The Black woman student experience: Black identity, activism, and fashion on the college campus

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The Black woman student experience: Black identity, activism, and fashion on the college campus

by

Dyese L. Matthews

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Apparel Merchandising and Design

Program of Study Committee:
Kelly L. Reddy-Best, Major Professor
Sara Marcketti
Jeanne Dyches

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2020

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving, sweet, and funny Auntie PeeWee. Thank you for always loving me and supporting me, we miss you. I also dedicate this thesis to my loving support system (loved ones, family, friends) who continually keep me encouraged through advice and prayer. And finally, I dedicate this thesis to Black women—keep shining sis! Psalm 46:5.
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ABSTRACT

Historically, Black people have, along with other forms of resistance, used aspects of dress and their appearance to defy and reject racism, oppression, and discrimination (Baxter & Marina, 2008; Ford, 2015). Black women specifically have used dress and appearance as a form of resistance to oppression and as a means for expressing their Black identity (Ford, 2015; Miller, 2016; O’Neal, 1998). To build on past work, in this thesis I examine how Black women use dress and appearance as an embodied practice and as a way to negotiate both their Black and activist identities. I focus on a particular space and time: campus life at predominantly white institutions during the Black Lives Matter movement era from 2013 to 2019. Examining Black college women’s experiences on predominately white college campuses is of importance because of the historical connection between United States colleges and Black empowerment as numerous Black activist movements started either at predominately white institutions or by college-aged people (Cohen, 2018; Morgan & Davies, 2012). Understanding these experiences will add to our knowledge of how Black women continue to resist oppression and express their Black identity through dress, adding to the much-needed modern-day history of Black people. Additionally, examining Black women’s experiences in research recognizes their stories as important through counterstorytelling (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), allowing Black women to write their own history in their own voices.

To achieve my purpose, I conducted in-depth interviews with photo and garment elicitation components with 15 Black women college students between the ages of 18-28 who are currently attending predominately white institutions in Iowa. Critical race theory informed my data collection and analysis processes (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
After analysis of the data, I found that the Black women participants had significant, identity-affirming experiences at predominately white institutions in Iowa, and these experiences informed their dress and appearance practices in relation to expressions of Black and activist identities. Across the interviews, three larger themes were identified in relation to expressions of Black and activist identities: (1) experiences on campus, (2) Black identity through dress and appearance, and (3) activist identity through dress and appearance. Numerous subthemes were also identified within the larger themes. Participant quotes and images were utilized to support the themes. Much of the findings of my research were supported by past literature, including reports of Black student experiences at predominately white institutions (Chen & Hamilton, 2015; Eakins & Eakins, 2017), individual’s identities continually evolving and becoming (Kaiser, 2012), and the historical significance of Black and activist styles being used by Black people to express their identities (Ford, 2015; Lewis, 2003; O’Neal, 1998; Robinson, 2008). Affirming past research, as well as adding to the literature, this research provides insight on how Black women continue to use dress to empower themselves while facing racism and discrimination on the college campus, as well as information to apparel brands that might target these consumers allowing them to express their many identities through products available on the market.

After an analysis of the themes, I propose the following substantive theory, or a theory that is transferable to additional studies that have similar context to this study, to further explain the results (Glaser & Strauss, 1967); Black women college students have both positive and negative experiences on campus while attending predominately white institutions, which ultimately informs their everyday dress and appearance practices related to subtle and overt expressions of Black and activist identity.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Historically, and currently, Black people in the United States have faced overt, systematic acts of racism, oppression, and discrimination (Taylor, 2016). Black people have initiated civil rights and activist movements aimed at accessing equity in efforts to overcome these adversities. The Civil Rights Movement, which took place in the 1950s and 1960s (Wilson, 2012), the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, founded in 1961, and the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, founded in 1966 (Ford, 2015) comprise some of these 20th century movements. Although these activist movements mostly took place in the mid and latter parts of the 20th century, the need for 21st century activist movements still exist as there is still a need for Black people to continue to fight against the same inequities experienced by Black people of the past. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement is one of the prominent modern-day Black activist movements. BLM started in 2013 after the murder of Trayvon Martin, who was shot and killed by a neighborhood-watch patrol person who was acquitted of all charges related to Martin’s murder (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018; Taylor, 2016). Due to the present cultural and political climate in the United States, many people demand the continuance of resistance against Black oppression with aspirations to empower the Black community and encourage an authentic Black identity (Hill, 2017).

Dress and appearance practices are one way individuals express and negotiate their identity and resist different forms of oppression, racism, and discrimination (Kaiser, 2012). Within the numerous Black activist movements, people have intentionally used dress and appearance practices to express and show pride in their Black identity in addition to expressing

1 While the APA guidelines state that racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized, as a Black feminist, I purposefully capitalize the “B” in Black and not the “W” in white to combat against the systems of white supremacy in U.S. vocabulary.
solidarity with activist movements (Ford, 2015; Kaiser, 2012). For example, Black and Latino men wore zoot suits, or suits made with an excessive amount of fabric, as a rebellious symbol against hegemonic masculinity following World War II in the 1940s (Peiss, 2011). During that same time, society deemed zoot suits unpatriotic because of the excessive fabric used in their construction (Kaiser, 2012; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). Zooters, as they were referred, were targeted because of their sartorial choices, yet actively dressed in a way that embodied self-pride and resisted racial and economic oppression (Tortora & Marcketti, 2015).

To build on past work, I examine how Black women college students use dress and appearance practices as a way to negotiate both their Black and activist identities. I focus on a particular space and time: campus life at predominantly white institutions (PWI) in Iowa during the Black Lives Matter Movement era from 2013 to 2019. Using critical race theory to inform my work, I ask these research questions about Black women college students:

1. How do they use dress and appearance practices at PWIs to express their activist and/or Black identity?

2. How do their experiences at PWIs influence these dress and appearance practices?
   a. More specifically, how do experiences of oppression and/or empowerment at PWIs influence these dress and appearance practices?

In answering these questions, I examine how Black women college students express their identities through their dress and appearance practices during unpredictable and intense cultural and political climates in the United States while attending a PWI. This study aims to increase the understanding of Black women’s experiences expressing their intersecting identities through dress and appearance, specifically through counterstorytelling—a major tenet of critical race theory. Additionally, my work will emphasize the potential impact that Black activist movements
continue to have on negotiating Black and activist identity through dress and appearance. Understanding this impact will add to our knowledge of how Black women continue to resist oppression and empower themselves adding to the much needed modern-day history of Black people. Additionally, examining Black women’s experiences in research recognizes their stories as important through counterstorytelling, allowing Black women to write their own history in their own voices.

**Thesis Organization**

Chapter One, the current chapter, includes the introduction to the study, which provides a brief introduction to the importance of the study by citing relevant literature, the research questions, and the overall purpose of the study. I include key concept definitions and my positionality statement as it relates to this research. Chapter Two includes an in-depth review of literature explaining the history of racism and Black activist movements including the Black Lives Matter Movement, as well as the role that dress and appearance practices and identity have played historically and today for the Black community. Chapter Two concludes with an explanation of critical race theory, the theory informing my study. In Chapter Three, I provide an in-depth explanation of the research design as well as a reflexivity statement of myself as the researcher. Chapters Four and Five include the results and discussion of the research, respectively. A comprehensive reference list follows Chapter Five. The Appendices include the interview schedule including a demographic survey, participant recruitment flyer, informed consent document, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter, the code book, and images from the resulting mounted exhibit that ran in the Textiles and Clothing Museum from February 3 to April 17, 2020.
Definitions

**Activism** – the act of supporting and/or fighting for a cause (Xiong, Cho, & Boatwright, 2018).

**Black identity** – aspects of the self that relate to one’s Black, African American, or African descent racial status (Rael, 2002).

**Black Lives Matter (BLM)** – “The Black Lives Matter Global Network is a chapter-based, member-led organization whose mission is to build local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes” (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

**Dress and appearance practices** – the actual application of modifications (e.g. styling one’s hair) and/or supplements (e.g. clothing) in relation to the body; these practices influence one’s communication of identities to society (Eicher, 2010; Johnson et al., 2008; Stone, 1962).

**Empowerment** – the dedication of giving power or agency to groups within the context of social justice (Collins, 2009).

**Ethnicity** - a commonality within groups of people who share cultural traits including language, religious beliefs, place of origin, and traditions (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

**Fashion** – a social process that embodies everyday life experiences through styles that are of the time or in vogue (Tulloch, 2010).

**Predominantly white institution (PWI)** – an institution of higher education in which 50% or more of the student enrolment consists of white students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

**Race** – a social construct that attempts to categorize different types of human bodies by physical characteristics (Omi & Winant, 2015).

**Racism** – a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, based on race, restricting access to human rights and material resources (Grosfoguel, 2016).

**Style** – Self agency or control in the construction and/or presentation of self through the use of garments or accessories (Kaiser, 2012; Tulloch, 2010).
Positionality Statement

A positionality statement describes the researcher’s relationship to the context of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Depending on the research topic, researchers may describe their gender, race, age, personal experiences, or other relevant information to the context of the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In identifying with and describing these various identities, researchers become reflective of experiences related to these identities and the influence that these experiences may have on the researcher’s perspective of the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recognizing how one’s own experiences related to identity can influence perspective is important within research as the researcher must be sure to separate their own biases when analyzing experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing refers to purposefully setting aside one’s own biases and preconceived experiences while analyzing data in an effort to fully understand the experiences of the participants—an essential part of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). As the primary researcher of this research project, I aim to recognize my intersecting identities and be reflective on how they may impact the research.

I share many similar identities to the participants of this study. I am a 24-year-old Black woman currently working towards my master’s degree. Since as far back as I can remember, I have always been encouraged by my family to embrace my Black identity and to be proud to be Black. I grew up engulfed in my Black culture, attending family reunions in the South, growing up in a Black church, living in a Black community, and listening to Black music artists. As I transitioned into college and my environment changed from predominately Black to predominately white, I found ways to stay true to my culture and exemplify my Black identity more purposefully. I attended Central Michigan University, a PWI, between 2014-2018 for my undergraduate degree where I studied Fashion Merchandising and Design. My master’s degree will be from Iowa State University, another PWI, in Apparel Merchandising and Design. With
having attended two different PWIs since 2014, I am fully aware of and have experienced what it is like being a Black women college student in a predominately white space during the Black Lives Matter era.

Being in college while witnessing the countless murders of unarmed Black people at the hands of law enforcement and the birth of the Black Lives Matter Movement immensely motivated me to find ways to positively impact and represent Black people. Being at a PWI during this era has presented me with a number of experiences of both subtle and overt discrimination. In efforts to stay encouraged, I would often identify safe spaces on campus where I knew I could be Black comfortably and unapologetically. I joined student organizations that aimed to uplift, educate, and give a voice to the Black community. I embraced my natural hair texture more than I had ever embraced it before even though I was often one of few with my type of hair in many spaces on campus. I purchased shirts that read messages like “Proud Black Woman” and “When Black Girls Win, We All Do” and wore them during campus events. I decided to use my voice, leadership skills, and dress and appearance as a way to exemplify my Blackness while in a predominately white space.

While in undergrad, and continuing into my master’s program, I have discovered that I can merge my love of my Black identity with my admiration for fashion through academic research. I believe that research dedicated to the expression of Black identity through fashion has the potential to create opportunity for a more in-depth understanding of the intersection between Black identity and dress and appearance. This type of research is important because many people use the presentation of themselves as an expression of their identities and the experiences that they have lived through (Goffman, 1959). To understand why someone presents themselves in the ways they do can mean to understand how they interpret their identities and lived experiences
(Goffman, 1959). Specifically, this study aims to understand how Black identity and dress and appearance are related. This is important, in my opinion, because to be Black is powerful and beautiful within itself, therefore, to have a deeper understanding of how people use their bodies to express this power and beauty is activism. With the current political climate that is encouraging the silencing of many marginalized groups, it is important for me to combat those ideals and create space for people’s stories to be heard and appreciated.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter of my thesis, I review literature about the history of racism starting with African slavery in the United States and a brief history of the American Civil War. I also cover the history of and reasoning for Black activist movements in the United States starting with the Civil Rights Movement and ending with the Black Lives Matter Movement. I explore the concepts of race and ethnicity, and the continual development process of one’s identities. Finally, I discuss a number of activist statements made through dress in relation to Black identity from a historical perspective starting in the 20th century.

Racism

Racism refers to the belief that one’s race is superior politically, culturally, and economically to others, or that another racial group is inferior and threatens the wellbeing of one’s superior racial group (Grosfogul, 2016). Since the United States was colonized in the 15th century, racism has been a deeply rooted and systemic issue. Millions of Africans were sold on the Slave Coast of Africa and shipped to western ports in the Americas and the Caribbean during the Transatlantic Slave Trade that began in 1650; this was the start of the documented perpetuation of racism by white people in the Western world (Eltis, 2000; Filler, 1998). Since then, Black people have faced constant racism and discrimination despite efforts to overcome these issues (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Taylor, 2016). Attempts to justify the cultural inferiority of Black people to white people has a long-standing history in the United States (Farmbry, 2009; Taylor, 2016), and has caused Black people to fight for basic rights as U.S. citizens (Jennings, 1992; Wilson, 2012). Although it is the 21st century, and a number of years have passed since the end of slavery, the past history of oppression and discrimination against Black people is still embedded within current U.S. policies and procedures, which often serve as sources of
institutionalized and structural racism (Carbado, 2017; Fisher, 2018; Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Therefore, racism is still a significant issue for Black people in the United States today.

**Brief History of Black Oppression and Activist Movements**

To give a brief context of the history of Black oppression, I first provide an overview of the American Civil War (1861-65), which was one of the most oppressive eras for Black people (Dattel, 2009). Moving forward in time, I then discuss a number of the major Black activist movements during the 20th century and transitioning to the 21st century while acknowledging that the movements mentioned were not isolated. It is important to acknowledge that there were numerous other Black activist movements occurring throughout history including the Harlem Renaissance and the Women’s Movement, yet with the context of this research being the Black Lives Matter Movement, I focus on this era (Banaszak, 2006; Jordan, 2011).

**American Civil War, Black Codes, and Jim Crow**

The American Civil War took place in the United States from 1861 to 1865 between the Union, the northern states, and the Confederate, or the southern states. These two regions fought over the abolishment of African slavery. During the African slavery era, cotton became a global business rooted in slave labor in the southern states of the United States; therefore for Southerners, ending slavery meant a loss of essential forced labor, which would then lead to significant financial losses (Dattel, 2009). When the North proposed an end to slavery and the South disagreed, the Civil War began. Due to a stronger economy, a greater population, and more industrial strength in the Union, the Confederate was defeated in the Civil War (Dattel, 2009). The period after the Civil War, known as the Reconstruction era, took place between 1865 and 1877 (Carlisle, 2008). During Reconstruction, the South aimed to rebuild its economy after destruction from the war (Carlisle, 2008). The South was acrimonious about being defeated and being forced to free slaves. Therefore, to try and maintain power structures, white people in the
South continued to treat Black people as inferior through racist and discriminatory behaviors and actions (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016).

Black Codes, or laws passed in southern states that forced Black people to work for low wages and restricted them from rights such as education and housing accessibility, developed in the 1860s after the Civil War ended were the foundation for Jim Crow laws (Tolnay, Beck, & Sass, 2018). Jim Crow laws were strategies put into place by southern white people to discriminate against and prevent the social mobility of Black people (Tolnay, Beck, & Sass, 2018). Jim Crow Laws became yet another hardship that Black people faced in the United States. Wilson (2013) explained,

Jim Crow determined one’s residence and educational opportunities, dictated one’s behavior and demeanor, and restricted one’s employment and political rights. As a system, it was meant to codify white supremacy and politically, socially, and economically subordinate African Americans living in the American South. (p. 1)

Black Codes were implemented to criminalize people living in poverty, to prevent Black people from attending white schools or having a gun, and to prevent Black people in the South from engaging in leisure activities (Dierenfield, 2004; Taylor, 2016; Ward & Rivera, 2013). Being Black quickly became equivalent to committing a crime in the South, and Black people were arrested at significant rates as compared to white people with little or no reasoning (Hart, 2003; Wilson, 1965).

Black people began to relocate to northern states seeking employment, housing, and equal opportunity in a desperate attempt to escape the Jim Crow South. (Reich, 2014). Known as Black migration, Black people moved north to mining towns in the West while others left for
midwestern cities such as Chicago, causing the Black population in northern cities to grow exponentially (Taylor, 2016; Wilson, 2012). Black people in the North still faced issues of racism and inequity despite relocation for better opportunities. Continued experiences of racism, discrimination, and other inequities are what lead to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States beginning in the middle of the 20th century (Dierenfield, 2004; Wilson, 2012).

**Civil Rights Movement**

Because white people had denied Black people human rights for, the Civil Rights Movement formed and its purpose was to attain rights being denied to Black people in the United States (Levy, 1998). For example, in the mid-20th century, Black people were denied the right to vote and to receive funding for education (Levy, 1998; Rohde & Guest, 2013). According to Wilson (2013), “Blacks not only had to contend with unequal per capita spending for pupils and limited access to educational facilities, they also had to negotiate an education system that promoted intellectual white supremacy and [B]lack inferiority” (p. 10). Civil Rights leaders began to step up and fight for equity as they were determined to make changes and provide equitable opportunities for Black people. Presumably the most monumental moment of the Civil Rights Movement was Thurgood Marshall’s case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, where ‘separate but equal’ in the U.S. school system was dispelled (Dierenfield, 2004; Sargent, 2004). This moment in the legal system laid the foundation for major changes towards equity for Black people.

Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement intentionally utilized public demonstrations to make the struggles of Black people visible. The 1963 March on Washington, with at least 250,000 people in attendance, was the first national demonstration of the Civil Rights Movement, which focused on the countless manifestations of racial discrimination in the United States (Newman, 2004; Taylor, 2016). Through the March on Washington and many other public
protests, The Civil Rights Movement gained momentum and national recognition which was essential to its success (Taylor, 2016). Eventually the U.S. government passed both the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, which aimed to eliminate legal discrimination towards Black people (Riches, 2017; Taylor, 2016). But even after the acts were passed, Black people still battled inequitable access to basic rights such as employment, housing, and education. (Newman, 2004; Riches, 2017; Rohde & Guest, 2013; Taylor, 2016). Debates over the rights of Black people in the United States have continued throughout the 21st century as Black people are still labeled as inferior and unimportant (Taylor, 2016; Ward & Rivera, 2013). Arguably one of the most visible representations of Black people being labeled as inferior in the United States is the continuous, violent killings of unarmed Black people by law enforcement that are, more recently, being captured on camera with modern-day technology (Nguyen, 2015; Taylor, 2016). The Black Lives Matter Movement is one of the most recent political resistance and activist movements that has gained momentum fighting against the continual devaluing of the Black community in the United States (Taylor, 2016).

**Brief Overview: Black Lives Matter Movement**

In 2013, three Black women organizers, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, created the Black Lives Matter Movement, later termed #BlackLivesMatter. The movement started in response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed teenager who lived in Sanford, Florida and was killed by George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman. Zimmerman was acquitted in a court of law for Martin’s murder (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.; Nguyen, 2015). Nguyen (2015) stated,

> Having purchased Skittles and an Arizona Iced Tea from a nearby 7-11 convenience store, Martin was returning to his soon-to-be stepmother’s house in a gated community
while Zimmerman followed him, first in his truck then on foot… A hundred heartbeats later, Zimmerman fatally shot Martin in the chest. (p. 791)

After the brutal murder of Martin and the acquittal of his murder, the killings of unarmed Black people continued (“Mapping Police Violence”, 2019). With the use of modern technology in the 21st century, the killings were captured on video making visible the numerous killings of unarmed Black people by police. Other highly publicized murders of unarmed Black people continued to fuel the movement. For example, in 2014, Michael Brown was stopped by Ferguson, Missouri law enforcement after leaving a convenience store; he was shot six times and killed by officer Darren Wilson (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Brown had become yet another Black, unarmed man killed by a police officer whom the grand jury did not indict (“Ferguson Cop Darren Wilson,” 2014).

With law enforcements continued killings of unarmed Black people, activists in Ferguson began to organize marches, protests, and other public demonstrations demanding justice for those killed by law enforcement (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018). These demonstrations also sought acknowledgement that Black lives do matter (Khan-Cullors & Bandele, 2018). Leaders of BLM utilized public demonstrations due to their effectiveness in past movements such as the Civil Rights Movement. Public demonstrations communicated that the BLM Movement was organized and allowed the movement to continue to gain supporters (“At Least 2,710 Black Lives Matter Protests”, 2019).

Eric Garner’s murder provided another pivotal moment in the BLM Movement. In 2014 Garner was living in Staten Island, New York, when police approached him for selling cigarettes on the sidewalk. In an effort to get Garner to the ground, officer Daniel Pantaleo put Garner in a chokehold (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Garner repeated the phrase “I can’t breathe” until
law enforcement choked him to death. Despite the unnecessary murder of Garner, Pantaleo was not convicted of a crime (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Pantaleo was eventually fired from the New York Police Department (NYPD) in August 2019 (Li, 2019), but sued the NYPD in an effort to get his job back by October 2019 (Madani, 2019). At this time, Pantaleo has not been re-granted his job with the NYPD (Li, 2019). To the BLM Movement, and the Black community in general, this was yet another detrimental loss of life and hope. It was also another reason to continue to educate others on the truths about these killings in an effort to stop these senseless incidents (Taylor, 2016).

In the same year, 2014, 17-year-old Laquan McDonald was suspected to be vandalizing property with a knife in Chicago, Illinois and police were called. McDonald was approached by several officers and squad cars in the street where he was quickly and fatally shot 16 times by officer Jason Van Dyke (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Despite another loss of a young Black life, the outcome of the incident that happened to McDonald is slightly different as officer Van Dyke was found guilty of murder charges and sentenced to 81 months in prison (Chaves, Andone, & Baldacci, 2019).

