is a separate set of disorders that affects more than 19 percent
of U.S. adults – making it the most common mental health concern in the country (Anxiety NAMI, n.d.; Anxiety NIMH, n.d.). Anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, which creates chronic, exaggerated worrying about everyday life; social anxiety disorder, which triggers intense fears about social interaction, often driven by irrational worries about humiliation; panic disorder, categorized by panic attacks and sudden feelings of terror sometimes striking repeatedly and without warning; and phobias generate powerful reactions of strong, irrational fear (Anxiety NAMI, n.d.; Anxiety NIMH, n.d.).

Each of these anxiety disorders have their own symptoms, NAMI says the most common symptom across the aforementioned disorders is the persistent, excessive fear or worry in situations that are not threatening. People living with anxiety disorders may experience emotional symptoms like feelings of apprehension or dread, feeling tense or jumpy, restlessness or irritability, and anticipating the worst and being watchful for signs of danger, and physical symptoms like pounding or racing heart and shortness of breath, sweating, tremors, and twitches, headaches, fatigue and insomnia, upset stomach, frequent urination, or diarrhea (NAMI, n.d.).

As of 2019, the World Health Organization estimated more than 300 million people across the world was living with an anxiety disorder (2022). According to NAMI, scientists have reason to believe that anxiety disorders are caused by genetics and an individual’s environment (n.d.). Because each anxiety disorder has its own distinct set of physical symptoms, they are often confused with and even misdiagnosed as heart disease or hyperthyroidism and often occur with other conditions like depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, eating disorders, and even trouble sleeping (NAMI, n.d.). Risk
factors for anxiety disorder include but are not limited to childhood feelings of shyness or feeling distressed or nervous in new situations; having exposure to stressful and negative life or environmental events; a family history of anxiety or other mental disorders in biological relatives; physical health conditions, such as thyroid problems or heart arrhythmia; and the use of caffeine or other substances/medications (NIMH, n.d.).

Black Women and Anxiety

While anxiety is the most common mental illness in the U.S., women are twice as likely as men to experience symptoms due to a variety of social and biological factors like poverty, race, neighborhood, and hormonal fluctuations associated with childbirth, pregnancy, and menstrual cycles (Watson, Roberts, & Saunders, 2012). Black women endure all of those factors and simultaneously navigate maltreatment due to their race and ethnic background withstanding both overt and covert racism in the form of microagressions (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018) – “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue, et al., 2007).

Researchers agree that Black women are more susceptible to anxiety, however, anxiety disorders in Black women remain understudied, underdiagnosed, and undertreated (Williams, Kanter, & Ching, 2018; Williams, Beckmann-Mendez, & Turkheimer, 2013) for a myriad of reasons including a lack of participation in clinical research studies (Williams, Beckmann-Mendez, & Turkheimer, 2013); the pattern in
help-seeking behaviors that leads them to a general physician, clergyman, or an emergency room; a negative perception of researchers due to the abuse of Black people in previous clinical studies like the Tuskegee experiment, sickle cell studies – most famously Henrietta Lacks, and studies that declared Black people inferior to whites; a small number of Black researchers; a general disinterest on the part of researchers (Neal & Turner, 1991); and stigma. Neal and Turner also point out that anxiety disorders likely manifest themselves differently in Black people and that very little is known about the epidemiology of anxiety disorders in this particular sample group (1991).

Coping

With depression and anxiety affecting so many, it is imperative that treatment and coping mechanisms be made available to those who need them. Coping is defined as “thoughts and behaviors mobilized to manage internal and external stressful situations” and is used specifically for the conscious and voluntary mobilization of acts, different from ‘defense mechanisms’ that are subconscious or unconscious adaptive responses, both of which aim to reduce or tolerate stress” (Algorani & Gupta, 2022).

Symptoms of depression and anxiety can often be triggered by stress. A 1989 study developed a multidimensional coping inventory to assess how people respond to stress and measure various aspects of their coping styles: problem-focused, including active coping, planning, suppression of competing activities, restraint coping, seeking of instrumental social support; emotion-focused, which includes seeking of emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, acceptance, denial, and turning to religion; and three scales that are “less useful” including focus on and venting of emotions, behavioral
disengagement, mental disengagement (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub). In this research, we will focus on emotion-focused coping.

Social Media Musicking: Healing Power of Black Music, Black Social Media Spaces, and Online Group Sociality, Musicking Practices in Social Media Spaces

Music for Coping

The phrase, “Music has charms to soothe a savage breast,” was first uttered in a production of William Congreve’s “The Mourning Bride” in 1697 (Padua, 2010; The Mourning Bride, 2022; Ruud, 2008, Thaut, 2005) and some 325 years later, it remains part of the lexicon in an altered state. The altered version, “Music soothes the savage beast,” is still relevant because it’s true, and there is evidence-based research to back it up. According to the Cleveland Clinic – 100+ year-old nonprofit, multispecialty, academic, medical center – music therapy has proven successful in treatment for psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, cognitive, and social ailments by improving mood, self-expression, self-reflection, and memory (Music Therapy, 2022). Music therapy has also been effective in lowering blood pressure, reducing muscle treatment, increasing motivation, and joy (Music Therapy, 2022).

According to Garrido, Davidson, and Odell-Miller, the concept of music for the treatment of mood disorders dates to ancient Greece (2013). Since the late 1990s, Western cultures, primarily in the U.S., Europe, and Australia, music for mood regulation has become more common than in decades past (Garrido, Davidson, & Odell-Miller, 2013).
The story of Black people in America is one of resilience, resistance, and strength that can be traced through the history of Black music that dates to when the first enslaved African people arrived on the Atlantic Ocean’s coast of what is now the United States of America (Veal, 2022). It is important to understand what Black music is before one can understand how it has been used as a coping tool for Black people in the U.S.

In 1967, scholars tried to define “Black music” while participating on a panel of the Symposium in Black Music. Three years later, Dominque-René de Lerma edited and later published the findings where the consensus was that Black music is ‘in whole or significant degree, part of the musical tradition of peoples of African descent’ (1970). While this seems to be true, this explanation fails to explain what constitutes the musical tradition of people of African descent, or an “Africaness.” In 1974, Olly Wilson published an article that proposed a different approach to defining Black music where he deduced that Africaness is “the way of doing something” and not something that is done. Simply put, Wilson believes that there are ‘predilections’ for the conception of music that includes (1981): the creation of musical structures with clashing rhythms or a disagreement of accents; singing or playing instruments ‘in a percussive manner’; call-and-response; filling all the musical space with improvisation like ad libs; and the incorporation of physical movements as a part of the ‘music-making process’. In a paper published in 1996, Cheryl L. Keyes studied “Africanisms” that are part of the rap music tradition where she expanded on Wilson’s thoughts by narrowing the retentions in Black musical culture to the west and central African regions (1996). It is my belief that Black music is a combination of all those things, as well as the influences and instruments borrowed from other cultures to which musicians and singers have been exposed.
As far back as the 16th century, enslaved Black people self-soothed by singing work, satirical, and protest songs, as well as field hollers, street cries, and play songs that evolved over time due to circumstances (Maultsby, 2022-i). They also played and danced along to syncopated dance music associated with string instruments like banjos, fiddles, and guitars, as well as percussive instruments like drums, washboards, and spoons (Daniels, 2022). According to Timeline of African American Music, singing helped the enslaved people pass time, coordinate movement with other workers, and offered encouragement to each other while communicating their emotions and not-so-secret criticism of the white people in power (Maultsby, 2022-i). The play songs, which used call and response, body percussion, and syncopation allowed enslaved children and adults to interact.

The late 1700s introduced what Portia K. Maultsby classifies folk spiritual music (2022-c). The earliest form of Black religious music, spirituals (also Negro spirituals) are filled with Christian beliefs and storytelling, evolved to become concert spirituals, rural gospel, spiritual as art song, and freedom songs making it a predecessor of gospel music (Maultsby, 2022-a), the genre that Williams-Jones refers to as an ‘emotionally potent force’ (1975).

The 19th and 20th centuries birthed many firsts and strides toward equality for Black people including the creation of historically Black colleges and universities – many still in operation today – the genesis of what is now known as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909, the National Urban League, the Brotherhood of Sleeping car Porters, and the New Negro Movement, more widely known as the Harlem Renaissance (LOC, n.d.). This era in history also brought about a wave of
violence to Black people in the form of race riots (Atlanta; Springfield, Ill.; East St. Louis, Ill.; Houston; Chester, Pa.; Philadelphia; Tulsa; Charleston, S.C.; Gregg and Longview counties, Texas; Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Elaine Ark.) and 1,420 known lynchings, as well as federally sanctioned segregation and death to an anti-lynching bill by filibuster in the U.S. Senate (LOC, n.d.). According to Mauldsby, rural gospel, gospel hymn, and jubilee quartet music reigned on the sacred side of music, while rural/folk blues, boogie-woogie, and vaudeville/classic blues, along with syncopated brass bands, rag time, and New Orleans-style jazz took hold on the secular side (2022-d; 2022-e).

For more than half of the 1900s, Black people fled their homes and everything they knew to be normal for what Isabel Wilkerson calls “the warmth of other suns” in what is known as ‘The Great Migration’ – an era when Black people fled southern states for northern cities in one of the most significant events in the U.S. (Tolnay, 2003). Over the course of about 54 years, approximately six million Black people left southern states for northern cities like Oakland, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, Philadelphia, New York, and Washington, D.C., among others (Library, 2019). As Wilkerson pointed out in her book, people left for a myriad of reasons including the promise of work, education, and/or safety from those white men who may lynch them (2011).

Among the fleeing masses were many Black blues musicians who were a part of the evolution of the blues genre – known as urban blues (Library, 2019; Titon, 2022). Performed in cities with large populations of Black people – Memphis, Chicago, Detroit – urban blues mostly falls among three categories – sophisticated country blues performed by soloists, duos, or trios; downhome blues performed by soloists and small
bands; and amplified, jazz-inflected blues performed by medium-sized jazz combos (Titon, 2022). According to Titon, blues singers and musicians sang the blues from back home while adding new songs that spoke to their challenges of living in the city while recreating institutions from the south, i.e., southern juke joints transformed into blues bars hubs for social interaction (2022) and an opportunity to build a sense of community between people from the north and the south.

Unfortunately for those who migrated, Jim Crow laws were just as prevalent in northern cities as they were in southern towns and cities, with constant violation of people’s civil rights. Frustrated by the lynching death of a Chicago teen, Emmett Till, in Money, Miss., (Hudson-Weems, 1998) and tired of fighting for their rights to live, vote, send their children to good schools, to be served in public places and second-class treatment led Black people them to organize boycotts (Montgomery), demonstrations (Albany, Ga., Birmingham, Chicago), and marches (Washington, D.C., Selma), and sit-ins (Greensboro, N.C.) that led to other movements to desegregate whites only spaces (Bond-Nelms, 2018). As their ancestors used music to pass time and lift their spirits, the participants of the modern civil rights movement used music to do the same (Rosenthal, 2001).

The mention of the modern civil rights movement usually conjures up imagery of people marching arm-in-arm singing the spiritual, “We Shall Overcome,” (Rosenthal, 2001) however, protest songs were available across nearly every genre of Black music. The gospel genre provided adapted spirituals like “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize (Plow), attributed to Pete Seegar, but written by Alice Wine in 1960 (Hedin, 2019), “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around,” “We (I) Shall Not Be Moved,” “Woke Up This Morning
with My Mind Stayed on Freedom (Jesus),” and “This Little Light of Mine” that people sang and learned during demonstrations (Rosenthal, 2001). In addition, student participants – like the Nashville Quartet – in the various movements and demonstrations sang altered versions of popular songs the listened to on Black-oriented radio stations by artists like Little Willie John and Ray Charles (Reed, 2005).

In the jazz genre, John Coltrane wrote and recorded “Alabama” in 1963 inspired by the tragic death (and maybe the eulogy by Dr. Martin L. King, Jr.) of four Black girls in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church (Early, 1999); in 1964, Nina Simone performed her song, “Mississippi Goddam,” – which could be classified as folk, R&B, or jazz – a response to the murder of Medgar Evers the previous year; and in rhythm & blues (R&B), Ray Charles’ cover of “Georgia on my Mind,” released in 1961 after hearing that a show he was set to play in Augusta would have a segregated dance floor; and Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come,” released in 1964 following the arrest of him and tourmates after trying to book a stay at a whites only hotel (Trammell, et al., 2013). Also, within the R&B genre was “Dancing in the Street” performed by Martha and the Vandellas in 1965 (Baker, 2015), artists signed to Motown, a Detroit-based record label that billed itself as “The Sound of Young America.” Baker wrote in her thesis that it was the lyrics of the song that inspired civil rights leaders to use the song as a “call to action” to convince people of all races to join the movement and stand up against racial discrimination (2015).

Though the song by Martha and the Vandellas was adopted by civil rights leaders, missing from Motown’s roster were songs that were specifically and deliberately about the happenings of the era. With legendary Black artists like The Supremes, Stevie
Wonder, The Temptations, The Four Tops, Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, and Marvin Gaye all producing massive hits and touring the country, needing access to food, and lodging during this era (Sykes, 2015), it seems that the Motown acts publicly joined the fight for civil rights a little late.

However, the addition of the Black Forum record label made Motown right on time for the Black Power Era (Sykes, 2015) after the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965, and the assassination of both King and his ideological mismatch, Malcolm X. According to Sykes, Motown was “compelled” to speak out on those issues that were critical to Black people in America (2015). Among those issues – freedom, justice, jobs, housing, and the war in Vietnam (Joseph, 2009). The Black Forum label released recordings by King, Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Touré), Langston Hughes, Ossie Davis, Bill Cosby, Amiri Baraka (previously LeRoi Jones), and Elaine Brown, former chair of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (Sykes, 2015) – the organization founded in Oakland in 1966 on Marxist-Leninist beliefs of anti-capitalism and communism, also referred to as Black nationalism, and the concepts of socialism, and armed self-defense (Marxism-Leninism, n.d.; Cleaver, 1970; Delli Carpini, 2000; The Black Panther Party, 2016).

Black Power, a phrase made famous by Carmichael (Sykes, 2015), soul music – born of the gospel music tradition – became the sound for the “ascension of Black pride” (Maultsby, 2022-f). Artists like Al Green, Aretha Franklin, and artists from the Stax record label – Otis Redding, Sam & Dave, and Isaac Hayes all performed songs focused on unity and respect, as well as romantic relationships while the music of their
contemporaries like Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions, The Staple Singers, and James Brown all focused on the social and political issues of the day (Maultsby, 2022-f).

It was Brown’s two-part single, “Say It Loud – I’m Black and I’m Proud,” that became an anthem for the era (Sykes, 2015). In 1970, members of the Black Panther Party formed a band, The Lumpen – a shortened version of “lumpenproletariat,” a concept by Karl Marx that referred to “the lowest strata of social society”, was a key part of the Black Power Movement for the Black Panthers (Cromartie, 2017). While some soul performers were singing songs about love and sex, The Lumpen performed original songs about political activism and revolutionary social change, as well as covers of songs by Brown and multi-racial funk band Sly and the Family Stone, sometimes changing the lyrics to be more radical (Cromartie, 2017).

Though much of the music during the civil rights and Black power movements accentuated the struggle for rights and the declaration that Black is indeed beautiful, I posit that it was the music listened to for the sake of listening, dancing, or having a good time is what helped people navigate their daily lives. Reed pointed out that freedom fighting was “often unimaginably arduous” work and the repeated singing (hearing) of the freedom songs were “disturbing” reminders of what they endured, while singing (dancing and listening to) music was a source of pleasure, relaxation, and recreation (2019). I am inclined to agree with him as it is well-documented that music has therapeutic properties (Hernandez-Ruiz, et al., 2020; Hadley & Yancey, 2012; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2021) and is known to trigger memories (Belfi, et al., 2016). This speaks to why it would have been necessary for movement participants to have enjoyable experiences with music.
In the period after those movements, Black music ushered in new genres of funk – a genre that encompasses elements from jazz, blues, R&B, soul jazz, gospel, and rock – and disco – an abbreviated form of the French word ‘discothèque’ that became associated with a specific sound created by the studio musicians from Philadelphia International Records (Maultsby, 2022-b), that was created specifically for fun, i.e. dancing, overall happiness. Artists like George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Con Funk Shun, The Bar-Kays, The Gap Band, Chic, Donna Summer, Sylvester, and The Village People utilized their platforms to offer up socio-political commentary in their lyrics over funky and catchy instrumentals (Maultsby, 2022-b), making sure the masses participated in what retired syndicated disc jockey Tom Joyner calls a “party with a purpose.” This trend of escapism through music has always been a part of the tradition of Black music, as evidenced by the variety of subjects explored and stories told through music.

That trend continued in the late 1970s with a group of Black and brown kids of immigrants at a block party in Bronx, NY who arguably created a brand-new genre of music – rap (also referred to as hip-hop, as it is the musical contribution to hip-hop culture) (Orejuela, 2022). According to Orejuela, hip-hop music is a product of inner-city communities overrun drugs, poverty, and gang violence (2022). Some scholars like Catherine Tabb Powell credit The Last Poets and Gil Scott Heron as the pioneers (1991). Initially written off a “passing fad” (Dyson, 2004) rap music is one of four ways hip-hop culture is expressed – the other three are dance, visual art, and fashion (Lightstone, 2012). In rap music, a vocalist (see also: rapper or MC/emcee) rhymes while telling a story over a rhythmic musical background created by a disc jockey (DJ) using a drum machine and often samples music from years past (Powell, 1991). Like their predecessors in Black
music, hip-hop artists created music for fun and evolved to utilizing their music to talk about the social, economic, and political issues of the day (Dyson, 2004).

Ronald Reagan was elected the 40th U.S. president in 1981, shortly after taking office, his administration enacted a series of economic policies that would eventually cause “financial pressures” and “restrain growth of domestic government” (Heclo, 2008) and what Harrington called the “growing visibility” of poverty in America (1984). Hip-hop music was in its infancy and artists like Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did their part to grow the visibility of poverty through their vivid descriptions and social commentary about issues like police brutality, drug addiction, teenage pregnancy, and poverty that consumed their inner-city neighborhoods in their songs, “The Breaks,” and “The Message,” respectively (Dyson, 2004).

As hip-hop music entered what is considered its “golden age” the mid-1980s – mid-1990s (Klatskin, 2018), influential groups like Boogie Down Productions (BDP) and Public Enemy (PE) followed in the footsteps of hip-hop pioneers used their platforms to both educate and entertain their audience, while dropping messages in the music about Black history and avoiding drugs and violence. In their 1989 single “You Must Learn,” BDP issued a sharp critique of the education system and its tendency to fail (Black) students for disagreement with the system’s “reasoning” and omission of Black contributions to history (Shusterman, 1991). One year earlier, PE cautioned their audience to beware of crack – a smokeable form of powder cocaine, water, and baking soda named after the crackling sound it makes when heated (Reinarman, 1997) – the drug that ravaged inner city neighborhoods from Los Angeles to New York and everywhere in between in their single, “Night of the Living Baseheads.”
While there were not exactly mass social movements happening in the streets, Trapp presents the idea that hip-hop music was, in itself, a movement with disputes over whether hip-hop was the cause or the effect of the social ills they rapped about (2005). While the rap music that originated in of New York City on the East Coast of the U.S. seemed to be rooted in principles out of Black Nationalism and radical politics, rap out of Los Angeles took on a “grittier, grosser, and more controversial form” that we now know to be “gangster rap” (Best & Kellner, 1999). Artists like Ice T, Too Short, and N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitudes, a group that proclaimed themselves “the most dangerous group,” also released music about their experiences in their own neighborhoods and their lives on the other side of the law. However, their music was viewed as a glorification of crime that placed the focus on individuals instead of the systems that created the conditions (Edgar, 2016).

Much of the criticism arose as the music grew in popularity with young, white audiences creating “fantasies about violence and danger” and “white panic” (Edgar, 2016). N.W.A.’s song, “Fuck tha Police” from the 1988 album, “Straight Outta Compton,” spoke out against police brutality against young Black men (Edgar, 2016). The song features a young Ice Cube belting out lyrics about being “not the other color” and police believing “they have the authority to kill a minority,” shining a light on the behaviors he and his counterparts endured at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department (Dyson, 2004). Just three years later, Rodney King was filmed by a private citizen while being brutally beaten by four police officers. The video was shown on news across the country showing people proof that what N.W.A. said about police was true and embodying a 1989 quote Chuck D. made at a music festival in Indiana, “We’re almost
like Headline News. Rap music is the invisible TV station that Black America never had … Public Enemy and rap music are dispatchers of information.”

I propose the thought that the criticism of rap from both the east and west coasts is twofold – it has provided an outlet for Black male rage, and it has offended powerful white people and the systems they control by being publicly called out (Neal, 2017) for their wrongdoings that led to the poverty, drug addictions, crime, over-policing, and police brutality in Black and brown neighborhoods. For example, “Fuck tha Police” turned out to be among the first in a series of songs about police brutality.

During that golden age, BDP front man KRS-One penned “Sound of da Police” and “Black Cop,” while PE released “911 is a Joke,” and rapper Ice T performed the song “Cop Killer” as the lead singer of heavy metal band, Body Count. Since the mid-90s, artists continue to record songs about police overreach and brutality as the problem persists (Clay, 2006). A 2004 study pointed out the rise in concern over disproportionate numbers of racial and ethnic minorities – mostly Black and Latino – being pulled over and searched by police (Hernández-Murillo & Knowles). In recent years, a number of routine stops and detainments of Black men, women, and children have led to death at the hands of police, the police adjacent, or those who have been aided in some way by state actors.

In 2013, #BlackLivesMatter was founded by three women in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman (BLM, 2022) self-identified neighborhood watchman in Sanford, Florida. The following year, 18-year-old Mike Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri (Carney, 2016). While Zimmerman, a white presenting Latino, was
not a police officer, he was initially not arrested for the killing, signaling the complicity of police, state, and white power structures.

The BLM website specifically stated that the movement was “working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Carney, 2016). In the years following, BLM protestors have taken to American streets in demonstrations to protest the deaths of Sandra Bland, Philando Castille, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, and recently George Floyd in Minneapolis. Like the movements before it, BLM demonstration participants adopted songs that expressed their views.

“Alright,” the fourth single from Lamar’s third studio album, “To Pimp a Butterfly,” was released in 2015. Like his predecessors Chuck D and KRS-One, Lamar used his lyrics and his platform to speak out against police brutality. In an episode of the docuseries, “Hip Hop: The Songs that Shook America,” Lamar spoke about the personal tragedy of losing three childhood friends over the course of one summer while people were joining the BLM movement (Thompson, et al., 2019). Williams shared in the episode that his original idea for the song was to tell a story about “guys in the hood environment who maybe sold dope,” but, Lamar had the foresight to think about things from a broader perspective and to put it in context of what the culture was experiencing (Thompson, et al., 2019).

