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This dissertation, UNAPOLOGETICALLY PRESENT: AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK GAY YOUNG MEN’S SOCIAL DISCOURSES AS A DEMONSTRATION OF AGENCY, by MARCUS NORTH, was prepared under the direction of the candidate’s Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student’s Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

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Unapologetically Present:
An Examination of Black Gay Young Men's Social Discourses as a Demonstration of
Agency

by

Marcus North

Under the Direction of Dr. Michelle Zoss

ABSTRACT

Black gay young men participate in a unique culture that is representative of their identities and the agency they have over their identity performances. The purpose of this study was to explore how young men who self-identify as both Black and gay leveraged Discourses in social spaces that were typically oppressive. Discourse performances in such spaces were both influenced and molded by the setting in which these young men found themselves and the cultural background they brought with them (Almelhi, 2020). I used multiple phases of analysis to understand how Black gay young men in the South existed in their surroundings. Viewing these performances allowed me to explore how language and discourse made a difference when understanding how Black gay young men chose to define and present their identity to others. This study further explored whether Black gay young men challenged and disrupted hegemonic social constructs through their chosen Discourse and identity performances. Grounded in Queer of Color Critique (QOCC, Brockenbrough, 2015) and Intersectionality (Collins, 2019), this study joined the conversation of identity as a performance (Holland et al., 2014) through a Narrative Inquiry framework, centering the stories of Black gay young men (Rogan & de Kock, 2005). I collected interview and focus group data and approached analysis using tools of critical discourse analysis, QOCC, and intersectionality

to focus on young men as the narrators of their own stories of identity. I found (1) authentic expression, (2) visibility, (3) being both queer and spiritual, and (4) community each motivated these Black gay young men to be authentic and present with the identities they performed. Through this study, I explored how Black gay young men use their Discourses to challenge and resist hegemonic heteronormative ideologies, making it achievable for them to exist in all spaces. The implications that show the importance for Black gay young men being seen for who they are in familial, community, and educational spaces.

INDEX WORDS: Black gay young men, Black gay agency, Queer of Color Critique, Intersectionality, Discourse, identity, agency, narrative inquiry, Black students, Black gay students, queer students

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A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Teaching and Learning

in

the Department of Middle and Secondary Education

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA

2022

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the little Black boys who feel deep in their hearts and know they are different but don't know how, don't know why, and don't have the support to explore. The little Black boys whose family looks at differently and talks about behind their backs to other family members, but won't dare speak anything to their faces. But you hear and feel and see it all. To those little Black boys who fights day in and day out trying to hide who they are. This study is dedicated to you! It is a consolation to BE YOU! You are not alone. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Black, queer, and excellent. We all had to start somewhere. Today is your day. Today is your brand new start. Today is the day you GET to start living the words spoken by none other than Queen Beyonce (2022a) herself:

Damn, I love the burning of the dagger

From the words that you say.

Dancin' in the mirror, kiss my scars

Because I love what they made

[I'm] comfortable in my skin

Cozy with who I am

Lastly, this dissertation is dedicated to my unborn son, Leland Alexander, and husband Patreon. Because of the work I've done personally through life experiences and engaging with the young men of this study, I am a better person and in a better position of understanding *ME* as a unique individual, prepared to be the best father and husband to each of you I can be!

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
Chapter	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Purpose of Study	3
Significance of Study.....	4
Theoretical Framework	9
Summary	16
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	18
Discourse.....	19
Identity.....	24
Agency.....	29
Developing Identity and Agency Through Discourse	35
Discourses of Being a Black Gay Man.....	42
3 METHODOLOGY	48
Crystallization	49
Research Design.....	51
Research Setting and Participants	59
Researcher Positionality	62
Data Collection.....	63
Data Analysis	66
Trustworthiness and Credibility	73
4 FINDINGS	77