Today BLM has over 40 chapters nation-wide, building local power to combat violence imposed on Black communities (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.). These BLM chapters act as a voice for Black people in fighting against the racial profiling that often occurs between law enforcement and Black people. Researchers have suggested that historic issues of racial profiling by law enforcement as well as the history of police brutality against Black people are what lead to the killing of Martin and numerous others (Bah, 2006; Hall, Hall, & Perry, 2016; Carbado, 2017). Carbado (2017) suggested that law enforcement is protected by the Constitution and outlined how police officers are able to racially profile Black people under the Fourth
Amendment. Black citizens have expressed confusion over the role of law enforcement within their communities, and whether police presence is for their protection or prosecution (Hall et al., 2016). While law enforcement has the legal authority to racially profile and use deadly force (Carbado, 2017), the Black community is constantly faced with the loss of life. The constant loss of life is evident in the 2017 Police Violence Report that stated, “Black people [are] more likely to be killed by police, more likely to be unarmed, and less likely to be threatening someone when killed” (“Mapping Police Violence”, 2019). The 2017 Police Violence Report found police killed 1,147 people in 2017 and 92% of those killings happened by police shootings, yet officers were charged with a crime for only 13 of those cases (“Mapping Police Violence”, 2019). The over-use of deadly force is apparent in the statistics, which is why members of the BLM Movement continue to fight for justice and equity (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.).

In the next section I disentangle concepts related to race, identity, fashion, and culture. I also define race, ethnicity, Black identity, and dress, and then explore how these concepts interrelate with Black identity and activism.

**Continual Development of Black Identity**

**Race and Ethnicity**

Race is a social construct that individuals use to categorize different types of human bodies by physical characteristics such as skin color or hair type (Kaiser, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2015). Ethnicity is often conflated with race, yet it has a different meaning. Ethnicity refers to a commonality within groups of people who share cultural traits including common language, religious beliefs, place of origin, and traditions (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Both terms, race and ethnicity, have experienced fluidity in meaning over time, yet race is often more specific and identifiable via visual physical characteristics (Kaiser, 2012). The meaning of race has continually changed over time in relation to changes in cultural discourse, societal hierarchies,
and power relations plagued by racism and people’s perception of superiority and inferiority (Grosfoguel, 2016; Kaiser, 2012).

**Black Woman Identity and Culture: Becoming Versus Being**

Before delving into Black identity, it is important to first discuss the depths of the concept of identity. In place of the term identity, Kaiser (2012) uses the phrase subject formation. Subject formation refers to the ongoing process of being or becoming, which is intricately related to the concept of identity (Kaiser, 2012). Prioritizing “becoming” over merely “being” allows for the process of subject formation to take place. As one is discovering their identity it is important to understand the constant negotiation process to get to a full understanding and awareness that our identities continually evolve, shape, and shift over time (Kaiser, 2012). That is, they are not static. Therefore, while I use the term “Black identity” and “activist identity” throughout my thesis, I view this and our other identities as a part of a non-essential, continually evolving way of thinking as outlined by subject formation in Kaiser (2012).

There are a number of terms that individuals with African ancestry use to identify their racial identity. Two common descriptors are Black and African American. It is important to note that “African American” can be used to refer to ethnicity, but the terms “Black” and “African American are often used interchangeably and understood to have the same meaning rather is be racial or ethnic identity (Rael, 2002). After the Civil Rights era, the Black Power ideology was dominant in Black culture and the term *Black* became the common racial identifier amongst people of African descent (Martin, 1991). In the 1980s, the phrase African American was introduced to the Black community by Civil Rights activist Jesse Jackson. Jackson wanted to designate African American as the new identifier of people with African ancestry because he believed that it provided cultural integrity and a relationship with the continent of Africa, which was absent within the term Black (Martin, 1991). Today, both of these terms are used and
sometimes used interchangeably. Throughout this thesis, when referring to racial or ethnic identity, I will use the language from the literature that I am summarizing; additionally, I will honor and use the language preferred by the participants in the results, discussion, and conclusion sections.

Part of the process of determining which racial term to identify with includes forms of racial rearticulation. Kaiser (2012) introduced the concept of *racial rearticulation*, meaning that race is continually revised and re-understood; this relates to the idea that race plays a role in political movements within the Black community as Black people have grown to embrace their Black identity in new and different ways over time (Kaiser, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2015). For example, during the Civil Rights era, racial rearticulation allowed for the rethinking and reclaiming of being/becoming Black, which was different from traditional representations of Black identity; all of which were mostly negative (Craig, 2002; Kaiser, 2012; Omi & Winant, 2015). The ideology of “Black is beautiful” encouraged Black people to see and fully embrace the beauty within themselves (Craik, 1994; Kaiser, 2012). Many Black people embraced the concept “Black is beautiful” with self-expression through dress and appearance while simultaneously making activist statements, for example, overt expressions of Black identity through clothing during political protests or demonstrations (Kaiser, 2012; O’Neal, 1998). Black people used a unique style and dress as a way to express their new understanding, or racial rearticulations, of Black identity within the changing political and cultural contexts (Miller, 2009). During the ongoing process of racial rearticulation, Black people have used dress to express their many identities via “aesthetics, metaphysical beliefs, and attitudes and values” (O’Neal, 1998, p. 170).
Black Woman Identity: Self-definition

Self-definition is another important concept to consider when thinking specifically about Black women’s identities—who are the focus on this thesis. Collins (2009) identifies self-definition as an essential concept in Black feminist thought and defines it as a process in which Black women are becoming fully aware of who they are through their many lived experiences, which is essential to a free mind or free consciousness. Collins (2009) stated, “Rather than viewing consciousness as a fixed entity, a more useful approach sees it as continually evolving and negotiated” (p. 304). With a dynamic consciousness, Black women enhance their ability to resist domination (Collins, 2009). Self-definition and a dynamic consciousness are both unique and made up of motivations and emotions that are valuable when understanding Black women’s resistance and self-identity (Collins, 2009). Black women have often not been afforded the ability to self-define who they are and are frequently defined by imagery and stereotypes around them. Therefore, self-definition is a central idea for Black women in defining themselves, through their own voices, who they are and how they identify as being both Black and a woman.

Brief History of Activist Statements Through Dress in Black Culture

Our different identities/subject formations are often reflected through dress and appearance practices and continually negotiated and renegotiated on an everyday basis (Kaiser, 2012). Black identity is portrayed through particular styles that embody racial identity and pride for the wearer (Miller, 2009). Throughout history, Black people have purposely performed their Blackness through their dress and appearance practice, such as wearing bright colors, bold jewelry, and political statements on their garments in addition to expressing one’s being (O’Neal, 1998). These specific styles have been significant to Black people and have been seen as a way to make overt statements related to Black activism through the fashioned body (Ford, 2015).
Styles reflecting Black identity in the early 20th century that are highlighted in previous literature have been used in numerous ways for expressions of activism. I should note that Black people’s styles before the 20th century certainly reflected Black empowerment ideologies. For example, in the late 19th century, Black women in the southern United States wore headwraps not only for functionality (e.g., protection from the sun) but also arguably as a way to express oneself creatively (Hunt, 1994; Hunt & Sibley, 1994). Additionally, Black people’s styles before the 20th century certainly reflected activist ideologies. However, for my thesis I contextualize within the 20th and 21st centuries due to the focus of my research questions on modern Black student experiences.

1940s

One early example of styles used as expressions of activism is when Black and Latino men wore zoot suits in the 1940s to highlight racial and economic inequities, in addition to using the suit as a symbol of self-empowerment (see Figure 1) (Kaiser, 2012; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015; Tyler, 2008). The effects of WWII created the need to rationalize resources including fabric. This made wearing zoot suits an unpatriotic and rebellious symbol because zoot suits creating zoot suits required large amounts of fabric (Lynch & Strauss, 2015; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015). Zoot suits were comprised of trousers with a high waist and baggy legs that narrowed into tight cuffs. The coat had wide-padded shoulders, a tight bodice, wide lapels, and a knee or floor length hem on the coat (Lynch & Strauss, 2015). Zooters, or those who wore the outfit, were frequently portrayed as criminals by the media (Lynch & Strauss, 2015). There were many instances where, because of their reputation, Black and Latino men wearing zoot suits were attacked by white war veterans, stripped down to their underwear, and left humiliated in the streets (Kaiser, 2012; Lynch & Strauss, 2015). Black men continued to wear zoot suits as
symbols of rebellion and self-empowerment despite the negative connotations that came with wearing the suits (Kaiser, 2012; Tyler, 2008).

Figure 1. Example of a zoot suit that would be worn during the 1940s by Black and Latino men, Photo from https://www.flickr.com/photos/floridamemory/6298592762, n.d.

1960s

During the 1960s, Black people utilized soul style, or a fashionable expression of Blackness, as a way to visibly identify with the Civil Rights era and to be seen as Black enough (Ford, 2015). A common objective during the 1960s was if you were a Black person that did not have a role in some type of Black activist movement, you were often seen as not Black enough due to your lack of effort to empower yourself and your fellow Black community (Ford, 2015). During this time period, Ebony magazine and the Ebony Fashion Fair became prominent influences of embracing Black culture in fashion, providing groundbreaking images and traveling exhibitions of Black styles to the general public (Bivins, 2015). Afrocentric style, or style that is focused on cultures of African origin, were also popular during this time. Afrocentric style is a form of ethnicity as it cultivates cultural traditions (Afrocentric, 2012). Dashikis, a part of Afrocentric style, became popular amongst Black people because they served as a symbol of
African identity and Black pride (see Figure 2) (Ford, 2015; Lewis, 2003; Lynch & Strauss, 2015). A dashiki is a colorful, loose-fitting, pullover shirt traditionally worn by men in East and West Africa (Lynch & Strauss, 2015). When the dashiki became popular in the United States during the 1960s, they were worn as an expression of cultural struggle and Black nationalism (Lynch & Strauss, 2015; Romero, 2012).

![Figure 2. Example of a dashiki that would be worn during the 1960s by Black people. Photo from https://www.flickr.com/photos/scrc/6967382788, n.d.](https://www.flickr.com/photos/scrc/6967382788)

Another use of fashion as an activist statement started in 1961 when student members of the Southern Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wore their Sunday’s Best clothing on a daily basis in an effort to earn respect from white people (Ford, 2015). Founded by Black activist Stokely Carmichael, SNCC was a nationally recognized student led organization located on numerous college campuses seeking rights that were being denied to Black students (Morgan & Davies, 2012). Sunday’s Best clothing included suits for men and modest skirt lengths and high collared blouses for women (Ford, 2015). The student members attempted to earn respect from white people through this style of dressing ultimately failed (Ford, 2015). SNCC members replaced their Sunday’s Best clothing for more functional garments, such as denim overalls,
which aided them with storing flyers during public demonstrations, allowed for re-wear without washing due to durability, as well as a blank canvas for multiple pins that read political slogans that supported their efforts during public demonstrations and protests (Ford, 2015). Ford (2015) stated,

> Overalls were the clothing of choice for sharecroppers because they had multiple pockets for carrying farming tools and supplies. The durable fabric could sustain the wear and tear of work in the fields…Moreover, baggy denim pants and overalls allowed for free range of movement that aided farmers…SNCC women likely found the overalls practical for many of the same reasons that farmers did.

(p. 78)

As the non-violent initiatives of SNCC became stagnant, some of the members became affiliated with more radical movements such as the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP).

Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, two Black, college-educated men, founded The BPP in 1966 (Tyner, 2006). Members of the BPP used their style to communicate Party affiliation (Ford, 2015; Romero 2012). The BPP adopted a paramilitary uniform consisting of hep caps, leather jackets, light blue or black turtlenecks, and black slacks or skirts (Ford, 2015; Lewis, 2003; Lynch & Strauss, 2015; Romero, 2012). This highly identifiable appearance is what set members of the BPP apart from other Black activist organizations and made it apparent that their appearance efforts were intentional and effective.

**1990s**

Moving forward in time, in the 1990s there was a major revolution in Black style as there was a surge of Black owned, hip-hop apparel clothing brands that were created for and by the Black community. The development of Black brands created an environment of Black pride for Black people because the success of Black businesses within fashion was not common during
this time. These brands pushed for department store distribution and propelled Black urban
fashion designers and entrepreneurs into the fashion industry (Romero, 2012).

Daymond John, Carlton Brown, J. Alexander Martin, and Keith Perrin founded one of
these prominent brands, FUBU, in 1992 (Romero, 2012). With the acronym FUBU meaning
“For Us, By Us”, the company earned a capital investment from Samsung International,
expanding its consumer reach internationally (Romero, 2012). FUBU became highly successful
amongst the Black community as Black people saw purchasing from the brand as a way to invest
in the livelihood of Black entrepreneurs within the fashion industry. Purchasing from these
brands also, in some ways, represents a form of Black identity as the term “For Us, By Us” Us
refers to Black people. FUBU is a brand that Black people felt proud of supporting because of
what FUBU embodies—an outward expression of and pride in Black identity (Romero, 2012).

LL Cool J, hip-hop star and rapper, popularized the Kangol hat, another example of a
Black style that was favored during this time (Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Gray, 2013). Prior to LL
Cool J popularizing the hat, the European brand Kangol was not well-known in North American
culture, yet its newly affirmed affiliation with hip-hop culture propelled the brand’s success
within the Black community (Lewis & Gray, 2013). Black people began wearing the Kangol
brand, and the infamous Kangol hat became a staple accessory in urban wear culture during the
late 20th century (Lewis & Gray, 2013; Robinson, 2008). Additionally, urban wear brands such
as Cross Colours and Karl Kani popularized African-inspired prints and colors in hip-hop styles
(Robinson, 2008). These two brands introduced “colorful, stripped, oversized” styles that
became dominant in the wardrobes of actors and actresses in 90s Black television shows such as
2000s

The interrelationship of Black identity and activism is also found in relation to the more recent political movements such as Black Lives Matter, which began in 2013. For example, both Black people and non-Black people began wearing BLM slogan T-shirts, buttons, or related objects on their body (King, 2016). Some examples of slogans or phrases found on apparel that support the BLM Movement include “We Are All Mike Brown”, “Black Lives Matter”, “Stop Shooting Us”, “Say Her Name”, “I Can’t Breathe”, “Am I Next?”, and “Respect Existence Or Expect Resistance” (see Figure 3) (Dahir, 2016; Jaenichelle, 2017). In some instances, wearing BLM supportive gear has been deemed inappropriate in spaces such as courtrooms. For example, in September of 2016 Erika Ballou, public defender in Nevada, entered a courtroom while wearing a pin that read “Black Lives Matter.” The judge instructed Ballou to either take off the pin or hand the case over to another attorney (Kagan, 2018). This example highlights the possible backlash that comes from outward expressions of support of the BLM Movement and in essence Black pride and identity.

Figure 3. Image of protester wearing a garment that reads the phrase "Black Lives Matter". Photo from https://www.flickr.com/photos/diversey/23512016005, n.d.

Another phenomenon in relation to fashion and the BLM Movement emerged when 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed by a neighborhood watchman in Sanford, Florida in 2012.
Trayvon Martin wore a Black hoodie at the time of his murder, which allowed the black hoodie to become symbolic of the BLM movement. Supporters began wearing hoodies to celebrate the life of Martin and as a symbol of solidarity, Black identity, and empowerment (Nguyen, 2015). During the introduction of the hip-hop era in the 1990s, baggy clothing including hoodies worn on Black bodies were often perceived by white America as a threat (Nguyen, 2015; Robinson, 2008). This sweeping generalization and false interpretation that hip-hop style clothing equates to a threat has led to an inaccurate societal norm that states that any Black person wearing a hoodie or streetwear styles is a “criminal”, “thug”, or “urban” and therefore deserves to be racially profiled, harassed, or even killed by law enforcement (Fulton & Martin, 2017; Nguyen, 2015). Wearing a hoodie in honor of Trayvon Martin became an expression of Black and activist identity as wearers used their hoodies to combat racial profiling in order to create positivity around being/becoming Black.

In the next section I discuss some experiences of Black students at PWIs, an important context to consider, as the focus of my thesis is the Black woman student experience at PWIs.

**Black Student Experiences at Predominately White Institutions**

A PWI can be defined as an institution of higher education in which 50% or more of the student enrollment consists of white students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). PWIs offer numerous student organizations for all students to thrive in different spaces, yet these institutions also fail to meet their promises of ensuring diversity on campus and providing as much support as possible to assure four-year success for every student of color at the institution (Chen & Hamilton, 2015; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). Black students at these institutions often have significant difficulties and/or drop out of college at higher rates as compared to students from other racial groups because of the lack of support for students of color.
at PWIs (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Grier-Reed, Ehlert, & Dade, 2011; Thompson, Gorin, Obeidat, & Chen, 2006).

Students that attend college often make the decision as a part of developing their identity (Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). This process of identity development is frequently more challenging for Black students attending PWIs as they often receive less academic and social support services compared to their fellow white classmates (Allen, 1992; Brower & Ketterhagen, 2004). At PWIs, Black students have also expressed experiences of racial discrimination, alienation, and lack of integration into the campus environment (Allen, 1992; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that everyday experiences of “racial demarcation” at PWIs in the forms of microaggressions, avoidance, exclusion, as well as a lack of diversity within classes, faculty, and staff also negatively influence the Black student experience at a PWI (Bailey-Fakhoury & Frierson, 2014, p. 218; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Eakins & Eakins, 2017).

Black college students have actively resisted the many disadvantages of attending PWIs by creating Black student organizations, holding public demonstrations, and creating social media campaigns demanding changes in curriculum and other aspects of their higher education experience (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Jones & Reddick, 2017). Although researchers have shown that these efforts have had positive impacts on Black student experiences at a PWI (Jones & Reddick, 2017), there is a lack of research examining how dress and appearance practices are used by Black, specifically women, college students attending PWIs to negotiate their Black and activist identity on campus. Understanding Black women college student experiences at PWIs during the BLM Movement era is especially important because the uniqueness of these experiences will allow for a deeper understanding of the many reasons behind the dress and
appearance practices of Black women, which enhances the opportunity to empower them within predominately white spaces (Collins, 2009).

**Theoretical Foundation: Critical Race Theory**

To aid in understanding the roles that race, power, and identity play in the experiences of Black women college students at PWIs, I turn to critical race theory (CRT) to inform my thesis. CRT is a theoretical framework that sees and transforms the relationship between race, racism, and power (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Although developed within legal studies, CRT provides a critical lens for analysis of race and racism that is applicable across numerous disciplines (Hall, 2018).

Critical race theory was introduced in an effort to dispel the “color-blind” mentality that played a large role in the Civil Rights era that, although with good intentions, did not address the root causes or spread of racism (Bissonnette, 2016). In an effort to address racism more directly, critical race theory questions foundations of liberal order including equality, legal reasoning, and principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT is comprehensive and includes a number of overarching themes such as empathic fallacy and counterstorytelling (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Empathic fallacy gives marginalized groups the agency to change stereotypical narratives of themselves by offering a different, better narrative (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Ideally, through empathic fallacy, listeners of the revised narrative will show empathy and embrace the new narrative (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Additionally, counterstorytelling uses stories to give a voice to those who are often silenced in an effort to challenge the pernicious narratives often shared about these groups of people (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Racial equity and diversity are reoccurring themes in different institutional and public policies, specifically in the United States (Hall, 2018). Despite this, the historical residue of
racial hierarchy continues to plague the nation as being white continues to translate into having power over people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hall, 2018). CRT is utilized as a tool to understand and dismantle power structures dependent on race (Hall, 2018), where scholars ask questions about privilege, inequity, social power, and other social injustices that involve race.
CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN

Purpose and Research Questions

There is substantial research on dress and appearance practices and how these embodied experiences influence identity (e.g. Johnson, Lennon, & Rudd, 2014). There is also a significant body of literature that analyzes dress and appearance practices specifically for individuals who identify as Black (e.g. Blake, 2019; Ford, 2015; Tulloch, 2010). However, there has been limited research on the role that dress and appearance plays in the lives of Black college women attending predominately white institutions; more specifically, how these dress and appearance practices relate expression of Black identity and/or activism. Although the studies on dress and appearance through a Black identity lens are imperative to understanding the Black experience, it is also important to consider and understand the current cultural climate for Black people in predominantly white spaces to continue to resist white supremacy and oppression. Based upon my review of literature, it appears that no scholars have investigated Black women’s experiences negotiating their identity through dress and appearance practices as forms of resistance, activism, or expression of Black identity within predominantly white spaces during the Black Lives Matter era. Therefore, I focus on a particular space and time: campus life at predominantly white institutions in Iowa during the Black Lives Matter era from 2013 to 2019. To fill this gap in the literature, this study is guided by the following research questions about Black women college students:

1. How do they use dress and appearance practices at PWIs to express their activist and/or Black identity?
2. How do their experiences at PWIs influence these dress and appearance practices?
a. More specifically, how do experiences of oppression and/or empowerment at PWIs influence these dress and appearance practices?

**Participant Recruitment**

I used a qualitative approach for my research and used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling allows for intentional recruitment of particular persons to provide information that is specifically relevant to the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to identify as Black and/or African American; identify as a woman (including both transgender and cisgender women); be a current on-campus college undergraduate or graduate student attending a PWI in Iowa; have pride in their Black identity, were willing to lend garments or accessories for a public museum exhibition in the spring semester of 2020, and was age 18 or older.

To recruit participants, I created digital posters with my research purpose and eligibility requirements, as well as my contact information. I distributed the poster on Facebook and Instagram, via paper copies on campus bulletin boards, and e-mailed to various on-campus student organizations throughout Iowa. After the participant confirmed they met the eligibility criteria, they reviewed and signed the consent form which provided all of the details of the study. Appendix B contains the participant recruitment flyer, and Appendix C contains the informed consent document.

**Data Collection**

To answer the research questions, I used a social constructionism qualitative approach guided by an abbreviated version of grounded theory (Burr, 2003; Willig, 2013). Social

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2 As a part of this thesis, I curated a textiles and clothing focused exhibition at Iowa State University in the Mary Alice Gallery in Spring 2020. The exhibition consisted of 40 objects loaned by participants of the study as well as images collected through participant interviews. Photos of the exhibition can be found in Appendix F. The exhibition provided a rich source of scholarly information in relation to the research topic to the Iowa community with an opening talk and curator-led exhibition tours.
constructionism is an approach that is “concerned with identifying the various ways of constructing social reality” based off of the way people talk about their experiences (Willig, 2013, p. 7). This approach is also based off of the ideas that language and discourse construct reality, and people construct different versions of reality “through the use of language” (Handford & Gee, 2012; Willig, 2013, p. 17). The use of language within this approach is important as it is the tool that allows the researcher to gain knowledge about the research topic (Willig, 2013).

An abbreviated version of grounded theory was used to create new, contextualized substantive theories that are grounded in the data collected for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Willig, 2013). I used an abbreviated version of grounded theory as I did not go back to my participants after the initial interview to collect any further data, as suggested by Willig (2013). I analyzed the original data that I collected, including the demographic survey, in-depth interview transcripts, pictures, and garments or accessories.