Lamar pulled from classic hip-hop artists who forced fans to listen over and over to analyze the masterful wordplay, double entendrés, and the irony (Thompson, et al., 2019) while illuminating the plight of the people and reassuring them that despite current circumstances – violence, police misconduct, grief, and even poor mental health – they will be alright. In Black Lives Matter and Music, Stephanie Shonekan pointed out that
BLM adopted Lamar’s “Alright” as an anthem like leaders from the civil rights movement adopted, “We Shall Overcome,” in the 1960s (2018). I contend that both songs offer a sobering looking at conditions of the time and hope for a better future for the collective group.

**Social Media for Coping**

In a society that seems increasingly less social in person, platforms like Twitter and TikTok seem to be the preferred places for users to seek and gain support during hard times, this is a practice that Naslund, et al. refer to as “peer-to-peer” support (2016). I argue that this support can be categorized as “emotion-focused coping” as it involves individuals seeking emotional social support, positive reinterpretation, and acceptance as outlined by Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub (1989). Individual user participation in this voluntary interaction is aimed at inclusion and mutual progress allowing individuals to develop a sense of community through their shared experiences (Naslund, et al., 2016; Hayes, Carr, & Wohn, 2016). Shared experiences can range from favorite sports teams to hobbies to navigating mental health diagnoses, and even racial and ethnic groups (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Perhaps one of the most common communities in the social media space is Black Twitter (Clark, 2020), – commonly understood to be users from across the world who self-identify as Black who are from across the African Diaspora who unite to collectively “discuss issues of concern” (Clark, 2020), laugh, mourn, enjoy various forms of entertainment, and to call individuals and companies to the proverbial carpet, while simultaneously fighting injustice – with the occasional debate about $200 dates, HBCUs
vs. PWIs, and men vs. women. Another community having collective discussion is individuals with diverse health concerns including mental health concerns (Naslund, et al., 2014). Peer support within this community often works on a system of reciprocity in that individuals share information about their daily challenges living with their respective conditions amongst themselves while simultaneously offering companionship, encouragement, and hope (Naslund, et al., 2014). This kind of support gives individual users opportunities to be vulnerable and support seeking in digital public spaces in ways they cannot or will not be in person (Clark, 2020). According to Hayes, et al., that support takes on various forms including engagement (i.e., likes, shares), or verbal cues (i.e., comments, direct messages) (2016).

According to Clark, Black Twitter creates and connects communities on three levels – personal communities, usually between individuals who are “preacquainted” through offline spaces; community connection, or clusters of individuals who have found each other via online conversations about mutual interests; and the meta-network – what most people refer to when they use the identifier of Black Twitter, like how “the Black community” is used” (2020). I agree with Clark and propose that other named digital communities, i.e., Indigenous-, Asian-, Disability-, Queer-, Mental Health, operate the same way. I posit that these communities exist on every social media platform and an outsider looking in might assume people are looking to isolate themselves or “gatekeep” certain aspects of their lives and cultures when the individuals operating within these spaces are simply in search of digital spaces where they can feel safe to make connections to people with similar issues, concerns, and experiences from across the world, and to share tragedies, triumphs, and solutions.
While individuals may find these spaces offer them benefits, there are some concerns to consider for people within these communities, specifically health-related communities. As Naslund, et al. point out, individuals providing support may become overwhelmed or frustrated, face interpersonal conflict due to the challenge of trying to manage their own condition, and there are privacy concerns (2016) as there could be violations of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) or Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) if the individual is a student.

**Black Public Sphere**

The Black Public Sphere is essentially an extension of Habermas’ theory that “the public sphere” is a place where “private people come together as a public” to affect change politically and socially (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974; Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018). For nearly three decades, social media has become a place where people from all walks of life share their opinions and experiences in a place that serves as an equalizer, of sorts. According to Clark, since the beginning of the internet age, the lack of Black voices in various media spaces and research has damaged efforts to dismantle the persisting negative stereotypes and ideologies about race (2014), particularly about Black people. While all are subject to the almighty algorithm – regardless of race or class – and community guidelines of their respective sites, social media allows all people the space to offer their commentary regardless of their personal views. As a spectator, it seems that such large, mainstream platforms have not been as welcoming to Black people who were not well-known. Now, thanks to platforms like Black Twitter, Black Instagram, and Black TikTok there now exists such a place.
Music as the Black Public Sphere. In his dissertation, Neal defined the Black Public Sphere as “the often covert social, cultural, and political spaces and institutions created by Blacks for the purpose of fellowship, recovery, and the creation and distribution of multi-discursive modes of social and political critique” (1996). I am inclined to agree with Neal in that the history of Black people dating as far back as ancestral enslavement on U.S. soil forced them to sing songs that seem to mean one thing to oppressors and another to the oppressed. As Maultsby pointed out, the enslaved would mix their native African and African American dialect with songs that had biblical themes to reflect their daily lives and experiences being enslaved and their desires for freedom (2022-i).

The history of Black music in in the United States of America tells the story of resilience, resistance, and strength of Black people and I assert that music has been an illustration of the Black Public Sphere. From the spirituals to work songs to protest songs of the Civil Rights Movement to the soul music of the Black Power era all the way to hip hop in the late 1970s and beyond, Black music has been that space for fellowship, recovery, and critique. In 1989, Chuck D – the front man of rap group Public Enemy – made a comment during a music festival in Middle America that “Rap music is the invisible TV station that Black America never had” as its artists and the music itself are “dispatchers of information.”

At a time when the world was at a standstill in an effort to keep everyone safe from the COVID-19 pandemic and U.S. Americans were being subjected to the politicization of their very lives, Black people in America were grappling with the ongoing miscarriage of social justice and in need of overt and covert messages via music.
**Social Media + Instagram**

With about 60 percent of the world’s population now using social media (McIntyre, 2014), scholars and market intelligence analysts across the world are invested now more than ever before in the benefits and challenges of social media use for individuals, agencies, and companies. Social media allows agencies and companies to speak directly to their target audience(s) while focusing on specific issues like purchase behaviors (Felix, Rauschnabel, & Hinsch, 2017). Saravanakumar & Sugantha Lakshmi consider social media to be a method of statement in the 21st century that allows individual users to openly express their beliefs and ideas in a way that differs from traditional media (2012).

In a 2010 study, Andres M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.” Saravanakumar & Sugantha Lakshmi define it as “any kind of online media that stimulates participation, openness, conversation, connecters and sense of community” (2012) and McIntyre simply defined it as “a form of computer-mediated communication” (2014). Nearly ten years after the latest definition, it is time for an update to the definition due to the use of mobile apps like Instagram, Tik Tok, and Snapchat.

Colloquially, social media is referred to as if it is one entity encompassing all things – much like its traditional media counterpart. However, social media is a “constellation” of sites and applications designed to deliver information, by users for users, to many consumers in a short amount of time (McNab, 2009; Brar, et al., 2021).
With well over 100 social networking platforms available to the public, different ages prefer different platforms, and all are relevant and dominant based upon which demographic is the target audience. Social networking, i.e., use of social media websites and applications, has been described as “an ever-increasing phenomenon” as approximately 7 out of 10 people in the U.S. use social media (Bekalu, McCloud, & Viswanath, 2019; Social Media, 2021) – most of them, daily. With about 70 percent of Americans utilizing social media, it is a safe assumption that the environments are a microcosm of American society complete with people from all races, creeds, education levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, religious and political beliefs, genders, sexual orientations, and everything in between.

McIntyre proposes the idea of technologies complement each other in lieu of direct competition, usually in the form of niche mediums with niche meaning “a specialized by profitable corner of the market” (2014). One such niche medium is Instagram. Initially intended to be a picture-sharing social media mobile application, Instagram was officially launched in October 2010 (Cooper, 2020). Within hours of the app launch, more than 10,000 users downloaded the app, which grew to more than 100,000 by the end of the first week, and more than a million by the end of the year (Cooper, 2020).

Traditionally, users have utilized the platform to network with friends, family, and strangers alike (Amosun, 2022). At the onset, photos could only be posted in square orientation with a select number of filters to modify photos (Cooper, 2020). Since 2010, Instagram has added additional features that allow users to alter things like contrast, brightness, saturation, photo orientation, video posting, a live feature, and Stories – like
Snapchat (Cooper, 2020). Instagram Live is an ‘in-the-moment’ feature that allows the user to connect with their followers for up to an hour at a time (Veissi, 2017).

More than a decade later, Instagram is one of the largest social networks worldwide with an estimate of more than 1.1 billion users (Statista, 2022). In the U.S., about 40 percent of adults who use social media say they use Instagram (Social Media, 2021), coming in third behind YouTube and Facebook, respectively. Forty-four percent of those users identify as women, 48 percent are ages 30-49, and 49 percent identify as Black (Social Media, 2021).

While Instagram users have been utilizing the platform to chronicle their lives and create personal online networks, brands and celebrities are able to connect directly with consumers and fans for direct marketing opportunities. (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015). During the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent quarantine, public health agencies have been using the platform to deliver messages and images critical to public health and safety and communicate risks (Malik, Khan, & Haase, 2021).

Black women have been using Instagram to find their respective communities, i.e. those that share their beliefs, sense of humor, and who have like experiences in order to create their own definitions and narratives about the world around them (Stanton, Jerald, Ward, & Avery, 2017). During the COVID-19 quarantine, Black women utilized the platform to keep themselves entertained or otherwise occupied (Overby, Platenburg, & Pickett Miller, 2021).

In March 2020, near the onset of many of the U.S.’s shelter-in-place orders, Derrick “D-Nice” Jones began a series of dance parties he dubbed “Club Quarantine” using Instagram Live (Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2021). Missing his family and friends,
Jones decided to go live on Instagram and play some music. The first night, March 17, was mostly friends and friends of friends, and in a matter of days, Jones gained an audience of more than 20,000 people for a 9-hour long set (Houghton, 2020). By the week’s end, he made Instagram history when his audience swelled to 100,000, including multiple A-list celebrities like Michelle Obama, Oprah, then-candidate for President Joe Biden, Drake, and “Club Quarantine” was born (Breakfast Club, 2020).

Jones created what I now call a “Cathartic Social Media Experience.” A cathartic social media initiative is an event, or a series of artistic entertainment events (dance party, concert, comedy show, poetry slam), that takes place via a social media platform (i.e., Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) during a transboundary crisis (like COVID-19) to help users mitigate the symptoms of mental illnesses (i.e. depression and anxiety) that empowers participants to release pent up and often shared emotions. This builds upon Aristotle’s definition of catharsis, “the purgation of pity and terror in theatre audiences” and the evolution to Belifiore’s “art as therapy’ approach (2016).

Religion-based Coping

Since the enslavement of their ancestors, Black people have sought the protection and the comfort of their churches (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Raboteau, 2001). Due largely in part to stigma, mental health remains a sore and almost taboo subject with many people from BIPOC families and communities. Black women hold a double minority status thanks to their gender and their race which can create additional, unwanted issues and stigma (Watson & Hunter, 2015).
Historically, it has been indigenous and Black people who have been subjected to the horrors of racism that include genocide, enslavement, Jim Crow laws, murder, having their homes and lives destroyed while somehow finding a way to persevere leading many to believe that Black people, especially women, possess a superhero-like strength and endurance while turning a blind eye to the invisible ailments and scars leading to the Strong Black Woman schema (Watson & Hunter, 2015) and the Black Girl Magic trope (Hall, 2017). That way of thinking has made its way through generations and eventually met up with people in Generations X, Y (Millennials), and Z as a “central aspect” of Black womanhood and an affirmation of the Black woman’s “strength and ability to triumph” in the midst of oppression (Watson & Hunter, 2015).

During the era of slavery, church was usually the only place where a group of Black people could gather without the presence of their white overseers or masters, thus, all important matters and problems were discussed with the clergy and/or congregation within the confines of the church (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Raboteau, 2001). Religious leaders have long been what Brewer & Williams referred to as “natural helpers” and served as trusted counsel their congregants on marriage, child rearing, and even their health – with or without proper training to do so (Brewer & Williams, 2019). Because Black women make up most of the membership of Black churches and church-related activity, they are more likely to participate in prayer and other religious practices used to self-soothe or self-medicate mental illnesses compared to their Black men counterparts (Bowie, et al., 2001).

As church remains a pillar in the Black community, many of them have opened their doors for health fairs that provide various screenings for chronic disease like
hypertension and diabetes, and offer information on healthy eating, exercise, etc.

Noticeably absent from many of these events are mental health specialists (Brewer & Williams, 2019). Clergy members often meet with congregants who may be facing bouts with depression, anxiety, or both and often recommend prayer, Bible study, and even involving themselves in activities within the church to help with coping (Blank, et al, 2002). While these suggestions may work as coping tools for some, not all clergy who counsel recommend professional care for those who made need it for various reasons, some being that they may not believe in professional help for mental health, while others may be concerned with the optics of seeing a mental health professional (Fanegan, et al., 2022).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many churches battled with declining membership, specifically of younger congregants (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Jones, 2021). This is due to the increase in the lack of religious affiliation, and generational differences (Jones, 2021). Much of this, I believe, was due to the persistent condemnation of what many young parishioners know to be normal for their peers and themselves.

Respectability in Black churches has long been the norm with an expectation that men wore suits with ties and haircuts that were deemed masculine and that men would “act like” men. The expectation was that women would wear dresses – not too tight or short – heels, not too high, light make-up, if any at all, and they would be feminine or “act like” ladies. Keeping up with this act for many proved to be damaging to the mental health of people who do not fit into those molds. After the pandemic shut churches down for more than a year, many congregants have yet to return (Nortey, 2022).
In a 2021 study, the Pew Research Center reported that more than 70 percent of the U.S. American public uses some form of social media. When broken down by age groups, 81 percent of adults aged 30-49 utilize social media, second only to 18-29-year-olds – a group with a whopping 84 percent usage (Pew, 2021). The gaps between group usage grow wider when broken down by gender and race. For example, 78 percent of adult, U.S. American women report using social media, while 66 percent of adult, U.S. American men report using at least one social media site (Pew, 2021). When it comes to race, 69 percent of white adults in the U.S. report using social media while 77 percent of Black adults, and 80 percent of Hispanic adults report using at least one social media site (Pew, 2021). Given those numbers, I would deduce that a large percentage of Black women in the United States use social media, yet they manage to somehow go underrepresented or completely unnoticed in many spaces that were not designed for entertainment or to hypersexualize, degrade, or stereotype them in some way. The explanation for this can be explained by Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality.

In an article, Crenshaw explained intersectionality as the “various ways” that gender and race work in tandem to marginalize groups that belong to more than one minority group, like Black women – who she used as her example (1989). The concept refers to the ways in which systems of oppression and power – like racism, sexism, ableism, etc. – “co-construct each other” to create and uphold injustice and systemic harm (Coles & Pasek, 2020; Garcia, 2023). Therefore, by simply being Black and being women, this group does not represent the prototype of their race or their gender, rendering them (us) invisible (Billups, et al., 2022), yet there is an expectation of them to
perform labor – physical, emotional, mental, etc. – without regard to their physical and mental health, creating the myths of perceived invincibility, strength, and even magic. This leads to what Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach call “intersectional invisibility” (2008) which often results in Black women being completely erased from conversations about sexism and racism in spaces online and off, focusing instead on the views of white women and Black men (Goff, et al., 2008).

**Transboundary Crisis Management: COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and Political Polarization**

In 2020, the United States experienced a transboundary crisis – an event that effortlessly exceeded “geographical, policy, cultural, public–private and legal boundaries” (Boin, 2019). The hyper-contagious virus COVID-19 spread rapidly across the globe, while many in the U.S. continued to advocate for Black lives, during a highly contentious and divisive national election season.

For many, the federal government failed to adequately respond to this pandemic because of poor leadership from political leaders. Former senior director for global health security and biodefense on the White House National Security Council, Beth Cameron, penned an op-ed for The Washington Post where she said former president Donald Trump dissolved the office, thereby “leaving the country less prepared for pandemics like COVID-19” (2020). Cameron wrote that the lack of clear, White House-led structure to give oversight to the response left the country and everyone in it vulnerable due to “lost valuable time” (2020).
Based on the numbers from the World Health Organization, the U.S. accounted for more than 98 million confirmed cases of the virus and more than 1 million deaths from complications of the virus, as of December 12, 2022. Much of the early illness and death is due largely in part to the Trump Administration’s downplay of the danger of the virus and placing experts on the sidelines (Lewis, 2021).

In addition, three high-profile murders of Black people in Georgia, Kentucky, and Minnesota involving white police or police-affiliated aggressors sparked protests and demonstrations around the country and reminded us of “systemic discrimination and violence” that are the byproducts of the “pandemic of racism” (Bailey, Flynn, & Henry, 2021). The rallying cry for those protesting remained, “Black Lives Matter,” as it has been since 2013 (Carney, 2016). That rallying cry, and subsequently the movement for Black lives, has become a source of racial and political divisiveness in an already hostile political environment (Drakulich, et al., 2019).

Finally, the 2020 Presidential Election wrought with mis- and disinformation about COVID-19, vitriol about policies on policing, climate change, and the economy (Hart, 2021) led to a polarized and seemingly angry electorate.

**COVID-19**

COVID-19, also known as coronavirus disease 2019, is a contagious disease caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2 and discovered in Wuhan, China (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2021). SARS-CoV-2 is part of a family of common viruses that cause a variety of illnesses that range from head or chest colds to what is known as severe acute respiratory
syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (CDC, 2020; Fauci, et al., 2021).

Coronaviruses received that name based upon its appearance as the word “corona” means crown and the virus has spike proteins protruding from it (CDC, 2020). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the spike proteins are the part of the virus that attaches itself to human cells to infect them, replicate themselves, and spread to other cells (2020). Symptoms can range from mild to severe and can feel like a common cold, influenza, or pneumonia and could possibly attack the lungs and respiratory system of those who contract and can lead to serious illness or death (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2021; WHO, n.d.).

Further complicating the virus, people with mild and even no symptoms at all can still carry the disease and unknowingly infect others (CDC, 2020). The potential for severity of the disease increases in older adults and in those who may be immunocompromised or experience additional underlying chronic medical conditions such as cancer, kidney disease, liver disease, asthma and other lung diseases, cystic fibrosis, diabetes, and even mental conditions like dementia, depression, and anxiety (CDC, 2022-b).

Since its discovery, scientists have debated the origin of the disease – some saying it is the product of manipulation in a laboratory and others saying that the virus’ similarities to “bat SARS-like coronaviruses” indicate that a bat is where the virus originate (Ciotti, et al., 2020). As early as 2007, scientists studying coronaviruses issued a warning about the “presence of a large reservoir of SARS-CoV-like viruses” saying it was “a time bomb” that “should not be ignored” (Morens, et al., 2020). About twelve
years later, COVID-19 emerged to become the deadliest respiratory disease in more than 100 years (Morens, et al., 2020).

COVID-19 first appeared in the United States in January 2020 in Washington State, then by mid-March, the WHO declared the outbreak a global pandemic with more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries with nearly 4,300 deaths (WHO, n.d.). The virus spread to all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Omer, Malani, & del Rio, 2020) just days after being declared a pandemic, sending waves of panic across the country prompting local, state, and federal leaders to issue stay-at-home (or quarantine) orders, mask mandates and instructions from the WHO and CDC about travel, handwashing, limiting the number of people within confined spaces, and even adaptations for businesses and schools to keep people from contracting the disease (Mervosh, Lu, & Swales, 2020; WHO, n.d., & CDC, 2020).

Pandemics, defined as “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people” (Last, 2001) are known to influence the mental health of various at-risk groups and the general population (Neelam, Duddu, Anyim, Neelam, & Lewis, 2021). However, there has been little research on the impact of pandemics on those people who have preexisting mental health conditions (Neelam, et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the latest in a string of pandemics over the last decade. In the United States, the health, economic, and social tolls were among some of the highest in the world (Khubchandani, Sharma, Webb, Wiblishauser, & Bowman, 2021). As of November 2022, there were more than 97.8 million cases of COVID-19, nearly 1.1 million deaths in the U.S. (CDC, 2022). As early as May 2020, economists
estimated the pandemic would have a long-term impact on the global economy due to slowed production of products, job loss, the closing of borders for imports and exports, and the cancellation of public events (Akbulaev, Mammadov, & Aliyev, 2020).

In addition to the health and economic tolls, mental health experts and professionals warned that the directives could lead to conditions like stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, and frustration (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020; Jetten, et al., 2020), as well as loneliness and anxiety (Bentley, 2020; Jetten, et al., 2020). Sudden outbreaks – like the one experienced with COVID-19 – can worsen mental health conditions for that population (Ho, Chee, & Ho, 2020). Just as in previous crises – Sept. 11, Hurricane Katrina, and mass shootings – large groups are forced to utilize skills they already have or “improvise and adapt” skills to cope with the stress (Garros, Austin, & Dodek, 2020).

Social Movement in 2020

As the world prepared itself for the unknown associated with COVID-19, Black U.S. Americans were simultaneously continuing the fight against racial injustice and police brutality, a fight that has been dubbed a public health crisis (Bylander, 2015). In 2020, U.S. police killed at least 1,020 people (The Washington Post, 2022). The Washington Post’s Fatal Force database tracks only shooting deaths at the hands of on-duty police officers. However, two of the three most high-profile murders – Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd – at the hands of police (active duty and retired) are not included in that number.
Arbery, 25, was out for a run when he was chased by father and son – Gregory and Travis McMichael – as he ran through their suburban neighborhood, just outside of Brunswick, Georgia (Fausset, 2022). The elder McMichael is a retired police officer and former investigator with the local district attorney’s office (Baur & Osborne, 2020).

Armed with a .357 Magnum handgun and a 12-gauge shotgun, the McMichaels and their neighbor, William Bryan, chased Arbery, suspecting him to be the suspect in a number of neighborhood break-ins (Fausset, 2022). More than two months passed before McMichael was arrested due to a series of events that included two different prosecutors recusing themselves due to a conflict of interest (Fausset, 2022).