	Dear Mama, I'm 100% "Dat Bitch"	77
	Only My Clothes Wear Labels	88
	Code Switching to Be Both Invisible and Hyper-visible.....	95
	Just Because I'm Present Doesn't Mean I'm HERE	101
	When We All Get Together.....	108
	And the Promises of God are "Yes" and "Amen"!	111
5	DISCUSSION	119
	Resistance through Authentic Expression.....	120
	Queer Visibility.....	122
	Queer Spirituality.....	125
	Community.....	128
	Implications.....	132
	Suggestions for Further Research	135
	Final Thoughts.....	135
	References.....	138
	Appendixes	157

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1 Participant Demographics.....	61
Table 2 Data Sources and Artifacts	63
Table 3 Steps in the Coding Process.....	67
Table 4 Open and Axial Codes.....	69
Table 5 Tenets of Intersectionality and Queer of Color Critique That Led to Inform Data Analysis	72

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Inquiry Framework	59
Figure 2 Data Analysis Process.....	68
Figure 3 Connecting Fairclough’s Three-Tiered Model of CDA to Wade’s Levels of Discourse	74

1 Introduction

The catchphrase “the positive struggle” identifies the intersection when the challenges you face, but overcome, serve as a catalyst to your growth. Taking these struggles as life lessons mold an individual’s existence; shapes their identity. This struggle informs the perspectives from which you view your life experiences, creating a critical reflection of your daily engagements. This struggle allows you to grow into the person God has called you to be and *walk in your divine purpose*. For soon-to-be Dr. Marcus North, this struggle continues to mold the identity that everyone sees as he navigates spaces as a young successful Black man, married to another young successful Black man. Instead of a successful Black man, society uplifts two cultural images stigmatizing Black men in the United States as either a criminal or an endangered species, reproducing racial inequalities through institutional practices and cultural representations of cultural differences (Ferguson, 2000). Race continues to be a ready-made filter for interpreting events, informing social interactions, and grounding identities and representation in schools.

Combating the reproduction of not only racial inequalities, but also inequalities and oppressions that lie within the intersections of race and sexuality, Black gay young men acknowledge the spaces they find themselves in also contribute to the self-reflection of their positioning within society (Cohen, 2005). Heteronormative spaces that say a *man* is a person who is born male and engages in sexual acts with women. Hegemonic white spaces that suggest white supremacy superior to his Blackness. Religious spaces that preach a man shall lay with a woman and anything outside of this preaching is an abomination. Professional spaces that practice male dominance, but only if you are a *straight* man, polished with suit and tie. Familial spaces where it’s okay to be gay, but not *too gay*, and definitely not gay in front of the people that we *know*.

The issue present within identifying, naming, and uplifting the cultural norms of these spaces treads the line between representation and erasure of Black gay boys and men. Black male students

often complain about the curriculum being uninteresting and irrelevant to their interests and lived experiences (Wright et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ students often express the feeling that they don't see themselves at all in the curriculum (Pritchard, 2017). Students living in the intersections of being a Black gay male are often not respected or valued by their teachers or classmates (Wright et al., 2015, 2018). Ford (2011) adds that if education lacks relevance, it is often deemed meaningless. Instead, Wright et al. (2022) call for an educational experience that honors, affirms, and respects the identities of minoritized students such as Black gay young men, promoting the development of a healthy self-identity and agency. This agency lends space and opportunity for Black gay young men to be unapologetically themselves.

When being unapologetically you and authentic to who you have constructed yourself to be, identity and agency play important roles in this existence. We create this identity partially through the narratives we tell ourselves and others (Miller, 1994): Self-talk versus oral expression. A *narrative* is more than just a story or a type of storytelling. Stories reflect a monolithic self. Instead, narratives have a robust existence beyond the individual, allowing persons to construct stories reflecting experiences with identity groups, communities, and even organizations (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are one of the ways individuals are afforded the opportunity to express their complex selves. Identity, then, can be assembled and disassembled, accepted and contested, and performed, all through the narratives a person shares.

Vygotsky (1978) and Wertsch (1985) explain that these narratives are ways, or tools, we as people use to tell our stories about past experiences. These experiences include your relationships with our family and friends, encounters in social settings, and even encounters teaching us about power relations. These past experiences help develop what I reference as our cultural identities, or “identities that form in relation to major structural features of society: ethnicity, gender, race, nationality, and sexual orientation” (Holland, et. al., 1998, p. 7). Acknowledging that there are

multiple cultures in which we operate, many of which operationalize within other cultures, throughout this study, I speak of cultural identities as opposed to one cultural identity to first acknowledge that we all have varied social experiences and then to suggest that our cultural identities are fluid, evolving over time with each experience (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014). Therefore, our identity is the manifestation of who we believe ourselves to be through a cultural lens.