Participants completed a short demographic survey via the online survey service, Qualtrics, prior to the in-person interview (Brace, 2013). Appendix A contains the demographic survey. Participants also, prior to the interview, found up to five photographs of themselves since the year 2013 that highlight their clothing style and pride in their Black and/or activist identity. Examples of these images can be seen in Figure 4. Some participants requested to cover their faces in photographs for anonymity. These photographs were used as part of the photo elicitation process during the in-person interview (Joy & Numer, 2017). I specified the year 2013 as this was the year that the BLM Movement was founded (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.).
I conducted an in-depth, semi-structured interview with 15 participants (see Table 1) to allow the participant to talk about their life experiences related to the research topic and research questions (Willig, 2013). Some participants requested pseudonym while others did not. The interview questions functioned as discussion points throughout the interview while I simultaneously maintained control of the interview and the topics of discussion (Willig, 2013, p. 29). I utilized the wardrobe interview method as the interview took place in person at the participants’ home near their closet for accessibility to their clothing and accessories during the interview in order to implement a garment and photograph elicitation portion of the interview (Woodward, 2007). Some interviews took place at public locations within private rooms such as a library study room depending upon the interviewee’s preference. In these instances, the participants brought their clothing items with them to the location for the wardrobe interview. The wardrobe interview method allows for “an in-depth understanding of the multiple…identities that are articulated through the material culture of clothing” (Woodward,
Appendix A contains the interview schedule, which was informed by literature on experiences on the college campus, styling practices within Black culture, and Black identity and activism through dress and appearance (e.g. Allen, 1992; Ford, 2015; Tulloch, 2010).

Table 1. Demographic Information of the 15 Black Women College Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>Area of Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Erica (pseudonym)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donielle</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Pre-business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bianca (pseudonym)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Management Information Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aja (pseudonym)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viveca</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Journalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Elementary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucille</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Apparel Merchandising, Anthropology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black, Liberian</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black, African American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Apparel Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brea</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Black American</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Sociology, Spanish Language, Chinese Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vashalice</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2nd year Masters student</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oni</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Black American</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kara (pseudonym)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black, African American, Afro Latina</td>
<td>3rd year PhD student</td>
<td>Civil Engineering</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis

Each interview was audio and/or video-recorded based on the participant’s preferences. I transcribed the interviews verbatim, and then listened to them a second time while reading the transcriptions to check for accuracy. I analyzed the demographic survey and transcriptions (Neuman, 2011; Willig, 2013). I used the photographs, garments, and accessories to support the survey and transcription analysis. These objects informed my analysis and significantly aided in collection of rich data, but I did not do in-depth photograph or object analyses using visual analysis methods. Data analysis began during the first interview, where I wrote memos and short notes about each interview (Willig, 2013). I created a list of possible categories after the completion of the first interview and continued to add to and revise these categories until the end of data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Analysis Process

I used open, axial, and selective coding, respectively, for my analysis. Open coding is the creation of generally descriptive labels for phenomena (Willig, 2013). Axial coding is when categories are related to their subcategories, which are then labeled and organized (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Finally, selective coding is when all of the categories are unified, and I identify larger themes (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). See Table 2 for an example of my inductive coding process. I constantly moved between the data and my findings in a cyclical process. After analysis of the data, I then interpreted my findings with my theoretical framework and past literature. Collection of data from the interview transcriptions concluded after saturation of the data was reached and no new information emerged during analysis (Neuman, 2011; Willig, 2013).
Table 2. Illustration Representing Inductive Coding Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Conceptual category</th>
<th>Initial code</th>
<th>Focused code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“A safe space for me, I’m in a program called [name of STEM program] that is a minority program for STEM students. We have our own study room in [name of on-campus building]. That is a safe space for us. I go up there to study and to talk to other members of the program.”</td>
<td>Experiences on campus</td>
<td>Feeling safe on campus in specific spaces</td>
<td>Multicultural student offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I have a lot of shirts I wear that say like ‘Black is dope’…and I love to wear those out on campus. One, because when I see another Black person in passing one of us will be like ‘I like your shirt!’ And I know it’s not just that they like it, but the connection there that they like that I’m wearing it proudly.”</td>
<td>Expressing Black identity through dress and appearance</td>
<td>Slogan T-shirts</td>
<td>Feeling connected to other Black students when they acknowledge Blackness in dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I'm not much of a spoken person…but I really try to wear stuff where people go ‘hey, what does that mean?’…I always try to wear stuff that speaks for me when I don’t feel like speaking. I also have a shirt that says, ‘the revolution will be cute as hell.’”</td>
<td>Expressing activist identity through dress and appearance</td>
<td>Educating others through activist clothing</td>
<td>Non-verbal education for others through activist dress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reliability and Validity

Reliability is understood in qualitative research as dependability or consistency (Neuman, 2011). To create and maintain reliability, I was consistent in my interviews, as well as my data
analysis. To do this, I used the same interview schedule for each person. However, I did allow for flexibility during the interviews if a participant wanted to share a related story that was not necessarily related to the current question. During data analysis, I checked intercoder agreement and met a benchmark of 90% or higher in agreement. I used the percent agreement method and collaborated with another coder, my major professor, Dr. Kelly L. Reddy-Best, to check consistency in coding (Neuman, 2011). We independently coded 20% of the data, or 3 transcripts, and then compared codes. To calculate percent agreement, I divided the total number of agreements by the total number of sentences coded (Neuman, 2011), resulting in 90% agreement. Additionally, the use of a codebook with code definitions allowed for a more consistent data analysis process (Neuman, 2011), as I continually referenced it during the analysis process. The code book can be found in Appendix E.

To increase validity, I utilized numerous techniques. First, I worked to establish rapport and trust with the participants so that they would share rich data about their lived experiences during the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted all of the interviews in person so that way I could make eye contact with the participants and also read their body language. Also, I briefly introduced myself at the beginning of the interview and asked them about their day. Body language is especially important as it helped me understand the meaning of what was being said at that moment (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I utilized probes to attain rich descriptions in their answers; for example, I asked “why” or “can you tell me an example” when a participant gave a short answer that was not very descriptive (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I allowed time for participants to answer the questions by consciously pausing after I spoke, recognizing that it takes time to think of responses (Seidman, 2013). I frequently summarized what participants said in the interview and asked them to confirm in order to ensure I understood their experience. I
made sure the transcript included references to what the participant actually meant. For example, the participant might have said something such as “yea, no, uh huh.” I clarified if they agreed or disagreed depending upon the tone and context of the sentence so that way I understood what they were saying.

I also increased validity by utilizing triangulation of measure—learning more by observing from multiple perspectives (Neuman, 2011). Triangulation increases validity by providing multiple sources of data allowing for a more in-depth understanding of the participant’s experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2017). This then leads to a clearer, more valid understanding of the data. To do this, I collected and analyzed a demographic survey, interview data, photographs, and garments or accessories.

**Reflexivity**

Finally, I was reflexive in my approach by recognizing that I am a Black woman and a college student completing a study that involves other Black women college students. Therefore, I utilized bracketing in my research as a way to identify the “taken-for-granted” assumptions of experiences and set them aside as I analyzed and interpreted (Neuman, 2011). For example, one assumption I had was that Black women would probably experience microaggressions everyday. Therefore, I would try to identify these types of assumptions prior to the interview or during analysis. I continually asked myself how my own assumptions or biases might influence how I asked questions, and also how I reported and interpret the data. To assure an external check of the data by someone who is familiar with the research topic, I continually debriefed with my major professor, who is not a person of color, throughout all phases of the research.

**Integration of Theoretical Framework**

Throughout my thesis, I considered CRT as the theoretical framework. In the research questions, I asked about the Black woman student experience at PWIs and the influence that
these experiences have on the dress and appearance practices of the Black woman, specifically in relation to expressions of Black and activist identities. The interview questions used in my study aim to capture the experiences of participants as they have or have not encountered racially derived occurrences at PWIs that may relate to systematic issues of power. CRT also frames the over-arching theoretical foundations of the study as I provide an opportunity for counterstorytelling, or giving a voice to those who are often silenced—in this case Black women (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Jerkins, 2018). When analyzing the data and writing the results, CRT was used to interpret the data.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Across the interviews, three larger themes were identified in relation to expressions of Black and activist identities: (1) experiences on campus, (2) Black identity through dress and appearance, (3) and activist identity through dress and appearance. Numerous subthemes were also identified within the larger themes and are presented in italics. To sustain a constructivist research approach, I did not aim to quantify each theme (Willig, 2013). In the place of quantified themes, I support each theme with rich context including quotes from the participants and photos of the participants and their garments that were discussed during the interviews. I provide “thick” descriptions (Geertz, 1973) for in-depth context of the data. As a guide for each theme and subtheme, a themes map is provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Map of Themes That Emerged from Data Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major theme</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Experiences on campus</td>
<td>1.1. Safe and welcomed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.1. Safe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.1.1. University multicultural programming events or offices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.1.2. Personal living spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.1.3. Gaining a mentor or color</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.2. Welcomed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.2.1. When spaces become familiar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.1.2.2. Black student on-campus organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Non-POC spaces</td>
<td>1.1.3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. Unsafe and unwelcomed</td>
<td>1.2.1. Unsafe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.1. Specific spaces—First Amendment rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.2. What fraternity parties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.3. Unfamiliar spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.4. Walking at night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.5. Seeing written messages of racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.1.6. Need to be aware of surroundings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2.2. Unwelcomed</td>
<td>1.2.2.1. Unwelcomed over years of attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.2.2. Want to transfer or graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.2.3. Being the only Black person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.2.4. Microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2.2.5. Unwelcomed by faculty/staff (felt unseen)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Occurrences of racism and discrimination</td>
<td>1.3.1. On-campus apartment staff person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3.2. Discrimination from faculty/students (people touching natural hair)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3.3. White males: microaggressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3.4. White women: walking space on the sidewalk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3.5. Accused of being “angry Black woman”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Black identity through dress and appearance</td>
<td>2.1. Motivations to show Black identity through dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.1. To show Black woman student success at PWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.2. Being one of only a few Black women students at PWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.3. Family influence: both everyday wear on and off campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.4. Recognition from other Black students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.5. Wanting to embody influential Black women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.1.5.1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2. Examples of dress overtly showing Black identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.1. Pride in skin tone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.2. Form-fitting clothing (body positivity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.3. Denim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.4. African inspired prints/garments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.5. Slogan T-shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.6. Hair accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.6.1. Hats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.6.2. Headband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.6.3. Head wrap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.7. Jewelry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.7.1. Earrings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.7.2. Waist beads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.8. Shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.8.1. Nike Air Force Ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.8.2. Air Max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.9. Modifications to the body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.9.1. Tattoos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.9.2. Fingernails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2.9.3. Make-up (lip gloss)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Experiences showing Blackness in dress</td>
<td>2.3.1. Adamant to show Black identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3.2. Hide Black identity for specific reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3.2.1. Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3.2.2. Feel need to “tone it down” based off of environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3.2.3. To look professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.3.2.4. Changes perspective of showing Blackness in dress over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.3. Sense of sadness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.4. Feel empowered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.5. Feel visible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.6. Increased self-love</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.7. Uncertain looks from non-Black people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Activist identity through dress and appearance</td>
<td>3.1. Activism and the use of dress to express activist identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.1. Are you an activist?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.1.1. No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.1.2. Indecisive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.1.3. Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.2. Forms of activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.2.1. Members of Black student organizations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.2.2. Activism through conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.2.3. Public demonstrations on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.2.4. Other examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.3. Resistance movements of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4. Expressing activist identity through dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.1. Does not have/wear much clothing that expresses activist identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.2. Does have/wear a lot of clothing that expresses activist identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.3. Slogan shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.4. POC imagery shirts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.5. Wearing all black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.6. Doc Marten boots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.4.7. Pins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.5. Experiences wearing activist clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.5.1. No reaction from anyone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.5.2. Verbal support from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.5.3. Nonverbal discomfort from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.5.4. Fear of wearing activist clothing at Iowa PWI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.6. Motivations to purchase activist clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.6.1. Mature enough to understand the BLM movement when it began</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.6.2. Relationship to BLM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.6.3. Modern-day Black empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.1.6.4. To educate others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. To reject racism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: Experiences on Campus

To understand Black women college student’s experiences with fashioning their bodies at PWIs, I will first address these women’s general experiences on their college campuses as these experiences informed their dress practices. The Black women college students in this study had varying experiences on predominately white college campuses in Iowa. At times they felt safe and welcomed, and at other times they felt unsafe and unwelcomed. They also related experiences of racism and discrimination while on campus.

Safe and Welcomed

When asking participants about their everyday experiences while attending a PWI, many of them shared that they felt both safe and welcomed in the environment. Some of the safe spaces or instances of feeling safe on campus identified by the participants were directly related to university multicultural programming events or offices where mostly people of color congregated or are directly related to the Black student experience on campus. For example, Oni stated,

I think my [multicultural student support personnel] office is maybe the only safe space. I know at the [campus union building] they made affinity spaces for people groups, but they're whack. It's like a locked door that you need a code for to get into. The [name of off-campus building] is the affinity space for Black people, but it's like all the way down [name of street off campus]. They tried making a nice little space for everybody, but it's really dividing everybody out in my opinion. If it really is safe space, why do you need a code to get into the room? Or why do you need to travel off campus to get to your spot?
Oni identified this specific multicultural office as a safe space because of the connection to community that it provides for students of color in regard to these students having a space where they can be themselves. Another example of an on-campus multicultural office being a safe space for the participants was identified by Princess who stated,

A safe space for me, I’m in a program called [name of STEM program] that is a minority program for STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] students. We have our own study room in [name of on-campus building]. That is a safe space for us. I go up there to study and to talk to other members of the program.

Both of these examples by Oni and Princess highlight the ways that having a space that is occupied mostly by people of color at a PWI can make students of color feel safe.

Many of the participants identified their personal living spaces as safe because of the comfortability and sense of community that their home provides. For example, Marie stated,

My [dorm] hallway is a bunch of minority women and it wasn’t planned that way but when I was moving in and I saw that my neighbor was Black I was shocked. And then I saw another girl who was Black. So, to have two girls in a hallway of 50 who are also Black already doubled what I was used to from last year. So, I just feel like I lucked out that I am a part of a community where it takes me more than one hand to count the minorities. I notice those things; I am not sure how much other people do. But it’s where you live.

Destiny also stated, “My apartment is pretty safe because I’m always there.”
When asked about ways that the participants have sought a safe environment for themselves, some of the participants related their experiences of gaining a mentor of color on-campus. For example, Bianca stated,

I have that support group that I have built here and [I am] able to go to them and vent and express myself in a safe environment. And on top of that I found my mentor here, a woman of color in the graduate program. And advisors who have been there that are older that I can talk to and express myself to and ask questions about how to navigate [name of university] or how to handle different situations when I come across them.

With building these mentor-mentee relationships with other women of color, the participants felt motivated to stay at the institution they were attending when contemplating if the university was the right environment for them. Having a woman mentor of color significantly enhanced the participant’s on-campus experiences and helped them feel more welcomed and safer.

The participants also shared experiences of feeling welcomed on campus in various ways and spaces. Often times when a space became familiar to a participant, it became a welcoming environment. For example, Vashalice stated,

For the most part, just as an individual, I feel welcomed only because I particularly stay in places that I am already…that I know I’m welcomed in. So, in this case, for example, [name of on-campus academic building] hall because that’s where the [her major] is located. I know that place very well. I know everybody there and I always feel welcomed when I come into that building.
Having a similar experience, Marie stated, “I probably feel welcomed when I am surrounded by people that I know and enjoy being around.” These women’s experiences represent how familiarity in specific spaces can lead to a welcoming feeling.

A number of the participants were either student members or frequent attendees of different Black student on-campus organizations. These organization meetings and events were another space where the women felt welcomed. For example, Princess stated,

I remember my freshman year it wasn’t the feeling of being welcomed or not, but it was an eye-opener because I came from [city near where university is located] with a small high school and we were all minorities. So, there were a lot of Africans, Mexicans, Blacks, whites, we were all mixed, but coming here it was basically whitewashed. So, it was an eye-opener for sure. If it wasn’t for [name of Black student organization on campus] or [name of African student organization on campus] I wouldn’t have felt completely welcomed.

Princess explains here that if it were not for various Black student organizations on campus that she decided to become a part of, that she would not feel welcomed.

Some of the participants also stated that they felt welcomed in spaces on campus that are not directly related to the Black student experience including student resource offices and religious student organization events. For example, Donielle stated, “A lot of the Christian organizations too here, I feel welcomed when I go to their events.” Nina also stated,

I spend a lot of time in the [university Greek life office] and most of the people who come through the office have a different identity then I do. They tend to mostly be white women or white men, but I never feel unwelcomed in there. The input that I can provide and the different ways that I can help within their
organizations. I never feel like they are going to turn me away because I’m Black versus my major that is very white-centered.

It should be noted that both of these welcoming spaces identified by Donielle and Nina are not people of color specific spaces, which highlights the variety of spaces where the Black women in this study felt welcomed at varying times.

Unsafe and Unwelcomed

In addition to expressing feelings of safety and being welcomed when asked about their experiences as a Black woman attending a PWI, the participants also shared experiences of feeling unsafe and unwelcomed on campus. Some of the participants felt unsafe in specific spaces, including areas where First Amendment rights can be publicly exercised on campus. For example, Nina stated,

I feel like the free-speech zone can get a little rocky sometimes because it is the free-speech zone so really and truly within certain limits people can say and express what they want to. Depending upon who is in that space at a given time, walking through there I’m like, ‘maybe I’ll go this way because I don’t want to interact with what they are saying or what they stand for.’ Which is kind of counterintuitive because the free-speech zone is supposed to be a safe place for people to express their views, but a lot of the views that get expressed in that zone or what have been expressed recently are more problematic than helpful.

Nina explains here that often times when walking on campus past the free speech zone, she feels unsafe based off of the type of messages being shared at that moment. When asked if there was a specific experience with the free-speech zone that made her feel unsafe, Nina stated,

Yesterday when I was walking the person [in the free speech zone] was yelling that everybody was going to hell. Basically, anyone who wasn’t white, or who
wasn’t straight, or who doesn’t have those dominating identities are going to burn in hell. And I was like, ‘this makes me uncomfortable.’

Other spaces on campus that were labeled unsafe by the participants included white fraternity parties that take place on campus. For example, Brea stated,

I guess because frat parties, especially white frat parties, are already a center of toxic masculinity where they are like, ‘I’m going to do whatever I want because I can get away with it.’ So white frat parties, if you add me not just being a woman but being a Black woman, I have another level of danger.

Here, Brea identifies the intersectionality of being both Black and a woman and recognizes that the intersection of these identities counts against her in regards to safety at a white-centered space.

Some of the participants shared that they mostly felt unsafe when venturing into unfamiliar spaces on campus. For example, Vashalice stated,

If I ventured to someplace new, it’s going to be with people who I trust or somebody who already kind of knows that space really well. Or even if it’s a bunch of us and we don’t really know the space, it’s like safety in numbers type deal.

A significant number of participants related that they did not feel safe on campus while walking at night. For example, Truth stated,

I would probably say more so at nighttime walking around campus. For instance, if it’s a group of me and my friends and we are walking through campus at night it’s kind of uncomfortable because we will get a lot of looks and stares. You can
already guess what they are thinking—that we are up to no good because it’s a group of us [Black people].

Other participants also expressed feeling unsafe when walking to their homes or cars at night after an exam or evening class.

The participants also shared that various forms of written messages that they read on campus played a significant role in their reasoning for feeling unsafe in the campus environment. For example, Brea stated, “Walking past the physics hall I already see “MAGA” and “Trump 2020” [via chalk on the sidewalk] so, no [I don’t feel] entirely safe.” Knowing that these types of messages were being shared on college campuses, many of the participants felt the need to always be aware of their surroundings to assure their own safety. For example, Kara stated, “I think it’s just always like, you have to be super vigilant and be on your P’s and Q’s too. If you feel uneasy, just go with it. Like, don’t ignore that feeling.”

When asked if they ever felt unwelcomed while on campus, the participants shared a number of different instances including feeling more unwelcomed over their years of attendance at the university due to the current U.S. political climate having direct impacts on the campus environment. For example, Oni stated,

When I first came here, I thought it was pretty welcoming. Like I didn’t do one of those pre-school tours here. I toured everywhere else but here because it was like the place accepted me and it was more money. But when I was here, I mostly focused on [name of major area of study]. I knew there was going to be all white people. I knew all the Black people were gonna be either athletes or from [name of nearby city with significant Black population]. So, I was trying to be mentally prepared for that. But yeah, there was a nice little facade of welcoming the first
couple of years. But ever since this current election or current president, people have gotten real bold. And so as of lately I could see that there are a lot of people who don't care about the wellbeing of anybody of color.

Due to the lack of welcoming feeling, some participants shared that they no longer had desires to stay at the current PWI they were attending, planning to diligently work to graduate early or deciding to transfer schools. Oni also stated,

I'm honestly ready to leave this place. I'm ready to graduate or if I can't take it that much longer, I probably will transfer cause it's getting ridiculous out here. I know there are racists out in the world, but I need to focus on graduating. I don't want all that energy right now.

Many of the participants also shared that as Black women attending PWIs, they often felt unwelcomed when they were the only Black person in various settings on campus, especially while in a class that is dominated by white males. For example, Donielle stated,

In class absolutely, no [I don’t feel welcomed]. I do have…I’m an African American studies minor and so when I go to that class I don’t feel a discomfort.

But when I go to like my psychology classes or science, just the more general classes, yes, I feel uncomfortable there. I think up until this semester I’ve been one of like five, maybe even one Black person in the classroom.

When talking about often being the only Black person in a classroom, the participants explained they felt most unwelcomed when it was time to work in groups because their white classmates would avoid them or not acknowledge their presence. This often happened to Lucille who is an engineering major; therefore, most of her classes are dominated by white men. Lucille stated,
Definitely being an engineer, I am in a bunch of classes with predominately white males. So, when we are doing certain projects, I end up being the *secretary*, which is fine, but you don’t get to do as many things or contribute to the actual project as much.