Just ten days after Arbery’s murder, Breonna Taylor, 26, was murdered in her home in southwest Louisville, Kentucky while officers were serving a warrant (WLKY, 2020) that was later determined to be a botched raid with police investigating men they believed were selling drugs from a house far away from Taylor’s (Oppel, Taylor, & Bogel-Burroughs, 2022). Police convinced a judge to sign a search warrant for Taylor’s home because they believed one of the men – Taylor’s ex-boyfriend – used her apartment to receive packages (Oppel, Taylor, & Bogel-Burroughs, 2022). Police knocked Taylor’s door of the hinges, fearing for their lives, her boyfriend fired one shot striking a police officer in the thigh and police fired several shots, striking Taylor five times, killing her, but not right away (Oppel, Taylor, & Bogel-Burroughs, 2022). Taylor’s boyfriend told investigators that she coughed and struggled to breath for at least five minutes after being wounded and never received medical attention (Oppel, Taylor, & Bogel-Burroughs, 2022).
In May, Minneapolis police respond to a call at a local grocery store in response to a suspect using a counterfeit $20 bill, a responding officer points his gun at the unarmed Floyd who places his hands on the steering wheel and is pulled from the car and placed in handcuffs (Boone, 2020). The officers tried to place Floyd in the back of a squad car when he stiffened, fell the ground, and said he was claustrophobic, additional officers responded, all struggling to put Floyd in the car when Officer Derek Chauvin pulled Floyd from the car and kneeled on Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds, killing him (Boone, 2020) sparking protests (see also: social movement) around the world.

For the purposes of this research, social movement is defined as “rational attempts by excluded groups to mobilize sufficient political leverage to advance collective interests through noninstitutionalized means” (1982). In a 2008 study, Armstrong and Bernstein pointed out that social movements include “the state, other institutions, and/or culture as targets” and seek “policy change, new benefits, inclusion, cultural change, or changes in the rules of the game.” The protests sparked by the deaths of Arbery, Taylor and Floyd have been viewed as an extension of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The origins of the BLM movement can be traced back to the death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of self-identified neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, and the death of 18-year-old Mike Brown at the hands of police in Ferguson, Missouri (Carney, 2016). While Zimmerman, a white presenting Latino, was not a police officer, he was initially not arrested for the killing of the Black teenager, pointing to the police, state, and white power structures. The BLM website specifically stated that the movement was “working for a world where Black lives are no longer
systematically and intentionally targeted for demise ...” and that BLM “is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation” (Carney, 2016).

To raise awareness of police sanctioned violence against Black people in America, BLM organizers and affiliates have been utilizing social media as a tool to organize protests and air their grievances to the general public, policy and decision makers, and any members of the press who might be watching (Brown & Harlow, 2019).

**Political Polarization in the U.S.**

Polarization and hostility in the U.S. political landscape has a been a growing concern for political scientists and the electorate as a whole since the early 1990s when candidate Pat Buchanan declared war for the “soul of America” in a speech at the Republican National Convention (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). The polarization received a visual representation at the conclusion of the 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush when political pundits and media began using the red and blue map to represent republicans and democrats, respectively (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008).

Across the globe, political polarization is characterized by disagreements over ideology, i.e. a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions exhibiting patterns that compete to provide plans of action to create public policy (Moore-Berg, Hameiri, & Bruneau, 2020; Freeden, 2001). In the United States, it has been characterized over disagreements over immigration (Daniller, 2019), public education, climate change, reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, women’s rights, and economic issues like taxes and labor unions (Grossmann & Hopkins, 2015). Most recently, the red and blue divide seems to have
been characterized over the disagreements about voting rights, policing, white supremacy – exacerbated by demographic change (Boxell, 2020) – and COVID-19.

Playing a major role in the polarization has been social media as individuals are allowed to curate their timelines and, in some instances, creating echo chambers for their own opinions, biases, and even conspiracies (Barberá, 2020). While individuals curate their timelines, political leaders now pander to the opinions, biases, and conspiracies of their constituents and fans, or as Poole and Rosenthal referred to them – “extreme support coalitions” bypassing the interests of traditional “middle-of-the-road voters” (1984) and creating intense dislike and in some cases discrimination without regulation (Bougher, 2017).

Research Questions

Drawing upon the literature outlined above, I plan to utilize semi-structured, in-depth interviews and autoethnography to answer three questions concerning the mental health of Black women, how they cope with symptoms of the most common disorders of depression and anxiety, and the benefits of collective coping in digital spaces.

RQ 1: How did Black women create connections and community during the transboundary crisis of 2020?

RQ 2: How did Black women, ages 35-45 in the United States utilize online musicking to cope with symptoms of anxiety and depression during the transboundary crisis of 2020?

RQ 3: How have Black women built upon skills they developed to manage stress post transboundary crisis?
Chapter 3 – Methodology

“No need to fear, you’re not alone. Just take my hand, but you’ve got to find it on your own. There’s just got to be more than one way. But you go your way and I will go mine and I’ll see you when I get there.”

– Avery Sunshine

Qualitative research offers the world of academia a look into the lives of their research subjects through various methods that include, but are not limited to, content analysis, ethnography, and interviews. This chapter will provide the research design using semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Black women ages 35-45 who participated in Cathartic Social Media Experiences, like DJ D-Nice’s Club Quarantine, Timbaland and Swizz Beatz’s Verzuz, DJ Jazzy Jeff’s Magnificent House Party, DJ Cassidy’s Pass the Mic, and others during the transboundary crisis of 2020. The women were recruited using video posts via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tik Tok and snowball sampling via email. One pilot interview was conducted to test and review interview protocol, and I utilized secondary data from peer-reviewed articles, news articles, as well as my own social media posts and other users.

This chapter will also outline validation strategies used such as triangulation, which is achieved through cross-checking the data and interpretations of the participants across categories; member checks, achieved through the constant checking of interpretations and data among participants; and reflexivity to minimize the threat of researcher bias that can be achieved through self-reflection about predispositions and biases the researchers bring into their work (Cypress, 2017; Roulston, 2010), as I fit into the sample group, and I am utilizing autoethnography as a method.
Research Design

This qualitative study employs the widely used grounded theory to gather information via the method of in-depth interviewing and autoethnography in the form of a personal narrative. The interview is the foundation of qualitative research (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Ortiz, 2016). For humanities and social science scholars, it is important for scholars to hear directly from their subjects their individual understandings about the ‘hows and whys’ of their lives as they navigate various stages and make meaning of specific things and events (Meyers & Newman, 2007). The data gleaned from these interviews are important to help scholars explain the information to audiences that reach further than the academy (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Grounded Theory. One of the most widely used methods in social science, qualitative research, grounded theory begins with the collection and analysis of data in lieu of a formulating hypotheses (Schroth, 2023; Charmaz, 2008). One of the founders of the theory, Barney G. Glaser referred to it as “the total methodological package” due to the provision of “a series of systematic, exact methods” that lead the researcher to a publishable, theoretical piece (1999). By collecting data instead of forming a hypothesis upfront, researchers are afforded the opportunity to “use both inductive and deductive thinking” to “engage in a systematic generation from theory” and in a sense chase multiple “mutually exclusive” goals (Schroth, 2023). Schroth explains that researchers using grounded theory engage in four stages while collecting data – codes, concepts, categories, and theory.

In-depth interview. Theoretically, qualitative interviews are utilized for the discovery of information in grounded theory, storytelling via narrative inquiry, and the
discovery of phenomena in phenomenological study (Meyers & Newman, 2007). This information is gleaned through in-depth interviews, as opposed to a survey due to the fact that many surveys are designed by using scales or close-ended questions, i.e. yes or no, multiple choice, that does not leave room for variation or deviation from predetermined answers. This would be considered a structured interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

An example of an in-depth interview would be a semi-structured or unstructured interview as it allows the respondent(s) to give more thoughtful answers to open-ended questions that could be classified as sensory, feeling, knowledge-based questions (Denzin & Lincoln). An example of a sensory question would be “Describe the smell of entering a botanical garden,” while a feeling question would be “How did it make you feel to attend your first Club Quarantine event,” and finally, a knowledge-based question would be, “What are the rules and regulations you must follow when attending an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting?”

As most things tend to evolve, so has the process of qualitative interviewing. Thanks to updated technology and protocols, there has been innovation in interviewing techniques that allow subjects to see, hear, and feel materials to offer up their knowledge and the meanings they have made about the particular subject matter. This is important when designing the interview guide, as it is essentially a road map to the data required to complete the research (Turner, 2010). When designing the interview guide, specifically for semi-structured interviews, it is necessary to ask questions that do not violate any research ethics or violate any specific information breaches, such as HIPPA or FERPA. The guide allows the researcher to ask relevant questions to the interview subject in a
sequence that builds upon the knowledge from the previous data given by the subject, and to ask follow-up questions that may further understanding or lead to additional relevant information. It is crucial to ensure that the respondent feels safe so they may answer the questions as truthfully as possible and help improve the validity – or the state of being grounded, relevant, logical, or meaningful – of the information they receive.

When working directly with human subjects, it is imperative to treat them ethically in that they are respected, the proper consent has been obtained, and that all commitments to individuals and organizations are honored (Ortiz, 2016). Interviews can now be conducted in person, via phone, social media chats, or video chats. While this is convenient for researchers, specifically those who interview people in different geographical locations, it has created a larger challenge ethically (Parvaresh-Masoud & Varaei, 2018). Technologically assisted interviews are subject to difficulties like protecting interview subjects’ identity, making sure that the respondents are who they say they are, and consent to both be interviewed and recorded (Parvaresh-Masoud & Varaei, 2018). For this study, all interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and stored to a password protected folder on my university OneDrive.

In humanities and social science research, it is highly possible that the interview respondents are members of marginalized groups, i.e. racial minorities, women, members of the LGBTQ+ community, low socioeconomic backgrounds, and the disabled – as were the women in this study. This is specifically why it is necessary to be careful with the questions and the ways in which they are asked as to not disrespect, offend, or otherwise unnerve the very people who have the information you need to conduct research, and the people who may be helped as a result.
Autoethnography. While the qualitative method of autoethnography has become more increasingly accepted in recent years, it still has its share of critics. When discussing the relevance of this particular method, it is important to first understand what it is.

Autoethnography combines concepts of autobiography – the process of writing about selective aspects and epiphanies of one’s life – and ethnography – the act of observing the cultural aspects of the lives of others (Ellis, et al., 2011; Adams, et al., 2017). Autoethnography is the act of writing about oneself, selectively choosing aspects and epiphanies while making meaning of those epiphanies as a part of a specific culture, and not merely an observer (Adams, et al., 2017).

Autoethnography allows members of various cultures, specifically those from marginalized groups, to tell their own stories while trying to dispel stereotypes, tell an unvarnished truth, and share their experiences with audiences that go beyond scholars within the academy (Butz & Besio, 2009).

Traditional ethnographies found their roots with white scholars embedding themselves into indigenous communities for the purposes of observation (Jones, 2016). On the surface, this may seem harmless, however, ethnographers carry with them their assumptions and stereotypes into these community, creating a lens that can be inaccurate and offensive to the people they study, while creating long-term negative views of entire populations.

Autoethnographers are afforded the opportunity to explain aspects of their culture – the whys and the hows of specific beliefs, practices, and the reasoning behind it all (Adams, et al., 2017). In traditional ethnography, entire groups of people are subject to
the researcher’s assumptions and biases of cultural practices that they simply do not understand or in many cases appreciate.

Autoethnography gives a researcher the opportunity to share their cultural experiences and practices in an authentic way that “draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experiences … and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues” using a lens of understanding and vulnerability (Poulos, 2022). Because the key to effective autoethnography is to understand and execute dynamic self-reflection, the product of an autoethnography is a self-reflective narrative that could emerge in one of five forms: “academics’ systematic efforts to analyze their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena; researchers’ reflective ruminations on their fieldwork encounters; subaltern subjects’ responses to the ways their group has been represented ethnographically; so-called ‘Indigenous ethnographies’; and other types of insider or complete member research” (Butz & Besio, 2009). Adams articulated that autoethnographic researchers “offer accounts of personal experience to complement, or fill gaps in, existing research” (2017; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022).

Poulos points out that autoethnographic researchers craft narratives shaped from their own personal experiences of being part of a culture (2022). To do that, researchers rely heavily on diverse methods of data collection including: “participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artifact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling” (Poulos, 2022; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022). I like to think of
it as a methodological approach to journaling as it is a balance between the facts of what has happened and the meaning the researcher makes of it. This can include utilizing source materials like journals, social media posts, and in some cases news stories, photos, etc.

The practice of autoethnography is selective in the experiences and epiphanies used as it requires the researcher to be both self-reflective and vulnerable (Ettore, 2005). In their paper, Kelly, et al. spoke about the cultural importance of hair to racially minoritized women (2021). As a Black woman who grew up hearing the adage, “A woman’s hair is her glory,” from the men in my family, I was able to relate to the authors’ personal accounts of their own triumphs and tragedies concerning their respective manes. It has been my experience that my white woman counterparts did not experience the same cultural attachment, which means I would more than likely find offense to an ethnography written by someone who has not had a similar experience.

Like all research practices, critics have voiced their concerns. Chief among them is that autoethnography is not scientific enough, there is not enough rigor, it is too therapeutic, and it is not reliant upon theory (Jones, 2016). These criticisms raise ethical concerns for autoethnography detractors as there is not an effective way to verify the “auto-” portion of autoethnography, leaving it open to dishonesty and fabrication. I disagree with this assessment to a certain degree. With the technology available, electronic sources such as social media posts and metadata available on certain documents, it is possible to verify dates, times, and authors.

The practical concerns I anticipated included knowing exactly what and how much information to share. Because I utilized my social media posts, it was imperative
that the posts and information pulled be relevant to the subject matter and protect the
people who may have commented on or shared my information. This particular point
straddles the ethical and practical.

Validation Strategies. Qualitative research emerged in the 1960s and 70s as one way to
both explore and provide more in-depth insight into “real world problems” by asking
open-ended that cannot be easily answered numerically as they require “whys” and
“hows” (Tenny, et al., 2017). Qualitative research finds its opposite in quantitative
research which is widely accepted as more rigorous due to it being more absolute as it
“linear” (Tenny, et al., 2017). Critics of qualitative research question the rigor of the
research, which is determined by reliability, validity, and generality (Flick, 2004).

One way qualitative researchers can answer the critics is to employ the use of validation
strategies to undergird their research findings. For this study, I employed the use of
triangulation and member checks for the in-depth interviews and reflexivity for my
autoethnography.

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple sources at different times, in different
places, or from different people (Flick, 2004). For this study, I utilize news stories, social
media posts, and the accounts of the twenty-six respondents to triangulate the
information. Sofaer likens this process the assumption that truth exists in the spaces
where “multiple Venn diagrams converge” (1999). However, Sofaer does write that some
of the truth may be found in those places within the diagram where the circles don’t
converge at all.

To help undergird the study’s validity, I employed the use of member checking to
show the honesty in the data gathering and use process (Candela, 2019; Crewswll &
Miller, 2000). Just as with traditional interviews for a news story, sometimes there can instances of miscommunication or something can be taken out of context. Member checking provides an opportunity for researchers to give respondents a chance to correct something taken out of context or to clarify their answers (Carlson, 2010). This also gives respondents the impression that they can “say it better” or change their answers. Fortunately, the respondents who were contacted to clarify information that was incorrectly transcribed were gracious to take the calls and respond to the emails to clarify only what was asked and did not try to change anything they said.

Finally, for my autoethnographic narrative, I utilized reflexivity, defined by Kingdon as “the ongoing process of self-awareness” (2005) to demonstrate the “trustworthiness” of the information in my narrative. According to Bott, self-reflexivity in the process of research has grown in importance over the last two decades with queer and feminist methodological approaches stressing the need for researchers to remain “flexible” in dialogue and context to maintain their own subjectivity and avoid becoming “absent” or “above research context” and toward the nurturing of relationships that have a mutual exchange of information that could be considered sensitive (2011). Within the narrative, I disclose how, like the respondents, I am in positioned at the intersection of race and gender, in addition to living with coexisting anxiety and mood disorders. It is my belief that my experiences actually made me more attentive to the respondents. Critics of autoethnography point out to a possible ethical dilemma of exaggeration or outright lying because there doesn’t seem to be a way to verify the information. However, I also used triangulation by adding timestamped screenshots to the narrative, adding validity.
“But then I hear a whisper that this too shall pass, I hear the angels whisper that this too shall pass. My ancestors whisper that this day will one day be the past, So I walk in faith that this too shall pass.”

– India.Arie

More than three years removed from the onset of a global pandemic (COVID-19), a highly volatile election season in the United States, and a season of civil unrest set off by the state sanctioned murders of unarmed Black people around the country, I finally know what to call it all – a transboundary crisis. Boin defined a transboundary crisis as “geographical, policy, cultural, public-private, and legal boundaries” (2019). Prior to learning this phrase, my upbringing and my Christian faith conditioned me to believe that times like these are akin to “seasons” in the biblical sense, as explained in the third chapter of Ecclesiastes, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven…” for things such as life and death, planting and harvesting, and even war and peace.

In this chapter, I will share – via social media posts, news stories, and my own recollections – my experiences: creating connections and community – as asked in RQ 1; utilizing online musicking to navigate my own mental health challenges in addition to managing the stress that goes along with moving nearly 1,000 miles away from my family, and beginning a doctoral program at the peak of the transboundary crisis that was 2020 – as asked in RQ 2, and; how I have built upon the skills I already had for coping and managing stress post transboundary crisis as asked in RQ 3.
I Need You to Survive

Like many ‘older millennials,’ social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok have become the primary way I gather and share information (Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018). With millions logging into their respective accounts across multiple platforms, I posit that the social media space has become a contemporary version of the public sphere Habermas wrote about in that it is a public space where private people come together to discuss various topics with the purpose of furthering knowledge that would ultimately lead to political change ([1989] 1991). Habermas wrote in 1989 that the public sphere no longer existed due to the influence of corporations and other institutions.

While I can agree with Habermas with the majority of his explanation, one of the major differences I have with his explanation is that people use the public sphere for political change only. My years of social media use and my experience with various communities within the social media space like Black Twitter, Black Instagram, and Black TikTok have shown that these spaces are used to spark, start, foster, and continue conversations about political change, as well as social change, and advocacy for the various groups that need it. For me, these spaces have been a source of news, information, entertainment, support, and everything in between.

I have been an active user of social media networking since 1996 when I created my first profile for Yahoo Chat. I chose an alias, that I no longer remember, joined a teen chatroom, and began with my A/S/L – age, sex, and location. At the time, my parents warned me to be cautious and not to “meet strange people from the internet.” Now, nearly 30 years later, I have not only met strange people from the internet, but I have also
formed real, genuine connections that helped me get though some of the toughest times in my life, including the transboundary crisis of 2020. According to Manago & Vaughn, this is primarily because sites like Facebook are “geared to coordinating offline connections” (2015).

In a 2017 study, Althoff, Jindal, and Leskovec analyzed nearly 1 billion online and offline actions of about 6 million social media users over the course of 5 years. What they learned is social networking actually led to an increase in the users’ activities online and IRL or in real life (Althoff, et al., 2017). This is evidenced by the introduction of specific in-app features like the Events function within Facebook or the app MeetUp that allows people to search events and activities they enjoy where they can meet new people, join, or create communities with like-minded people.

In 2020, there wasn’t much of an option to merge the online and offline. I lived alone with my dog in a two-bedroom apartment less than a 10-minute drive from two of my three siblings and their families, and about a 45-minute drive from my eldest sibling and his family. Under normal circumstances, we all spent a great deal of time together when our schedules allowed. However, in March 2020, Gov. Roy Cooper issued a statewide Stay-at-Home order (NCDHHS-a, 2020), essentially confining everyone to their residences. As an introvert, naturally, I was perfectly fine with being home with my dog. I got to work, listen to music, and relive Hallmark Christmas (Jones, 2020-a) – in March.

Initially, I was of the opinion that this was a virus, much like the flu and there was mass panic for no reason. I specifically remember calling people “weird” and going on a rant on Facebook (Jones, 2020-b), that I believed was comical at the time.
Typically, I post things on my social media feeds that I find funny, informative, and otherwise entertaining. That is, after all, the best way to ensure engagement on your posts, and a way for me to stay connected with the people I know IRL (in real life), and those I interact with online. Early on, I utilized the live performances by some of my favorite artists and sets by some of my favorite DJs – mainly Derrick “D-Nice” Jones – to connect with others. In fact, I posted to my social media feeds in an attempt to get more people I knew personally to participate (Jones, 2020-c).

In addition to entertainment, I managed to gather a small group of friends and family members with whom I exchanged recipes, horror stories about online dating, suggestions for movies and shows to stream, and the phenomenon that was the “Tiger
King” series on Netflix. I grew so fascinated with the series and discussing it with others on my social feeds that a friend added me to a Facebook group – Triad Exotic – so we could properly unpack the series. When I was added to the group, I knew three people, while I didn’t meet anyone outside of the group, we all managed to keep each other laughing about the series, the people in it, and the subsequent memes. In hindsight, I’m not sure if it was the actual series or interacting with others during a time when I was starved for human interaction and affection.

Like nearly one quarter of all adults in the United States, I am living with a mental disorder (Zender & Olshansky, 2009) – actually, I live with two. I was officially diagnosed with anxiety when I was 22 years old and major depressive disorder when I was 35 – three years before the onset of the pandemic. In the time since my diagnoses, I have learned that these disorders commonly occur in women (Zender & Olshansky, 2009), particularly Black women as they are subjected to stress, or as Davis and Jones call it – warfare (2021), related to race, gender, socioeconomic status (Brown & Keith, 2003), and being subjected to the stereotypes and expectations of others as it relates to the Strong Black Woman schema (Abrams, Hill, & Maxwell, 2019; Davis & Afifi, 2019; Donovan & West, 2015; Nelson, Shahid, & Cardemil, 2020), and Angry Black Woman (Staples, 1979; Ashley, 2014; Erving, Patterson, & Boone, 2021) and Black Girl Magic (Gillespie & Brown, 2019; Hall, 2017; Steward, 2019) tropes. In learning to cope with these disorders, my first instinct has always been to isolate so I could figure things out on my own, then to reach out to my therapist.

What I noticed about 2020, I posted more to my social media feeds to vent my frustrations about being alone and the lack of affection in my life. In an odd way, the
engagement from my family, friends, and followers helped. It was a reminder that I was not as alone as I thought. It seems cliché, but we really were all in it together and their reactions to my posts were proof enough for me.

A simple confirmation of my feelings from my aunt, friends sharing how hard it is for them not to hug or visit their elderly parents, people sharing the frustration of putting their family at risk because they were essential employees, and everyone experiencing Zoom fatigue – the exhaustion and other symptoms like headaches associated with frequent video conferencing meetings (Brooks, 2022) – expressed via comments on social media posts, direct messages, and text messages were helpful in navigating my own feelings.

While the comments and engagement were helpful, it was definitely music that kept me going every day. It has remained one of the constant things in my life that has
always been there in one form or another regardless of my location, my mood, and everything in between.