In addition to identity, agency plays an equally important role in presenting an unapologetic and authentic self. *Agency* marks a practice of resistance. Resistance to oppression. Resistance to being *othered*, or distinguished as different from dominant ideologies. Through agency, the Black individual takes a critical stance and makes political choices supporting their decision of employing Black Language to dismantle Anti-Black Linguistic Racism (Baker-Bell, 2020). Through agency, the Black individual becomes emergent from the imagined pain of ridicule and judgment from using Black Language. As a result, a Black man can feel free to sustain and develop a nuanced, complex self, demanding representation of the kind of world they want to live in (Lyiscott, 2020). Agency is demanding a space of homonormativity by making homosexuality consistently represented and out in the open to society by those who identify as homosexual (Ferguson, 2005). Agency, then, is a performance. It is an illustration of an authentic self. Therefore, you cannot be unapologetically you without holding a sense of human agency.

Purpose of the Study

For the purpose of this study, I define *gay* as same-gender-loving (SGL) males. The term SGL was coined by African American activist Cleo Manago in the 1990s to identify those in the African American community who prefer to be detached from the white-dominated identifiers of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (Pounter & Washington, 2005; Malebranche, et. al., 2004). Therefore, moving forward, I reference the Black gay young adult males of this study as Black gay young men, as the *adult* distinction is implied through the usage of the term *young men*. Additionally, I move from

identifying the population of this study as African American to *Black* and *Black American*. This shift in identification ensures inclusion of those individuals who self-identify as not being descendants of Africa as the term African American implies, but as being descendent of Africa, the Caribbean, and South and Latin America (Martin, 1991).

The purpose of this study is to explore how young men who self-identify as both Black and gay leverage Discourses in social spaces that are typically oppressive. Discourse performances in such spaces are either influenced by the setting in which one finds themselves or molded by the cultural background one brings with them (Almelhi, 2020). This analysis of Discourses leads to the understanding of how Black gay young men exist in their surroundings with their Discourse performances through a critical literacies lens. Viewing these performances through a critical literacies lens affords this study explore how language, text, and discourse each make a difference when understanding how Black gay young men chose to use Discourse to define and present their identity to others. This study further explores whether Black gay young men challenge and disrupt hegemonic social constructs through their chosen language practices.

Therefore, the following questions guide my study:

1. How are Black gay young men using social Discourses to define and present themselves?
2. How are Black gay young men demonstrating agency through the Discourses they perform in a variety of social settings?

Significance of the Study

Activist Cleo Manago (2015) explains manhood to be a concept that perplexes the Black community because of the way it is defined. *Manhood* is defined by whatever society says it is at the time of context, thus distracting men from discovering and understanding their true selves (Manago, 2015). In the White heteronormative society of the U.S., Black gay men are often not associated with society's definition of manhood. Therefore, focusing on defining Black young men through their

embodiment of manhood, young Black men have been discussed in research more as simply cultural beings than intellectual beings (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002; Gay, 2000; Kinloch, 2011; Lazar, 2004; Lee, 2007). As a result, the identities of Black queer men are underrepresented in language and discourse research. Due to this lack of representation, understanding how their identities contribute to their Discourse practices is also missing. By listening to and analyzing the stories of how Black gay young men navigate and negotiate their linguistic and racial identities across multiple contexts, researchers and educators will be able to use these understandings to reconceptualize the way those in power value the languages of those that do not mimic White Mainstream English (WME) (Baker-Bell, 2020). Valuing these differences will ultimately create a space where knowledge construction is authentic to the learners' cultural identities and more inclusive of those who are historically marginalized. Below, I briefly discuss the intersectional identity of being a Black gay young man as it relates to this study on Discourse.