Feeling unwelcomed due to being the only Black student also lead to experiences of microaggressions for the participants including white students avoiding sitting next to them on the bus and being asked offensive questions. For example, Donielle stated,

Another example besides groups in classes is the bus. My freshman year I noticed that on the bus I would sit down, and there would be maybe one or two seats open beside me and the non-colored students would get on and stand. And I was like ‘is it me?’, ‘do I stink?’. And then, one town hall meeting we had for NAACP a young lady brought it up, and it kind of made her emotional. And, it hit me then like ‘oh my God!’ They do this on purpose and it’s not just me. It’s not a personal issue.

Participants also shared that they felt unwelcomed during various interactions with university faculty, staff, or administration. The participants shared that they often felt unseen by university personnel as compared to their white counterparts. For example, Destiny stated,

It’s kind of like it doesn’t really matter if I am here or not because they are not going to see me. They are not going to reach out to me and offer me things like they do white students. They won’t walk me through processes. I have to go out and get help for myself. I have to do things for myself while white kids are really welcomed into the institution. It’s great to be a [name of university] alum if you are white. It’s great to be here if you are white. But I feel like Black students as a
whole, and me especially, kind of come in and are not really welcomed. I guess it is unwelcomed. We are not fully welcomed like white kids are. And I don’t think it’s because they unwelcome us, I think it’s just because they don’t care.

When participants felt unseen, they often gradually felt isolated or othered in most campus environments.

**Occurrences of Racism and Discrimination on Campus**

While describing their many lived experiences as Black women college students attending PWIs, many of the participates shared that they faced *occurrences of racism or discrimination* while on their college campuses. Some of these occurrences of racism and/or discrimination took place at the participant’s dorms or apartments on campus where campus staff people were the perpetrators. For example, Erica stated,

> I used to live at [name of apartment complex on campus] and me and my friends, we all lived together. We are all Black females. And, we had a dog, which was technically illegal because my friend didn’t get her documents, yet she was working on it. But basically, we used to always walk the dog because you have to take care of a dog. And there was this lady who worked at [name of apartment complex on campus] and she used to always try to get us in trouble with the dog. And it’s like, ‘why you always come after us?’ There are all these other people who have dogs…a lot of white people have dogs. You don’t see too many Black people with dogs. And we just felt like she was always coming towards us.

Some of the women explained their experiences of racism and/or discrimination in relation to students and faculty touching or offensively asking about their natural hair and hair texture. For example, Marie stated,
I had a professor that pet my hair as she was walking past me. She said ‘Oh! I just can’t help it.’ And later I talked to her about it and she regretted it. But still that wouldn’t have happened if I didn’t have the type of hair that I do where you literally see me as like an animal to pet. Especially touching someone without asking.

In a similar experience where a participant had to express not wanting her hair touched by others, Nina stated,

The professor that I had was talking about how she is more of a hands-on person and she likes to walk past and flip people’s ponytails. And she got to me and she was like ‘is it okay if I touch your hair?’, and I was like ‘I would prefer if you didn’t.’ So instead of saying okay and moving on, she kind of made a point about it like ‘see it’s okay to say you don’t want people to touch your hair.’, and to have a whole conversation about it instead of ‘everyone has the right to say you don’t want me to touch your hair.’

Other participants shared that they faced discrimination and racism in the forms of microaggressions directly from white male students on campus. For example, Kara stated,

I'm there as a STEM major. It is still, unfortunately, rare for a Black woman to be in STEM. One of the young men, white male, he was like, ‘oh you shouldn't be doing this major. You’re not gonna make it and you shouldn't do it.’ And I just looked at him like…okay! What does that amount to me?

Marie gave another example of her experience with racism and discrimination from white males on campus when she stated,
But then my most negative racial experience was last year after one of those discussions on race. This guy, who was white, followed me all the way back to my dorm because he was like pestering me with a bunch of questions because he literally saw me as the representative of Black people. And his big culminating question that he was building toward was he was saying, it was so ridiculous, he was like ‘I know this guy and he worked so hard. He works all these hours and he is taking so many classes. He is helping support his mom’, and I was ready for him to say like ‘I have a Black friend so how can I be racist?’ But he took a turn and he said, ‘and that guy is white, and I just don’t know any Black people that work that hard or have that good of character.’ And my blood was boiling, but also here he is telling me he doesn’t know any good Black people, so then I was in this tricky situation where I did not want to prove his stereotype right. So, I had to handle a really horrible situation, that I was only in because I am Black, with dignity and grace.

Not only did participants identify white male students as perpetrators of racism and discrimination on the college campus, but also white female students. The Black women students identified they face significant microaggressions with white women students claiming walking space on campus sidewalks. For example, Erica stated,

I’ve had people bump into me and I would say excuse me. They are walking towards me and then I’ll say, ‘excuse me’ and they just look at me like I’m crazy. And I’m like, I don’t know if that’s considered racism, but nine times out of 10 it’s a white female. It’s nobody else doing that to me. I just feel some type of way about it because I’m just like ‘why are you upset? Why you look mad because I
said excuse me?’ First of all, you are the one that kind of shoved me. That literally happened yesterday when I was going to class. I was just like ‘really?’

Participants also shared that they often were accused of being “angry Black women” by their white student counterparts, and that they had to be cautious and show that they do not fit that stereotype. For example, Marie stated,

I was one of two Black girls on a floor of like 50 girls and what I would hear people say about the other Black girl would be like ‘she is just so intimidating, and I feel like she hates me.’ And I figured that those people might be saying that about me too because I didn’t think the other Black girl was ever in the wrong for anything, so I think it was the whole angry Black woman narrative. And then people didn’t feel like they could approach her or be friends with her. And I felt like that was probably the same reason why I was feeling isolated.

**Theme 2: Black Identity Through Dress and Appearance**

The participants of this study had both positive and negative experiences while attending PWIs in Iowa including feeling safe and welcomed and experiencing racism and discrimination. When asked if there was a relationship between their styling practices and their college experiences, some participants shared that the experiences motivated them to express their Black identity through their dress. Before aiming to understand how the Black women participants used dress to express their Black identity, it is important to relay the motivations that the women identified to do so.

**Motivations to Show Black Identity in Dress and Appearance**

When explaining the connection between their college experiences and their use of dress to express their Black identity, the women related different motivations to show Black identity in dress and appearance while on campus. Some of the participants related that expressing their
Black identity while attending a PWI gave an opportunity for others to see Black women accomplishing goals in a predominately white space, a space where society assumes Black women will not be able to succeed. For example, Donielle was explaining one of the photos (see Figure 5) she shared during the interview that she felt expressed her Black identity and stated,

I wanted to show Black excellence. Being a colored person at a PWI, still here my junior year, and then accepted into an undergrad research program, and being a part of NAACP. Also, being able to do things like when the directors of student affairs came, I got to have dinner with them, also being able to be in the conference with the police officers and the [name of on-campus office for equality]. I got to sit with faculty members to make the [university-wide community standards]—I got to be a part of that and help make the video. So being a part of different things and being a Black student here at a PWI, that’s crazy! I never would have thought that in a million years.

*Figure 5*. Image of Donielle wearing professional-like clothing to express Black woman student success at a PWI. Photo courtesy of Donielle, 2019

Lucille demonstrated her motivation to show Black student success at a PWI by purposefully wearing shirts (see Figure 6) with engineering imagery on them as she is an engineering major.
and wants to signify through her garments that Black women can succeed in a white, male dominated field. Lucille stated,

A lot of my clothing that I have is based around [name of university] or is based around engineering. So, a lot of it is saying ‘this is what a Black person can do’, and that I am currently doing it. It shouldn’t be a surprise; it should be something that anybody can do. And for other Black people, ‘hey you can do this!’ And for people who aren’t Black that you should support people who are doing it.

![Image of "Raw Bacon Robotics Team" shirt owned by Lucille portraying engineering skills. Photo by author, 2020.](image-url)

*Figure 6.* Image of “Raw Bacon Robotics Team” shirt owned by Lucille portraying engineering skills. Photo by author, 2020.

Some of the participants shared that being one of only a few Black women attending a PWI motivated them to embody and express their Black identity through their dress and appearance. For example, Princess stated,

Yes, attending a PWI did intensify my desire to show Black identity in dress. I don’t want to say we are different but being a minority means that you are unique in a way. So, I am going to showcase who I am and my skin color, my hair. I don’t care if you don’t like my afro blocking your way. You just start to be proud of yourself.
Similarly, Erica stated, “Honestly, coming to this school has made me want to bring out my Black identity more than it ever has in my entire life.” Both Princess and Erica express here that transitioning to a PWI environment was a significant source of motivation to express their Black identity through their dress.

Many of the Black women also identified family influence as a significant motivating factor in their desire to express their Black identity through dress and appearance, both in everyday wear and while on campus. For example, Destiny stated,

I just dress Black, I don’t know. I grew up with a Black woman and man. My parents are really, really African American in the way they dress. Like FUBU was mostly what my dad wore in the early 2000s. It’s just my house is just Black. Growing up it was just African American trends in the Black community. The Black women in my family taught me how to love myself. They had so much pride in being Black women and they made sure to show it through everything they did. Everything from the way they dressed to the makeup they wore represented being a Black woman. They had so much pride in not only being Black, but also being a woman. I saw my mom walk around with pride. So now I wear the clothes she wanted to wear and do the hair styles she wanted to do.

Brea also explained how Black women in her family influenced her to wear headwraps (see Figure 7), a staple Black woman hair accessory. Brea stated,

My aunt used to wear headwraps because she lives with alopecia. Her hair is thin and sometimes she has spots. So, if she wasn’t wearing a wig, she was wearing a headwrap. And that’s kind of something that I have seen with Black women all of my life.
While describing how family has influenced her motivation to express her Black identity through dress and appearance Kara referenced the way she was raised culturally; she stated, I’ve always been the type of child to wear colors. I've always been a colorful person. I think people even describe me as that in my personality. I'm very colorful, very like bubbly, open. I will say within my cultural background and the way I was brought up, very expressive people through colors, through design, through hairstyle, everything. So, everything I wear is very like, big. Like whether that's hats, church hats—I grew up in the Baptist church and all the women wore huge hats. I feel like even earrings it's very colorful. It's very big.

Similarly, Oni stated, “I've noticed I dress a lot like my mother when she was in college—baggy clothes and bold prints and whatnot. And she is like the Blackest woman I know.” While describing her decorative nails and how they reflect her Black identity, Truth stated, “I like to change people’s minds and shock them, with my nails—they are a part of me. My grandmother knew how to do nails and she had super long nails too, so I got it from her.” All of these Black women described that various family members have influenced how they express their Back
identity through their dress. These expressions of Black identity occurred both within the everyday styles of the women off of their predominately white college campuses, as well as on campus.

Some participants also shared that they were motivated because it feels good to be recognized by other Black students when wearing garments that overtly reflect Black identity. This recognition comes from signifiers that are broadly known within the Black community. For example, Donielle stated,

I have a lot of shirts I wear that say like ‘Black is dope’ and I have one that says ‘melanin’. And I love to wear those out on campus. One, because when I see another Black person in passing one of us will be like ‘I like your shirt!’ And I know it’s not just that they like it, but the connection there that they like that I’m wearing it proudly.

Donielle also stated,

When another Black person sees my shirt that has a reference to Black culture on it (see Figure 8), it makes me feel happy. It’s like a ‘you know what’s going on.’ The awareness that’s happening because in today’s society the biggest thing is this culture of…it almost seems like another wave of the Black is beautiful movement when everyone was wearing afros, and everyone was wearing dashikis. And I kind of feel like there is another wave of that going on. It’s kind of like love yourself. And I think that’s dope.
Many of the participants shared that they are motivated to express their Black identity through their dress and appearance because of their desire to embody other influential Black women. Similar to family influences in the women’s dress, the styles that embodied influential Black women were both everyday styles worn both on and off campus. Additionally, most of the women identified this use of dress while describing their garments and accessories in the pictures they presented during their interviews. For example, Destiny stated,

That was 2018 (see Figure 9). I had a wig on in that picture and that cap is from my mom’s closet. The jacket is from Von Maur, that wig is from Mid-K so that’s definitely Black. I think this outfit was really…I based it off if *The Cheetah Girls*. Raven Symone was an icon for me growing up. *That’s so Raven* and *The Cheetah Girls* was everything. I just love cheetah print, and the denim comes back into play. I love hats. It’s hard to really describe how I think it fits into the Black narrative, but I think it’s the overall look of it is very Black.
Here, Destiny identified the Black women characters from the movie *The Cheetah Girls*, including actress Raven Symone, as women she aimed to embody through her dress and appearance. Similarly, Kara identified musician and artist Beyoncé as a Black woman she aimed to embody in her appearance. She stated,

> The hair is just braids, cornrows, with a little dash of color (see Figure 10). I just wanted something simple, but I feel like this is like one of the most, I don't want to say common or famous styles, but I just feel like it's very common in the African diaspora to have cornrows. Especially when you're young growing up it’s a go-to style. But for me, I did it more out of convenience, and then also it was inspired from like Beyoncé with her lemonade braids. So, I was like, ‘let me do it a little bit for the culture.’
Figure 10. Image of Kara (pseudonym) with lemonade style braids made popular by music artist Beyoncé. Photo courtesy of Kara, 2019.

Kara mentioned her lemonade braids, inspired by Beyoncé, also had added color in them. Other Black women participants also shared that wearing non-traditional colors was another way to express their Black identity and also embody influential Black women. For example, while describing a picture during her interview (see Figure 11), Nina stated,

I put color in my braids for me because at the time I saw so many people that had color in their hair, but I wasn’t ready to dye my hair like women in the media. This was a very big Nicki Minaj time for me, so I was like ‘she is killing it, she looks like she is confident in who she is, she is confident in the identities that she has but I’m not ready for pink hair’. So, I thought of a color that is somewhat an understatement but still out there. I don’t think that it is immediately representative that everyone in the Black community has to have color in their box braids. Having plain box braids is cute, too. For me it was me stepping out in the world. Sometimes it is an internal struggle of ‘I don’t want to be ratchet with the color that I pick out’, so that struggle of what makes a color ratchet? That was also a big part of getting the color because it was like, it is ratchet…it’s ratchet.
But I, my mom, and friends thought it was cute, so I kept it. So regardless of what society had to say about it possibly being ratchet, I still decided to just embrace that.

*Figure 11.* Image of Nina with purple and black box-braids. Photo courtesy of Nina, 2015.

Some of the participants specifically identified Egyptian queen Nefertiti as the Black woman they aimed to identify through dress and appearance practices. For example, Princess stated,

I think I got this scarf from the beauty supply store (see Figure 12). I wrapped it to give it a Nefertiti look, she was an Egyptian queen. I think she was famous for her looks. I wanted to mimic my high cheek bones just like she did...
Similarly, Oni stated,

And I also have this necklace of like, it looks like a choker that wraps around kind of backwards and it's queen Nefertiti (see Figure 13) and a little emblement of Africa. Every time I wear that, or I have this vest that's a 90s print with an African aesthetic, I wear that every now and then. I'll describe myself as that 90s person who was all of a sudden super pro-Black.
In another example of the Black women aiming to embody Black women influencers in their dress, Brea stated,

This was in May 2018, it was prom (see Figure 14). The outfit, I had a different one planned, but then I liked this dress more. I chose to be very reminiscent of the disco era. The dress is very shiny, and it had a cowl neck, and the shoes. My hair, I wanted to model off of Donna Summers…it doesn’t look the same, but there is not enough hair spray in the world. I wanted to show a lot of older Black icons and a very iconic era for Black people. So, I had on what I thought, at least now, is disco. I guess there was a lot of showing how iconic Black people are.
Examples of Dress Overtly Showing Black Identity

After explaining the motivations for showing Black identity through dress while attending PWIs, the women participants then discussed *examples of dress that they wear on campus to exemplify their Black identity*.

One example described by participants was wearing bright colors or patterns to highlight their darker skin tones. For example, Princess stated,

*When I decide to wear certain patterns, sometimes I wear African patterns and that would showcase that I am embracing my African roots and my African culture as well. I feel like we [Black women] are versatile in many things that we do with our hair and our clothes. Basically, my confidence, the patterns and colors*
that I wear, bright colors go well with darker skin tones so sometimes I wear a bright color just to make my skin pop.

While also describing how bright colors complement the darker skin tones of Black women, Truth stated,

I believe with melanin skin we look beautiful in any color—bright, bold colors are my favorite. Hence my hair, why its orange. Also, the dyes that I do in my hair I feel highlight my Black identity and shows it off in many ways.

In these examples, both Princess and Truth share that wearing bright colored clothing while on campus, to them, is significant because of the opportunity it provides to overtly display their darker skin tones via the contrast of bright and darker colors.

While describing additional ways that the use of dress and appearance are often used as a tool to express Black identity while on their college campuses, some of the Black women shared that wearing form-fitting clothing is essential. For example, Bianca stated,

My hometown is predominately African American, so I was never self-conscious about my clothing or the way I dressed or my shape. When I came to [name of university] people would sometimes make comments about how big my legs were or how big my boobs were. And I became very self-conscious about my body because it wasn’t something that I thought about before, especially being home. So, I started covering up a lot and wearing baggier sweatpants or really big T-shirts to cover myself. And then, again, when I found that [Black] community here, I became more confident and more comfortable in myself again and got back into the clothes I would wear before—tight fit and form fitting outfits.
While explaining her clothing choice in a photograph during her interview (see Figure 15), Erica shared a similar experience to Bianca. She stated,

I feel like I was showing off, kind of my body. I was a little…a little chubbier back then. But I don’t know, I feel like Black women, we just have these figures. So me just showing off the thighs and just embracing my body [in this picture]—I guess you would say. I was proud of my body.

Some of the participants also identified denim as a staple Black fabric and shared that they wear denim on campus to express their Black identity. For example, Destiny stated,

I really like denim. I feel like denim is very African American, especially the way I use denim, I like Canadian tuxedos—wearing a top denim and a bottom denim. Just from fashion history and the [denim] bell bottom trend in America, it was started by a Black woman. It’s because of soul style. It was started by Black college students who wanted to dress more like Africans because with soul style they wanted to be closer to their African heritage and roots. So, they started making their own garments that really reflected what they thought was soul and African style at the time, and bell bottoms came out of that and got really popular.
in the 70s and became a national trend. But it was definitely started by a Black woman.

While describing a photograph during her interview (see Figure 16) Destiny described how she was wearing denim, once again, on her college campus in representation of her Black identity. She stated,

Denim is in the picture; I think denim is a huge thing in Black styles because the first activist women to wear denim wore denim for a reason. You didn’t see denim on middle class Black people because they didn’t want to be associated with a poor fabric like denim. When Black women started wearing denim it really changed everything for a lot of people. These Black women with this giant hair and these giant attitudes are wearing denim, and no one wears denim unless you are poor and work on the farms. I think denim is really a Black fabric—Black women really took the fabric and ran with it and made it something; made it into what it is today.

![Image of Destiny wearing black denim. Photo courtesy of Destiny, 2018](image)

*Figure 16. Image of Destiny wearing black denim. Photo courtesy of Destiny, 2018*

Many of the participants of this study related that they often wore African-influenced dress on college campuses today to express their Black identity. For example, Vashalice stated,
Some of the stuff, the patterns and stuff, the type of fabric is kitenge. Anytime I would put on a piece of fabric that's like this that looks very quote unquote African or it looks like it is a piece from the continent, I do feel like super empowered. A lot of these items, especially the more statement pieces, like the jewelry or whatever I decided to wear. A lot of them, they either come from a combination of my mother and my grandmother or they come from Uganda specifically when my husband brings things for me. So just about every piece of jewelry or every piece of clothing that I have from my time in Uganda is purposely like a statement.

While also describing how wearing African-inspired garments allow an expression of Black identity, Princess stated,

My African print scarves I get those from the African stores or some type of African grocery stores. You can just walk in and get waist beads or scarves. Basically, the African and the Black stores. There are two beauty supply stores in [name of town nearby college campus] that have a lot of silk scarves that you can use to wrap up your hair. Of course, African print always makes a statement—it shows Afro pride.

Another popular example of dress used to overtly express Black identity while on campus identified by the participants was slogan T-shirts. For example, Donielle stated,

I wear my “melanin” shirt on campus all the time. Off campus too. It’s cute. I like wearing “melanin” because I know most or a lot of people…well now it’s being taught what melanin is. But I don’t think a lot of non-colored people understand what that signifies, and why we say melanin. So, I like it and it’s unique. Also, I
like the print on it because it’s kind of takes you back to the 90s, which I think was another wave for us as far as our culture being very…pushed. Because that’s when you had like NWA, the show *Martin, In Living Color*, and *A Different World*. I think this shirt incorporates that because I think that’s a big wave in our culture where it was cool to be Black.

In another example of how wearing a slogan T-shirt is an expression of Black identity, Aja stated,

I do wear a lot of graphic T-shirts and some are displaying my Black identity, and some are just cartoons. I think it all depends on what I wear, and I guess what my intentions are putting it on. One specifically that I was going to bring for the exhibition is a Nike shirt. It’s just a plain black Nike shirt and their typical font and it says “equality” on it in white (see Figure 17), and that’s all it says. And I feel like me wearing that as a Black person you kind of assume what kind of equality I’m talking about. See me as an equal, and not just respectfully, but in your mind see me as an equal.

*Figure 17.* Image of Nike T-shirt with slogan that reads “Equality” owned by Aja. Photo by author, 2020.
While describing another slogan T-shirt with a quote from Andre 3000, Grammy Award winning music artist, that she owns and wears on her campus (see Figure 18), Aja also stated,

I have a shirt that I ordered off of a website. It’s a quote from, you know how Andre 3000 wears those black suits when he performs, and they have words on them? I liked the words on this shirt, and I think I bought this around like 8th grade, so this was like the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement. It says, “Across cultures why is it that darker people suffer most.”

![Image of slogan T-shirt](https://example.com/image.png)

*Figure 18.* Image of slogan T-shirt that reads “Across cultures, darker people suffer the most. Why?” owned by Aja. Photo by author, 2020.

Similarly, Viveca explained the reason why wearing slogan T-shirts on campus to express her Black identity is so important to her; she stated,

I think that a lot of the shirts that I wear, they all have some type of a statement on them. Usually an expression of being a proud Black person, or usually just an expression of being proud and Black.