Balm in Gilead

Since the arrival of the first enslaved African people on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean of what is now the United States (Veal, 2022), the story detailing the resilience, resistance, and strength of Black people can be traced through the history of Black music. Chapter 2 gives a definition of Black music and illustrations of how it sustained Black people in the U.S. during pivotal times. The transboundary crisis of 2020 turned into such a time for me and led to a period of music-related self-discovery. While I love all genres of music by artists from all backgrounds, I realized it was Black music that kept me grounded. Based upon what I have learned about Black music, this makes sense. Just as music has been a coping tool for Black people in the U.S. since the arrival of our ancestors, it was just that for me in this time and the times before and since. While conducting research for this study, I was challenged to reconsider what I believed was Blackness.

For the entirety of my life, I believed it was all tied to skin and the origin of my ancestors. Upon further reflection, interviews, reading the accounts of others, and viewing documentaries like The 1619 Project, my thinking has led me to a more informed place. I now understand that the social construct of race dates back to American system of chattel slavery in an attempt to justify the barbarian treatment of the people who were enslaved and the subjugation of their descendants to mistreatment for centuries after the fact (Guy & Jabali-Nash, 2023). Though our ancestors came from different
countries, regions, villages, and tribes, those who enslaved them, particularly in the U.S., stripped them of their customs, culture, and those things that made them different and put them all in a group – Black – to other them from themselves and treat the enslaved as an inferior race (Guy & Jabali-Nash, 2023)

I now believe Blackness to be a uniquely American concept from the United States. It is important to note that the concept of Blackness is due to the history of colonialism across the globe and it does exist in places other than the United States. Given my beliefs about Blackness being an U.S. American concept, I posit that Black music is created by people who have descended from the formerly enslaved Africans in the U.S. utilizing “Africanisms” that survived through our people over time like predilections’ for the conception of music like clashing rhythms, the disagreement of accents, singing or playing instruments in a percussive manner, call-and-response, and ad libs and improvisation (Wilson, 1981). This to me indicates that Black music transcends words and definitions – it just is.

In the “Music” episode of The 1619 Project miniseries, Nikole Hannah-Jones explained in her narration:

“Black music is a feeling. It’s a thing that you hear and recognize. It is a spirit that lives in us, it’s a thing that lots of people want to respond to but they don’t know what to do with it when they get it. – there are centuries in that music, centuries in that spirit. It’s too deep to be encapsulated. It’s too deep, it’s too fast. It’s too elusive” (Hannah-Jones, 2023).
I agree. For as long as I can remember, Black music has been at the forefront of my life – in good times and bad, especially bad. One of my earliest memories is the first time I heard Stevie Wonder’s “I Just Called to Say I Love You.” When the song was released, I was a toddler, however, I remember standing in the middle of the living room floor crying and then stopping when the song started. Nearly 40 years after that experience, I have no idea what I was crying about and no idea how my dad knew that song would calm me down. What I do remember is the happiness I felt when the chorus came in:

“I just called to say I love you, I just called to say how much I care.
I just called to say I love you, And I mean it from the bottom of my heart.

(Wonder, 1984)”

Since then, I have been in love with Wonder’s music and it has been my go-to when I need something to lighten the mood or something to accurately express my feelings. When I need to dance away anxious feelings, I listen to “Sir Duke” and “Do I Do” at an excessively loud volume. When I want to mellow out, I will listen to the entire Songs in the Key of Life album. And if and when I just want to feel good, I listen to his greatest hits album, The Definitive Collection because it has all my favorite songs. A conversation with my dad revealed that he would often play Wonder’s music to calm me throughout my childhood when I was upset and thus began my practice of managing all my ‘big feelings’ with music, particularly music with which I am familiar. In a 2011 study, Pereira, et al. discussed the idea that an individual’s familiarity with a specific piece of music plays a key role in the individual’s emotional engagement with the piece.
That idea resonates with me as all of my biggest moments and feelings have a song or a soundtrack associated with them and even some of the mundane ones (Hannah-Jones, et al., 2023). For example, the awkwardness of early adolescence was punctuated by TLC’s *Ooooooohhh ... on the TLC Tip* and Queen Latifah’s *Black Reign* albums, and The Spice Girls’ song “Wannabe.” I was all about girl power then and suspect this was a catalyst for building my self-esteem. Middle adolescence was somewhat of a confusing time for me, musically, anyway – my tastes drifted toward artists like Lil’ Kim, The Notorious B.I.G., The Lost Boys, Deborah Cox, Adina Howard, Alanis Morissette, The (Dixie) Chicks, and Beck. That was also the time when my love affair with Gospel music manifested and artists like Kirk Franklin, Fred Hammond, and Mary Mary became prominent in my CD case.

As a teenager, I began my journey of exploring my Christian faith and subsequently faith-based coping. I grew up in a Black Baptist church in rural North Carolina where my mother was the youth advisor which meant my siblings and I were always at church – usher practice, choir practice, Vacation Bible School. In my home, if you didn’t go to church and participate, you couldn’t do anything else that was non-church related. Because I have always loved music, it is the thing that held my attention. As a child, I listened to the instruments. As a teen and a budding young adult, I started listening to the lyrics and exploring what the messages meant to me. It was when I realized the immense joy that listening to music gave me overlapped with the messages I was being taught in church.

The transboundary crisis of 2020 forced me into a mental space where I had to lean on the soothing effect of secular music and the uplifting messages in gospel music to
regulate my mood in the times when I felt everything was out of my control (Garrido & Davidson, 2013). In speaking to my friends both online and off, I understood that I was not the only person who was suffering from symptoms of anxiety and depression and decided to post some of the songs that uplifted my mood, specifically after the release of the videos showing the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, as well as the details of Breonna Taylor’s death at the hands of police in Louisville, Kentucky. There were times when all I could do was either listen to music or dance my cares away.
While sharing music in my social media spaces didn’t begin in 2020, it certainly picked up. One way music and social media overlapped that year was the sharing and participation in quizzes and challenges that were music focused. For example, my friends and I participated in several 30-day music challenges posted by different creators via Instagram stories. The object was to share one song from the available music within the app to fit the day’s respective theme. This for me was what Schäfer and Erola called “social surrogates” as they were what was available as “positive social interactions” that directly involved music that was dear to me or that sparked feelings of nostalgia (2020) when direct social interaction was unavailable. The feelings of nostalgia made me feel less lonely (Derrick, Gabriel, & Hugenberg, 2009) as I was briefly transported to simpler times when I was able to freely engage with my family and friends.

In addition, I have found that sharing music with others is a form of vulnerability for me as it is a window into how I am feeling in the moment. I was able to indirectly communicate to my family, friends, and followers when I was feeling uneasy or restless or even hopeless, which has always been a challenge for me. For the entirety of my life, I have bottled my emotions and fears in an effort to not burden others and to maintain the image people had of me as being ‘strong’ or somehow ‘magical.” This points to Hesmondhalgh’s two dimensions of musical experience – music feels “intensely and emotionally linked to the private self” and that music is “often the basis of collective, public experiences” (2013). In many ways, sharing music in these social spaces has made me more human in that it’s helped me see just how therapeutic it is to actually share how I was feeling with people other than my therapist. I believe this is much of what my friends were feeling as well as the creatives who ran my favorite music-related events
during that time. My love affair with DJ D-Nice’s Club Quarantine (Cobb, 2020), DJ Jazzy Jeff’s Magnificent House Party, DJ Cassidy’s Pass the Mic, and the Verzuz battles almost became an obsession as I set alerts for every time they went live on Instagram and Facebook or posted to YouTube. I even set up calendar reminders for Verzuz battles. All of these events focused primarily on music from my childhood and young adulthood and allowed me the opportunity to engage via the chat function with others, or even in my text messages with personal friends who were also listening.

Listening to those different events, and the spin-offs (Sunday SCQool and The Magnificent Lunch Break), also reintroduced, and in some cases introduced, songs that I had forgotten about or never heard of before. While conducting interviews for this study, I asked the respondents to name three songs that illustrate pivotal times in their lives. As I started to explore that question for myself, I came up with a list that can only be described as eclectic – “Push It” by Salt n’ Pepa, “Near the Cross” by the Mississippi Mass Choir, and “A Children’s Story” by Slick Rick. What I have come to realize is these songs were played by multiple DJs during their respective events or they made their way into my own curated playlists. Another question I pondered for myself that I asked respondents was songs that were pivotal during the transboundary crisis and for me it was revisiting music by Phyllis Hyman (You Know How to Love Me), and Nina Simone (Mississippi Goddamn, and a song by Maverick City Music (Jireh). I specifically remember engaging others in conversation about each of these songs at some point during 2020, spilling over into 2021, specifically “Jireh” due to it touching me at a particularly emotional time – moving halfway across the country to start my doctoral
program, experiencing the loss of a cousin with whom I grew up, and experiencing an intense loneliness that I don’t remember feeling before or since.

I am the youngest of four siblings – all of which I share a close bond– and they all have children with whom I have a wonderful relationship. As the youngest, I also have a great relationship with my surviving parents (father and stepmother, and stepfather), as well as several cousins, and friends. Even with the technology of phones and video calling, I still dealt with feelings of loneliness and isolation, ultimately slipping back into a prolonged depressive episode that eventually required me to restart my anti-depressant. Before medicinal intervention, I would spend hours listening to “Jireh” on a loop just to hear the lyrics:

I'm already loved, I'm already chosen.

I know who I am, I know what You've spoken.

I'm already loved, more than I could imagine.

And that is enough. (Brown, et al., 2021)

When I discuss this song with people, one of the first things I say is “That song met me in some lonely places.” One thing depression and anxiety robbed from me is knowing for sure that there are people who love me. It was replaced by feelings of failure, imposter syndrome, and alternating feelings of numbness and intense emotional pain. Before my medication was restarted, I relied heavily on what I believed worked for me and that was listening to music to alter my mood. The music in many ways remains a salve to soothe those emotional wounds that I don’t always have the words to articulate.
I Will Survive

Coping during a transboundary crisis looked like many different things for me. While music and social media were at the forefront, other activities like playing with my dog, meditation, yoga, and playing video games were also part of my routine. As an emotional support animal, my dog is strangely in-tune with my mood and somehow knows when I am feeling overwhelmed or sad and in need of a break. I believe I’ve started depending on him more than a person should depend on an animal; however, it seems to work for us. The only thing that doesn’t work for us is when I am seated on my mat on the floor trying to practice meditation or yoga and he believes it’s playtime or he tries to mimic my stretching. And strangely, even that helped with my sadness because even though he doesn’t speak, he emotes, and somehow showed me how to properly do Downward Dog.

Oddly enough, video games have been comforting for me since childhood. From the time I started playing Super Mario Bros. on Nintendo, there has been comfort in being in charge of the story line. While, I have upgraded to the PlayStation 4 – I refuse to by the PlayStation 5 until the price decreases – I still find comfort in playing the games of my youth on my NES Classic Edition.

Now, three years removed from the onset of the transboundary crisis, I find that I have been adding to those activities gradually. One activity that I have added has been baking, while listening to music that reminds me of my deceased mother and grandmother. It is almost sacrilege to be a woman from the American South who cannot or does not bake. Prior to 2016, I was that woman. I began adding easy things like brownies and cookies, then in 2020, my abilities expanded drastically to include pound cakes of just about any variety I could think of or in some cases, dream up. Under normal
circumstances, cooking is my go-to activity. It allows you to be creative as you can experiment with spices and flavors, add new side dishes, cook traditional sides in new ways, boil, bake, fry, sauté. There are so many possibilities. Baking is exact. There is no room for creativity or error. In fact, I believe that baking is a science – chemistry, specifically. Only instead of the chance of an explosion, there is a chance for a mess and a bad dessert.

During the transboundary crisis of 2020 when many people were under stay-at-home orders, many people took to what was being called “pandemic baking” (Chee, et al., 2020). As many people across the world started turning to food in times of boredom and stress, I noticed many people in my timeline started baking bread and cupcakes (Ball, 2021) – and posting them to social media – to deal with their feelings of unease and uncertainty. Subsequently, people were eating more as they were spending more time in their homes and less active than before and choosing options that are less healthy than before that are higher in sugar, salt, and fat due to their feelings of stress (Chee, et al., 2020). That was certainly the case for me.

Cooking has always been a means of stress relief as I had the opportunity to disconnect and do something unrelated to whatever was stressing me out. In my family, food is a love language and that is how we show our love to each other and people who aren’t family. However, snacks are my favorite thing to eat and with shortages and limits on purchases at my local grocery stores, I had to resort to baking my own snacks. Because baking has never been my activity of choice, I was extremely bashful about sharing my experiences on my social channels until I felt like they were worthy of photography. Because nobody wants to be the person who posts food to their social
timelines that get no engagement or recognition of any kind, I refused to share until about 2022. One reason was out of sheer amazement that I was baking and it was edible, and the rest out of some strange desire for praise and validation from my followers, much like how many teenagers use social media to gain attention (Siddiqui & Singh, 2016).

Another activity I have added more walks with my dog and taking the time to sit and enjoy the sunshine. It is commonly understood that an increase of physical activity can benefit your health in the long and short term (Rhodes, et al., 2009). Under normal circumstances, I walked my dog for around 20 minutes to expel some energy so he won’t become mischievous. During 2020, our walks got increasing longer as we both grew tired of being confined to the four walls of our apartment. To keep myself entertained while we walked and my dog explored (see also: sniffed) everything with which we came into contact, I brought along my headphones to either listen to guided meditation and of course, music. I have found that a leisurely walk while listening to the soothing baritone of Gregory Porter or the warm richness of Gladys Knight’s alto reminded me to breathe and to be mindful of the beauty around me.
One walk in particular that I remember lasted more than an hour as I used the time to pray and to talk directly to God about the grief I was feeling for losing my mother and the current state of the world. My apartment complex in North Carolina had a 2-mile walking trail around the property. While walking the trail, I put on a playlist I curated called, “Getting On Through” that features music by Kirk Franklin, Yolanda Adams, Hezekiah Walker, Ricky Dillard, Donald Lawrence, Israel Houghton, and John P. Kee that allowed me to be mindful of the beauty around me and not focus on the negative feelings I had when I left my building. One song in particular by Franklin, “Still (In Control),” remains a staple for me. The lyrics somehow provide warmth:

“Lately depression, your job, and your life,
weighs on your mind all day and all night.
You know every scripture and what prayer to pray,
only a fool would think it’ll all go away.
But there is good news, for you there’s a plan,
a High Priest who knows and who understands what you cannot say (Franklin, 2007)

As we walked, I felt tears falling from my face and instead of feeling heavy or upset, I felt relief. Looking back, I’m not sure if it was having music that articulated my feelings, confirmation that the God I have been learning about my entire life truly does have a plan for my life, or if it was the entire experience. What I do know is it was the validation I needed to know that I was going to be OK and from that moment on, that song became part of my playlist for extended walks.
Chapter 5 – Connections and Community: Analysis, Part One

“Anytime you need a friend, I will be here. You'll never be alone again, so don't you fear. Even if you're miles away, I'm by your side. So don't you ever be lonely, love will make it alright.”

– Mariah Carey

Due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, many people across the world were confined to their homes due to shelter-in-place or stay-at-home orders, and social distancing practices (WHO, 2020). This meant that many people were forced into low to no contact with family, friends, and co-workers bringing about emotional outcomes including stress, depression, irritability, insomnia, fear, confusion, anger, and frustration (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020), in addition to loneliness and anxiety (Bentley, 2020). To combat these conditions, many people turned to social media to connect with others. While social media has its share of critics thanks to the prevalence of mis- and disinformation (DeMartino, et al., 2017), users like Diana, a married mother of one, with another in utero, who lives in Indiana, says that social media was a help to her at a time when she needed it.

“It's my form of human interaction because I get to control it, it's at my leisure and it doesn't require me to actually talk to people. So that's nice. There's a lot of information as a new parent. I learned a ton of stuff on Instagram that I would not have otherwise. It used to be about keeping in touch with people, but I’d find it a lot easier to do that through like when Facebook was more of a thing, but now it's a lot easier to do a mix of like Instagram sending stuff and actually talking to people who are actually sending text messages and such.”
This chapter will explore the ways in which twenty-six Black women ages 35-45 created and maintained connections and community during the transboundary crisis of 2020. In interviews that lasted from sixty to one hundred forty-six minutes, the women spoke candidly about their social media beginnings, their personal experiences, the experiences of others they observed, and how they made connections with others in challenging times. For some, social media was a respite from the challenges they faced in their daily lives, for others, it became a lifeline and a window to the world to which they were being denied access. To get an understanding, it is important to note how it all began and the reasons in which Black women sought and continue to seek safe places in these online spaces.

**Race, Gender, and the Intersection**

About one hundred and twenty years ago, Dubois prophetically wrote that the problem of the twentieth century “is the problem of the color-line” speaking specifically about the relations between those races which are darker and lighters around the world (1903). Given the time in which DuBois penned the essay, “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” he was speaking specifically about the enslavement of African people and their descendants, particularly on U.S. soil. More than a century later, a descendant of American chattel slavery and journalist, Nikole Hannah-Jones, created The 1619 Project to mark the 400th anniversary of the arrival first enslaved Africans to Virginia. The project has since been made into a four-episode mini-series highlighting democracy, race, music, and capitalism where Jones and a series of experts talk about the contributions and effects of slavery racism on Black people in the United States.
Over the centuries since the unofficial and official founding of the United States – 1619 and 1776, respectively – race has been a lightning rod of sorts as it relates to the treatment of people in the country who are not identified as white. It is the identification of people, and their ancestors, as a particular color or race that led to the current caste system with “ancient rules and assumptions” in which America operates (Wilkerson, 2020). This system is widely practiced in nearly every, if not all, facet of daily life leading to what is essentially a dichotomous approach to health and wellness, socioeconomics, societal norms, and everything in between that has been widely accepted – one for white people and the other for everyone who is not white – that seemingly returns under “different guises” (Amin, 2010).

As it relates to the women in this study, each of them had an understanding of what race is – particularly Blackness – yet, only one, Lalah, could clearly define it and she called upon knowledge she acquired while earning an undergraduate degree in African American studies.

“Blackness is a social construct that is pretty much in proximity, sadly, to whiteness. But what we have done is reclaimed it over the years, and as a result of it being something that was seen as a negative is definitely something that, seen as a beauty. We here in the United States are definitely part this whole pan African diaspora we are the descendants of the Motherland.”

In episode 2 of The 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones outlines how race is a social construct that has its origins in the U.S. system of chattel slavery as a means to “perpetuate the system of slavery, generate profit, and sustain white supremacy” (Guy & Jabali-Nash, 2023). Othering the enslaved, regardless of their various tribes and places of origin on the
continent of Africa, allowed the white Americans to treat them as an inferior race and justify the barbarian actions against them during slavery (Guy & Jabali-Nash, 2023).

Achille Mbembe wrote that race is “a form of primal representation,” “a perverse complex – a generator of fears and torments, of disturbed thoughts and terror” “especially of infinite sufferings and ultimately catastrophe” (2017). This negative view of Blackness has permeated populations in the U.S., and across the globe leading to negative opinions, assumptions, and stereotypes about people with darker skin, whether they identify as Black or not. For California native, Diana, her understanding of Blackness was rooted in “struggle,” i.e. the lack of something, discrimination, and other mistreatment, and being “in contrast” to those things that were considered to be white, which is not the place in which she wanted to center her own identity.

“All of those things that made you different from white people is a big part of what I understood to be Black … It was me buying it to the fact that blackness was this thing of lacking, and less than in comparison to, instead of it being this basis coming from a continent or a group of islands, and there being commonality in the practices and there being commonality in the languages – the same way everybody else, defines themselves in the culture that they come from.”

It has only been in recent years that Diana’s thinking about Blackness has shifted to include positive attributes about Blackness such as “the laughter” the not “taking anything seriously” the “beauty of being able to do different things with your hair” as well as the “color of your skin and how gorgeous that is, and how people want that and pay for that.”
The shift from viewing such a large part of her identity in a negative light to a positive one that Diana experienced is not exactly uncommon for Black women as they belong to multiple groups that are marginalized and/or discriminated against – specifically by race and gender. This can be further exacerbated by socioeconomic status, level of education, sexual orientation, disability status, etc., which may lead to acts of physical, psychological, and/or emotional violence – perceived and real. Crenshaw writes that the many experiences Black women face do not lie within the “traditional boundaries” of discrimination based upon race or gender has they are understood because “the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women’s lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly” by looking at those factors individually (1991).

One participant, Erykah, fits into several of these categories as she is a Black, woman, living with Bipolar I disorder – a mental illness that causes unusual shifts in a person’s concentration, mood, activity levels, and energy that can make it difficult to carry out daily tasks (NIH, n.d.-b) – and Bell’s Palsy – a neurological disorder that causes weakness or paralysis on one side of the face (NIH, n.d.-a). The intersection of her race, gender, and federally recognized disabilities led to problems with coworkers that had to be handled in human resources. Erykah recalled feeling a sense of relief when the COVID-19 pandemic forced her entire office to work from home because she did not have to deal with in-person microaggressions.

“This is when I have my first panic attack and I thought I was about to die. I thought I was gonna have a heart attack. It was based off this one white lady from Wisconsin ... It like it really, physically made me ill to deal with this lady. She would always sit beside me, and she always played the victim. I would look at her
crazy sometimes because of what she was saying on the phone … This wasn't a regular call into the office with HR (human resources). They had the HR team. She's crying and looking stupid, and I'm walking in, blind. The man looked at me and said, well, we are getting complaints about you from her, saying that you're giving her mean looks.”

In early adulthood, Erykah spent a significant amount of time in the overwhelmingly male-dominated world of underground hip hop as a disc jockey (DJ) and a talent manager, at a time when most of the women in the space were models. Erykah recalled having to fight to be heard, navigating the disrespect because she is a woman, and in an extreme case being threatened with bodily harm in advance of a conference. Another participant, Diana, also stated that working from home brought her a sense of relief in that she got things off her chest about her experiences in the workplace and because she was away from the office and subsequently the microaggressions. Lalah agreed and shared that she enjoyed the break from the daily microaggressions and “having to put on a face” or having to explain to colleagues, “I am not your Black friend. I work with you.”

Experiences like this are not uncommon. Scholars like Crenshaw (1991), hooks (1989), and Jerald, et al., (2017) all write that that these experiences place Black women in the margins of society that are sustained by gender- and race-based stereotypes including the “Jezebel,” more common tropes like “Angry Black Woman” and “Strong Black Woman,” and the most recent entry – “Black Girl Magic.” For this study, respondents were asked their opinions of the phrases “Strong Black Woman” and “Black Girl Magic.” Answers range from pride to exhaustion to frustration. I posit that this is
because of the unspoken expectation that Black women will be – must be – all things to all people, except themselves.