To Be Multidimensional

Many scholars make the connection between discourses and the social construct of being literate (Bleich, 1988; Chang-Bacon, et.al, 2021; Norton, 2013). This study explores the intersections of being a multidimensional individual and the social implications that come with being literate in each intersectional identity of a Black gay young man. What does it mean to be literate while Black? What about being literate while gay. How does being literate as a young adult manifest? Yet, how does being literate manifest in an individual who checks all three of the boxes without dissecting each identity in isolation?

To Be Black and Literate

When evaluating what it means to be Black and literate, many automatically lean toward a deficit mindset. Yet, scholars like Alfred Tatum, Nathaniel Bryan, and David Kirkland all value the art of being Black when identifying a person is literate. Each illustrate how being Black and literate

are intersections themselves. They work together. In evaluating these practices, it is important to acknowledge identity. Tatum (1999, 2000) explains that if reading education is not provocative, meaningful, and designed to help Black males affirm their identity, they will be denied access to educational, economic, social, and political opportunities. He emphasizes the idea that in order to get Black boys engaged in literacy practices, teachers should acknowledge to their identities and include texts that speak to these identities. Tatum (1999) illustrates the importance of fostering a child's natural curiosity to read through texts that speak to the individual, including notions of power. Teachers should not stray away from controversial texts if the student wants to engage with the text. Kirkland (2008, 2009, 2013) emphasizes the literacy practices of Black boys outside of school contexts. He places emphasis on cultural identities and communal literacies. For example, his research on tattoos as a form of literacy practice illustrates how Black men used their bodies to tell stories through art (Kirkland, 2009). Hip Hop as an expressive art is also a form of literacy practice, informed by a cultural identity (Kirkland, 2008). Bryan (2021) adds to the conversation the notion of embodied literacy through an examination of Black boys *play*. He finds that Black boys play with one another as an expressive literacy and a means to express their perceptions of their surroundings. PlayCrit literacies allow for an authentic observation of how younger children view the world, especially in relation to controversial topics such as social justice, where otherwise boys may not know how to express their thoughts or feelings.

To Be LGBT+ and Literate

The current shift in literacy research related to LGBT+ young men surround social justice and advocacy. Wayne Martino (2009) uncovers the need for pedagogical practices that teach students to question text. He informs that the classroom needs a structure that addresses institutionally embedded practices of *privileging* and *othering*. Inclusion of literature and pedagogy that embraces the politics of difference is required to do this work. Edward Brockenbrough (2015), too,

reveals the need to resist privileging an othering. He explains that to achieve agency in the Queer of Color (QOC) culture, spaces must be created to openly critique heteronormative racial narratives that produce QOC invisibility. The challenging and critiquing warranted by both Martino and Brockenbrough is a clear illustration that being critical is central to the literacy practices of LGBT+ individuals.

To Be Young and Literate

Keeping the same sentiments of avoiding deficit narratives, Johannessen and McCann (2009) suggest that while many young men and young adults have been deemed as non- or low-readers, there are three implications for instruction that provide hope. First, teachers can establish supportive and trusting relationships between them and their students. Second, teachers can cultivate a partnership between all stakeholders of the students. This includes parents, the community from which the students come, and the school as a collective. Third, teachers can refine their teaching practices to connect with the lives of their students in a culturally and socially responsive way. The idea is that young adults don't receive instructional approaches when they don't feel seen. Tatum (2009) adds to the discussion the belief that the texts engaged by young men and young adults should do something *for* them. He explains that with the shift in culture and education practices as a whole, many young men come to school troubled, perplexed with the idea of being an outcast and a sense of not belonging. Therefore, the purpose of the texts they encounter should aid in their recovery, reconciliation, and resilience. Jamal Cooks and Arnetha Ball (2009) assert the importance of also accounting for dialect and vernacular when assessing the literacy practices of young men. They highlight the contribution the Oakland, California schools Ebonics controversy had on young men literacy research. As a result of this crisis, researchers began to explore how ebonics contribute to literacy practice and education of young men.