While giving examples of what some of the messages on the slogan t-shirts she owns read, Viveca stated,
I have a t-shirt that says, “stolen from Africa”. So, it’s a statement and it makes, and I don't feel uncomfortable wearing it. I'm letting people know I'm here. Me and all of mine we’re here. We weren't here by choice. You know what I'm saying? I live in Iowa every day. Every day. I look at it as I'm getting dressed and I’ll be like, ‘oh, that's a good statement. We will roll with that one for today.’ I want to make white people uncomfortable by making them aware of their lack of awareness on their privilege. Lack of awareness on being culture vultures. I have a shirt that says “it's ghetto until it's profitable or fashionable” or something like that. So, things like that, that just make you more aware.

Lucille, an engineering student, shared that she expresses her Black identity through slogan T-shirts representing her engineering program or university (see Figure 19). She shared that she wears these T-shirts because as a Black woman she is often seen as someone who will not succeed in any STEM field. Therefore, for her to wear a shirt representing her engineer identity as a Black woman, she is actively using dress to express her Blackness in a space that is not majority Black.

*Figure 19.* Image of Iowa State University slogan/graphic T-shirt owned by Lucille. Photo by author, 2020.
Many of the participants shared that they wore different types of hair accessories while on their college campuses that represented their Black identity. These hair accessories included hats, headbands, and headwraps. For example, while describing her hat (see Figure 20), Viveca stated,

That's a hat showing where I'm from. Again, it's showing the colors of Africa colored into Africa. It's the colors of the African flag colored into the continent. It's just a proud, ‘say it loud’, you know what I'm saying? Type of hat. I wear the hat wherever. I would just throw it on. While wearing it on campus a couple of people have asked me what [the logo] is. So, I just kind of like ‘what you'd think? You don't know?’ I don't really, I'm not the person to use as learning experiences with certain things, and like…it's a continent. This is common knowledge. So, for you to look me in my eyes and ask me ‘what continent is that on your hat?’ I don't really have anything for you. So yes, that is something that has stuck out a couple of times.

Figure 20. Image of hat with shape of Africa on it owned by Viveca. Photo by author 2020.

Wearing a headband as an accessory was also a form of dress and appearance that some of the Black women participants felt expressed their Black identity. For example, Nina stated,
I have this really cute headband that I got from H&M and it’s probably the thing that if I could wear it every day and it would match stuff, I would wear it because it looks really nice when I wear my hair naturally. It holds the puff together and it’s just like I look good today. I know that I am cute, and you don’t have to tell me. I’m killing this headband and the outfit that I put together to go with it, also killing it. You’re welcome. But sometimes I feel like it helps me walk a little taller. When my hair is natural, technically I’m taller so it makes me walk a little taller and feel more confident because I know that I put in work to look this good.

Many of the participants related that wearing a headwrap as an accessory undoubtedly allowed them to express their Black identities through dress and appearance, as headwraps are a staple hair accessory within the Black woman community. For example, while describing her picture in her interview (see Figure 21) Aja stated,

This goes back to what I was saying about the headwraps being a reflection of my Black identity. Now that I look at it, that did not go together at all. But just me wearing the headwrap in general is a style that we have in terms of Black women. So that is how I reflect it, this is just a style that we identify with.
In another example of the Black women participants using headwraps as a form of Black identity expression on campus, Princess stated,

That is not a scarf, it’s called lappa (see Figure 22). It is basically a cloth kind of like a towel that African women we wrap it around ourselves, walk around the house and be comfortable. It’s kind of like pajamas. There is a trick we use it to hold babies on our backs, you put the baby on your back and wrap the lappa under you and tie it and the baby is secured. On special events like graduations or weddings you take the lappa and make it into like a red carpet and you have the person walk on it. It is a big symbol in Africa, and in my Liberian culture. I was looking for another scarf but couldn’t find it, so I ended up wrapping up the lappa and putting it around my faux locks, and it went well with my outfit. The colors go well together and the fact that I had on an African scarf and my faux locks, that was empowering. I felt like a true Black goddess. I felt like my African roots were really showcasing.
Similarly, Truth stated,

[Headwraps showcase my Black identity] I would say because in African culture they are very big on patterns. I have always been in love with African print. I love anything with any type of print, colorful, bright, and stands out. So, I feel like that really tells our story and each pattern is different—just like each one of us is different. Each one of us tells a story, and our story goes very deep. So, I feel a head scarf tells that story in many ways. With its colors, if they are mellow, they can tell a sad story. If its bright colors, it can tell a happy story.

In addition to hair accessories being used by the Black women participants to express Black identity while on campus, jewelry was also identified as a form of dress or appearance for the same reason. Specifically, many of the women related their use of hoop earrings as a major Black woman jewelry accessory (see Figure 23). For example, Brea stated,

Hoops have always been something that Black women have worn. I know people are like, ‘everybody wears hoops,’ but who wore the bamboo hoops first? I know Chicanas did it, but in the emulation of which woman? Black women have always
had hoops. And of course, people thought it was ghetto because I lived in a predominately white area. At a point I did that—I thought it was ghetto. I was like, ‘I don’t want to wear them.’ But I love them now. They complement an outfit and all Black women look good in hoops.

![Image of hoop earrings owned by Brea. Photo by author, 2020.](image)

Figure 23. Image of hoop earrings owned by Brea. Photo by author, 2020.

Erica also described why hoop earrings are, to her, such a Black woman identity statement. She stated,

> I feel like growing up I saw a lot of movies back in the day where the Black women would have on the big ol’ hoops and stuff. And I feel like that’s just a part of our culture. I feel like it’s just a trend that we have established that’s part of us, and I was just following the trend, I guess. I just like hoops, too.

While explaining why hoop earring are significant to her, Princess stated,

> It [hoop earrings] are probably the most accessible for us because you can get them from the beauty supply stores. There are also the earrings with your name on it [bamboo earrings]. I feel like we love it because it brings out our structure and its extra. I could wear a simple pearl earring that would be cute, but it’s not making a big statement, which is what big hoops do.
Waist beads were another example of a jewelry accessory that one of the participants identified as a form of dress and appearance that expresses Black identity (see Figure 24). While talking about the cultural significance behind waist beads, Princess stated,

It is part of African culture—there are different representations of the waist beads throughout different African cultures. I feel like the newer the generation becomes we lose more meaning of the waist beads because I don’t wear waist beads for the original meaning. We just wear them now for the beauty of it. We usually start at a young age. Our mothers put them on us when we are babies basically and you keep doing it. The original meaning for waist beads symbolizes that you are a virgin and when you get married your husband rips it off and then you are no longer a virgin. That’s in most African countries. But now we just wear it for beauty standards.

![Image of waist beads](image.jpg)

_Figure 24._ Image of waist beads owned by Princess. Photo by author, 2020.

As another example of dress that overtly shows Black identity, a few specific brands of shoes were described by many of the participants of this study. One example described by some of the Black women participants as a Black style that they have worn growing up and now wear
on their college campuses was Nike Air Force Ones (or Ones). For example, while describing a picture of her Air Force Ones (see Figure 25) in her interview Aja stated,

I think I had the camera app open and I was like, ‘this is really hitting my shoe really good.’ I think I originally took the picture and cropped it because my shoes did look good. Although my shoes are dusty, as you see now. I took this in 2018, which means I was 17 so I guess I was in high school and that particular style of shoe is what most of the Black kids were wearing. So, I think One’s in general is just Black identity, even when I see white people wearing them, I’m like, ‘that’s really shaking me up.’ So, I really feel like One’s are millennial, Black identity.

![Image of Nike Air Force Ones owned by Aja (pseudonym). Photo courtesy of Aja, 2018.](image)

Figure 25. Image of Nike Air Force Ones owned by Aja (pseudonym). Photo courtesy of Aja, 2018.

Another specific shoe brand described by the Black women participants as an example of Black identity being expressed through dress while on campus was Nike Air Max. When asked if her Black identity is shown through her dress while on campus, Erica stated,

Yea. I would say the shoes. I would definitely say Air Maxes and stuff because those shoes were originally [popularized] by Black people. When I wear shoes like that I’m definitely like, ‘this is part of being Black’ because our culture, part
of our culture is shoes. I feel like that’s a big part of Black people culture—the type of shoes we wear. So, yea. I would definitely say that.

Dress and appearance encompass modifications and/or supplements to the body, and many of the participants identified these types of additions to the body as ways to overtly express their Black identities while attending a PWI in Iowa. One example of a modification of the body is a tattoo, which Brea describes as a form of art that she used to express her Black identity (see Figure 26). Brea stated,

My tattoo is a tarot card, everyone is given two tarot cards for their birth. This is one of them and I heavily identify with it. And of course, tarot is not Black, but a lot of Black people have been getting more into spirituality that is not Christian. I am agnostic I am not Christian, but its these arts that are becoming more spaces that Black people are holding. Which I think is really important. Even though it’s something that is not Black I wanted to put a Black woman in this position because I think it’s really important to see Black women as magical. I love stories where a Black woman is strong. I am a writer, and some of my favorite books I’ve read have been a Black girl who is a protagonist who is magical. And it’s like, ‘what the fuck? I suddenly can do this?’ I really like that.’
Another example of a modification or supplement to the body as a medium to express Black identity that many of the women participants identified was long, colorful fingernails. For example, Nina stated,

I feel like the length of my nails gets associated with my Black identity. I’ve been getting acrylic nails for a relatively long time. Probably since I was 16, then I paused because I was broke. But I always get questions like, ‘how you function with nails so long.’ Especially working at a daycare I get a lot of questions about it. I think sometimes it makes people feel some type of way like, ‘only “ghetto girls” have nails that long’ or things like that. But I like having long nails because it boosts my confidence. I like the sounds that they make, typing on my phone and hearing the click. It makes me a more confident person over all. I feel put together because I can afford to get my nails done.

Participants also described makeup as a body modification to express their Black identity while on campus. For example, Erica stated, “I always have on lip gloss. You know that we all
[Black women] be wearing our lil’ lip gloss.” Oni also stated, “Lip gloss, I feel so naked without it or earrings. If I don't have earrings or lip gloss, I feel like I just rolled out the bed and I look like somebody who just doesn't care.” While expressing how doing her makeup is a form of body modification that she uses to express her Black identity, Brea stated, “I love makeup. It’s something I really enjoy because you are able to express yourself through putting things on your face. I find it therapeutic. There are Black women in the business who got me into liking it.”

**Experiences Showing Black Identity Through Dress at PWI**

When asked about their personal experiences wearing dress that overtly representing their Black identity while attending a PWI, the Black woman participants shared varying encounters. Some of the women shared that there were often times when they were adamant to show their Black identities in the predominately white environment. For example, Princess stated, “No. Never. Maybe back when I was younger. No, I can’t ever recall trying to hide my Black identity.” Similarly, Truth also stated,

No. I never try to hide it because my culture is who I am. It is what molded me and made me. It is my foundation so me trying to hide it I feel like is a slap in the face because it’s kind of spiteful in that I am not acknowledging where I started. And being proud of my culture shows through my clothes, and if I am not trying to show that then what am I doing? And it would kind of be like my grandma would be turning over in her grave if she ever saw me try and hide who I am because that’s who I am, and if I am not being myself then I am doing something wrong.

In contrast to showing one’s Black identity through dress while on campus, some of the women felt it was necessary to hide their Black identity for specific reasons. For example,
Vashalice shared that while wearing African-inspired clothing pieces on her predominately white campus, she sometimes feels unsafe. She stated,

Even in this space, [I feel] a little fearful just a smidge because I'm just like, I know this is kind of very loud in a positive way. They're going to see that, and they're going to know automatically it's cultural and specifically Black cultural as well too.

Brea also shared that she sometimes feels unsafe when wearing clothing that shows her Black identity while on campus. She stated,

I think there are certain times when I would hide it [Black identity] when I was going into certain areas. When I first moved in, my roommate is white, so I had my Black Lives Matter jacket and I was like, ‘I don’t know if her parents are going to be cool so I’m going to just turn it around because it’s on the back of the jacket.’ So, that’s an area where I’ve tried to hide my Blackness because I was going to be living with her. I heard the stories of that girl whose white roommate was high key trying to kill her. And I didn’t want to be in that. If I was hiding my Blackness it was more for safety reasons because I was worried; ‘is this going to end up doing me mental, physical, or emotional harm?’

Some of the participants felt the need to “tone it down” based off of the environment they were going in to. For example, Viveca stated,

Sometimes I'm like, ‘all right let me tone it down a little bit.’ And sometimes I’m like, ‘yeah I feel just being out there and making every single white person I come across extremely uncomfortable with this message across my shirt or my head.’ I don't remember where I was going, but I was getting dressed and I had the option
to throw on a shirt that said ‘stolen from Africa’ and I was like, ‘you know what, nah, I'm going to cool it because I was going to wear that shirt and a hat that had a black fist on it. But I was going somewhere, a club or something, like something like a chill environment. I was like, ‘all right, let me just chill.’

Another example that participants shared about was feeling the need to suppress their Black identity through their dress and appearance when in professional settings on campus. For example, Bianca stated,

I’ve been to career-readiness workshops and, in a rush, they would say ‘afros are not professional, it says you are wild, and your hair is wild and un-kept.’ So subconsciously that’s the mindset I would get into, it’s like okay I need to put it up so they see it’s contained almost. And same thing with a curvier shape, so making sure that it isn’t showing too much. Like pencil skirts are not a great idea because I have hips and it’s going to make my skirt rise up, things like that. I noticed whenever I go to the career fair [on campus] or a professional event I try to put my hair up into a ponytail or braid it so it’s not as out. And then my clothing is still form-fitted but not as tight. I will try to get baggier skirts, or maybe bigger shirts to not come off as what some people may say is unprofessional or one of my classmates calls it ‘trashy’. It’s like I still in some ways will change the way I dress or the way that I present myself in a more professional setting.

However, Lucille used to feel like she had to hide her Black identity, but since being on her college campus this has changed. She stated,
I used to think about hiding it more, or it was I couldn’t wear this because I’m Black or I shouldn’t wear that because of it. But it definitely changed once I started going to [name of university] and I was like, ‘oh I should probably not think about what I shouldn’t be doing as much, and think about what I am doing or what I could be doing.’ Definitely try to show off being an engineer a lot more to show that I am here and I am actively doing something.

In addition to feeling adamant to show and sometimes hide their Black identity through dress, the participants also experienced specific emotions when using dress to express Blackness. Some of the participants expressed feelings of sadness. For example, Brea stated,

It’s [wearing Black identity expressive clothing] a sense of power, but also a sense of sadness that I even have to proclaim to the world that my life matters because I know that they don’t acknowledge my humanity. They don’t acknowledge that my life matters because they see us lower than dogs. People care more about a dog than a human. The news will say ‘a dog was found in a dumpster’, I love animals, but they will say ‘omg the puppies!’ Then they say ‘this Black man was killed’, ‘well he deserved it.’ We are below puppies, and I love dogs, but we are humans and we deserve humanity. Even after the emancipation proclamation they still don’t see us as human. So it’s pride that I am Black and you are not going to take that away from me and I’m going to live. You can say I’m not human, but I am. But it’s also a sadness that I really have to fight for my life because you don’t see. I have to tell you that I matter when you should already know.
Despite some feelings of sadness when the women decided to use their dress and appearance as an expression of their Black identity, there were much more feelings of empowerment, visibility, increased self-love, and increased self-awareness. For example, when asked if she felt empowered while expressing her Black identity through her dress, Bianca stated, “yes because it makes me feel like I am not ashamed of who I am.” Kara also stated, “yeah, because it just makes me stand out. You know, some people might be like, ’oh, I don't want to draw attention to myself.’ I'm like, ‘I like drawing attention to myself in that way.’” Similarly, Lucille stated,

Yes, I definitely do. When people ask me about being an engineer it makes me feel good because you don’t always feel like an engineer. You definitely get, as a Black person, the imposter syndrome like ‘oh I shouldn’t be here’ or ‘I just made it because I’m Black.’ But when someone asks you about being an engineer, or being a part of whatever is on my shirt you just feel really good about it and even when you are in networking events and you are wearing something fancy, you feel like ‘oh I should be here.’

While asked if she feels empowered through her dress and appearance practices in relation to her Black identity, Marie stated,

Yea because when I feel that if I am suppressing my Black identity, that’s when I am like a slave to the trends. When I’m following whatever I think I am supposed to be wearing even if I feel like it was made for someone who wasn’t me, or it’s not made for my body, or I am too tall or something like that. But I feel that I am fully expressing my Black identity when I wear what makes me happiest, which also usually happens to be what is most unique.
In addition to feeling empowered, the Black women participants also felt visible. For example, Aja stated,

I feel more visible. I feel like the clothing that I wear is more of everyday wear, anybody can do it. And just adding the [slogan] shirt or I guess wearing a headwrap it’s just more visible. Visibility is not me just being there taking up space. It’s like I am there with a purpose and a message. Even just my backpack, if you are walking behind me and you are reading the pins on my backpack say, ‘I’m free to be what I want to. ’I have more [pins] that are more geared towards Black people in general, too.

Many of the participants also shared that they felt an increased self-love when expressing their Black identity through dress and appearance. For example, while talking about her tattoo (see Figure 26) Brea stated,

Being a Black woman in whatever form that may be is really empowering to me. I guess just putting that on my body symbolizes that Black girls are magical, and we can do whatever. And putting that on my body forever is a reminder to even myself when I’m not feeling a certain way. Being like, ‘hey you are still magical and awesome.’ Just be yourself because being yourself is the ultimate rebellion. And loving yourself and seeing yourself in a positive light is going to make a change.

Brea also stated, “I started to see clothes and I was like, ‘hey that kind of makes me feel good.’ It makes me rebel and love myself while in my Black identity.” While describing her evolving increase of self-love in relation to her Black identity Destiny stated,
I think it was an evolving idea. Honestly, I started getting into more paying attention. When you are in middle school you don’t really care, you have your friends. But as the world started getting bigger, my eyes started getting wider and I started really wanting to know more about everything. And that’s when my Black identity really came into full view. And I realized my space on the planet, what I occupy, and how people saw me. Because before I was just like, ‘I’m just another kid’, but it wasn’t that way at all. I was a Black kid in a 90% white school. So, I started realizing my place in everything. That is when I started looking deeper into my history, deeper into Blackness, the identity of a Black woman in America and that’s when I really was like, ‘ok I’m really going to make this change.’

Some of the participants also shared they received uncertain looks from non-Black people while expressing their Black identity through dress and appearance. For example, Destiny stated,

I usually get a lot of stares. People like to look at stuff they are not used to. Especially here in Iowa. People aren’t used to Black women wearing stiletto boots and giant afros. Sometimes I get questions, especially when I have braids in and they are pink or blue, I get questions about my hair a lot. Sometimes I get questions about where I purchased some of my stuff.

While describing when she wears her dashiki (see Figure 27) Bianca stated,

I actually wear [this] on campus. I am not afraid or ashamed to wear them. People look at me and they can look, but its who I am so I don’t mind. I usually wear this one shirt [dashiki] a lot. Even in the winter time, I will put shirts under it and still wear it. I wear it around campus or anywhere really.
Theme 3: Activist Identity Through Dress and Appearance

During their interviews, the Black women participants shared their various experiences in relation to using dress and appearance as a form of expression of Black identity. In addition to this, the women also related experiences using dress and appearance to express their activist identity. The women related the continual evolvement of their activist identities, ways that they are involved in activism on their college campuses, as well as motivations and experiences expressing their activist identities through their dress and appearance.

Activist Identity

The Black women college students shared varying perspectives of *activism, activist identity, and the use of dress to express activist identity*. During the interview, they were asked if they identified as activists, the participants had varying answers based off of their own definitions of what activism is. Some of the women shared that they did not see themselves as activists. For example, Oni stated, “I wouldn't say so because if I was an activist, I would be like more involved in grassroots campaign type stuff.” Similarly, Viveca stated,

Nope. I thought about it. I thought that was the approach I wanted to take, but that's a lot of work. That's a lot of effort and you have to be willing to take a lot of

*Figure 27. Image of dashiki owned by Bianca. Photo by author 2020.*
bullets, and I'm not willing to do that. I realize that. And it's not a bad thing, but somebody has to do it. I'm just not that person anymore.

Aja also did not identify as an activist; she stated, “Not really. I don’t think I do anything that is changing someone’s life. But I guess some stuff I do, I guess I bring awareness to something, but I don’t think I would be considered an activist.” It is important to note that often times by the end of the interview, the participants’ view of activism was broadened, and they sometimes changed their perspective from not identifying as an activist to identifying as activists.

Many of the Black women participants were indecisive about if they identified as an activist or not. For example, Nina stated,

Not in the way media describes or portrays activism. Whenever I watch it or hear about it, it’s very hands-on and involved; knees to the street type of thing. And with what I was saying about being a conversationalist, I think the way that I would [participate in] activism is when people ask me questions that they are afraid to ask other people.

Destiny described that she was not sure if she identified as an activist because of the lack of opportunities to protest in Iowa. She stated,

I don’t know. In the traditional sense, no. I don’t go out and protest, in Iowa I don’t think there are many opportunities to protest. I wouldn’t say there is not oppression here because clearly. But it’s not as presented as it is in Virginia or southern states or even on the east or west coast. The Midwest has that Midwest-nice, so everyone is like more under the table stuff.

While describing circumstances when she is unsure if she identifies as an activist, Truth stated,
Yes and no. Because I am big on Black culture, but it’s also with certain things I
don’t like to debate with others about because we have very strong opinions. I
wouldn’t say we don’t like to be told we are wrong, but all of our ideas on our
Black history is very different. So, with that I try to just fall back and observe a
little bit, but with others I still do try to educate the basics of Black culture and
history.

In addition to some of the participants not initially identifying as an activist or being
indecisive about their activist identity, many of the participants did identify as activists. For
example, when asked if she identified as an activist, Donielle stated, “Yes. Being a member of
the NAACP.” Bianca also stated,

Yes. I am that person where I may not go to every protest that happens on
campus, but whenever they have the discussions, I always attend those. And I
have no problem speaking out giving my opinion, and I think that that courage
came from that first protest with Trump, so I am glad I went to that because it’s
given me the courage and strength to speak out at other events as well.

Similarly, Brea stated,

Yes. I try to engage with a lot of things. I am still learning how to get organized
into groups where I can actively do that because it’s something that I want to do
for the rest of my life. I know what ever field I go into, whether it’s my dream job
of writing or if I end up going into law, activism has always been super, super,
super important to me because I still hold privilege. I am a cis-woman, able-
bodied, middle class, able to get a higher education, my dad makes enough money
to where if I need something he can pay me. I have privilege, so as an activist, I
want to acknowledge where I am disenfranchised, but I also want to help the communities that in a way I actively oppress even by holding a certain identity. I’m queer, but I’m still cis.