In a personal reflection following the testimony of Anita Hill prior to the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the U.S. Supreme Court, Bell wrote that she not only identified with Hill, but Hill represented her when she testified because Bell had also been perceived as “the wanton, sexually promiscuous woman,” “the scorned Black woman out for revenge,” the Black woman “who suffered from just about every psychopathic disorder known to womankind” (1992). Bell likened the questioning to which Hill was subjected to a “high-tech raping” which left Bell feeling “defenseless,” and “powerless in a way that was debilitating” (1992). In such cases, Black women are expected to soldier on in spite of their pain because “When a Black woman is hurt, wounded deeply inside, no one comforts her cry,” (Hill, 1992).

Continuing with life in the face of inequality, inequity, mistreatment, discrimination, and outright violence is the root of James’ John Henryism hypothesis (1994) – based upon the legend of John Henry who won a contest against a machine designed to drive steel pins into railroad tracks (Bronder, et al., 2014). While Henry emerged as the winner, his victory came at the cost of his life due to the physical and mental exhaustion he suffered by participating in the competition (Bronder, et al., 2014).

Many of the Black women in this study shared that the concept of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) and Black Girl Magic (BGM) is much like the legend of John Henry – a concept that makes them less human and somehow mystical, while, for some, strangely providing a sense of pride and for others, feelings of inadequacy when they are unable to
“push through” or just “suck it up.” In the case of Dana, just hearing SBW makes her “tired.”

“I don't want to! Strong black woman, I am tired don't wanna be strong no more. Leave me alone. That's what I think about Strong Black Woman. I think that white folks, people (who) are not black look at it as a compliment. This is not a compliment. It is not because we literally have to be resilient in times when everybody else has the opportunity to be soft. It's us who have always gotta toughen up.”

Respondents Patti and Beyoncé outright reject the SBW moniker. “I prefer to not be called strong or resilient again,” she shared. Beyoncé wants to shed the expectation of others that she will “carry everything” or “do everything without batting an eye.” For Patti, she has no desire to be strong. “I feel like I am done saving the world, as we are always the person who has to be like the martyr.” Whitney echoed this sentiment, stating that she finds being called a SBW “offensive” because she does not view herself in that way and she often has to “pretend to be this strong person” that people think.

On the contrary, BGM – coined by a Washington, D.C. blogger, Cashawn Thompson in 2013 began as a hashtag in response to an article in Psychology Today written by Satoshi Kanazawa that stated Black women were “objectively less physically attractive than other women” (Olayinka, Gohara, & Ruffin, 2021). Users began using the hashtag and phrase to refer to Black women’s abilities to excel in spite of patriarchy and sexism, arouses a sense of pride for some of the respondents (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). A search of the #BlackGirlMagic hashtag on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), or TikTok yields thousands of posts about the
achievements of Black women and girls – big and small. For Black women, this space to be heard and celebrated is sorely needed.

An Amnesty International study about abuse on Twitter – now X – revealed that one out of every ten tweets that mention a Black woman was categorized as “abusive or problematic” while one out of fifteen were categorized the same for their white counterparts (2018). The study also found that Black women are disproportionately targeted Black women with the tweets being 84% more likely to be categorized as abusive or problematic (Amnesty International, 2018). According to Musgrave, et al., in online spaces, abuse can include the typical insults, embarrassment, shaming, doxxing (releasing a person’s identifying information, i.e. address, phone number, etc.) (Dictionary.com, n.d.), and revenge porn (sexually explicit pictures or video that was stolen, shared, or distributed without consent) (Nguyen, n.d.) (2022).

Though BGM was created as a way to uplift Black women and girls, it has had its critics like Linda Chavers who likened it to SBW in an Elle magazine article, saying that the sentiment had the potential to overexaggerate the strength of Black women while indirectly imposing nearly unobtainable expectations professionally and personally (Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017).

For Deborah, BGM is becoming sort of “cliché,” in that it now brings about the same feelings SBW did in years prior. However, those feelings are almost always positive. “It’s encouragement. It’s empowerment. I think it makes us uniquely Black because not everyone can say Black Girl Magic, unless they are Black. It helps us standout and it makes you feel like you have a little something extra that maybe other women of color or white women don’t have,” Deborah said. Respondent Janet echoed
much of that sentiment and shared that she celebrates BGM through the accomplishments of Black women and the inspiration it provides to little Black girls. “We have to have someone to look up to. We’ve got to have someone on the screen that shows us ‘we can do that’. And it’s OK, baby, to break these barriers,” she said. The idea of BGM almost gives Black girls and women permission to celebrate themselves, even if it makes others uncomfortable. “Damnit, we’ve been uncomfortable for too damn long! You can spread your magic seeds. Sprinkle your confetti wherever you want.”

Black women’s negative experiences within a society centered on whiteness make an argument for the need for Black spaces where they feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves and their concerns IRL (in real life) and online, as social media spaces tend to be a microcosm of the real world. Spaces like Black Twitter (Clark, 2020) provide a semi-safe space for people who self-identify as Black from across the African Diaspora to have collective conversations about their various opinions and experiences with pop culture, current events, past events, memories, and everything in between. I posit that those safe spaces are an example of the Black Public Sphere.

Social Media Experiences (self and observed)

Much of the data that exists about social media experiences focuses primarily on adolescents and college-aged young adults. Because this study is about Black women ages 35-45, it was important to learn about their experiences and how they utilize social media platforms to build or join communities. It is important to note that the women in this study were born between 1975-1985, making them the youngest members of Gen X, and the oldest members of the Millennial generation. The group that fits in the middle,
born between 1980-83, are classified as Xennials because they straddle both generations. This age group tends to more tech savvy than their predecessors as they were exposed to technology from a young age (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2021). Due to this, it is believed that this group spends much of its time within social media environments (Dwivedi & Lewis, 2021).

In a 2008 study, Coyle & Vaughn found that college undergraduates – some respondents would fit into that sample group – used social media for the purposes of keeping in contact with family and friends; entertainment; posting and looking at photos; boredom; replying to messages they received; and because their peers were using the platforms. For the participants in this study, much of this still holds true as all but one of the respondents pointed to spending time on their social media platforms to keep in touch with family and friends who are living in other places or whose lives are busy with work and family and entertainment, as well as professional purposes like networking. One respondent, Gladys, utilizes her platforms for all of those things:

“I use social media for keeping up with family and friends. you know, because I do have a lot of family that I that I'm not close to as far as state-wise … I do keep it up with my friends, because again, I have friends that I’m close to but they're not in physical proximity. I do use it for networking purposes, because, like I said, I do have a sorority. I do that to keep tabs on them, because, as an executive in that organization I have to keep and my eyes and ears out open for what these people are doing, because that's a brand, and that's a business.”

For Chanté, social media has essentially become a lifeline due to her upbringing as “an Army brat” and her own career in the U.S. Army. “Being in the military, and living all
over the place, you lose touch with people, and social media has helped to stay connected to family and friends over the miles.”

While all of the respondents shared that they have had either positive or neutral experiences using social media, Beyoncé shared that while her own experience has been overwhelmingly positive and allows her the escapism she desires from time to time, her best friend of over two decades has not be quite as fortunate. Negative comments and subliminal posts (i.e. passive aggressive posts directed to individuals without using their names) contribute to negative experiences online as social media has become a digital “word of mouth” communication (Sago, 2010) that has been shown to be at least seven times as effective as traditional advertisements due to the consumers of the information trusting the word of the person sharing it (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

Since their inception, social networking websites and applications like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram usage has become part of the daily lives of millions of users across the world (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). In their study, Boyd & Ellison define social networking sites as “web-based services” that allow users to do three things – construct a profile (public or semi-public) within a “bounded system,” build a list of other users with whom they share a connection and have access to their connections (also: friends) and their friends within the system (2008).

For the women in this study, social networking sites became part of pop culture as they were coming of age in middle, junior high, and high school in the mid- to late-1990s at the height of chatroom interactions. Chatrooms are defined as “a channel of synchronous dialogue” among users of computers connected through a network (Rhodes, 2004). This allowed users to type messages to other users from around the world in
rooms that were about specific interests or general conversation. For the women in this study, America Online, or AOL, and Yahoo were the chatrooms of choice. As they transitioned to high school and undergraduate studies, sites like BlackPlanet/Mi Gente offered them the opportunity to engage with others and a way to learn coding in its very early stages as the pages allowed interactive features like colorful, dynamic backgrounds, music, and features like falling rain or sparkly objects that would appear as users scrolled the pages of friends and acquaintances. Users also mentioned the now defunct College Club that was eventually replaced by MySpace that incorporated features of both BlackPlanet and College Club with an added feature of choosing your Top 8 friends who appear on your page. However, it was the advent of Facebook where five of these women traced their entry into social media.

Originally created in 2004 for Harvard students only (Hew, 2011), Facebook is now one of the most widely used social networking sites in the world. In 2021, the Pew Research Center reported that Facebook now has a total of more than 2.8 billion users worldwide and about 70 percent of adults in the United States say they use the platform (Gramlich, 2021). Pew Research Center stated that in the U.S., 77 percent of women, 77 percent of people aged 30-49, 74 percent of Black people, and 73 percent of college graduates used Facebook (2021). All 26 women in this study identify as Black, lived in the U.S. in 2020, and have at least one college degree – 2-year, 4-year, or postgraduate. The vast majority of these women admit to having used Facebook previously or currently to maintain contact with family and friends from high school, college, and work. One respondent, Tina, a teacher in New York, has never created a Facebook account and recalls thinking and saying the concept of the platform was “dumb.”
“I remember when Facebook was born and it was only available to college students at certain colleges ... And I remember like very distinctly sitting in the computer lab one day and everyone was talking about it. People were excited because they were getting these invitations, and I was just like, that's sounds dumb. I said it out loud. I was like that sounds dumb, and so I never joined, and I've never wanted to, and I've had these moments where I see it seems like a scene where it's useful for some.”

The one platform that Tina has taken to is Instagram, the mobile app released in 2010 for iPhone users (Manovich, 2017). She joined upon the recommendation of a former student while transitioning to another school that gave her the opportunity for international travel. Instagram provided the perfect place for Tina to share her journey in a visual way that also allowed her to narrate using captions. Other users like Nina, Phyllis, and Faith use the platform frequently to both post and stay updated on the lives of their friends and family in a space that is more about photos and videos than the mostly written updates on Facebook.

Another platform that has managed to remain a mainstay with a smaller percentage of social media users is Twitter. The Pew Research Center reported that only 23 percent of adults in the U.S. use the microblogging social networking site (2021). In 2012, Black internet users actually used the site at high rates with nearly 30 percent using Twitter, and 13 percent doing so daily (Pew, 2012). This still holds true as eight of the twenty-six women participating in this study stated they used Twitter for the purposes of entertainment and to stay abreast of news and current events.
Other social media platforms that rose to prominence in the last decade include the now defunct instant video sharing app Vine, followed by Snapchat – a mobile app that allows users to share photo and video messages that disappear from the recipient’s phone after viewing a limited time (Piewek & Johnson, 2016), and the latest sensation, TikTok, which was launched in 2017 as a short video app that most users, typically teens, utilized for short music videos (Yang, Zhao, & Ma, 2019). TikTok’s popularity exploded among users of all ages in 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic with people participating in various challenges and sharing their experiences to combat boredom (Kennedy, 2020). The participants of this study all acknowledge knowing about TikTok and watching videos on the platform and when people post them to other platforms, but not being users themselves. Megan, a child psychologist in Maryland, found herself employing the app to discover helpful information from her peers within the field of psychology. Another participant, Toni, a content strategist in New York, communicated that her lack of desire to have anything to do with the app at all had nothing to do with the app itself, but the people who work(ed) there. “TikTok's office was on the same floor as my office, before all of this happened, and (those) fucking kids – I will never use TikTok.”

As Toni pointed out in her steadfast dismissal of TikTok, it can be the people who can make or break your social media experiences, where some people can certainly add value, others can create toxicity in environments that you use to escape the challenges of your day. Much like IRL, in social media spaces, Black women are subjected to harassment, misogynoir – a term coined by Moya Bailey, is defined as the “hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice directed toward Black women” (Lewis, 2023; Merriam-Webster,
n.d.) – racism, threats, and a plethora of other things that can have an adverse effect on their mental health (Musgrave, Cummings, & Schoenebeck, 2022). Amnesty International reported that Black women are 84 percent more likely than their white counterparts to be mentioned in tweets that they categorized as “abusive or problematic” (2018), making the task of establishing and maintaining connections in online spaces that much harder.

**Social Media as the Adult Sandbox – Making and Maintaining Connections**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention define “mental health” as “emotional, psychological, and social well-being” which is important at every stage of life (CDC, n.d.). While there is no one cause for mental illness, there are several things that may contribute to it such as childhood trauma or abuse, chronic medical conditions, chemical imbalances in the brain, use of drugs or alcohol, and feelings of loneliness or isolation (CDC, n.d.). Because feelings of loneliness and isolation can contribute to mental illness, friendship – the relationship between people who have formed a bond of mutual affection (Oxford, 2016) that usually involves feelings of concern, trust, respect, and closeness (Lama & Cutler, 1998) in addition to positive support and validation (Demir, Özdemir, & Weitekamp, 2007) – can play a critical role in a person’s quality of life (Therrien, 2019; Cleary, Lees, & Sayers, 2018). Most of the single women in this study who lived alone, or with pets, reported feeling lonely and sometimes isolated. Jill, a self-described introvert and only child, said, “I was made for this.” Much of her childhood lent itself to enjoyable time spent alone because “being around people” drained her of energy forcing her to take the necessary time to herself to “recharge.”
Aretha, a married, entrepreneur, and mother of three adult children, admitted that she found managing good mental health “challenging” due in part to the fact that the few friendships she had changed during the transboundary crisis of 2020. Whether it was the individuals changing, a change within herself, or the actual friendship changing because everyone was going through their own challenges at the same time. Aretha shared that it has been virtually impossible to make new friends as she lost the old ones – “I’m a woman of a certain age and you know how it is to try and make friends. There is no adult sandbox.”

For this age group that became adults during the digital age, perhaps social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and others have become high tech versions of the sandbox from childhood. In a traditional sandbox, children who don’t know each other yet seem to engage in nonsocial or parallel play where children play alone, but in the company of others, until one child interacts with another and the friendship begins (Luckey & Fabes, 2005). Heather, a single mother of two in North Carolina recounted how she was warned against things like riding in cars with strangers and meeting people from the internet, but now technology has advanced to the point of using a mobile app – Uber or Lyft – to summons a stranger to ride in their car. But she still has some reservations. “I’m not going to meet you (from the internet), you might be crazy. It’s not happening. I’m not going.”

Jill primarily uses social media for business purposes as an entrepreneur to promote the business and to do research for clients. However, in 2020, she joined a live workout group that included people from across the country with whom she built community while simultaneously getting in the best physical shape of her life. “Then, life
opened back up and I wasn’t able to be available every day at 11:30,” she shared. Jill has remained in touch with some of the people and built genuine friendships that she continues to maintain.

In contrast to Jill, nearly all of the women in this study shared that entertainment is one of the primary reasons they use social media. Whitney, a self-described “cat mom” said that social media is her primary source of entertainment as she enjoys a good joke, watching people “do something funny,” and learning new things. Known colloquially as YouTube University and TikTok Community College (Turla, 2023), many users flock to the video sharing sites to learn about everything from crafting to breadmaking to financial literacy. Mary shared, “I have my associate’s (from) YouTube University.”

During the transboundary crisis, she utilized YouTube for learning “hacks” for natural hair and nail care because with the world shut down, she “had the time.”

Most of the women in this study all pointed to keeping in touch with friends they had prior to the transboundary crisis as one of the reasons they have social media. For users like Marianna and Lalah, social media provides a way for them to remain “virtual aunties.” With a small niece and nephew in North Carolina and Louisiana, Facebook and Instagram allows Marianna to see pictures of the kids and hear stories about their lives regularly. For Marianna’s niece, the primary method of communication has been Facetime because it is easy for the girl to call from her iPad, whereas Facebook’s Messenger app works for her nephew.

“[Nephew] actually has a nighttime routine where right after his bath for the night, he will call me. It will be me and both my sisters, and his mom and we’ll just talk about the day, read a story, pray, and say good night. That would last,
depending on how much he wanted to talk about his day and who wasn’t being a good citizen that day. We were having preschool chats, so that was a way I stayed connected.”

Lalah pointed out that using social media platforms is almost a necessity for those who want to keep up with family and friends because keeping up with phone calls and even text messages can be “taxing.” However, viewing what her people post is truly what they are open to sharing and gives her “a little bit of a glimpse” into their lives and the lives of their families and all the children who call her “Auntie Lalah.”

For Nancy, making some connections online was literally about life and death. In 2018, she was diagnosed with triple positive invasive ductal carcinoma – a form of breast cancer. In her search for information, Nancy immediately went to social media in search of Black women who survived breast cancer. Prior to sharing the news with her family, she got in contact with a woman with whom she connected after searching the hashtags #BlackWomen and #BreastCancer. “I told her what was going on and she gave me encouragement. I would have no reason to know this woman, but she followed me and gave me encouragement along the way. Had it not been for social media, I would never know her.” Now that she is on the other side of her terrifying diagnosis, double mastectomy, and six laborious chemotherapy treatments, she is using social media to pay forward the kindness she received and do the same thing for other women who have been diagnosed or who are going through their own treatments.

Nancy’s experience with social media during her breast cancer diagnosis and treatment required a great deal of vulnerability on her part to share her challenges and
victories with people she knows and those she didn’t. It’s this kind of vulnerability that Whitney found to be refreshing.

“I will say, it has definitely been helpful. Well, a lot of people are more vulnerable on social media, too, and the fact that they were able to talk about the issues they were having it made me more okay with what I was going through, because I wasn't going through it alone.”

Pierson wrote that vulnerability of people who engage in the “self-communication” of posting on social media can change and possibly increase over time which can “intensify the need for empowerment” and exacerbate the risk of disempowerment (2012) likely due to the engagement of others with the post, i.e. likes, comments, sharing. What Whitney and Nancy both described in their experiences with social media, per Pierson’s explication, is empowerment – “enabling people to control their lives and take advantage of opportunities” (2012; van der Maesen & Walker, 2002). The control taken for both women was over their emotional health, while the empowerment was achieved after seeing their connections and their connections fears and concerns laid bare on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other sites for all to experience.

Experiences in the Black Public Sphere

The women in this study were asked a series of questions about experiences they consider to be uniquely Black and their experiences within the Black social media spaces. Of the twenty-six women interviewed, fewer than ten admitted to not being part of the phenomenon for various reasons including not having a Twitter account or just not
wanting to participate in the conversations. Nina’s reason for choosing not to participate in Black Twitter has to do with how the space has been discussed in media and by researchers:

“It got to a point where it was just like, ‘No, I wanna be the voice in the face of Black Twitter’. It's like no one voice. Black Twitter is actually a compilation of lots of people (and voices) because we are not a monolith. And that's always what happens when talking about our culture. Like white people, we cover the spectrum … if you dig down deep enough in there, you will see a variety of opinions.”

The remaining respondents all, in some way, applaud and welcome the spaces of Black social media calling it everything from “a landing space” to “my favorite place in the world” for different reasons that include social commentary, collective viewing of TV and awards shows, and the comradery among their Black peers from across the country when discussing various topics. Whitney shared that her favorite thing was the discussion about “Growing up Black” that exposed that Black people from across the country somehow managed to have the same childhood and grandparents. “It was like they just naturally know what you know and it’s hilarious because you see your parents in this,” she shared. For Lalah, the ultimate demonstration of Black Twitter was what she called the “lovely Pan African Diasporic demonstration” that was the global response to the death of Queen Elizabeth II, because unification on any topic is usually not the case on Black Twitter thanks to the “Diaspora Wars.” According to Urban Dictionary, the diaspora wars are defined as “skuffles of hatred and culture clash between different
members of – in this case – the African diaspora (2022). “The whole world was kicking back on stuff,” the amused Lalah recalled.

This sort of connection is what Erykah loves about participating in these specialized spaces as mainstream social media spaces tend to be more restrictive:

“These algorithms don’t know our language. They don’t understand our slang. So, I said something, and it I wasn't being violent at all, I was just like, “If I was there, I would have pushed them” or something stupid like that, and all of a sudden, here I am in Facebook jail.”

Megan agreed that she finds it to be refreshing not to have to always code switch (Nilep, 2006) like some of her friends who occupy white spaces – “It's like a knowing look … You just speak and you don’t have to explain yourself and I don’t. I’m not in a lot of spaces where I have to code switch.” In Lauryn’s experience, spaces like Black Twitter and Black Instagram have provided learning opportunities as it relates to things like pop culture, new slang/African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and even natural hair, cooking, and fashion from others who do not mind sharing their knowledge. “It’s informative. I feel like there is community and it is very hard to be an outcast in Black Twitter. You gotta do something really, really funky for people not to mess with you on Black Twitter,” Lauryn shared.
Chapter 6 – Social Media Musicking and Stress Management: Analysis, Part Two

“Last night a DJ saved my life, yeah. 'Cause I was sittin' there bored to death and in just one breath he said, ‘You gotta get up, you gotta get on, you gotta get down, girl’.”

– Indee

The year 2020 was wrought with what seemed to be one crisis after another – COVID-19, civil unrest, and a highly volatile election season which “effortlessly” exceeded “geographical, policy, cultural, public-private, and legal boundaries” making it a transboundary crisis (Boin, 2019) for the United States. For the women in this study, the time was “stressful,” “weird,” and “eye-opening” in a number of ways. Chante, an active-duty member of the military at the time, said it was an emotionally trying time as she was set to retire in March and was put “on hold status.”

“I thought I had plans and was looking forward to retirement. I was active duty, moving into the civilian workforce – I hadn't planned to stay out of work, and I actually ended up staying out of work for a year. As things progressed from that spring to the summertime and just being at home and watching everything unfold on television, living in the Middle of Nowhere West, Texas. It was a scary time and West Texas was a scary place to be for Black people.”

This chapter will explore the ways in which respondents utilized music in social media spaces during the transboundary crisis of 2020 to cope with their various moods and feelings in uncertain times. The twenty-six women spoke about what music means to
them, their involvement with music-related Cathartic Social Media Experiences, and the collective healing they believe occurred through those experiences.

The Healing Power of Music

For many, the uncertainty of 2020 brought about continuous feelings of unease and even fear. Quite a few of the women in this study mentioned experiencing symptoms of anxiety including feelings of tension, worry, insomnia, headaches, and an inability to focus. For Aretha, the crises greatly affected her mental health, so much so, she was unsure of how to cope. “My toolkit stopped working and I had to develop other ways – some not so healthy,” she shared. One such way – a nightcap. Having had her first drink at the age of 25, Aretha used exercise to cope and found that option taken away once gyms closed during shelter-in-place. With the lack of routine and no access to outside entertainment, she found herself saturated in news about the pandemic, protests, and the volatile election cycle. “It was just in your face constantly.” In an effort to find some solace and stability, the women in this study turned to music as a means of escaping the monotony of life in quarantine.