Just (Be)ing ME

While research can be found on the literacy practices of each of the above groups (Black, male, young men), there is a gap in the literature regarding the literacy practices of individuals who “check all of the boxes.” There is no research that I found that explains how those who identify as Black gay young men males navigate literacy practices while compensating for each of their identities. How do they perform literacies being Black and Gay? How do they perform literacies being a gay young man? Is it a new level of literacy practice when you check off all of the boxes? OR, do you just merge the three together and have a hodge-podge of literacy encounters? As an implication for future research, I plan to uncover this intersect through the studying of the communicative practices of Black gay young men.

Each iteration of what it means to be literate at each intersect of the Black gay young man’s identity reflects the discourse performances of this community. The discourses of a Black gay young man may not appear the same as the discourses associated with being literate in White mainstream U.S. contexts. Therefore, their performed, individual Discourses are tied to their social identities and societal acceptance. Gee (2015a, 2015b) explains Discourse with a big D as socially accepted ways of using languages and symbolic expressions within a cultural context. These Discourses account for not only cultural context (Gee, 2015a), but also for the particular time and particular context or institution the practiced Discourse manifests itself (Bergstrom, et al., 2017). Understanding how Black gay young men’s primary Discourses, or the culturally distinctive ways of being an everyday person based on the social constructs learned during early life, that of being a Black male, evolves as they engage in what they have learned as their secondary Discourse, that of being a Black *gay* male, informs us on how they construct their identity. In the sense of being literate, the cultural Discourse of being a Black gay young man is socially recognized as accepted in the Black gay community. Outside of this community, these performances are viewed as rebellious. With this understanding, I

can begin to identify the ways Discourses contribute to these young men's identities construction and their performances of human agency.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the identity construction and demonstration of human agency of Black gay young men based on their performances of Discourses, I need a theoretical perspective that accounts for their existence as multidimensional beings. It needs to address race, gender, sexuality, and power. Based on this need, I chose to frame my study from a Queer of Color Critique (QOCC) perspective (Allen, 2009; Bailey, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2015; Ferguson, 2004.)

QOCC emerged from the experiences of queer communities of color. It is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the relationship between hegemony and resistance as it shapes the lives of queer people of color (Ferguson, 2004). It seeks to provide a framework for exploring the strategies of resistance queer people of color employ to combat social and historical forces of marginalization (Brockenbrough, 2015). QOCC challenges the epistemological stance that "knowledge is not situated, but lodged somewhere far from where Black queers live, and whose pretensions to universalism only serve to further marginalize" (Allen, 2009, p. 323). Knowledge is not constructed without the acknowledgement of the experiences of those in the space, including Black queer people. Failure to acknowledge the identities of all in a space further distance and omits the presence of people of color. Instead, QOCC proclaims knowledge as a product or existence from within queer communities of color where their knowledge construction rely on their experiences.

Furthermore, QOCC is a product of acknowledging the limitations of queer theory. It calls into question the whiteness of mainstream queer theory and prioritizes queer communities of color. In queer theory, *queer* refers to *all* queer people from various racial, ethnic, cultural, national, gender, and class backgrounds, simultaneously erasing and hegemonizing the multiple differences among

queer people of color (Anzaldua, 1991). While queer theory “signals a strong antipathy for heteronormativity and aims to deconstruct heteronormative ideology” (Collins, 2019, p. 102), it holds opposition to identity-based categories. Categories such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender all became central in the ideology of Queer theory. This ideology ultimately facilitated a shift in theory, theorizing both gender and sexuality as intimately and inextricably linked (Collins, 2019).

QOCC also pulls from women of color feminists like Moraga (1983), Anzaldua (1987), Smith (1983), and Lorde (1984) to explore strategies of resistance in response to multiple and intersecting systems of oppression. Focusing on the intersections of complex identities, many credit women of color feminist studies as a crucial foundation to QOCC (Brockenbrough, 2015). Understanding these intersections as an expression of multiculturalism, Ferguson (2018) argues that the modes of difference situated in a person’s multicultural identity are, in fact, modes constituted in relation to one another. This belief affirms the notion of intersectionality that upholds each cultural identity of a Black gay young man is not isolated, but works in concert with the others. A Black gay young man cannot be considered as such without considering race, gender, age, *and* sexuality all as one.