Marie described how she identifies as an activist through conversations that she often has on campus. She stated,

Yes, I start a lot of conversations and educate people through words and I think that most people when they think of me, activist might be one of the top identities that they would check because whether they like it or not they know that I am always going to start conversations about those topics.

**Activism Involvement**

After the Black women participants were asked if they identified as an activist or not, they were then asked what forms of activism they were involved with on their college campuses, if at all. Some of the women related that their activist identity came from being members of Black student organizations on their college campuses. For example, Donielle shared her activist experience with the campus chapter of NAACP; she stated,

Yea, my spring semester of my freshman year I became a part of the NAACP student chapter here. We are still trying to get off the ground, like the ideas that we would love to see come into action. For the most part though I’ve been able to connect with people off of campus. The [city near college campus] chapter or the state conference chapter. A lot of the elders’ experiences and a lot of what they want to see changed in the [name of city where college campus is located] community. But as far as on campus, the one thing I did like that we were a part
of were these talks that would happen in the library with the [on campus office of
civil rights and equity].

Also involved in NAACP on campus, Truth stated,

Yes, my freshman year I was part of NAACP for a little bit. We would talk about
situations where we would try and improve campus for the Black community and
try to come up with ways that we can approach the board with ways to make us
feel more welcomed and comfortable with the campus. We would try to come up
with bills and rulings. That was one of the ways I got involved with trying to
make things better for us [Black students].

In addition to being members of Black student organizations and their related
activities on campus, the Black women participants also shared that they are involved in
activism through conversation. For example, Destiny stated,

Whenever I get an opportunity to speak out on something, I speak out on it. If I
see something that is incorrect or offends me or I think offends other people I
speak out on it. It’s just not for Black people, it’s for everyone. I try to be open to
everyone’s experience as a human on this planet. And I try to speak up for people
who can’t speak up for themselves. Or if they will they will get ridiculed or
something. So, I definitely speak out when I feel like something is happening.

Kara described her view on the importance of using conversation to build relationships
that can then lead to activist-centered conversations. She stated,

I guess for myself, I would kind of describe myself as more like a relationship
type of activist. I’m a very like, let me get to know you. You get to know me. And
that’s how we can break down barriers. So, for me I’m not really on a big scale
and I don’t need to be a part of this group to make a change. Everybody does it in their own way, of course. And that's fine. But I think for me and my mindset it makes sense to break down barriers one relationship at a time because these are people you're interacting with.

Nina also described her use of conversation for activism when she stated,

A lot of the issues that I have strong feelings about I don’t always feel like a rally or a group gathering is the best approach to get my message across. So, because I am an education major, everything that I focus on is very education-based and looking at how society impacts education and how that system grows back into itself. So, I am more of a conversationalist than a confrontationist. I always feel some type of way when there are protests that are held and I don’t necessarily know if my presence in the space is going to be helpful.

Similarly, Princess stated,

I do go hard when it comes to political conversations. I don’t know if that makes me an activist. I don’t partake in any activist activities, but I definitely do [participate] with everything that is said. I remember Donald Trump’s election was my senior year and that day all the schools in [name of city] got cancelled because they knew the students were basically going to go crazy. People had signs up, we were saying ‘he is not my president,’ we were playing *Fuck the Police* by N.W.A all over the city, it was crazy. That was my first activist moment, but I didn’t play a role in it after that. I just say what I have to say when it comes to political conversations.
The participants of this study also shared that they have taken part in public demonstrations that have happened on campus in relation to activism. For example, Bianca stated,

I was a part of when Trump came [to campus], that protest that happened. I was also within the [resistance] group that was there when the white activist was speaking [on campus], and then the follow-up conversation and discussions that happened afterwards.

Other forms of activism that the participants shared that they take part in on college campuses included not standing for the National Anthem at campus sporting events and focusing their academic research on activist-related topics.

**Examples of Dress Showing Activist Identity**

After either identifying as an activist or not, and sharing what activist movements they are advocates for, the participants shared ways that they express their activist identity through dress with examples of garments and accessories. Some of the Black women participants shared that they do not have many garments or accessories that express their activist identity that they wear on their college campus. For example, Princess stated,

I feel like most activists, let’s say Black Lives Matter shirts, I don’t think I own one of those but that doesn’t mean that I don’t believe that Black lives matter. I am more of a boogie type of style. I don’t really express activism through my clothes.

Similarly, Kara shared how she does not often wear clothing that overtly expresses her activist identity; she stated,

I would say no, not really. I mean I know some people when certain movements come around, they're very like, ‘I'm gonna start wearing these shirts’ and like
‘black business’ and ‘black lives matter’ and all these shirts that are great—promote! Promote! But for me, I just feel like I can be wearing the shirt, but it's like, ‘what am I doing?’ because I know tons of people that are wearing Black Lives Matter and stuff, but it's like they're not really doing anything. And not to put them down or anything. But it's more so like I'm very like action based. How can I do that on a micro scale? It's not always about being seen.

Although some of the women shared that they do not often use dress as an expression of their activist identity while on campus, many of the women did. For example, Marie stated,

I [have] a bunch of RAYGUN, it started in Iowa and it’s a very social justice, political, satire-oriented clothing. So, it’s all like graphic shirts and a lot of people have RAYGUN. What they are known for is a very plain style of font and it says something that is usually a joke. But I have a bunch of those, and they are either funny or politically charged. I have some that say “we are the ones that we have been waiting for” (see Figure 28) something Barack Obama said, “mount nasty” (see Figure 29) with a picture of all these women, that looks like Mount Rushmore, who Trump called nasty. I’ve got a “when they go low, we go high” which is Michelle, my lady. So just some graphic shirts like that.
Similarly, Oni stated, “I usually show it [activist identity]. I have a lot of those activism T-shirts or something like that.”

The participants of this study identified a plethora of examples of garments and accessories that they utilize to express their activist identity while on their college campus. A
popular example described by the women was slogan T-shirts. For example, Erica stated,

I have an original Black Lives Matter shirt. The first ones that came out. Just the Black shirt with the white letters on it. I feel like they have different ones now that have like stipes on them and stuff.

When relating her use of slogan T-shirts as a display of activism, Aja stated,

I see an activist as someone that brings attention to something, because it’s not that they can really change anything. So, I think sometimes with some things that I wear I do bring attention to it. Let’s say with the “equality” shirt (see Figure 17), I’m bringing attention to the fact that not everybody is equal. I don’t think there is anything else specifically clothing.

Aja also stated,

Ways in which social movements have become a part of my life is the clothing items I will purchase with like specific logos or slogans and even to the extent of the spaces I choose to be a part of.

While describing how she uses slogan shirts to express her activist identity non-verbally, Oni stated,

I'm not much of a spoken person or like I don't have the type of platform to really speak, but I really try to wear stuff where people go ‘hey, what does that mean?’ Then I'm like, ‘oh, I'm glad you asked. I can tell you.’ I also have a shirt that says “why be racist, homophobic, transphobic, when you could be quiet”. I like that shop I got it from, I get a lot of stuff from them because they're also young people, young people of color, non-binary, all those good things. They sell shirts like. “Pizza rolls. Not gender rolls” (see Figure 30). I always try to wear stuff that
speaks for me when I don’t feel like speaking. I also have a shirt that says “the revolution will be cute as hell.”

Figure 30. Image of shirt with slogan that reads “Pizza roles not gender roles” owned by Oni, Photo by author, 2020.

Viveca described that she is very passionate about Black people exercising their right to vote. She explained that she advocates for this cause through a slogan T-shirt; she stated,

I like to wear a shirt that says “rock the vote”, you know what I'm saying? A lot of people don't really know where that slogan came from. I'm old enough to remember when Diddy ran a marathon and did all that stuff and was really bringing Black people out to vote. So, it's a conversation starter. And again, it gets people back to the polling places.

In addition to slogan T-shirts, some of the women participants related that wearing shirts with people of color imagery is also a way they use dress to express their activist identity. For example, Oni stated,

I had a shirt with Iggy Azalea, not because I liked her music, but because I thought she was so pretty. But if there is a shirt or anything apparel that had a
white woman or has a white woman now, I won't really wear it. I never really realized why, but I think it's just cause I don't want to rep a white woman. I just mostly have shirts that if they are people, it's people of color. Like I have a Selena T-shirt, my favorite T-shirt. I know I have a shirt with her on it. My mother found me this shirt from a Black expo back home with this woman, it's all sequence and it's a woman with sunglasses and an afro.

Similarly, Vashalice stated,

I have one shirt in particular, it's this shirt I have with president Barack Obama on it. And it is in FAMU colors, Florida A & M University in Tallahassee, Florida, the best HBCU [historically Black college or university] in the country. I always shout out FAM every chance I get because that school is amazing. But I went there on campus for a football game and they were selling these shirts with the picture of him [Barack Obama] on a stamp, but instead of it being like in black and white or whether it was like in the green and the orange, the FAMU colors. So, I bought it and I was like, ‘oh, this is dope.’ Like this is such a cool shirt when he first won his election and everything. And I felt so happy to wear that shirt because I was like, you know, our first Black president, this is so cool.

Viveca explained she wears a Muhammad Ali shirt (see Figure 31) on campus to express her alignment with activist views that Ali stood for. She stated,

My dad got that Muhammad Ali shirt in Chicago. For me, Muhammad Ali, yes, he was a great boxer, but I don't really care about all of that. It's what he did outside the boxing ring that makes him like the greatest ever to me. The biggest thing, for me, was him standing up when he got drafted to go to Vietnam. That
was the biggest thing when he was just like, ‘no, I'm not going. He's like, ‘I'm more than a boxer. I'm more than what I can offer these white people.’ And he stood behind that and, nothing but respect for that. Just like, just like Colin Kaepernick.

![Image](image.png)

*Figure 31.* Image of Viveca wearing T-shirt with Muhammad Ali imagery, Photo courtesy of Viveca, 2019.

Some of the women participants shared that wearing all black ensembles is a way that they use dress to express their activist identity. To the women, wearing all black portrayed a militant aesthetic similar to dress practices of the Black Panther Party. For example, Destiny stated,

I like to joke with my friends and express that I either dress like a Korean schoolgirl, or I dress like a Black Panther, there is no in between. Not militant in a bad way, but I like dressing militant like Black Panther-ish. The all black, caps, big hair, huge hoop earrings. I really like Black styles. Oni also stated,
I notice I wear this black shirt and I see that people who just wear all black are either artsy or like…that show *Dear White People*. There's that one dude, I don't know his character name but he's like really pro-Black. I have noticed because I have people, even family, telling me ‘you dressed like you are going to go to a protest or something.’

In addition to slogan T-shirts and wearing all black, some of the women participants described wearing Doc Marten boots as an expression of activist identity. For example, Brea stated,

I like to wear Doc Martens, I got these on sale because Docs are so expensive. They never go out of style; they pair with everything. I think they give an edge to a lot of style that like, Adidas don’t. Adidas can be seen as streetwear or preppy, but there is no prep to Docs. I kind of go against prep, it makes me think of classism. People that wear prep may not be classists, but it still rubs me the wrong way. I wear these [Doc Martens] because even though other people may say I’m just wearing Docs, to me it’s in a way rebelling against classism because of the historical context of what Doc were. They were worn by working class people because these boots last a while and they are indestructible, and they are warm, and you can wear them in any climate. Also, I wear them especially when I want to give myself a boost of confidence when I am in areas when I may not be safe. It’s a way of being or having a safety net. Because when people saw Docs in the older times they would say ‘don’t mess with them.’ So, it kind of makes me feel like it shows people to think twice before doing something.
Some of the women also identified the use of pins as a form of dress that expresses their activist identity while on their college campus. For example, Aja stated,

I have a pack of pins that I bought for my backpack that are from the Muhammad Ali museum that are more geared towards activism and Black empowerment. But I still tie that to the Black Lives Matter movement. I tie any Black empowerment stuff to the Black Lives Matter movement because that is what we can identify with in this time period. I think it goes back to what I said about visibility and not me just being there taking up space. It’s like I am there with a purpose and a message. Even just my bookbag, if you are walking behind me and you are reading the pins on my backpack are like, ‘ok, I can see her message behind this.’ Everything that I put on my backpack is intentional.

Experiences Wearing Activist Clothing on Campus

When asked about their experiences wearing garments and accessories that express their activist identity while on campus, the Black women participants described reactions from others as well as their own interpretations. Some of the participants shared that while on campus, no one reacted to their activism-related clothing. Others shared that they often received verbal support from others. For example, while describing her advocacy for pro-immigration, Oni stated,

I don't really notice how much of an impact it is until again, I see people staring or trying to read my shirt. Because sometimes it will spark conversation or if I see something somebody is wearing I’ll be like, ‘I like your shirt’ or ‘I like your shoes’ and stuff like that. I have a Hamilton shirt because I saw it and every time I see somebody else with it I’m like, ‘I like Hamilton too!’ Hamilton was such a pro-immigrant musical.
Brea also shared how she received verbal support while wearing her Black Lives Matter jacket while on campus (See Figure 32), although she could not tell if it was genuine. She stated,

Actually, there are a couple white people who have come up to me and they are like, ‘I love your jacket’ and I’m like, ‘thanks.’ I don’t know if that’s because they want to be performative and say ‘I’m not racist because I said I like her jacket,’ or if they actually like it because there are those fake people that say ‘I love that,’ but they are also going to turn up at that only white party that they didn’t invite Black people to. They aren’t going to ask, ‘why didn’t you invite Jada?’

![Figure 32. Image of denim jacket with hand-painted design that reads “Black Lives Matter” owned by Brea. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.](image)

Some of the women participants related that they experienced a sense of non-verbal discomfort from others when they would wear activism-related clothing. For example, Erica stated,
I feel like in class maybe more people kind of payed attention to it [Black Lives Matter T-shirt], rather than walking on campus. I feel like people were maybe a little uncomfortable and alert that I had it on. I didn’t have nobody really say nothing to me about it, which was great. There is nothing to say. But yea I could feel a little tension. Maybe just the people I was sitting by made me uncomfortable because I feel like a lot of white people are uncomfortable with anything that comes to Black and white, when at the end of the day they the ones who started it, but you know.

In relation to the non-verbal discomfort and stares from others while wearing activism-related clothing, some of the Black women participants shared that they are sometimes fearful of wearing this type of dress on campus. For example, Vashalice stated,

I like to wear a shirt like that [FAMU Barack Obama shirt] on this campus, it would literally pigeonhole me and the assumptions would come flying. You're a Black woman, you're wearing a shirt with president Barack Obama on it. He's still my president, president Barack Obama on it. It's going to feel a way, people are going to feel a way because its Iowa and Iowa is a very conservative Republican state. So, I don't know, I said I was going to be more intentional about kind of getting over that fear.

It is important to note that, as Vashalice stated, many of the women participants are aiming to overcome fears of expressing their activist identities through dress and appearance while on predominately white college campuses.
Motivations to Purchase Activist-Related Clothing

When asked what motivated them to purchase clothing and accessories that reflected their activist identities, the Black women participants shared different answers. These motivations included being mature enough to understand the Black Lives Matter movement, embracing modern-day Black empowerment, and to educate others while combating racism. For example, Aja shared that the being a mature 13-year-old when the BLM movement started motivated her decision to purchase clothing that related to the movement. Aja stated,

It [BLM movement] started in like 2014 and I was like 13. So, I think me going through that movement and also going through me growing up and actually picking out my clothes, some things that I have purchased would have been influenced by that. Also, because I was growing up through that era between like 13 and now, I guess I am more dependent on the [clothes] that I pick out for myself rather than something that my parents would pick out.

Some of the women also shared that they recognized that their family members could easily be one of the many Black, unarmed people killed by law enforcement. Due to that realization, the women shared that they decided to purchase BLM clothing. For example, Erica stated,

I feel like for me it was really an eye-opener after seeing so many people so close to my age dying. I’m like that could be me, that could be my brothers, that could be any of my friends, guy friends. It just really hit me, I’m like I want people to know that no matter what, I’m proud of our people even if things are bad at the moment. I just wanted to show my support and love for just us. And just letting the world know that we are here, we are proud, and that’s what the shirt is for. It’s
a representation for all the bad and the good that has happened.

Some of the participants shared that the modern-day pro-Black movement spearheaded by BLM was their motivation. For example, Vashalice stated,

I view Black Lives Matter as the Civil Rights Movement 2.0 for the new generation. As far as how my clothing has been influenced by that particular movement, it's just being true to myself and not necessarily fitting into like a Eurocentric mold as far as what clothing should be or what I should wear or whatever the case may be.

Similarly, Viveca stated,

I'm not necessarily afraid to wear certain shirts, or I'll catch myself looking for bolder statements on the shirt. Things of that nature. I think it's [BLM] a bold group. So, I wouldn't say that I'm just a part of the Black Lives Matter movement, not directly, but essentially as a Black person, I believe my life matters. I think I am a part of the Black Lives Matter.

Many of the participants shared that they purchased activist-related clothing in an effort to educate others. For example, Donielle stated,

I wear this [shirt] all the time on and off campus (see Figure 33). This one is really worth a lot, and not because of money but because of what it actually says. For me this one is more so not about culture but about history. I love the responses I get. I was on a plane going to my seat and a man said ‘I like your shirt’ and he was a white man. And that was like, it spoke volumes to me because I want people to read this shirt and be educated when I wear this. The other
[shirts] you can look at them or whatever, they’re for me, but this one is for everyone to read.

Figure 33. Image of T-shirt with slogan “Each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done -Bryan Stevenson” owned by Donielle. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Some participants shared that they simply wanted to reject public displays of racism that they encountered. For example, Marie stated, “I started buying Black Lives Matter shirts in ninth or 10th grade in 2016 because everyone else had all lives matter ones.”
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION

I analyzed the ways in which Black women college students attending PWIs in Iowa use dress and appearance practices to express Black and activist identity. The previous section described the results of this research. In this section, I interpret the meanings of these results and draw connections to related literature and the theoretical framework.

The Context of the PWI for Black Women College Students

Before exploring how Black women college students at PWIs use dress and appearance practices to express their activist and/or Black identity, it is important to explore their on-campus experiences to understand the context in which they are living their college life, which is the focus of this study. This allows for a better understanding as to how and why these women express their Black and activist identities through dress and appearance in these contexts.

Researchers reported student organizations are created at PWIs for all students, including students with marginalized identities, to thrive in the university environment and to have a sense of belonging (Chen & Hamilton, 2015). The presence of these student organizations often leads to “perceived social acceptance” of marginalized groups (Chen & Hamilton, 2015, p. 586; Eakins & Eakins, 2017), yet there is still a lack of support for students of color on campus leading to negative experiences and high drop-out rates (Eakins & Eakins, 2017; Grier-Reed et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2006). The Black woman student experience at PWIs in Iowa confirms this sentiment as these women were often part of Black student organizations on campus, but still commonly felt unwelcomed or othered by their white counterparts. Research also shows that despite PWIs implementing various diversity and inclusion initiatives, such as increased Black student recruitment, these institutions often missed the mark when trying to assure that the voices of students of color are heard when they arrive on campus (Guiffrida &
Douthit, 2010; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). My work confirms this finding for Black women college students attending PWIs in Iowa, as participants shared they often felt unseen by university faculty, staff, and administration, and have felt increasingly unwelcomed over their years of attendance at these universities.

Past scholars also reported that providing advisors that have regular contact with the students, specifically students of color, often leads to higher retention rates for these students (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). My work confirms this finding for Black women college students in Iowa as the participants shared that having multicultural liaisons that they meet with regularly helped them feel safer and more welcomed on campus. Research has also shown that Black students attending PWIs that have mentorship relationships with other Black people on campus is another essential asset to Black student retention (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; Eakins & Eakins, 2017). The Black women in this study confirmed that having a mentor of color on campus influenced them to stay at their institution when they considered transferring due to racism and microaggressions.

Black students attending PWIs often face racism and discrimination in the forms of microaggressions including avoidance and exclusion (Bailey-Fakhoury & Frierson, 2014). These experiences are directly related to the long-standing history of racism towards Black people that has plagued North American culture (Carbado, 2017; Fisher, 2018; Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016). Participants of this study confirmed this notion, sharing that they often faced microaggressions in the forms of avoidance from white people while riding the campus bus and in classes. Past researchers also highlighted that Black students attending PWIs actively resisted racism and discrimination on their campuses by being involved with Black student organizations and holding public demonstrations (Jones & Reddick, 2017). My work confirms this research as
participants in this study shared that they were members of Black student organizations and have actively participated in public demonstrations on campus to resist oppression. Overall, these Black women’s experiences at PWIs in Iowa are largely similar to past scholarship in that they faced microaggressions, felt unwelcome and unsafe, yet found welcoming environments in Black contexts or other familiar spaces that were not necessarily Black.

**Self-Definition: Becoming Versus Being and the Black and Activist Identity on the PWI**

Collins (2009) introduced self-definition, a critical tenet of Black feminist thought, as the process that Black women engage in while *becoming* aware of who they are (Kaiser, 2012). Stereotypes and imagery often define Black women leaving them unable to advocate for their own self-definition (Collins, 2009). Through this research, I gave participants a space to actively self-define (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) their activist and Black identities, which reflected the continually evolving concept of identity as described by Kaiser (2012). Some of the participants shared that they became more aware and took ownership of their Black identity while experiencing multiple and often conflicting environments at the PWI. That is, they wanted to express their Blackness in ways they had never before due to being submerged in whiteness, which allowed for an increased sense of pride in their identities. The women then also shared that their activist identity, too evolved based off of their lived experiences and different environments that they encountered while in college. The evolvement of these identities often led to feelings of empowerment and were manifested in their dress and appearance practices. In some instances, this self-realization and self-definition occurred throughout the process of the actual 45- to 90-minute research interview.
Black and Activist Identities: Dress and Appearance Practices on the PWI

Identity Rearticulation

As a concept of becoming versus being, Kaiser (2012) suggested that racial rearticulation happens when the concept of race is revised and re-understood. This process of rearticulating one’s racial identity can be expanded to multiple identities, including an activist identity, as the notion of being versus becoming suggests that no identity is ever stagnant (Kaiser, 2012). The participants of my study exemplified this idea as they shared about a continued evolvement of both their Black and activist identities.