Roy and Dowd explained that music is not a singular object that can be captured by one definition (2010). They posit that music – like race and gender – is by and large a social construct “shaped by, and shapes, social arrangements and cultural assumptions” (Roy & Dowd, 2010). Given this explanation, it is my belief that music is something different for each person whether or not they find it enjoyable. In this study, each of the
participants shared that not only do they enjoy music, but it also holds significant meaning for them and helps in various aspects of their lives.

Megan grew up in a family of musicians which exposed her to various genres of music giving her a diverse palette for the music she finds enjoyable. A self-admitted band geek since fourth grade, Lalah has played clarinet, percussion, and sang background vocals. Tina considers herself a “band nerd” since fourth grade and participated in marching band and symphonic band in high school which also fed her appetite for all genres.

“I’ve just always loved it … Music is such a good, healthy, easy thing to love and I don't ever understand how people live without music in their life. Even before I moved to New York, I grew up in Michigan, and so you know, that’s a car place, and you drive everywhere. And you know, I've never rid(den) in silence like there has to be music on the radio. I love the radio.”

When asked to describe the role music plays in their lives, Aretha, Dana, Janet, and Lauryn all said music is “everything” for them. Colloquially, “everything” is typically used in an inflated context to indicate that something or someone holds such great importance to or /for you that it means “everything to you” (Everything, 2018). The remaining respondents echo those sentiments saying they wake up, execute their daily tasks, and go to bed with music playing. Beyonce elevates music to a basic need, sharing, “I think, as much as I need air to breathe and water to drink, I need music.” To some who do not hold music in as high regard as Beyonce, this statement may seem to be an exaggeration. However, Rebecchini stated that music has the potential to play a crucial
role in support of people at all stages of life as it can affect mood, cognition, and behavior (2021). To some extent, each woman in this study has alluded to this assertion.

The second question asked of participants in the music section of the interview was initially, “How does music affect your mood?” The question evolved during the data gathering process to “How does music affect your mood or how does your mood affect your music?” when some participants started sharing that the mood they are in affects the music they choose to play. Heather shared that when she feels down, she listens to upbeat music for motivation, while Gladys shared that the music she listens to is an indication of her mood.

“If I’m angry, if I’m annoyed, we’re going to put that gangster rap on … it’s a little violent, it’s a little dark. If I’m feeling lovely, then I’ll put on my 90s R&B … If I am feeling upbeat, I’m putting on Britney Spears, some Lizzo … When I need to concentrate, give me some jazz, but leave me alone.”

Toni’s experience is similar; however, she utilizes music to shift her mood. For example, when she is “not in a good space” she leans on Samba music from the 1950s or jazz – “I listen to something that’s in theory going to make me less angry, right?”

According to a 2019 study, the few epidemiological studies that examine the ways in which music and the risk of mental health problems are associated suggest that music has a positive influence on depression and anxiety, can be associated with an increased self-related health in women, and a positive effect on mood, pain, and symptoms of depression and anxiety in clinical settings (Wesseldijk, et al.). The idea that certain songs, or in the case of the women in this study – playlists, can help people cope with feelings of anxiety, stress, symptoms of major psychological and mental disorders, and help people
balance their mood was discussed in Hennessy, et al.’s study about the early stages of COVID-19 (2021). According to the study, listening to music has the potential to impact people’s well-being due to its ability to “induce strong emotions” (Hennessey, et al., 2021) which can be measured by the Brief Music in Mood Regulation Scale (B-MMR), a self-report instrument created in 2012 to assess the use of seven different mood-regulation strategies that are music related (Saarikallio, 2012).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MMR Subscale</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong></td>
<td>“I guess [music brought] relief and entertainment or relaxation. As it is in my everyday life without even forcing. It wasn't relief, it was like a zoning out, let's just do it. Go on and hope for the days when we can get out back in world.” – Lisa</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Revival</strong></td>
<td>“For mood boosting. You know, it's hard when you get up and you don't really got nothing to do. I never been there before so I'm like, ‘Alright, what am I supposed to do?’ So, making sure I'm listening to uplifting music while I'm getting dressed or going for a walk, it was really important.” – Phyllis</td>
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<td><strong>Strong Sensation</strong></td>
<td>“[Music] brought me and my husband closer, because, of course, we met on some music stuff, and then, when Verzuz came out. So, he was able to, even before they started streaming it on YouTube, he had some way of streaming it on our TV, the phone. So, we were watching it. And we'll just have date night.” – Erykah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversion</strong></td>
<td>“Yeah, that was the role – keeping my house alive with music. Music was on and it kept me moving.” – Marianna</td>
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Discharge – release of negative emotions through music that expresses these emotions

"OK, you can tell what kind of a mood I'm in by what I'm listening to. I've always been like that. Like, typically if I'm not in a good space and I'm not in a good mood, I listen to like Samba music from like the 50s or I listen to like jazz, or I listen to like something that's in theory going to make me less angry, right? So, if you hear me blast Wu Tang (Clan), I must be in a really good mood, right?"

– Toni

Mental Work – using music as a framework for mental contemplation and clarification of emotional preoccupations

“… especially during the protest, I actually found a protest playlist off Spotify. And it would be like old lectures from Malcolm X and Martin Luther

Many of the women in this study have alluded to at least one of these factors while discussing music, specifically when asked about the role of music during their shelter-in-place experience in 2020. Heather described music as her “savior” due to it being “an outlet” for her. “If I was frustrated, I (could) find me a playlist where I can just vent or get frustrations out. or if I need(ed) to take a walk, I could do that,” she said. She also used music as a ‘pick me up’ when she felt tired as she worked as a nursing assistant in a hospital during the pandemic. “It was something that brought me joy.”

For Deborah, music was also a friend as she spent much of her shelter-in-place time alone, even though she spent the time with family. “I am a social person. I need social interactions. I love my family, but being trapped here with them was a lot,” she shared. Listening to music gave her an opportunity to “kill the monotony” of being with her family every hour of every day. Janet shared that music was her “best friend” as she played it all the time, over and over again to the point that she abandoned her previous method of listening on YouTube for a subscription to Spotify, “the world’s most popular
audio streaming subscription service” (Spotify, 2023). Lauryn shares that sentiment, saying that the act of sitting and listening to music was “comforting,” especially when she was in control of the music. What these women are described align with Tarr, Enfield, & Kockelman’s study (2017) that found the “predictability provided by a rhythmic beat” when listening to music has the potential to stimulate effects that are both pleasurable and emotional.

The advent of music streaming sites and platforms like Spotify, Apple Music, Tidal, and Pandora make accessing the music of the listener’s choice as easy as accessing social media. Just as the almighty algorithm dictates the content users see based upon their previous visits and clicks, on these streaming platforms, it chooses music based upon the listener’s preferences and the songs played previously, in effect, prolonging the mood that has been affected by the music. Social media sites and apps now offer music as an add-on to posts. For example, both Facebook and Instagram – owned by Meta – have made fifteen second song snippets available for users to add to their Stories to “level up” their content (Gagliardi, 2023). This is an example of online musicking – specifically social media musicking.

Social Media Musicking

Musicking has been defined by Christopher Small as “taking part, in any capacity, in a musical performance” (1998) either through performing, rehearsing, practicing, listening, or dancing. Valverde built upon this definition for online musicking defining it as “a set of music-related practices that participants undertake online” (2022). These practices can include posting and engaging, i.e. commenting, rating, sharing (Valverde,
The ability to share music on an individual’s social media spaces is not a new concept. One blogger traces the relationship between social media and music back to the launch of MySpace in 2003 (LePage, 2014). I posit that the relationship actually began with BlackPlanet.com – one of the longest running and largest Black-focused social networking sites (Byrne, 2007). While the site was known for its discussion forums on things like civic engagement, BlackPlanet – founded in 1999 – was one of the first social networking sites that afforded users the opportunity to utilize the coding language HTML to personalize their page with photos, graphics, personal information, and music making it a precursor to its more widely known successors like MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and others. Five of the twenty-six women interviewed for this study shared that one of their first experiences with social media was BlackPlanet. Because BlackPlanet predates social media apps and the time when it was rare to own a personal computer as a student, Lalah’s memories of accessing the site are of her going to a “computer cluster” or lab on her college campus “circa 1998-99,” she shared. Some twenty-five years later, BlackPlanet.com still exists and has added a mobile app with a drastically different appearance and the ability to add videos by posting links from other apps like YouTube and TikTok, like it’s counterparts Facebook and Twitter. For the purpose of this study, I will utilize the phrase social media musicking to refer to the intersection of social networking sites and music where the participants post music, engage with music posts of others via sharing, commenting, and liking the posts.

Within the music section of questions, I asked the respondents how often they shared music and why they shared the music they chose to share. Deborah said she shares music on her social channels often and it is usually something she is listening to on her
hour-long commute. “I do it because I want people to feel the way I feel or know my mood for the day … I want other women to feel like, ‘OK, I see her head space, let me get in that space’ and then somebody else will share something they’re listening to just to help people make their day,” Deborah said. Many of the women in this study admitted to sharing music more during the pandemic and mostly via Instagram stories. Patti uses Instagram stories to avoid having her accounts flagged for copyright infringement, while Janet uses Instagram stories and TikTok to avoid scrutiny for her song selections from members and leadership of the professional organizations in which she participates. Marianna, on the other hand, utilizes music in her social media stories and feeds to make her videos “more dynamic to get people to stop” and watch her content. “It usually goes with my mood at the time. So, if I am feeling really cute or whatever, I have a (out)fit check after church, then I’ll use “Good Morning, Gorgeous” or something like that. “Gladys shared that she shared music mostly when she is in a lonely mood and it showed, usually resulting in messages from her friends and loved ones. “I’d get the messages like, ‘Are you alright?’ and I would say, ‘I’m fine, just feeling a way’,,” she said.

For Toni, sharing music via Instagram is a daily occurrence because one of her friends or people she follows has posted a song she likes or loves, and she feels like others should hear it. In 2023, Toni made it a point to add songs by a specific Hip Hop group to ensure that she does her part for the group to get the revenue from streams. This is similar to Erykah’s approach who shares music by lesser known and independent artists to help them gain exposure to wider audiences. Aretha’s approach is similar in that she shares music by artists and musicians who may not necessarily be signed to a label but may enjoy playing or playing around with instruments.
“If somebody is playing around with their guitar and I love the riff, then I'll share to the story. It's not like they're trying to become famous, they're just like, look at this cool thing. I can do … It's people out here who are sharing art for the sake of art. I don't know what their end all be all is – if they're just trying to get famous or they're trying to make money, but for me it just simply is like ‘this person's talented, and I'm going to share what they’ve got.”

I posit that social media musicking goes beyond the surface of just posting music to your social media channels. Social media musicking is the shared act of interacting and/or engaging with music within social media spaces which includes the acts of posting, reposting, sharing with others, commenting, and advancing the conversation or the experience – it is a semi-private bonding experience in a public space. It is sharing music and by proxy, emotions, with others who are not in the same room, maybe not even the same city or state. Respondents were asked how music and social media intersected for them and answers varied, but not much. For example, Aretha admits to learning about new music and artists through social media posts of friends and other people she follows. Deborah also learns about new music that way but said it is actually following the artists to learn more about their lives outside of their work is how music and social media intersect. “You’re able to almost feel like a personal friend of your favorite musicians … You know every step they make because they’re telling you what they’re doing, or their fan page is telling you or your favorite gossip site. You almost feel like a third cousin … it makes them seem human, within your reach,” she shared.

For Faith, following Naima Cochrane, a music industry veteran of more than two decades, is the perfect marriage of music and social media. In 2017, Cochrane created
#MusicSermon, “a curated storytelling series on Twitter” that was specifically about soul and hip-hop music that predates the blogging era (About Naima, 2023). Cochrane posts stories and little-known facts about songs and artists in short story form that she called “services” that drew in audiences of artists, athletes, and fans, alike. The series has since expanded to Instagram and now includes videos, photos, and various themed challenges to commemorate events like Black Music Month, Gospel Music Heritage Month, and recently, the 50th birthday of Hip-Hop.

Faith shared that Cochrane’s sermons were “lifesaving” for her because there were accompanying playlists for the sermons. While Jill did not participate in the challenges, she was an avid consumer via her friends and people she followed, for the most part. She enjoyed some peoples’ posts more than others. “With some people, I [didn’t] like their music,” Jill said.

For Lalah, music and social media intersected for her most notably via TikTok dances during the shelter-in-place period during the pandemic. As a person who enjoys
dancing and moving her body, Lalah found happiness, rediscovered her love for old songs, and discovered new ones by watching videos of the “trending sounds” on the social app. “On TikTok dance videos, you only get a smidgen of the song, so I actually discovered a lot of music like that.” While Marianna did not report participation in TikTok dance challenges, she did mention finding new music on the platform. “A lot of the music that is used on TikTok gives you intrigue, and you go looking for it,” she said. “You can discover or rediscover music on TikTok, I think that is the best place to put it—that and Instagram,” she continued.

It would seem that artists, producers, and DJs agree with Marianna’s assessment as they leaned heavily upon Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok during the transboundary crisis to create what I call Cathartic Social Media Experiences that include virtual concerts, dance parties, comedy shows, etc., that are performed and viewed on social media platforms.

**Cathartic Social Media Experiences**

A Cathartic Social Media Experience is an event, or a series of artistic entertainment events that take place via a social media platform (i.e., Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, etc.) during a transboundary crisis that empowers users to mitigate collective symptoms of depression and anxiety to release pent up and often shared emotions. This concept builds upon Aristotle’s definition of catharsis, “the purgation of pity and terror in theatre audiences” and the evolution to Belifiore’s “art as therapy” approach (2016) and the foundation of the uses and gratifications theory that assumes that individual users seek out media – in this case, entertainment media which includes social
media – to “fulfill their needs” leading to eventual gratification (Lariscy, et al., 2011; Whiting & Williams, 2013). In 2020, shelter-in-place experiences created what seemed to be a never-ending cycle of boredom, social isolation, fear of the unknown, and loneliness that led to widespread self-reported symptoms of anxiety and depression (Krendl & Perry, 2021). To combat these feelings of boredom and loneliness, many people – including performers and other celebrities – turned to their social media channels for temporary relief, i.e. gratification, and found it in various events hosted and performed by music artists, comedians, and online personalities including Zoom Where It Happens – a limited series produced and directed by Black women where actors and actresses performed live table reads of beloved sitcoms including The Golden Girls and Friends; Keep Your Distance Comedy – a series of socially distanced stand-up comedy shows produced and hosted by Kevin Fredricks; and the music-focused events like individual concerts, DJ D-Nice’s Club Quarantine, Verzuz produced by Hip Hop producers Swizz Beats and Timbaland, DJ Jazzy Jeff’s Magnificent House Party, and DJ Cassidy’s Pass the Mic. Nancy, a single mom and performer recognized early that a moment as unique as this transboundary crisis may never happen again. “It was the best. You’d have to pay good money to see the things we got to see during those times ... I just didn’t want to miss this moment; I knew it was special.”

To participate in this study, respondents had to have attended at least one of these social media musicking events two times or more in 2020 and utilize social media regularly, i.e., post, engage with posts of other users, or simply watch activity at least once per week. The women in this study were mostly familiar with Club Quarantine and/or Verzuz, as they considered themselves regular attendees. Dana said she was an
“almost” nightly attendee of Club Quarantine for “at least a couple of months.” Jill also shared that she participated in nearly every event at the beginning of the shelter-in-place order, as did Faith, Gladys, India, Lauryn, Lisa, Marianna, Nancy, Nina, Tina, and Whitney. An event that began as Derrick “D-Nice” Jones simply sharing music and stories with his friends and friends of friends quickly grew to become a musical balm for millions of people who needed an escape. When asked what made her return to Club Quarantine over and over, Gladys’ answer was simple – “the vibe.”

“I felt uplifted. My energy level was boosted. Like, okay, I can do this. Let's go! You know, I'm dancing around my house … And when I turn it off, I'm alright. I can approach the day, or I can go to sleep now, and you know, I can breathe. Let's go! The pressure is gone for some reason. I don't know why.”

“The vibe” to which Gladys is referring has multiple colloquial definitions. In this context, it is defined as "a pleasing ambience" (Vibe, 2003). Most of the respondents agree with Gladys’ assessment citing the music choices within Jones’ DJ sets brought sparked nostalgia from childhood to high school to undergraduate studies and young adult years. Diana said she got to listen to a lot of music she had not heard in a long time and in some cases never. “We were just looking for a chance to do something that kind of felt like we were going out again – it was something to look forward to,” she added. For Dana, the vibe she felt was “community” and connection with people she knew and people she didn’t like Michelle Obama and Oprah and Kerry Washington. “Being able to see the comment section and like, see some of your friends there, but also being able to go on Twitter and even in the group chat. It was so much entertainment,” she said. While she did not specifically use the phrase “the vibe,” Chante said the “energy” is what kept
her coming back night after night. “It was just a focus on the music, and I really liked that. I also liked how he was able to bring himself back to a relevant space by being able to do something that was good for other people,” she added. Aretha returned to Club Quarantine for the community vibe and what she called ‘a dopamine fix.’ “You didn't feel like othered. Names and check marks didn't matter, you know? Everybody was pretty much on the same kind of playing field and enjoying one thing together. That felt really good to escape,” she said.

Escapism emerged as a theme within this section of questions as the respondents spoke of needing to be distracted from the uncertainty of the transboundary crisis. Megan, a child psychologist, is a self-described extrovert who went out a lot prior to shelter-in-place orders and found herself at a loss when going out for fun was no longer an option. “I didn’t really know any other way to have a good time, but just go into a club … I didn’t get to dance with people but, I could dance in my house and have the same kind of vibe. I felt like it was a way to connect like I was in a club even if we couldn’t meet,” she added.

When it came to Verzuz – the series that placed legacy artists and producers of Black music in a "battle” of sorts that was more appreciation than competition – respondents shared that it was a way for them to engage with others in digital spaces, and for later events, get their live music fix with some of their favorite artists. Janet shared that her motivation for participating in so many Verzuz events was FOMO or fear of missing out. “It was fun! Our people are so damn creative. Even in a pandemic, we found ways to incorporate music and comedy and all the things we could not do. We said, we’re going to find a way,” she added. That way included dressing up like she was going out to
watch Verzuz battles in her living home. For Mary, that way was simply enjoying the “peaceful entertainment” of being able to log on to Instagram or Twitch to see who was playing and the vibe they were curating. “It became a community. You would log on and people would shout you out because you’re here every day … it was like going to a local spot where everybody knows your name,” she added. That way for Erykah was to watch the event and the comment sections because it seemed as if everyone became “comedians.”

Jones’ creation and curation of Club Quarantine – which became a franchise that included CQ Praise + Worship and Sunday SCQool, has since become a live experience selling out venues like The Hollywood Bowl, Carnegie Hall, and a residency at The Kennedy Center – was a practice of DIY (do-it-yourself)-disposition for online musicking and performance (Cayari, 2020). Jones shared in early interviews that he began playing music and telling stories to combat his own loneliness and feelings of depression using only his phone and his turntables on his kitchen countertop. Cayari explained in his study that the DIY-disposition does not require any sophisticated or “overly complicated” technology (2020). Upon the success of the first two live events, Jones’ practice evolved to DIWO (do-it-with-others)-disposition, which takes those DIY-disposition practices and adds a component of collaboration (Cayari, 2020). Adding the Sunday SCQool event, which included participation from members of his DJ crew – The Originals – pushed Club Quarantine into the DIWO-disposition as they continued to utilize their phones or tablets on D-Nice's Instagram platform to play their respective DJ sets. Once shelter-in- place orders started getting lifted, Jones’ events shifted to the DIFO (do-it-for-others)- disposition (Cayari, 2020) of not only creating an outlet for people to
enjoy, but it also created jobs for musicians, hosts, and people who work to set up live events.

Verzuz followed the same trajectory through the social media musicking dispositions as Jones’ Club Quarantine beginning organically with super producer Tim “Timbaland” Moseley on Instagram Live teasing records he was working on while in the studio and calling out to fellow producer Kasseem “Swizz Beatz” Dean, “Where you at?!” leading the pair to go live together the next night where the two took turns playing music and telling stories (G. Kennedy, 2020) – initially taking a DIY-disposition (Cayari, 2020). This eventually led to additional battles between producers and performers like Teddy Riley v. Babyface and Erykah Badu v. Jill Scott from their homes evolving to in-person artists only events DMX v. Snoop Dogg, The Isley Brothers v. Earth, Wind, & Fire, Patti LaBelle v. Gladys Knight, and gospel giants Kirk Franklin v. Fred Hammond, and then full-on live concerts with Keith Sweat v. Bobby Brown, The Lox v. DipSet, Mary Mary v. Bebe & Cece Winans, among others.

While both of these events are considered to be social media musicking, followed the same disposition trajectory, and offered entertainment – that was one part party and one part music appreciation – during a time when it was sorely needed, that seems to be where the similarities of the events end. As the respondents pointed out, both events were totally different vibes from the very beginning. Aretha pointed out that Club Quarantine was “more chill” as you didn’t have to watch in the same way that you did with Verzuz. “You could just put it on a speaker. I would just put it on Google home and just listen and check the phone every now and then to see who was in the group,” she said. Chante agreed, saying that Jones’ set up was usually just a view of him “usually just in his home”
which meant it wasn’t very much to see, whereas the Verzuz events at home included other people who were in the space. “I think it was Erykah Badu where I think the children came on screen and they were not being glamorous. They were just at home like we were,” Chante said. Megan put it simply by stating that Club Quarantine didn’t require the same amount of focus as Verzuz due to the fact that it was only Jones playing music as opposed to reading people’s comments, switching between platforms for others’ commentary, and reading the body language of the artists participating. Toni agreed stating, “I would like step away from my machine, have a dance break, go get something to eat like, come back upstairs, whatever work I’m doing. If it doesn’t require me to be on the phone or in a meeting, I definitely had it playing in the background.”

Another major difference between the two events was the spillover of conversation to other platforms. While Club Quarantine conversation stayed mostly on Instagram within the event itself, Verzuz conversation spilled over to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and even text messages with respondents making comments, jokes, and sharing memes. Patti shared that it was fun to watch, saying, “You saw so many things on social media after that, but then it turned into like a concert and then some people actually went on tour. Like SWV and Xscape – hey have a whole (reality) show.”

The reaction of these women in the two events are demonstrative of the journey of the audience through music history. As Small (1998) pointed out, silence during a musical performance is a relatively new concept. In the 18th century, it was aristocrats who “felt free” to treat the performers and the music they produced as “background” to the other activities in which they were engaged. Now, three centuries later, musical audiences on social media used the performances of D-Nice and the featured audiences
on Verzuz as background music, or a soundtrack, to relax or dance or to simply enjoy the music as spectators with the people in the same room and those who are in the same digital space. Historically, music performance was part of the dramatic presentation of what we know to be “ritual” where members of the community performed their various responsibilities to whole and their respective identities were celebrated and affirmed (Small, 1998).