I use QOCC to understand the role identity plays in the Discourse performances of Black gay and bisexual men (BGBM). I use it to affirm BGBM’s Discourses as a valid form of meaning making to facilitate critical self-consciousness (Harris, 2016). I prioritize QOCC when understanding BGBM’s Discourse performances as a means to interrogate not only identity formation, but also the way they position their identities in society, as it allows me to examine how BGBM present themselves through Discourse QOCC allows me to emphasize the intersections of being a Black gay man as it relates to the existences and experiences of BGBM. In addition to Queer of Color Critique, I use critical literacies and intersectionality to help frame this study.

Critical Literacies

Engaging in Critical Literacies is the approach to reading and analyzing text that allows the reader to apply cultural lenses. Yet, first, one must define *text*. For the purpose of this study, I define text as anything a person engages with to gather understanding. Defining critical literacies as a way to “analyze, critique, and transform the norms, rule systems, and practices governing the social fields of everyday life” (Luke, 2012, p. 5). Luke identifies text as any medium of communication. It is because of Luke’s mention of various mediums of communication in which these critical lenses are applied that I reference critical literacies as plural, acknowledging the various ways a person can read text from a critical stance. Therefore, taking the notion that text is any medium of communication, including written expression, dialogic interactions, and multimedia expression, critical literacies can be thought of as a way of seeing the world through daily engagements in society, ultimately challenging the hegemonic discourses of what counts as literacy and by whom (Mills, 2016). Power and power relations are the central focus of critical literacies, placing the concerns of literary practices on social inequalities, social structures, and power and human agency. Thus, Luke (2012) explains that critical literacies is a person’s acknowledgement and understanding of how text can be used and manipulated to alter their view of the world.

Critical literacies make power relations visible while ultimately using the knowledge of these powers to transform society. Therefore, when engaging in critical literacies, readers (actors) move from being passive to active consumers. They move beyond passively accepting the text’s meaning and message. Instead, they begin to “question, examine, or disrupt the power relations that exist between readers and authors” (Mcaughlin & DeVogd, 1991, p. 279). Readers take the text in front of them and look at *what* the author is *trying* to say and *how* the author is going about getting their underlying point across. Therefore, since the goal of critical literacies is to disrupt power relations through active interaction with text, readers (actors) ask complicated questions about language and

power, people and lifestyle, morality and ethics, and even who has advantage and disadvantage.

Exploring these notions and challenging the hegemonic constructs within discourses is the goal of critical literacies.

Furthermore, critical literacies promote social justice through the examination of power relations in society. Three principles allow this work to happen: (1) critical literacies focus on issues of power and promote reflection, transformation, and action; (2) critical literacies focus on the problem and its complexity; and (3) critical literacies focus on the importance of examining multiple perspectives (McLaughlin, 1991). This means that first, readers identify issues of power through reflection. Then they use action to transform the space where power relations are unjust. Yet, in order to accomplish the goal of justice, the reader has to acknowledge and focus on how complex the issue is. Issues of power may be multidimensional, requiring multiple lenses for deconstruction. Lastly, in order to become a change agent, the reader acknowledges that there are multiple perspectives that must be considered when both deconstructing the problem and arriving at equitable solutions. To achieve this goal, there are two theoretical perspectives that inform the practice of critical literacies: sociocultural theories and critical theories. Each of these theoretical perspectives allow for the work required to perform critical literacies to be both present and effective.

Intersectionality

What does it mean to be Black? What does it mean to be gay? What does it mean to be a young man? What does it mean to just *be*? Understanding that one can *be* each of these identities all at once is an illustration of intersectionality. Thus, focusing on being a Black gay young man, by definition, *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991) is a way to explore the intersections between any multiple identities such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, (dis)ability, etc. It means *something* to be Black, just as it means *something* to be Black and gay, yet a different *something* to be

Black, gay, *and* a young adult. So, when looking at the literacy practices of Black gay young men, it is important to address each of these identities and how they intersect to create the whole being.