Racial rearticulation has been prominent throughout history. For example in the 1960s during the “Black is beautiful” movement Black people embraced their Blackness more intensively through dress and appearance to resist white supremacy, while within a highly racist and discriminatory political and cultural context (Ford, 2015; Miller, 2009). My research confirms that Black people continually engage in racial rearticulation in the 21st century as a way to embrace their identity and resist oppression while attending PWIs in Iowa. The cultural context of power dynamics, racism, discrimination, and microaggressions (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), in part, motivated my participants to become more aware of and intentional about expressing their Black and activist identity through their dress and appearance. Despite the cultural context, the Black women engaged in racial rearticulations and self-definition (Collins, 2009; Kaiser, 2012) as they shared that they were becoming more aware of their Blackness and activist identity while attending a PWI. The Black women also shared experiences of increased self-love while embracing their Blackness more through their dress and appearance. Of note, is that these Black women’s experiences of racial rearticulations were occurring during a time period of increased Black activism (Black Lives Matter Movement) (“Black Lives Matter”, n.d.),
although they could have, and most likely did, experience racial rearticulation prior to the time period I interviewed them about.

**Identity Expression Through Dress**

Past literature has shown that Black people have historically used dress and appearance as a way to express Black identity and to reject abuse of power, racism, and discrimination in many forms (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ford, 2015; Kaiser, 2012; King, 2016; Lewis, 2003; O’Neal, 1998; Robinson, 2008; Romero, 2012; Tortora & Marckettii, 2015; Tyler, 2008). Although no past literature has shown how this use of dress has been utilized specifically by Black women college students within the PWI environment in Iowa; in the following section, I provide examples from my research that support findings from the literature in relation to Black women student experiences at the PWI.

Researchers reported that historically, Black people have expressed their Blackness through high-effect colors and exotic accessories, including bright colored garments, garments made of African prints, and bold jewelry, which are essential to a Black aesthetic (Ford, 2015; O’Neal, 1998). My research affirms this finding as my participants shared that they often wear bright colored garments, African prints, or colors that emphasize their darker skin tone. My participants also shared that they often wear large, hoop earrings as a way to express their Black identity, which also confirms these findings.

Collins (2009) and Ford (2015) found that through self-definition, dynamic consciousness allows for Black women to resist societal definitions of what is acceptable—in this case, dress. My research confirms this notion as the Black women participants explained that they wear politically charged garments as a form of activism that ultimately reaffirms their activist identity. An early example of activist identity being expressed through dress by Black people is the zoot suit which became an expression of rebellion against hegemonic norms during
the 1940s (Kaiser, 2012; Tortora & Marcketti, 2015; Tyler, 2008). My research participants confirmed that the act of rebellion through dress and appearance is still happening today as they shared that they often use garments, such as slogan T-shirts, to express their Black and activist identities. For example, Lucille wore her engineering shirt (see Figure 19) to outwardly express that, despite the sweeping generalization that Black women cannot succeed in STEM fields, she is a Black woman studying and excelling in engineering at a PWI. More specifically, they are wearing these garments purposefully in an environment where they face silencing, racism, and discrimination, similar to what Black men faced when wearing zoot suits. Therefore, with counterstorytelling, these women are representing themselves and reclaiming what it means to be rebellious in the name of self-empowerment (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Researchers reported that denim has had significance in Black culture, for example, SNCC activists adopted denim overalls from the sharecropping era and transformed denim’s purpose into a tool during protests and public demonstrations during the Civil Rights era (Ford, 2015). Activists used denim overalls as a blank canvas for political pins, and to house flyers and other materials in the many pockets on the garment that were passed out during protests (Ford, 2015). Denim gained substantial importance within Black activist culture in the mid-20th century, and my research confirms that this importance in denim is still evident in the 2010s as my participants shared that they often wear denim to express both their activist and Black identities due to its direct correlation to Black activist history. Although denim has become an extremely common textile in North American culture, my study gives Black women the opportunity to use counterstorytelling to reclaim denim as a textile that empowers them via its history within Black culture (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
Researchers also shared that styles worn by members of the Black Panther Party (BPP), including paramilitary styles and all black ensembles, reflected Black identity during the Civil Rights era (Ford, 2015; Lewis, 2003). My research confirms that these findings are still relevant as my participants shared that they often wear militant-inspired styles and all black outfits reflecting the BPP aesthetic, which expressed their Black and activist identity. The long-standing influence and history of Black activists and their corresponding styles and ideologies is still apparent in subtle ways for these Black women. So much so, that they still embody and wear similar styles, in overt and subtle ways, to feel a connection to past Black activism histories and to advocate for empowerment of modern Black folks.

Past scholars also reported that 1990s/early 2000s urban wear brands such as FUBU, Karl Kani, and Cross Colours were revolutionary for Black people and became popular expressions of Black identity (Lewis & Gray, 2013; Romero, 2012). Kangol was also popular during this time once Black celebrities endorsed the brand (Robinson, 2008). This era of style included bold jewelry, headwraps, bright colors, Doc Marten boots, Nike Air Force Ones, and other garments and accessories (Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Gray, 2013; Robinson, 2008). The Black women participants of my study extend this past research as participants shared that they often wear Kangol hats, headwraps, colorful styles reflective of the Karl Kani and Cross Colours brands, Doc Marten boots, and Nike Air Force Ones to express their Black and activist identities while attending the PWI. This highlights the continued influence of these revolutionary Black owned brands and styles popularized by the Black community in the late 20th century.

Research has suggested that Black students attending PWIs would have a better college experience if they understand the significance of presenting oneself professionally while in predominately white spaces that are deemed professional (Eakins & Eakins, 2017). However, the
experiences of the Black women student participants of my study contradict this sentiment. The women often reaffirmed that their style translates to feelings of empowerment and a sense of increased self-love when overtly expressing both Black and activist identity. The styles the women were referring to included overt slogan T-shirts, bright colors, and accessories that are often deemed unprofessional by Eurocentric standards.

Although my research confirms much of the past literature on ways Black people express Blackness and activism, my work extends past literature by identifying the dress practice motivations of 21st century Black women attending PWIs. Black women are often not given the opportunity to write their own histories through their own voices; therefore, through counterstorytelling, I offer these unique findings to the body of knowledge (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I found that motivations to express Blackness and activism included often being the only Black person in a space while at the PWI, gaining recognition from other Black students on campus, and wanting to embody influential Black women, as well as family influences. Participants of my study also shared that they were motivated to express Black and activist identity because of the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, opportunities to educate others about Black culture, and chances to reject racism. The significant impact that the everyday dress practices of these women have while at the PWI is important because although the women often feel ostracized and silenced while in predominantly white spaces, the women are empowered through their dress and appearance on a daily basis. That is, they are not always taking part in street protests or overtly engaging in televised activist activities, yet they are subtly engaging in these practices everyday through their dress as they walk through these predominantly white spaces claiming their Blackness.
Theoretical Interpretation

Critical race theory is used to study the relationship between race, racism, and power (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). In my research, I utilized empathic fallacy and counterstorytelling, tenets of CRT, to give Black women agency to own and describe their lived experiences. Through my research I give Black women college students the agency to dismantle stereotypical narratives of Black women by describing their lived experiences while attending a PWI that ultimately inform their dress and appearance practices in relation to Black and activist identities. With the insight that the Black women participants shared, society now has the opportunity to empathize and disregard the acceptance and distribution of stereotypes that negatively impact Black women. Additionally, with counterstorytelling, the participants of my research were provided a space to tell their own stories of expressing Blackness and activist identity through dress versus non-Black people speaking on these topics on their behalf.
CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION

The Black woman college student experiences at the PWI, specifically during the Black Lives Matter Movement era, is unique and undoubtedly important. Black Lives Matter is a movement that has impacted the Black community significantly and has encouraged Black students, in this case Black women students, to become more knowledgeable and vocal in activism—often times through everyday dress and appearance. The rich history of Black women utilizing dress to overtly express Black and activist identity is represented in the styling practices of these modern Black women college students in various ways. The recognition of these styling practices forces society to acknowledge that Black women continue to resist racism, discrimination, and oppression while empowering themselves through these everyday processes of fashioning the body.

Through this research, three themes emerged, the first being experiences on campus. Each participant shared their experiences being a Black woman attending predominately white institutions in Iowa during the Black Lives Matter Movement era, a time where there has been a significant surge in Black activism in North America. The women shared that while on campus they felt both safe and welcomed, as well as unsafe and unwelcomed. Some of the women also related experiences of racism and discrimination while on campus in the forms of microaggressions, avoidance, and other discriminatory actions. All of these experiences are important because they inform the ways that the Black women decide to fashion their bodies. More specifically, the experiences that the women faced on their campuses inform how the women utilize their agency to express their Black and activist identities through dress and appearance while at the PWI, during a particularly turbulent time in history.
The second theme that emerged was *Black identity through dress and appearance*. The women shared that they were motivated to show their Black identity through dress because they want to show Black student success, highlight the few Black women on campus, as well as connect with other Black students. Examples representing Black identity included brightly colored garments, denim, slogan T-shirts, bold jewelry, and hair accessories such as headwraps. When the women wore styles that reflected their Black identity at the PWI, they sometimes felt the need to hide their Blackness, because they received uncertain looks from non-Black people. Yet, the women also shared that they often related feelings of empowerment and increased self-love when they fashioned their bodies with garments and accessories that reflected their Blackness.

Finally, the third theme was *activist identity through dress and appearance*. The Black women participants also expressed various comprehensions of activist identity, many of them transitioning to owning an activist identity by the conclusion of the research interview. The women were involved with various activist activities on campus such as being members of Black student organizations, taking part in public demonstrations on campus, and having critical conversations about social issues with others. The women overtly demonstrated their activist identity by wearing slogan T-shirts, shirts featuring people of color, and all black ensembles reflective of the militant Black Panther Party aesthetic. The women were motivated to wear these activist styles because of their personal connection to the Black Lives Matter Movement, to educate others on Black culture and issues, and to reject racism.

After analysis of my themes and subthemes, I propose the following substantive theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that is grounded in my data related to Black women college students using dress and appearance practices to express Black and activist identities while attending
PWIs. Black women college students have both positive and negative experiences on campus while attending PWIs, which ultimately informs their dress and appearance practices. These dress and appearance practices often relate to subtle and overt expressions of Black and activist identity, which could be used to connect with like-minded people. Additionally, these everyday dress and appearance practices lead to feelings of empowerment and increased self-love for the Black women college students in white spaces.

Limitations

While I provided a significant amount of rich description from the data, this study had several limitations. First, the study was limited to current on-campus Black women college students. Opening the study to college students of all genders and who may be enrolled online could lead to expanded outcomes, particularly in the digital space. Also, the study was limited to predominately white institutions in Iowa. Expanding the study to different types of institutions, such as historically Black colleges and universities, as well as higher education institutions in different states could offer different perspectives on student life, and expression of Black and activist identity. Another limitation of this study was the requirement of the participants being willing to lend garments and accessories to the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing Museum for a consecutive time span of 3 months. This requirement excludes students who are unable to loan garments for a significant amount of time due to financial restraints, which, if these students were included, could have led to different results.

Implications for Society and the Apparel Industry

This study has implications for society, PWIs, and the apparel industry. Through this study, society is provided a rich description of the lived experiences of Black women college students attending PWIs, specifically during the BLM Movement era, and the direct correlation of these experiences to the long-standing history of Black oppression in the United States.
Furthermore, this study provides insight on how Black women continue to use dress to empower themselves while facing racism and discrimination on the college campus, in addition to ways that the women present themselves via dress to express Black and activist identities. Providing this perspective from Black women allows for recognition of the adversaries that Black women continue to combat in the 21st century. This recognition can lead to society obtaining a better understanding of Black women and activist identity, as well as opportunities for empathic fallacies (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017). The ultimate implication for society from this research is to work towards eliminating acts of racism and discrimination toward Black women, and an initiative to empower Black women. Additionally, my research continues the work of giving Black women a space to be heard when they are often overlooked, specifically within the university environment.

This research provides insight to PWIs about the experiences that Black students have while attending these institutions, which can lead to initiatives to eliminate any experiences that are hindering to students. PWIs can also utilize this research to consider improved methods of recruitment and retention of all students of color, while also determining the best practices to assure that these students feel safer and more welcomed while on campus and in the surrounding environment.

Through this research, I also offer implications to the apparel industry. I provide personal perspectives about garments and accessories that are worn to express marginalized identities (specifically Black and activist), which can be vital information for apparel brands that might want to target this consumer. These brands can use information from this study to understand consumer wants and needs, and tailor more garments and accessories to meet these standards. However, these apparel brands must be very cautious when creating designs that cater to this
market as the role of interest convergence (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) can easily be taken on when there is an interest to capitalize off of individuals who possess these identities versus supporting them. These brands must be sure to not contribute to the oppression of Black people who do and do not claim activist identities by, for example, proving garments and accessories that uphold discriminatory ideals, or excluding Black people from any part of the design and creation processes. Instead, these brands must be confident in their positive and supportive stance of the Black community and Black activism, along with including Black people in every step of the process in which these garments and accessories are created.

**Further Research**

There are numerous areas for further inquiry following this study. Researchers could examine the recent impact that dress practices expressing activist identity has had on university policies related to social issues. Future researchers could also examine the consumer behavior practices of the participants. For example, they could ask the Black women more questions about where they purchased the garments and accessories that reflect their Black and activist identities. The research could focus on the purchase decision process that went along with the consumption decisions. Additionally, researchers could study other populations including Black women in predominately Black spaces, men, other age groups, or people who are not currently college students. Other activist identities could also be examined, including those from Black and non-Black people. Researchers could also further explore more ways that people express their activist identities besides dress and appearance, or expressions of Black and activist identity in areas of the United States outside of the mid-west or in different countries.
REFERENCES


Dahir, I. (2016). People love this teen’s clapback after being told not to wear her BLM t-shirt at Thanksgiving. *Buzzfeed*. Retrieved from https://www.buzzfeed.com/ikrd/this-girl-was-told-not-to-wear-her-t-shirt-at-thanksgiving-d


APPENDIX A. DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY & INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Demographic Survey
1. What are the first three letters of your first name?

Part 1 of 3: Background Information
2. How old are you?
3. What is your ethnicity and/or race?
4. Where do you currently live?
5. What are your gender pronouns?

Part 2 of 3: Education
6. What college or university do you currently attend?
7. Are you an undergraduate or graduate student and what year are you within (e.g. sophomore in undergrad or 3rd year of PhD)?
8. What are you studying?

Part 3 of 3: Black Identity and Social Movements
9. Why do you have pride in your Black identity?
10. Are resistance, activism, or empowerment-like social movements a part of your life now?
   a. If yes, which ones and in what ways?
   b. If yes, what ignited your interest in resistance, activism, or empowerment-like social movements?

Next steps
1. Find up to 5 pictures of yourself from between the years 2013-2019 that highlight clothing styles that reflect pride in Black identity. Email the images to Dyese prior to the in-person interview at dyesem@iastate.edu.

Thank you for taking the demographic survey! -Dyese

Interview Schedule
Introduction
Thank you for participating in this research project. In this interview, I’ll ask you to share about information you shared in your Demographic Survey as it may pertain to Black identity, dress, and appearance and how they might relate to activism. We will also talk about the photos you provided. I’ll first ask you a series of questions, then I’ll ask you some questions about your photos, and then we will take a look at your garments that you might loan for the exhibition.

If at any time you feel uncomfortable or do not want to answer any questions we can skip the question or come back to it. Please remember that you can withdraw at any time. There are no right answers or lengths of answers.

Do you have any questions at this point? Do you feel fully informed of this study and your role as a participant? Is it okay if I start recording?
Campus life
1. Do you ever feel welcomed or unwelcomed on your college campus?
2. Do you ever feel safe or unsafe on campus?
3. Do you have any spaces that you would consider “safe or unsafe spaces” on campus?
4. Have you ever experienced racism or discrimination while on campus?
5. Have you ever engaged in activist-related activities while on campus?
   a. If yes, what issue was the activism addressing?
   b. If yes, how did you engage or what did you do?
   c. If no, why not? Have you wanted to, but decided not to?

Appearance, style, and identity
1. How would you describe your personal clothing style?
   a. Can you describe a typical outfit that you might wear?
2. Do you think your clothing style reflects your Black identity?
   a. If yes, do you feel empowered when you reflect your Black identity in your clothing style?
3. Do you ever think about actively trying to show or hide your Black identity in your appearance or clothing style? [on campus or other spaces?]

Activist identity, Black pride, and appearance/style as related to the campus experience
1. Do you consider yourself to be an activist?
   If yes, ask the following:
   a. In what ways?
   b. Do you think your clothing style reflects your activist identity?
   c. In what ways?
   d. Have you worn these styles on campus or the surrounding environment and why?
   e. Can you give me an example?
   f. Have you worn these styles on campus or the surrounding environment and why?
2. Do you think the Black Lives Matter Movement has influenced your most recent personal clothing style while on campus or the surrounding environment?
   a. In what ways?
3. How do you feel when you wear clothing that represents the BLM movement? Why is it important to you? What are your experiences when wearing it?

Photo elicitation
Now, can we look through your photos that you sent prior? For each photo, can you talk about the following?
1. What year is it from?
2. Where was it taken?
3. How does this photo reflect pride in your Black identity [or your activist identity]?

Garment Elicitation
Now, can we look through some of your garments or accessories that you found prior to the interview?
1. Can you show me any garments or accessories that you wear that you think signifies pride in your Black identity?
a. Where do you wear these garments?
2. Can you show me any garments or accessories that you think signifies your activist identity?
   a. Where do you wear these garments?
3. For the objects that you want to loan: What would be most important or what would you like the museum labels to say about these garments within the exhibition?

**Final Questions**
1. Is there anything else you feel I should know about your clothing style as it relates to pride in your Black identity, your activist identity, or related feelings of empowerment?
2. Is there anything you said during this interview that you would like to redact to assure that it is not shared?

**Exhibition Loans**
Can we discuss which outfits or objects you’d like to lend for the exhibition? This is simply an opportunity to talk through and finalize what objects I will be borrowing from you.
PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR STUDY ON BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN, ACTIVISM, BLACK IDENTITY, AND FASHION

COMPENSATION $40

PURPOSE
- To understand how Black women express their racial identity through fashion and appearance as a form of activism, pride in Black identity, or empowerment while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) in Iowa or in the surrounding environments of the PWI.
- To build a public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum based on the information collected from participants.

ELIGIBILITY
- Age 18+
- Identify as Black and/or African American
- Identify as a woman (including both transgender and cisgender women)
- A current on-campus college undergraduate or graduate student attending a PWI in Iowa
- Have pride in your Black identity
- Are willing to lend garments or accessories for a public exhibit on the experiences of Black women college students’ fashion held at the Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum in Spring 2020

WHAT WILL YOU DO?
1. Complete a short demographic survey prior to the interview (up to 15 min)
2. Find up to 5 pictures of yourself since 2013 that highlight your clothing style and pride in your Black identity and then send to researcher via email prior to the interview (up to 30 min)
3. Complete an audio and/or video recorded interview about your clothing style (up to 1.5 hours)
4. Identify garments or accessories (preferably about 1-3 outfits) to loan for the Spring 2020 public exhibition at the Textiles and Clothing Museum (up to 30 min)

CONTACT
Dyese Matthews, Graduate Student
Iowa State University
dyescm@iastate.edu

Kelly Reddy-Best, Assistant Professor
Iowa State University
klrb@iastate.edu
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

CONSENT FORM FOR: THE BLACK WOMAN STUDENT: ACTIVISM, BLACK IDENTITY, EMPOWERMENT, AND FASHION ON THE COLLEGE CAMPUS DURING THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT ERA

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project staff before deciding to participate.

Who is conducting this study?
Dyese Matthews, Graduate Student in the Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management Dept, Iowa State University
Kelly Reddy-Best, Assistant Professor in the Apparel, Events, and Hospitality Management Dept, Iowa State University

Why am I invited to participate in this study?
You are being asked to take part in this study because you:
1. Are age 18+
2. Identify as Black and/or African American
3. Identify as a woman (including both transgender and cisgender women)
4. Are a current on-campus college undergraduate or graduate student attending a predominantly white institution in Iowa
5. Have pride in your Black identity
6. Are willing to lend garments or accessories (preferably 1-3 outfits) for a public exhibit on the experiences of Black women college students’ fashion held at the Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum in Spring 2020. We would like to borrow items from the time of the interview until May 2020. However, the initial borrow time can be negotiated.

You should not participate if you:
1. Are age 17 and younger
2. Do not identify as Black and/or African American
3. Do not identify as a woman (including both transgender and cisgender women)
4. Are not a current on-campus college undergraduate or graduate student attending a predominantly white institution in Iowa
5. Do not have pride of your Black identity
6. Are not willing to lend garments or accessories (preferably 1-3 outfits) for a public exhibit on the experiences of Black women college students’ fashion held at the Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum in Spring 2020

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this study is to:
• understand how Black women express their racial identity through fashion and appearance as a form of activism, pride in Black identity, or empowerment while attending a predominantly white institution (PWI) in Iowa or in the surrounding environments of the PWI.
• build a public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum based on the information, garments, and photographs collected from participants.

What will I be asked to do?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a short demographic survey prior to the interview (up to 15 minutes)
2. Find up to 5 pictures of yourself since 2013 that highlight your clothing style and pride in your Black identity and then send to the researcher via email prior to the interview (up to 30 min)
3. Complete an in-person audio and/or video recorded interview about your clothing style, self-identities, and on-campus experiences (up to 1.5 hours)
4. Directly following the interview, identify garments or accessories (preferably 1-3 outfits) to loan for the Spring 2020 public exhibition at the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing Museum in Ames, IA (up to 30 minutes)

Your participation will last for up to 2 hours and 45 minutes.

Note: Your items loaned for the exhibition will be promptly shipped back to you following the end of the exhibition in Spring 2020. We will email you prior to shipping them back. We will also send you an email letting you know when the exhibition is open and inviting you to attend.

What are the possible risks or discomforts and benefits of my participation?

- **Risks or Discomforts**—The foreseeable risks or discomforts related to your participation in this research include
  1. **Emotional discomfort** - when answering interview questions during interview related to negative experiences involving racial identity, clothing, fashion, and appearance. Participants can skip any question if they feel discomfort.
  2. **Identification via one’s clothing** – participants may be identified by their clothing, if for example, they have worn the garments before and/or have an especially unique style of dress. Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
  3. **Social risks** - participants may share unpopular opinions as part of their interview or may share information with which others disagree. This may lead to participants experiencing backlash and/or being ostracized by those within or outside their social group. Researchers cannot predict the public’s reaction.