In spite of their stark differences, Club Quarantine, Verzuz, and other social media musicking events shared, perhaps, the largest similarity that the events shared is they became part of a necessary modern ritual of self-care and comforting each other in a time of need contributing to the collective healing of the masses during a time of collective trauma.

**Collective Coping & Healing**

The transboundary crisis of 2020 sparked one psychological and emotional traumatic event after another – COVID-19 pandemic, police murders of unarmed Black people, the protests that followed, and a volatile election season – for people in the U.S. – specifically for Black people. I posit that these events rise to the definition of collective trauma which Hirschberger (2018) defines as “a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society.” Each of these events on their own could rise to the definition of a collective trauma which means having them all occur simultaneously compounds the issue leaving in their wake large swaths of people who need to survive the remnants of said trauma. Examples of collective trauma include mass shootings, acts of terrorism, and catastrophic natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, or hurricanes.
According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), reactions to traumatic events immediate and shortly after can either help or delay recovery, and that is why it is important to develop positive coping strategies (2018). The list of tips offered by NIH in that article included not isolating yourself, calming yourself, creating or maintaining healthy habits, i.e. healthy diet, adequate sleep, staying hydrated, and avoiding use of tobacco, alcohol, and drugs (2018). While these suggestions may seem reasonable as healthy coping strategies, the global pandemic forced people into isolation, whether it was with their families or alone. The shelter-in-place orders mutually closed gyms and fitness centers, disrupted daily routines, and took away opportunities for people to be involved in their communities. Many of the women in this study discussed the toll the transboundary crisis of 2020 took on their mental causing symptoms of depression and anxiety to appear or become more pronounced, leading them to search for ways to make themselves feel better, ultimately landing on participation in Cathartic Social Media Experiences for relief. Respondents were directly asked how experiences like Club Quarantine and Verzuz, etc. compared to collective healing.

All of the respondents agreed that the transboundary crisis of 2020 met the criteria of a collective traumatic experience, however, more of them cited the deaths of Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd at the hands of their local police or police-affiliated individuals and the aftermath as one of the main sources of trauma. For Heather, it was clear cut:

“It wasn't other people's faces that were splattered on TV or on social media. It was us. So, when we went to the platforms, such as Verzuz or Club Quarantine, it was an outlet where we could bond. It was the outlet where we could pay homage or remember those we lost. And it'd be a safe place where we weren't going to be
judged for speaking out or saying what we needed to say. Like, it was going to be supported.”

Whitney agreed and went a step further saying that while it was not a complete healing, there were moments that didn’t make the mantle seem as heavy. “It made us feel joyful. And even though we were going through a lot, we were able to still smile during that time … we learned to live with it, you know? We didn’t let it overpower us,” she added.

From Phyllis’ purview, the artists and DJs recognized and respected he importance of music within the Black community – “That’s why they were willing to provide us with these opportunities and outlets in a very difficult time.” Phyllis believes that the trauma Black people experienced on top of the pandemic necessitated a space of healing and the artists and DJs did the community a great service by allowing the mental escape for “a couple of hours” a day. Tina echoed the sentiment that these experiences rise to the level of collective healing, “We have already established music is a place for healing. It has been a source of healing and joy and pride, and messaging for generations. So, I think that to come together at a tough time musically, is something that's very natural and easy for us to do, and something that most of us can relate to.” Lalah said that these experiences are evidence that we were not alone in this traumatic time. “It’s very high school, but it’s very true. The overarching theme of 2020 and 2021 was ‘We’re all in this together’… That was intentional for the healing. I love that.” This sentiment reiterates the point made in Gilboa, et al.’s 2009 study that music is a “fundamental channel of communication” that offers a method for people to share their emotions, intentions, and meanings (Amir, 2004, 2005; Hargreaves, Miell & Macdonald, 2002; Scheiby, 1999).
Ultimately for Dana, it was the community on social media where she believes the masses found its collective healing because in the absence of in-person gathering spaces, social media became a safe surrogate.

“We all have some kind of social media, right? And even if you don't have those kinds of social media, somebody shared this with you. You're more apt to sign up [to participate] because you want to be part of that space as well. And I think it gave us all an opportunity to just be able to let go in a space that we traditionally probably wouldn't have had it not been for the Panini (pandemic).”

This echoes Dearn and Price’s point that the communal nature of listening to music enhances the experience giving it social value (2016). While the feelings that arose for each participant were subjective, Nummenmaa, et al. point out that “human life” is rooted in music and has the potential to “bolster interpersonal bonds” provides paths for social communication (2021). Viewing these spaces from the standpoint of collective trauma and healing was an interesting concept for Chante as she never thought of it in that way.

“I don’t think I ever really looked at those platforms as a collective healing. As that year progressed and things took on a more racial traumatic experience, I didn’t think of it as healing for Black people because I don’t think we excluded anybody. The doors were open and anyone could come in, but we needed that.”

Like race and gender, music is a social construct and means something different for each listener whether or not they find it enjoyable. All of the women in this study have a deep affection and affinity for music and the feelings it can arouse stating that holds significant meaning for them and helps in various aspects of their lives. While people were safe at home either with family or alone, it was Cathartic Social Media
Experiences like Club Quarantine and Verzuz that provided ways for them to form social bonds like those discussed in Tarr, et al.’s (2017) study that found when people engage in shared musical experiences, it can help regulate the emotional state of the participants (Koelsch, 2014), in which the women reported feeling more relaxed while participating. The experiences the women shared all align within the Brief Music in Mood Regulation Scale (B-MMR), a self-reporting instrument created in 2012 to assess the use of seven different mood-regulation strategies that are music related (Saarikallio, 2012) including: entertainment, which is creating a nice atmosphere with happy feelings to maintain or enhance a current positive mood; revival, which is personal renewal, relaxation, and getting new energy from the music when stressed or tired; strong sensation which induces and strengthens intense emotional experiences; diversion to forget unwanted thoughts and feelings with the help of pleasant music; discharge which releases negative emotions through music which expresses these emotions; mental work which uses music as a framework for contemplation and clarification of emotional preoccupations, and; solace which involves searching for comfort, acceptance, and understanding when experience sadness or other troubles.

The advent of Cathartic Social Media Experiences (CSMEs) provided the women in this study with an opportunity to experience music in a community at a time when concerts, festivals, and other chances to enjoy music in a group setting were stripped away. These events enabled these women and millions of others to engage in the musicking and social media musicking practices outlined by Small (1998) and Valverde (2019; 2022), respectively, in the way that it was historically meant to be practiced – a communal space which either allowed them to be participants via commenting within the
chat functions or posting and discussing within Instagram or on other platforms, or by being passive spectators. I posit that the success of these events and the overall positive dispositions these women gained through their participation in these experiences are a direct outcome of musicking being practiced with others.
Chapter 7 – Discussion

“And here I am in this place, I’ve tried to get to all my life. Where I can give you all my love so much, where many people we can touch. I won’t disappoint you. Show me the world, I’ll go with you. No limitations to our journey, please help me be all I can be.”

– Vivian Green, Music

In Chapter 6, we discussed the ways in which the respondents utilized music within social media spaces during the transboundary crisis to cope with their feelings and moods in an uncertain time. The chapter used the women’s own words to discuss the ‘healing power of music’, the act of ‘social media musicking’ through the ‘Cathartic Social Media Experiences (CSMEs)’ of Club Quarantine and Verzuz, as well as the collective coping and healing the women believe occurred. This chapter will summarize key findings in this study, my understanding of the theoretical implications, my contributions to the body of knowledge, and possible directions for future study.

Findings

Much of the research conducted about Black women and mental health falls into distinct categories – women ages 18-24, the age of onset of many mental illnesses; women who are postpartum or have additional comorbidities; women whose income falls below the federal threshold for poverty, and; stereotypes about Black women such as the Angry Black Woman/Sapphire, Black Girl Magic, or Jezebel tropes. While the interviews may have obtained similar information about these twenty-six women due to their culture, their experiences were not the same, nor are these women a monolith.

One of the key takeaways from this study is the music and performances during these CSMEs provided the respondents a reason to assemble on the digital platform at the
same time when the option was not available in person. The respondents received immediate gratification, i.e. feeling better mentally while participating in CSMEs due to instant interactions allowed via social media networking sites like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook that are similar to the gratification of having a face-to-face interactions.

Additional takeaways that further affirm uses and gratifications theory include:

**Less focus on religious practice.** In a study about Black women and the suicide paradox, Spates and Slatton (2017) discussed Black women’s social networks and strong religious ties explain the trend of Black women being the least likely group to commit suicide. Another study suggests that events like the transboundary crisis of 2020 can either increase or reduce individual reliance on faith and spirituality (van Hook, 2016). While this study utilized research questions, prior to the interviews, I hypothesized that more women in this study would point to their faith and employ gospel music as a means to ground themselves or find solace. The interviews conducted in this study pointed to strong communities offering the necessary support for these women in trying times. While none of the women reported a loss of faith, there did seem to be less of a focus on religious practice with more focus on their respective relationships with the God they serve. This is in line with a longitudinal analysis from the Pew Research Center that found a 3% decrease in the number of people who attended religious services at least once per month from 2019 to 2022 (2023). Nine of the twenty-six women in this study mentioned the words “faith,” “gospel,” “worship,” and/or “God” in the context of utilizing it as a means of coping or “getting through” the transboundary crisis.
Specifically, Chante, an active-duty member of the U.S. Army in 2020, talked about prayer as a means of coping and “believing that what was happening was meant to happen at the time.” The COVID-19 pandemic delayed her retirement and subsequently her plans to enter the civilian workforce. “I've learned quite a few coping skills to try to maintain a positive mental attitude and to understand that when I look at my faith and I look over time, I know that God is laughing at me when I say I have a plan,” she shared.

Marianna talked about specifically holding on to her faith as much as possible because of the chaos happening in the world and even adjusting to new leadership in her house of worship and a shift in how they had service and teachings. “The bible says that if you just ask for it, He's going to give it to you liberally. And so, if I'm going to teach that scripture, I have to [live] that scripture. And so, like I said, I was leaning heavily on my faith.” In leaning on her faith, Marianna involved herself with other believers and followers of Jesus and found a safe space for her to be vulnerable and to receive encouragement from the community. The other women who spoke about faith in the context of utilizing it to cope participated in prayer circles and faithfully participated in daily devotions that included reading prose passages or even bible verses and praying while spending one-on-one time with God.

While stay-at-home orders eliminated attending religious services in-person, what each of the women in this study did do religiously was tune into their preferred Cathartic Social Media Experiences and “doom scroll” social media. Whether they preferred Club Quarantine or Verzuz, each of the women used some sort of system – calendar reminders, notifications, calls from other participants – to be present. Daily participation in these events and engaging with others on social media were almost like attending a religious
service and I posit that it was almost as fulfilling as attending a service as you experience the same feeling of community through participation. While there was not as much emphasis placed on lifting religious texts, these women flocked to their respective places on social media for the same reasons many people flock to their houses of worship.

**Escapism.** Whether it was simply scrolling social media or participation in these events, these behaviors were imperative for these women to escape the realities of uncertainty of the world thanks to the pandemic, the volatile election cycle, and watching murders of other Black people unfold on the news and via social media. In this context, escapism means to utilize social media sites or application to avoid thinking about or dealing with “real life” problems (Yong, et al., 2017). Aretha outright said the events were a distraction and a hit of the “pleasure” hormone dopamine. “You would see people while you’re strolling the comments … You didn’t feel othered – naming and check marks didn’t matter. Everybody was pretty much on the same kind of playing feel and that felt really good to escape with one another,” she said. Phyllis echoed the sentiment saying, “This was a great experience. We just came together for those couple of hours and we were able to kind of escape reality.” Whitney agreed, stating that the events helped her escape to happier times, “I really wasn’t even thinking about being depressed. When you’re up just listening and you hear a song that you haven’t heard since graduation from high school – it put a smile on my face and I wasn’t lost in my own head.”

A study by Kircaburun & Griffiths (2018) characterized the use of social networking sites like Instagram for escapism and the perceived feeling of presence as “problematic” as it can be associated with SMS addiction (Park & Hwang, 2009; Gao, et
al., 2017). Under normal circumstances, I would agree that leaning on social media for “presence” or to escape are indeed problematic, the transboundary crisis of 2020 was not a normal circumstance, especially for single people who worked from home during shelter-in-place. While a few of the women stated that their mental health improved during shelter-in-place, the majority reported feelings of isolation and loneliness that were lessened through use of social media and CSMEs.

**Music and social media a natural marriage.** As Dearn & Price (2016) pointed out in their study, the communal listening of music has the potential to affect the experience, negatively or positively. I posit that music, like social media, is best enjoyed most when listening, or participating, with others. Multiple respondents reported the excitement at the beginning of Club Quarantine was seeing who logged on to enjoy, i.e. their favorite celebrities, friends, and friends of friends, then admitting that their experience shifted to having the events playing as background music. But, when Verzuz was introduced, there was a participation element that forced them to watch for the body language of the artists, eventually the actual performances, but always for the comments on Instagram and later for the commentary and memes posted to other platforms. Phyllis and Chante shared that their viewing experiences with Verzuz actually included them having conversations via text message with friends and family members, in addition to watching the comments during the live stream. “We would talk about what was going on or the comments … looking at the comments was as much of the entertainment as the music in the performance and the artists telling stories,” Phyllis said. Patti shared that the conversations on Twitter, now X, enhanced the viewing experience because there were
visuals to illustrate the commentary. “On Twitter, it was kind of like a delay. Then there were GIFs,” and eventually hashtags, Patti said.

For Nancy, the moment of enjoying the music with so many people at once was like catching light in a bottle and being one of the “cool kids” at the same time. “I did all of everything – it was the best! They put out their best – the best sound, the best visuals when it evolved … I was so proud of my people! We were all on Twitter and there were white folks who like ‘God, I’m missing something. Is there something going on?’ I was so proud of us,” she said. What Nancy described is precisely what made these CSMEs uniquely Black and American experiences.

CQ and Verzuz are Uniquely Black and American. When asked to name experiences they considered to be uniquely Black and American, the respondents named things like having to assimilate and leaving behind important pieces of their culture; code switching to adapt in places that are both familiar and unfamiliar to them; patriotism and loving a country that does not love them; strength and endurance; and the ability to laugh at and through pain. By and large, the women pointed specifically to communal events that feature food, i.e. cookouts/barbecues, family reunions, family gatherings for no special reason, homecomings at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), attending a Black church, and line dancing. Club Quarantine and Verzuz brought people together to listen to, react to, and engage each other in virtual fellowship, much like churches did during shelter-in-place orders.

While many of the women found it difficult to put into words a clear definition of Blackness, they were all clear in that Blackness, a U.S. American construct, is on full display in events that bring people together for collective experiences, whether for fun,
work, and anything that lies between the two. I posit that these communal events, especially those involving music, create ad hoc (extended) families, that mimic the role of music in families as described in Calì’s (2017) study that documented the musical life of a family with a young child. She wrote that whether listening to, dancing to, or singing along, music plays a central role in the family as it is a shared experience as early as birth, forming core memories and building bonds and closeness – a community.

**Black Public Sphere.** The concepts of Black spaces within the larger, white-focused spaced is not a new concept. The Black Public Sphere is an extension of Habermas’ theory of the “public sphere” being the place where “private people come together as a public” to affect social and political change (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974; Kruse, Norris, & Flinchum, 2018). Historically, Black people’s public spheres were contained to field music/hollers and houses of worship. Thanks to technology and the wider availability of music over the years, the Black Public Sphere grew larger. Now in the 21st Century, social media sites have provided a place where people of all races and nationalities can be heard and, in many cases, validated.

The respondents in the study maintained that this “landing space” or their “favorite place in the world” included opportunities to vent their joys, their frustrations, and a place to bond with “distant cousins” – because somehow, we all had the same grandparents – that they never met. Yet, for all the happiness found within these spaces, there were causes for frustration due to the algorithm not being able to pick up on human things like sarcasm, parody, and colloquialisms that Black people just know because the majority of us live lives where we have to “code switch” regularly. Ultimately, the Black
Public Sphere is open to people of all racial backgrounds, however, there are barriers to the unknowing, i.e. language, cultural, etc.

**Theoretical Insights and Implications**

By utilizing grounded theory, I was able to recognize patterns and similarities in respondent answers to questions to develop codes, concepts, and categories for elements like emotions/feelings, activities for coping, and the need to find happy spaces. Because each of these women culturally identified themselves as Black and American, I sought to build on intersectionality theory, as discussed in the Black Women + Invisibility section of Chapter 2. All of the women in this study recognize our unique placement at the intersection of racism and sexism – further exacerbated by our age and absence in spaces and conversations that directly affect us – that often renders us the unseen saviors for our families, communities, and employers as caregivers and laborers.

During the transboundary crisis, Black women once again found ourselves in a dichotomous position of being both essential and invisible which meant we carried the bulk of the work, the bulk of the risk for becoming infected with the virus, and little reprieve, compounded with the daily struggles we endure by simply being Black and women. This directly fed the Strong Black Woman and Black Girl Magic tropes and the stereotypes that have never considered the high level of stress we endure daily that has lasting effects on our mental well-being, which often leads to poor physical well-being.

I also sought to build upon uses and gratifications theory – mass media communications concept that posits that people who engage with media – both traditional and electronic – are active, not passive, participants in the process of communication
The idea is that the people choose the media with which they engage based upon their needs or reasons for consumption, the social and psychological environment, the medium, functional alternatives to use, communication behaviors and the consequences of said behaviors (Urista, et al., 2009; Rubin, 1994). According to Kayahara & Wellman, previous research on uses and gratifications theory groups media gratifications into two distinct categories – process and content (2007). The process category includes gratifications that “arise from the performance of the activity,” while the content category gratifications arise from “acquiring information” (Kayahara & Wellman, 2007). Simply put, users consume media based upon their specific interests.

I conclude that the women in this study tuned into their chosen CSMEs on their respective social media sites because they did not feel invisible as they found a safe space within an online community that was filled with people who can identify with their own experiences; they were entertained by the performers, as well as other members of the community; and their participation helped them escape the reality of the transboundary crisis of 2020. This is in direct contrast to scholars like O’Reilly (2020), Berryman, et al., (2018), and Sadagheyani, et al., (2020) whose research found negative effects on social media users’ mental health. Perhaps it is the blind, unintentional use of social media that yields negative effects.

**Methodological Reflections**

**Autoethnography.** Considered a first-person research method, autoethnography typically includes the observation of one’s own experiences within a specific group of
subculture (Desjardins, et al., 2021). Critics have long condemned this method largely
due to it not being “scientific enough,” a lack of rigor, not reliant upon theory, and the
practice being “too therapeutic” (Jones, 2016). While I can understand ethical concerns
that scholars may have about dishonesty and fabrication, I now know that cultural
studies, like this one, can benefit from the use of autoethnography for multiple reasons.
Chief among them, I am the subject. I identify as a Black, American woman, age 38 at
the time who utilized social media musicking practices, primarily Club Quarantine and
Verzuz to help calm symptoms of depression and anxiety. I was able to identify with the
respondents in a way that researchers who have not lived within this culture cannot.
Because of my positionality within the culture, there are nuances, Black pop culture
references, colloquial terms, and childhood experiences that I understood without
explanation. This insight, coupled with the information gathered from the interviews,
allowed me add to the literature about the concept of U.S. American Blackness.

Adams, et al. wrote about relying on memory, hindsight to reflect upon past
experiences. For this study, I employed the use of my social media posts which served as
a bit of an open diary for me where I was able to hear from others who either identified
with my feelings or who offered a word of encouragement. Those spaces oddly offered a
level of comfort that I did not fully appreciate until I started pulling from the posts for
this research. Another thing I did not expect was to have those feelings of fear, confusion,
dread (Custer, 2014), and even embarrassment while looking back on those posts. Some
three years later, I found myself in a state of sadness while scrolling my own posts, until I
reached the posts about Club Quarantine and Verzuz. It was then that I fully appreciated
the lightning in a bottle that was this moment in time. For all of sadness and loneliness I
experienced in 2020, there were pockets of joy and the overwhelming majority of them came thanks to the various Cathartic Social Media Experiences in which I participated.

Further, my position as a member of the culture also provided respondents with a sense of trust while participating in the interview, leading them to be more candid and forthcoming in their responses. Because these women viewed me as “one of them,” my knowledge, in some cases, informed their responses, helping to build knowledge about educated and professional Black women in America.

For scholars considering this method with experiences that may be traumatic to them, I would recommend finding a way to ground yourself, either through speaking with your therapist as you work through this area of information gathering and/or utilizing the tools you used to work through the initial feelings you faced. I did both and added in constant conversations with the group of friends I leaned on for support during that tough time.

**In-depth interviews.** In a 2014 editorial, Jamshed wrote that the interview is the “most common format of data collection in qualitative research.” In-depth interviews for this study were used. In hindsight, I believe utilizing unstructured interviews would have given richer data as there would have been no restrictions on time and no expectation of sticking to the prewritten questions. Answers to some of the questions asked could have greatly benefitted from follow-up questions. I do believe that interviews of any sort seemed to be the right approach for these women for this particular study because the women were more candid and expressive than they could have been through a quantitative surveys. The women also expressed feelings of being in a safe space to be candid in their answers thanks to the anonymity and speaking with someone who ‘looks
like them’ and who ‘could/would understand’ them and their concerns without judgement.

As a ‘recovering journalist’, I relied heavily on minimal encouragers to let responders know I was actively listening and my note-taking skills during interviews to capture things I picked up on like changes in intonation that indicated some sort of discomfort, i.e. stress, amusement, sadness, etc., as well as body language and facial expressions, when available. For researchers looking to utilize interviews for studies that require respondents to go to places that may cause a surge in emotions, I would recommend beginning with demographic and contextual questions to alleviate initial feelings of discomfort or concern and to establish a rapport.

The main thing that worked to my advantage when recruiting respondents for interviews was utilizing the snowball method via email and social media posts. I emailed women I knew who fit the category from all of my networks, i.e. classmates, friends, my sorority, friends of friends, and asked them to participate and share the message with others. I also posted two social media posts – one static and the other a video – on February 28 and asked my friends and followers on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok to forward to women they knew who fit the criteria. Within two days, I received forty-two responses to the messages of acquaintances, friends, friends of friends, followers, and their followers. By April 8, I completed twenty-six interviews. This is not a common occurrence. The only explanation I have is, based upon asking the women what made them participate, they saw a study that applied to them that was being conducted by one of them and they wanted to help.
Practical Implications

Nearly four years removed from the onset of a global pandemic, a highly volatile election season, and an international uprising in response to state sanctioned murders of Black people in the United States at the hands of police – we have more information about COVID-19, yet, people are still being infected, we are in the throes of another highly contentious election season, and Black people are still being abused and murdered at the hands of police. In addition, Black communities remain disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and Black women remain more vulnerable and susceptible to unfavorable health outcomes due to persistent marginalization and systemic racism (Chandler, et al., 2021).