- **Benefits**—You may not receive any direct benefit from taking part in this study. We hope that this research will benefit society by educating the public about the history of clothing, appearance, and style of Black/African American college women.

How will the information I provide be used?
The information you provide will only be used by the research team for the following purposes: publication in an academic journal, book, or conference; display in a public exhibition at the Iowa State University Textiles and Clothing Museum; posted on social media or promotional materials related to the museum exhibition.

What measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data or to protect my privacy?
Research records identifying you will not be made publicly available without your permission. However, auditing departments of Iowa State University and the ISU Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies with human subjects) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and analysis. These records may contain private information.

For those allowing their identity to be shared in reports of findings and via the public exhibit, the following measures will be taken:

- **Name:** We are asking permission to use your name when findings are disseminated, though you may choose to use a pseudonym.
- **Video/Audio:** We are asking permission to video and audio record your interview. Video clips may be edited to create a short film for use in the public exhibit or on social media related to the exhibit. You may choose NOT to have your video disseminated via the exhibit or social media.
related to the exhibit (see selection options at the end of this document). If you choose NOT to have your video disseminated, the research team will transcribe the interview from the video and then delete the file.

- **Photographs:** We are asking to use photographs that may identify you. You may choose to have your face, and other identifying characteristics such as tattoos, blurred or distorted (see selection options at the end of this document). However, even if blurred/distorted, we cannot guarantee you will not be identifiable in your image.

For those desiring confidentiality to the extent permitted by law be maintained, the following measures can be put in place:

- **Name:** Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym when study findings are disseminated.
- **Video/Audio:** Recordings will first be transcribed and then destroyed. Identifying information will be removed from transcripts.
- **Photographs:** Faces and other identifiers in photographs will be distorted or blurred prior to their inclusion in reports of findings. However, even if blurred/distorted, we cannot guarantee you will not be identifiable in your image.

**Will I incur any costs from participating or will I be compensated?**
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated $40 for participating in this study after completion of the in-person interview. Compensation will be mailed to you. In the event of an early withdrawal from the study, you will receive full compensation.

You will need to complete a form to receive payment. Please know that payments may be subject to tax withholding requirements, which vary depending upon whether you are a legal resident of the U.S. or another country. If required, taxes will be withheld from the payment you receive.

**What are my rights as a human research participant?**
Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, irb@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

**Whom can I contact if I have questions about the study?**
You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information, please contact Dyese Matthews at dyesem@iastate.edu or Kelly Reddy-Best at klrb@iastate.edu.

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Please read and initial if you agree to the following. **If anything is left blank, it is assumed that you do not agree:**

1. _____ I agree to be audio recorded during the interview.
2. _____ I agree to be video recorded during the interview.
3. _____ I agree to allow use of video footage from the interview in the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textile and Clothing Museum and on related social media.

4. _____ I agree to allow use of my name when findings are disseminated via publications, presentations, or use in the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum.

   OR

   _____ I do not agree to allow use of my name when findings are disseminated AND would prefer the use of a pseudonym for publications, presentations, and use in the public exhibition at Iowa State University’s Textiles and Clothing Museum.

5. I agree for the researchers to use the photographs provided without blurring or distorting any of the visible faces when used for:

   _____ publications
   _____ use in the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textile and Clothing Museum
   _____ on the social media or promotional materials related to the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textile and Clothing Museum

   OR

   I would like for the researchers to blur or distort the visible faces in the photographs I provided to them when used for:

   _____ publications
   _____ use in the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textile and Clothing Museum
   _____ use on social media or promotional materials related to the public exhibit at Iowa State University’s Textile and Clothing Museum

6. _____ I agree to allow the interview to take place at my home at the following address:

   ____________________________________________________________

   OR

   _____ I would not like to have the interview at my home and will tell the researcher where I would prefer to have it at the time I return this signed document via email

   Participant’s Name (printed) ________________________________

   Participant’s Signature____________________________________

   Date________________

You are encouraged to keep a copy of this document, with your preferences selected, for your records and future reference.
APPENDIX D. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
2420 Lincoln Way, Suite 202
Ames, Iowa 50014
515 294-4566

Date: 06/27/2019
To: Dyese Matthews
From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: The Black Woman Student: Activism, Black Identity, Empowerment, and Fashion on the College Campus During the Black Lives Matter Movement Era

IRB ID: 19-231
Submission Type: Initial Submission
Review Type: Full Committee
Approval Date: 6/27/2019
Approval Expiration Date: N/A

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University according to the dates shown above. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Retain signed informed consent documents for 3 years after the close of the study, when documented consent is required.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study or study materials.

- Promptly inform the IRB of any addition or change in federal funding for this study. Approval of the protocol referenced above applies only to funding sources that are specifically identified in the corresponding IRB application.

- Inform the IRB if the Principal Investigator and/or Supervising Investigator end their role or involvement with the project with sufficient time to allow an alternate PI/Supervising Investigator to assume oversight responsibility. Projects must have an eligible PI to remain open.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- IRB approval means that you have met the requirements of federal regulations and ISU policies governing human subjects research. Approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are

IRB 01/2019
protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. IRB approval in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

- Your research study may be subject to post-approval monitoring by Iowa State University’s Office for Responsible Research. In some cases, it may also be subject to formal audit or inspection by federal agencies and study sponsors.

- Upon completion of the project, transfer of IRB oversight to another IRB, or departure of the PI and/or Supervising Investigator, please initiate a Project Closure to officially close the project. For information on instances when a study may be closed, please refer to the IRB Study Closure Policy.

If your study requires continuing review, indicated by a specific Approval Expiration Date above, you should:

- Stop all human subjects research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Human subjects research activity can resume once IRB approval is re-established.

- Submit an application for Continuing Review at least three to four weeks prior to the Approval Expiration Date as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Please don’t hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or irb@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX E. CODEBOOK

1. Reporting and discussion about racism and discrimination on campus
   1.1. Personally targeted
      1.1.1. White male students
      1.1.1.1. Experiences of sexism
      1.1.2. White women students
      1.1.2.1. White women dominate sidewalk space on campus
      1.1.2.2. In-class interactions are awkward and disheartening
      1.1.2.3. Stereotype: Being accused of being the “angry Black woman”
      1.1.3. Faculty or staff [white and POC]
      1.1.3.1. Spotlighting
   1.2. Reporting incidents to on-campus office for institutional equity
      1.2.1. No concrete outcome
   1.3. Memories of past discrimination
      1.3.1. Memories of Black people being arrested on campus due to racism
   1.4. Campus offices providing spaces for conversations about social issues
      1.4.1. Campus police present during conversations about social issues
      1.4.2. Felt bias against police due to history of police brutality [ex: Trayvon Martin, video of Black women being detailed while naked]
      1.4.3. Students felt unheard at these conversations
   1.5. Racism being present, but hidden on campus
   1.6. Posters with racists comments about Blacks on campus
      1.6.1. Being offended by the posters

2. Feeling safe on campus
   2.1. Degree of feeling safe on campus
      2.1.1. Mostly safe
      2.1.2. Mostly unsafe
      2.1.3. Mix of safe and unsafe
   2.2. Generally feeling safe on campus
   2.3. Walking in daylight
   2.4. People of color specific spaces
      2.4.1. Specifically named offices
      2.4.2. Multicultural student offices
      2.4.3. Other POC specific spaces
   2.5. Safe spaces that have turned into unsafe spaces
      2.5.1. When offices change staff members
      2.5.2. Staff members making racists comments [ex: “you people are always loud”]

3. Feeling welcomed on campus
   3.1. Degree of feeling welcomed on campus
      3.1.1. Mostly welcomed
      3.1.2. Mostly unwelcomed
      3.1.3. Mix of welcomed and unwelcomed
      3.1.4. No feeling of welcomed or unwelcomeness
   3.2. Walking to class
   3.3. Greetings from other Black women
   3.4. Going to multicultural student org events
      3.4.1. [name of Black student org]
      3.4.2. NAACP student chapter
      3.4.3. [name of Black student org 2]
      3.4.4. [Name of Black student org 3]
   3.5. Going to non-POC specific student orgs or events
      3.5.1. Christian student org events
      3.5.2. Greek letter org office
   3.6. Gradually feeling welcomed over years of attendance
   3.7. Having mentors of color
      3.7.1. Black women mentors similar to on-campus mother-like figure
      3.7.2. Influenced decision to stay at university
   3.8. Seeing diverse people
   3.9. Being around familiar people on campus
   3.10. Positive experiences in classroom settings

4. Feeling unwelcomed on campus
   4.1. Being the only Black person in campus spaces; class, student organization, transportation, or dorm
      4.1.1. Resulting experiences
      4.1.1.1. Feeling isolated or like “other”
      4.1.1.2. Struggling with the transition from all Black school to all white school
      4.1.1.3. Microaggressions from white people
4.1.1.3.1. Being asked offensive questions by white people
4.1.1.3.2. Having to ignore the microaggression with poise
4.1.1.3.3. Avoidance:
   4.1.1.3.3.1. on bus
   4.1.1.3.3.2. in group work
   4.1.1.3.3.3. in class
4.1.1.4. White people look uncertain or threatened
   4.1.1.4.1. Learned to ignore the negative looks
4.2. Especially around white males
4.3. Being around unfamiliar people
4.4. University lacks true initiatives for inclusion
4.5. Feeling unseen compared to white students
4.6. Receive minimal assistance from institutional offices or professors [ex: financial aid, class scheduling]
   4.6.1. Stopped going to class
4.7. Advised by other POC to avoid spaces due to unwelcoming environment for POC
4.8. Racial tensions rising on campus since Trump election

5. Feeling unsafe on campus
5.1. Overt discrimination
5.2. Never feel unsafe
5.3. Microagression: White students perceive Black students as a threat
5.4. Specific spaces
   5.4.1. White frat parties or large gatherings of white men
   5.4.2. Walking at night
   5.4.3. Pursued by men on campus
   5.4.4. Unfamiliar spaces
   5.4.5. Public lectures by white supremist
      5.4.5.1. Feeling targeted
      5.4.5.2. Disappointment in university for allowing their presence
5.5. Intersectionality: Black and woman
   5.5.1. Disadvantages
   5.5.2. Advantages
5.6. The Free-Speech Zones on campus
5.7. Seeing “MAGA” and other racists slogans on campus
5.8. Always be aware of surroundings

6. General Pride in Blackness
6.1. Being in PWI spaces makes love for Blackness deeper
6.2. Acknowledging Blacks who created ways for Black people now
6.3. Proclaiming Black Girl Magic

7. Involved in activism
7.1. Identifying as an activist
   7.1.1. Yes
   7.1.2. No
7.2. Motivation for activism involvement
   7.2.1. Assuring voice was heard
   7.2.2. Desire to uplift Black people
   7.2.3. Influenced by friends on campus
   7.2.4. Make campus more enjoyable for Black students
7.2.5. Personal experiences
   7.2.5.1. Living near Ferguson when Mike Brown was killed
7.2.6. Black Lives Matter movement
   7.2.6.1. Death of Trayvon Martin or other unarmed Blacks
   7.2.6.2. Feels need to avoid social media – too much violence against Blacks
7.3. Taking part in public demonstrations on campus
   7.3.1. “Black Out” demonstration
   7.3.2. Protesting Donald Trump visit to campus
   7.3.3. Students combating racism on-campus group
      7.3.3.1. Called for the firing of university employee with black face images
7.4. Being student members of Black student organizations on campus
   7.4.1. [name of Black student org on campus]
   7.4.2. NAACP student chapter
7.5. Activism through conversations that aim to educate
   7.5.1. Talking about white privilege and fragility
7.6. Tabling on campus as a form of activism
7.7. No chance to get involved yet but desires to
   7.7.1. Wants to create POC mentorship program on campus
7.8. Social media activism
7.9. Simply living as a Black person is rebelling
7.10. Monetary donations to fundraisers
7.11. Not standing for National Anthem [Colin K.]
7.12. Using one’s privileges to uplift others
7.13. Peace Corps volunteer
7.14. Scholarly research: activism

8. Dress overtly signifying Black culture and Black identity and related experiences
8.1. Blackness represented in all dress b/c they are Black
8.2. Being “extra”: Black women are over the top
8.3. Denim
  8.3.1. Bell bottoms
8.4. Black Panther Party aesthetic
8.5. Sunday’s Best
8.6. Jewelry
  8.6.1. Earrings
    8.6.1.1. Hoop earrings
    8.6.1.2. Basquiat earrings
  8.6.2. Waist beads
8.7. Slogan T-shirts, Black is dope, Melanin, Black Girl Magic
  8.7.1. Black woman engineer paraphernalia
8.8. Hair accessories
  8.8.1. Head wraps
  8.8.2. Head bands
  8.8.3. Hats inspired by Black culture
8.9. Form-fitting clothing that shows body shape
8.10. Shoes
  8.10.1. Air Max
  8.10.2. Jordans
  8.10.3. Timberland boots
  8.10.4. Air Force Ones
  8.10.5. Doc Martens
  8.10.6. Puma Creepers
8.11. Dress from Africa or inspired by African culture
  8.11.1. Being connected to African roots
  8.11.2. Lapa
  8.11.3. Connecting Black American and African cultures
8.12. Long fingernails
  8.12.1. Having long nails is perceived poorly
8.13. Long eyelashes
  8.13.1. Having long eyelashes is perceived poorly
8.14. Make-up
  8.14.1. Doing makeup is therapeutic
8.15. General styling practice [ex. Uniqueness]
8.16. Clothing that shows off skin color
8.17. Black hair styles
  8.17.1. Dread locks
  8.17.2. Having different colors of hair within hairstyles
  8.17.3. A significant expression of self
8.18. Lip gloss
8.19. Experiences showing Blackness through dress
  8.19.1. Wants to increase or has increased showing racial identity through dress [over lifetime]
    8.19.1.1. Social setting vs professional setting
8.19.2. Embracing curvier shape
8.19.3. Feeling empowered or liberated: Black culture through dress
  8.19.3.1. Especially in PW-spaces
    8.19.3.1.1. Sense of fear for loss of protection
8.19.4. White people give uncertain looks
8.19.5. Feeling visible: Black culture through dress
  8.19.6. Sense of sadness [having to proclaim Black lives matter should not be necessary]
8.20. Dress or style passed down from Black women family members
8.21. Tattoos representative of Black culture

9. Activism-specific clothing or dress
9.1. Activist clothing examples
  9.1.1. Wearing all black colors in solidarity
  9.1.2. Dressing differently from the current trends
    9.1.2.1. Preppy equals classism [Hollister, Abercrombie]
  9.1.3. POC imagery on t-shirts
  9.1.4. Dressing “Black”
  9.1.5. Slogan t-shirts
    9.1.5.1. BLM shirt
    9.1.5.2. Other slogan shirts
  9.1.6. Jackets
    9.1.6.1. Leather jackets
    9.1.6.2. Denim jackets
    9.1.6.3. Jackets w/slogans or symbolism
  9.1.7. Pins with images or slogans
    9.1.7.1. Muhammad Ali pins
  9.1.8. Doc Martens
    9.1.8.1. A form of safety
  9.1.9. Dressing for the “job at hand” [ex. Activism means jeans, boots, and t-shirt]
    9.1.9.1. Being able to get the job done
9.2. Motivations to purchase or wear BLM-specific or other clothing reflecting activist identity
  9.2.1. BLM is closely relatable during this generation’s era
    9.2.1.1. Unarmed Black people killed could have been their family member
    9.2.1.2. Unarmed Black people being killed were so close to their age
    9.2.1.3. Boldness of the BLM movement (ex: unapologetically Black)
    9.2.1.4. Initiated an investigation of self-Black identity
9.2.1.5. Making a statement that Black people are still here
9.2.2. Expressing wanting to be seen as equal
9.2.3. Show pride in Blackness
9.2.3.1. Being proud to be Black even during moments where we are being killed by police
9.2.4. Reject racism or Eurocentric norms
9.2.4.1. Reject “all lives matter” movement shirts
9.2.4.2. Upset about police brutality against Black people
9.2.5. Educate others through activist clothing
9.3. # of activist clothing items
9.3.1. Owns lots of activist clothing items
9.3.2. Own just a few activist clothing items
9.4. Experiences wearing activism-specific clothing
9.4.1. White people seem uncomfortable
9.4.1.1. Nonverbal discomfort
9.4.2. White people are supportive of activist clothing
9.4.3. Black people acknowledged and supported activism clothing
9.4.3.1. Verbal support
9.4.4. No reaction from anyone
9.4.5. Opportunity to educate
9.4.6. Feeling a burden that must be carried
9.4.7. Being discouraged to wear political garments by others
9.4.8. Fear of wearing political clothing in PWI space and the state of Iowa

10. Actively hiding Black identity through dress
10.1. Never hide it
10.1.1. Reject societal norms
10.1.2. Make white people uncomfortable
10.2. Hide it
10.2.1. “contain” natural hair
10.2.2. Wear loose clothing
10.2.3. Look more “professional” in professional setting
10.2.4. Feeling hurt for having to hide Black identity to meet societal standards
10.2.5. Tone it down
10.2.6. For safety reasons
10.3. Having to prove oneself as a Black woman at PWI

11. Why they desired to express Black identity through dress and appearance
11.1. Feeling connected to other Black students when they acknowledge Blackness in dress [ex: “I like your shirt!”]
11.2. Family influences
11.3. Expressing where they are from [ex: predominately Black city]
11.4. Being at PWI helped embrace Blackness through dress
11.4.1. Feeling empowered
11.5. Accomplishing goals as BWCS at PWI
11.6. Taking African American studies classes at PWI
11.6.1. Generally becoming more educated about Black history
11.7. Wanting to embody influential Black women
11.8. General pride in Blackness
APPENDIX F.  MUSEUM EXHIBITION PHOTOGRAPHS AND ONLINE CATALOG

In combination with my thesis research, I curated the museum exhibition titled *Collegiate Fashion & Activism: Black Women’s Styles on the College Campus*. The exhibition was part of my Agatha Huepenbecker Burnet endowed research assistantship. The exhibition was built from the research in my thesis where the participants loaned garments and accessories they discussed during the interviews for display. The mounted exhibition ran from February 3 to April 17, 2020 in the Mary Alice Gallery at Iowa State University. In the exhibition, I analyzed the ways Black women college students attending predominately white institutions in Iowa express their Black identity, activism, and expressions of empowerment through fashion. I focused on Black women’s everyday clothing and its connection to Black student empowerment on Iowa college campuses. I used counter-story telling to make space for Black women’s voices and styles in 21st century fashion history.

The fifteen Black women college students I interviewed for my thesis, shared stories through the in-depth interviews about their fashion and style, and then collectively loaned 40 garments or accessories that they discussed during their interviews, which were on display. The Black women also shared images during the interview, which I featured on the walls of the gallery. Through eleven themes, I explored the ways Black women represent themselves every day in predominately white spaces within the highly turbulent, current social climate An online catalog of the entire exhibition can be found at the following link: [https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/collegiatefashionactivism/front-matter/introduction/](https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/collegiatefashionactivism/front-matter/introduction/). A short video of some of the interviews was also created as part of the exhibition and can be found at the following link: [https://youtu.be/CIJjJZzFaog](https://youtu.be/CIJjJZzFaog). A list of the 11 themes and their descriptions that emerged from analysis of the garments and accessories are listed below:

- **In Messages of Strength**, we acknowledge the power within the Black community, and the need to continue support by shopping at Black owned businesses or advocating for Black people in positions of power.
- The section **90s Throwback** explores the nostalgic style of popular 1990s television shows featuring all-Black casts (e.g. Martin, A Different World, Sister-Sister) that are reemerging within the Black millennial community.
- **Matriarch** focuses on the strong Black woman leader of the Black family, in this case, the grandmother.
- The section **Self-Created Expression** represents designs created by Black women that overtly express their Black or activist identities.
- **In Pride in Skin Tone**, we represent the ways that Black women embrace their darker skin tone when wearing brighter colored garments.
- **Cause Solidarity** represents Black women advocating for various social justice issues including the Flint water crisis and women’s rights.
- **Connection to Roots** represents the Black woman’s desire for connection to their ancestors in Africa.
- **In Fearless Expression** the garments represent the ways Black women fearlessly express who they are through dress despite being in predominately white spaces.
- **Yes, I Can!** explores the experiences of a Black woman in not only a predominantly white space, but a predominantly male space as an engineering student.
• The section *Powerful Words* represents the use of slogan T-shirts to share messages of the rejection of social injustices.

• Lastly, *Black Girl Accessories* highlights different types of accessories that overtly express Black identity.

Below are images of the exhibition in the Mary Alice gallery including panoramic images of the gallery, detailed images of each of the 11 themes, and detailed images of the garments and/or accessories from each theme. The promotional flyer for the exhibition is also in this section. It is important to note the inconsistency of the color of the dress forms in these images. After photographing the garments on dress forms initially, I realized that the dress forms needed to be covered in fabrics that are colored to represent Black women’s skin tones, therefore the curator team undressed all of the dress forms, covered them in darker fabrics, and re-dressed the garments. A combination of the initial photographs and updated ones are used in this section.

*Figure 34.* Panoramic image of garments on display in the curved case. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 35. Panoramic image of exhibition entry. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 36. Panoramic image of the two vitrines and largest case in gallery. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 37. Image of theme Messages of Strength. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 38. Image of theme 90s Throwback. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 39. Image of theme Matriarch. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 40. Image of theme Self-Created Expression. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 41. Image of theme Powerful Words. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 42. Image of theme Black Girl Accessories. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 43. Image of literature and photographs of participants on display in the gallery. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 44. Image of garments from theme Messages of Strength. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 45. Image of garments and accessories from theme 90s Throwback. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 46. Image of garments from theme Matriarch. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 47. Image of garments from theme Self-created Expression. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 48. Image of garments from theme Pride in Skin Tone. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 49. Image of garments from theme Cause Solidarity. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 50. Image of garments from theme Connection to Roots. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 51. Second image of garments from theme Connection to Roots. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 52. Image of garments from theme Fearless Expression. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 53. Image of garments from theme Yes! I Can. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 54. Image of garments from theme Powerful Words. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.
Figure 55. Image of accessories from theme Black Girl Accessories. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.

Figure 56. Image of promotional flyer for the exhibition. Photo courtesy of author, 2020.