While entertainers, regular people, and everyone in between worked together for the better part of a year to keep each other distracted while being safe at home, there still exists a need for research about and mental health care specifically targeted to Black women at every age group, level of education, socioeconomic, marital, and parental status. Though mental health care is available to all, it is not always offered, encouraged, or accessible to Black women. As Walton pointed out in her 2021 study, the transboundary crisis took a “toll on the psychological well-being of Black women that none of us can afford to underestimate or overlook.” In the same way that many Americans – not all – made a collective effort to wear masks, socially distance themselves, and get vaccinated, it will take a similar, community effort to confront the realities of being undervalued, essential to the efficiency of the entire country, not being believed by healthcare workers, and creating environments that allow us to shed the
stereotypical tropes of having to be a superhero, impervious to all things, especially mental illness.

Just as music has the power to soothe the savage beast, when coupled with social media, it also had the power to form communities to entertain and soothe many Black women who lived with the symptoms of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and cabin fever. The findings of this study can help healthcare professionals, therapists, activists, political figures, and everyone in between who seek to have culturally competent conversations that lead to solutions more widely accessible information and resources to adequately address the disparities in mental healthcare for Black women in lieu of providing temporary relief for persistent ailments.

The practical approach is to advance these conversations in the same way a major brand would create a marketing campaign for a relaunch of a legacy brand or a traditional product. The mental health of Black women in crisis is not a new phenomenon. What does seem to be a new phenomenon is the wide acceptance of “self-care,” thanks to celebrities and influencers who fit into the millennial generation “co-opting” the concept (Silva, 2017). Self-care is the compact way of telling people to “take care” of themselves, however, it seems that the effort to ensure people participate in the practice begins and ends in the commercial space with the advertisement of products and services that offer temporary dopamine hits. This presents an opportunity for mental health providers, community-based organizations, and national health agencies like the National Institute of Mental Health, Substance Use and Mental Health Services Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to partner with commercial companies as well as performers, celebrities and nonprofit organizations to sponsor music-based CSMEs that
both provide the entertainment factor during high-stress times of the year and information and access to mental health services for women, especially Black women, who are in need of services.

If society insists on continuing the practice of leaning on Black women for their unpaid, unappreciated mental, emotional, and physical labor, it is imperative that everyone else, especially scholars, not only care about the mental health and well-being of the group, but they must also participate in creating safe spaces online and off, while actively working to guarantee that Black women and their challenges are adequately researched, solutioned, and invisible no more.

**Direction for Future Study**

The scope of this study specifically included women who identify themselves as Black, between the ages of 35-45, and living in the United States during the transboundary crisis of 2020. For future study of this topic, I would recommend expanding the scope to include men, who are also Black, within the same age group, and living in the U.S. during that time. An additional scope would include expanding to different regions of the United States as the women in this study were primarily located in the same regions – fourteen of the twenty-six lived in the Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern regions of the country, seven lived in the Midwest, four in the state of New York, and one in the Southwest.

In further studies, I would recommend expanding the study to Black women in other age demographics, geographical regions, and additional levels of educational
attainment to include respondents who may not have completed high school, as well as those who did complete high school. I would also recommend adding Black men of various ages, levels of education, and geographical placement to the study, as well as other forms of CSMEs like online gaming. Additional groups to add for future studies include American expatriates to this conversation to hear about their experiences living abroad during the transboundary crisis of 2020, Black journalists, healthcare professionals, and social activists.

Completing qualitative studies that center Black people and their experiences add new and necessary voices to the body of knowledge that have been censored or silenced. It is imperative to leverage the tools and strategies that resonate with diverse groups – especially Black women – to maximize the impact of health communication across all platforms – especially music, social media and any new media that follows. Perhaps utilizing all these tools will help us all get to the place that offers relevant, culturally competent, health-related information for us all

“You got a fast car, I want a ticket to anywhere
Maybe together we can get somewhere.
Any place is better
Starting from zero, got nothing to lose
Maybe we’ll make something
Me, myself, I got nothing to prove” (Chapman, 1988)
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Appendices

Appendix A. Email Recruitment

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Tiffany S. Jones, and I am a Doctoral Candidate at the School of Journalism, University of Missouri. I am writing to invite you to participate in an interview for my dissertation, titled “Let It Breathe: Online Musicking Practices Among Black Women in Coping with Mental Health Struggles During Transboundary Crisis.”

You are eligible to participate in this study because your background fits with the subject matter as you identify as a Black woman in the United States between the ages of 35-45 who regularly watched and/or participated in DJ D-Nice’s Club Quarantine, DJ Jazzy Jeff’s Magnificent House Party, Verzuz, or DJ Cassidy’s Pass the Mic in 2020. The purpose of this research project is to examine the ways in which Black women in the U.S., aged 35-45 utilized social media, particularly Instagram, and music to cope with symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as the stress during the transboundary crisis of the COVID-19 quarantine, social justice movements, and political polarization in the United States in 2020.

Your participation will be beneficial for the success of the project and ultimately increase knowledge about coping tools and community building practices of Black women in stressful times. The interview, via Zoom, is expected to last 60-90 minutes. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to revoke your consent at any time.

If you would like to participate or you have any questions and would like additional information about this study, please email me at tsjones@mail.missouri.edu or call me at 910-316-8831.

Please share this with others you know who fit into this demographic. Thank you for your consideration, I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Tiffany S. Jones
Appendix B. Consent Form

Written Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title: Let It Breathe: Online Musicking Practices Among Black Women in Coping with Mental Health Struggles During Transboundary Crisis

Principal Investigator Name: Tiffany S. Jones, Principal Investigator; Yong Volz, advisor

IRB Assigned Project Number: #2095605

Key Information About the Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The purpose of the research study is to examine the ways in which Black women in the U.S., aged 35-45 utilized social media, particularly Instagram, and music to cope with symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as the stress during the transboundary crisis of the COVID-19 quarantine, social justice movements, and political polarization in the United States in 2020. You are being asked to participate in an interview via Zoom that is expected to last 60-90 minutes. While this study will have no potential for direct benefit, the potential benefit for the community includes learning the ways in which online musicking experiences may help mitigate the symptoms of depression and anxiety within the 35-45 age group of people who identify as women and Black.

Some possible risks may include a breach of confidentiality, revisiting bad times or emotions, or embarrassment.

Please read this form carefully and take your time. Let us know if you have any questions before participating. The research team can explain words or information that you do not understand.

Research is voluntary and you can choose not to participate. If you do not want to participate or choose to start then stop later, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Purpose of the Research

You are being asked to participate in this study because your background fits with the subject matter as you identify as a Black woman in the United States between the ages of 35-45 who regularly watched and/or participated in DJ D-Nice’s Club Quarantine, DJ Jazzy Jeff’s Magnificent House Party, Verzuz, or DJ Cassidy’s Pass the Mic in 2020. The purpose of the study is to examine the ways in which Black women in the U.S., aged 35-45 participated in social media, particularly Instagram, and music to cope with symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as the stress during the transboundary crisis.

**What will happen during the study?**

You are being asked to participate in an interview via Zoom. Your participation is expected to last 60-90 minutes.

There will be about 20-25 women participating in this study.

**What are the expected benefits of the study?**

This study will have no potential for direct benefit. However, the potential benefit for the community includes learning the ways in which online musicking experiences may help mitigate the symptoms of depression and anxiety within the 35-45 age group of people who identify as women and Black.

**What are the possible risks of participating in this study?**

There are minimal risks expected when taking part in this study. There are some that we know about and some may not know about yet. Some possible risks include a breach of confidentiality, revisiting bad times or emotions, or embarrassment.

To help lower these possible risks, the information you provide will be kept confidential and only the researcher will have access. The interview will be recorded and stored on OneDrive in a password protected folder.

We will tell you about any new important information we learn that may affect your decision to continue to participate in this study.

What other choices do I have if I don’t want to be in this study?

You are not required to be in this study. You can simply choose not to participate. You can look for other research projects you may be interested in instead of this study.

**Will I receive compensation for taking part in this study?**

You will not be compensated for taking part in this study.

**Are there any costs for participating in this study?**

You should not expect any additional costs by participating in this study.

Other costs to you from being in this study may include transportation, parking, childcare, and/or time off work.

You should discuss any questions about costs with the researchers before agreeing to participate.

**Will information about me be kept private?**
The research team is committed to respecting your privacy and keeping your personal information confidential. We will make every effort to protect your information to the extent allowed by law.

Your records will be given a code name and will not contain your name or other information that could identify you. The code name that connects your name to your information will be kept in a separate, secure location.

When the results of this research are shared, we will remove all identifying information so it will not be known who provided the information. Your information will be kept as secure as possible to prevent your identity from being disclosed.

What we collected from you as part of this research will not be used or shared for future research studies. It will only be used for purposes of this study.

We may share what we collected from you as part of this research, after removing your identifiers, for future research without additional informed consent from you.

Who do I contact if I have questions or concerns?

If you have questions about this study or experience a research-related injury, you can contact Tiffany S. Jones at 910-316-8831 or tsjones@mail.missouri.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 573-882-3181 or muresearchirb@missouri.edu.

The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights and welfare of participants are protected.

If you want to talk privately about any concerns or issues related to your participation, you may contact the Research Participant Advocacy at 888-280-5002 (a free call) or email muresearchrpa@missouri.edu.

Do I get a copy of this consent?

You will receive a copy of this consent for your records.

We appreciate your consideration to participate in this study.

Consent Signatures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject’s Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix C. Before Script

**Original**

Good afternoon, I am Tiffany S. Jones, a Ph.D. candidate at the Missouri School of Journalism. Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed about the online musicking practices of Black women between the ages of 35 and 45 during the 2020 quarantine. This interview is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop at any time. I have allotted 60-90 minutes for this interview.

Please answer in as much detail as possible.

**Edited**

Hello, I am Tiffany S. Jones, a Ph.D. candidate at the Missouri School of Journalism. Thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed about the online musicking practices of Black women between the ages of 35 and 45 during the 2020 quarantine. This interview is completely voluntary, and you are free to stop at any time. I have allotted 60-90 minutes for this interview, but I will try to stick as close to the 60 minutes as possible. Please answer in as much detail as you deem necessary.
Appendix D. Final Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Answers</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic:</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation/Essential Employee</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contextual</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The year 2020 was wrought with COVID-19, high profile murders of Black people by police, protests, and a highly volatile election season. How would describe your experiences with all those things?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental Health</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe for me the state of your mental health prior to 2020.</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you say the crises of 2020 affected your mental health?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What are some tools and strategies that you found useful when coping with symptoms of anxiety and depression?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How have those tools and strategies changed since 2020?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Media</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you been a user of social media and describe to me your overall experience with social media?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons many users give for their use of social media include keeping in touch with family and friends, and some even use it to</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
expand their knowledge or for entertainment purposes. What are some reasons you use social media?

Describe the connections you’ve made or strengthened, and the communities you’ve built or joined on social media.

How would you say those connections and communities helped manage stress in 2020?

What practices for stress management have you adopted from these connections and communities that you continue to put into practice?

**Music**

Describe the role music plays in your life.

How does music affect your mood?

Since the existence of Black people in America, music has essentially been a narrator of the times in which we lived. Tell me about three songs that narrate the most pivotal times of your life.

What was the role of music during your quarantine (shelter-in-place) experience in 2020?

What song(s) were most pivotal for you in that time?

How do music and social media intersect for you?

How often do you share music on your social media feeds and why do you share the music you do?

**Cathartic Social Media Experiences**

How often did you participate in Club Quarantine | Verzuz | Magnificent House Party | Pass the Mic | Other(s)?

What about it made you return?

Describe your experience while participating
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You participated in several of these experiences, describe for me the differences and similarities of your experiences with these events.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you say participating in these events helped you cope with any symptoms of anxiety or depression in 2020?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Experiences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define Blackness? What makes you Black?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What are some experiences that you consider to be uniquely Black and American?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What immediately comes to mind when you hear the phrases, “Strong Black Woman” and “Black Girl Magic?”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Black people have created their own spaces within larger ones for generations. Tell me about your experiences within these spaces like Black Twitter/IG/Tik Tok.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you familiar with the concepts of collective trauma and healing – it seems that so many experiences that are uniquely Black and American fit into those categories. How do you believe these experiences of Club Quarantine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get the Mic</td>
<td>Others compare to those?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alias</td>
<td>Marital Status (S/M/D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aretha – 10</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyoncé – 26</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanté – 17</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana – 2</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deborah – 1</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana – 6</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erykah – 3</td>
<td>Engaged/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith – 21</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladys – 22</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather – 13</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India – 23</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet – 7</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill – 12</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauryn – 8</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa – 27</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marianna – 16</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary – 11</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan – 20</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>Nina</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patti</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phyllis</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix F. Respondent Music Choices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Pivotal Times</th>
<th>Transboundary Crisis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Aretha – 10   | • A Change is Gonna Come – Sam Cook  
                 • Let It Be – The Beatles  
                 • What’s Going On – Marvin Gaye | • Emily King – Earthquake & A Boy is a Gun; Tyler the Creator;  
                                                                 • Mood Forever – Beyoncé |
| Beyoncé – 26  | • I Didn’t Know My Own Strength – Whitney Houston  
                 • Changes – 2Pac  
                 • At Your Best – Isley Brothers or Aaliyah | • Marvin Gaye’s music  
                                                                 • Music about the movement and struggles of Black people |
| Chanté – 17   | • Maxwell – Urban Hang Suite  
                 • Janet Jackson – Rhythm Nation  
                 • Lauryn Hill – The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill | • The Preacher’s Wife Soundtrack  
                                                                 • Kirk Franklin & the Family |
| Dana – 2      | • Erykah Badu – Me from American Progress  
                 • Musiq – Moment in Life  
                 • Dramatics – Just Shopping, Not Buying Anything  
                 • Dramatics – Beautiful People | • Hannah Gardner – Heartbeat  
                                                                 • Aly-us – Follow Me  
                                                                 • Mos Def – Get to Steppin’ |
| Deborah – 1   | • Anything by N’Sync  
                 • Baduism by Erykah Badu – Apple Tree  
                 • I’m Coming Out by Diana Ross | • Player by 112  
                                                                 • You Oughta Know by Alanis Morissette |
| Diana – 6     | • G-Unit’s first album  
                 • Celine Dion – Back to Life  
                 • Rowboat Kitty – | • King Von |
| Erykah – 3    | • Jay-Z – Regrets  
                 • Jay-Z – Moment of Clarity  
                 • Mary J. Blige – My Life  
                 • Lewis York – Enjoy You | • Monaleo – Beatin’ Down the Block  
                                                                 • Durand Bernarr – E-shay and Hezekiah – Pressure  
                                                                 • Johnny Popcorn – Secret  
                                                                 • Ozy Reigns |
| Faith – 21    | • My Life – Mary J. Blige  
                 • Can’t You See – Total ft. Biggie Smalls  
                 • Night to Remember – Shalamar | • Thinking of You – Sister Sledge  
                                                                 • Jodeci; Boyz II Men; Dru Hill; Jeff Redd |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Songs</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Gladys – 22     | • Coconut Oil – Lizzo  
• The Glow – The Last Dragon Soundtrack  
• Level Up – Ciara | • Tender Love – Force MDs  

| Heather – 13    | • I Almost Let Go – Kurt Carr  
• Invisible – Jennifer Hudson  
• I Hope You Dance | Played a lot of old R&B, even before Verzuz; late 90s and early 2000s  

| India – 23      | • Wonderful – India.Arie  
• Simple – India.Arie  
• The Greatest Love of All – Whitney Houston | N/A  

| Janet – 7       | • 2Pac – Greatest Hits  
• Janet Jackson – All for You  
• Rod Wave | • Teena Marie – I’m Still Loving You  
• Destiny’s Child – Survivor  
• Kevin Gates – Titanic |

| Jill – 12       | • Emancipation of Mimi album – Mariah Carey  
• Beyonce – Formation  
• My President is Black – Jay Z | • Toni Braxton –  
• Charlie Wilson –  
• Foreign Exchange – I love them with my whole heart  
• HER –  
• J. Brown –  
• Joe –  
• Ledisi –  
• Stokely –  
• PJ Morton – |

| Lalah – 18      | • I Like It – DeBarge  
• Purple Rain – Prince (the album)  
• Formation – Beyonce | • Cool Off – Missy Elliot  

| Lauryn – 8      | • Love’s In Need of Love – Stevie Wonder  
• Purple Rain Soundtrack – Prince  
• New Agenda – Janet Jackson | • Black Parade – Beyonce  
• Someday We’ll All Be Free – Donny Hathaway  
• Near the Cross – Mississippi Mass Choir |

| Lisa – 27       | • Miseducation of Lauryn Hill  
• Faith – George Michael  
• Dirty Dancing Soundtrack | N/A  

| Marianna – 16   | • Purple Rain – Prince  
• What’s the 411, My Life, & Mary – Mary J. Blige | • I was playing songs I already knew;  
• Gracie’s Corner |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Songs/Comments</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embrya – Maxwell (around college graduation)</td>
<td>Who is Jill Scott? – Jill Scott Fred Hammond &amp; Radical for Christ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Megan – 20</td>
<td>Don’t Leave Me This Way – Thelma Houston Center of My Joy – Richard Smallwood Ambitionz as a Rider – 2Pac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy – 25</td>
<td>I Am Not My Hair – India.Arie Fantasy – Earth Wind &amp; Fire Any song with the word healing in it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina – 5</td>
<td>ABC – Iesha Jill Scott – The Real Thing Beyonce – Renaissance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patti – 9</td>
<td>No More Drama – Mary J. Blige The Reckless Love of God – Bethel Jireh – Maverick City Music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phyllis – 24</td>
<td>This Too Shall Pass – India.Arie The Point of It All – Anthony Hamilton Sunday Morning – Maroon 5 Ribbon in the Sky – Stevie Wonder When I See You – Fantasia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina – 14</td>
<td>India.Arie – Get It Together India.Arie – I am Liked India.Arie – Strength Courage &amp; Wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toni – 19</td>
<td>Protect Ya Neck – Wu Tang Clan Triumph – The Next Movement – The Roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitney – 4</td>
<td>Major – This is Why I Love You Michael Jackson – Working Day &amp; Night Bone Thugs N Harmony – First of Tha Month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Johnny Kemp – Just Got Paid | Inspiration of Gospel on vinyl  
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------
|                            | Off the Wall on vinyl               |
## Appendix G. MMR Subscale

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MMR subscale</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Entertainment</strong> – creating nice atmosphere and happy feeling to maintain or enhance current positive mood</td>
<td>“I guess [music brought] relief and entertainment or relaxation. As it is in my everyday life without even forcing. It wasn't relief, it was like a zoning out, let's just do it. Go on and hope for the days when we can get out back in world.”  – Lisa</td>
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<td><strong>Revival</strong> – person renewal, relaxing, and getting new energy from music when stressed or tired</td>
<td>“For mood boosting. You know, it's hard when you get up and you don't really got nothing to do. I never been there before so I'm like, ‘Alright, what am I supposed to do?’ So making sure I'm listening to uplifting music while I'm getting dressed or going for a walk, it was really important.  – Phyllis</td>
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<td><strong>Strong Sensation</strong> – inducing and strengthening intense emotional experiences</td>
<td>“[Music] brought me and my husband closer, because, of course, we met on some music stuff, and then, when Verzuz came out. So, he was able to, even before they started streaming it on YouTube, he had some way of streaming it on our TV, the phone. So, we were watching it. And we'll just have date night.”  – Erykah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diversion</strong> – forgetting unwanted thought and feelings with the help of pleasant music</td>
<td>“Yeah, that was the role – keeping my house alive with music. Music was on and it kept me moving.”  – Marianna</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Discharge</strong> – release of negative emotions through music that expresses these emotions</td>
<td>&quot;OK, you can tell what kind of a mood I'm in by what I'm listening to. I've always been like that Like, typically if I'm not in a good space and I'm not in a good mood, I listen to like Samba music from like the 50s or I listen to like jazz, or I listen to like something that's in theory going to make me less angry, right? So, if you hear me blast Wu Tang (Clan), I must be in a really good mood, right?”  – Toni</td>
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</table>
| Mental Work – using music as a framework for mental contemplation and clarification of emotional preoccupations | “… especially during the protest, I actually found a protest playlist off Spotify. And it would be like old lectures from Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. But then, like songs from like the 50s that were just like protests songs. And so that was nice because it was putting me in the spirit for when I'd go in the protest. But also, it was like I was just starting to see the connections between how we've been fighting for the same stuff for so long, and the things we wanted have been about the same things. And it's different styles of music, but it's still the same message, so that that really helped me to just feel connected when it felt really hopeless with the racism stuff which you know sometimes it's still does. But it's like, ‘OK, well, we have made some progress since they made this song, and we're gonna make a little more progress now.’ So that was really helpful.”
– Megan |
| Solace – searching for comfort, acceptance, and understanding when feeling sad and troubled | “It definitely helped get through, especially D-Nice. He played a lot of the stuff from the 90s and it put me back to happier times. You know it kind of helped you step out of your reality. You forgot about Covid for that moment that everyone on there was in their home listening to the same thing you were listening to and we're all making the most of it.
– Whitney |
VITA

Tiffany S. Jones is the Associate Vice Chancellor for Strategic Communication at Elizabeth City State University in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. In December 2023, she took the reins as the university’s chief communications and marketing where she leads and manages marketing, media, social media, brand management strategy, as well as internal and external communications, execution, and evaluation. As a member of the Chancellor’s Cabinet, Jones provides leadership and strategy, works closely with the Chancellor and senior leadership team for strategic communication-related events and crises. She is charged with creating the vision for and leading the implementation of a proactive, innovative, and comprehensive marketing, communications, and branding strategy that highlights the university’s strengths, bolsters its ambitions, expands its regional and national profiles, and increasingly engages and informs internal constituents and external audiences.

Prior to entering doctoral studies at the University of Missouri, Jones spent eight years in the Office of University Relations at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, following nearly a decade as a reporter for newspapers in Tennessee and North Carolina. In that time, she covered public safety, local government, education, and general assignments.

She hails from the Dear Old Town of Fairmont, North Carolina and is a proud graduate of N.C. A&T and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she earned her B.S. in journalism and mass communication with a concentration in print journalism and her M.A. in mass communication with a concentration in strategic communication, respectively.