Oppression and power relations are also important constructs that contribute to the existence of intersectionality. Dill and Zambrana (2009) define intersectionality as “an analytical strategy—a systematic approach to understanding human life and behavior that is rooted in the experience and struggles of marginalized people” (p. 4). This construct of marginalization is also important when studying Black gay young men whose existence and everyday experiences are grounded in a white heteronormative society. Because of this context, they are marginalized (1) by being Black, (2) by being gay, (3) by being a male, and (4) by being a young man. Each of these identities of race, sexuality, gender, and age bring different experiences of oppression.

Intersectionality allows for a researcher to achieve a deeper level of analysis as an “intersectional experience is greater than the sum of such single-axis dimensions of identity” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 140). Therefore, intersectionality sheds light on Black gay young men’s discourses through understanding how their complex identities collectively inform these performances, rather than in isolation.

In understanding intersectionality, it is important to understand its core constructs and guiding premises as discussed by Patricia Hill Collins (2019). While the core constructs are relationality, power, social inequality, social context, complexity, and social justice, the guiding premises acknowledge that (1) race, class, and gender as systems of power being interdependent, (2) intersecting power relations produce complex social inequalities, (3) intersecting power relations shape individual and group experiences, and (4) solving social problems requires intersectional analyses. By understanding each of these constructs and premises as interconnected entities, I can begin to observe and study the complexity of being a Black gay young man.

Each of the guiding premises of intersectionality contribute to the understanding of an individual. When looking at the Discourse performances of Black gay young men, I plan to do two things: (1) examine what each of these cultural identities work together to inform the Discourse of Black gay young men, then (2) understand how each of performances of Discourse work to develop a sense of agency within the social communities Black gay young men find themselves.

While each construct of intersectionality (Collins, 2009) may not be present in every study, I spend this section illustrating how each can be applied when looking at Black gay young men through an intersectional lens. The first construct, relationality, demonstrates how various social positions necessarily acquire meaning and power in relation to other social positions. For example, power can't be established for Black gay young men without first juxtaposing him with his White heterosexual counterpart. You can even drill down even further and place him alongside his older or younger gay or straight counterpart.

The second construct is power. Collins (2019) explains that “intersecting power relations produce social divisions of race, gender, class, sexuality, ability, age, country of origin, and citizenship status that are unlikely to be adequately understood in isolation from one another” (p. 46). This means that being Black, gay, male, and a young man creates a set of societal power dynamics that would not be a reality if one of the identities were eliminated. For example, the power dynamics for a Black gay young man are different from those of a Black lesbian young woman, acknowledging gender politics. Therefore, each of these power dynamics jointly shape the social realities of Black gay young men.

The third, social inequality, points to the workings of power relations in producing social inequalities and the social problems they engender. Because it is taboo to be Black and gay in U.S. White heteronormative society, a set of social inequalities are present. For example, Black gay young men may be overlooked for a scholarship after completing an interview because the individual(s)

conducting the interview neither understood him as a person, nor took the chance to learn how being a Black gay young man contributed to his ideology. Additionally, Black gay young men create subcultures and affinity groups for themselves (Burke & Greteman, 2022). Therefore, because they exist in these groups, their association may encourage those not associated with these subcultures and affinity groups to disengage from them, creating a power struggle for whose culture and/or subculture is dominant.

The fourth construct is social context. This construct is important when understanding how interpretive communities organize knowledge production. Black gay young men use Discourses to create these communities, relying on performance interpretation to understand social constructs within the community. Social context matters when understanding how distinctive social locations of individuals and groups within intersecting power relations shape intellectual production. In understanding Black gay young men, it is important to consider the interpretation of what it is to be a Black gay young man from multiple perspectives. For instance, what does being a Black gay young man look like in the eyes of a 40-year-old Black gay male. What does it look like in the eyes of a working class, middle aged Black woman? What does being a Black gay young man look like in the eyes of a White straight young man. The social contexts of each of these individuals contribute to the understanding of the population at the center of inquiry and analysis.

The fifth construct of intersectionality is particularly important to my study because it allows for the analysis to be iterative and interactional, always examining the connections among seemingly distinctive categories of analysis. This process uncovers a level of complexity that would not be possible with a single-axis of analysis. Looking at what it means to be Black, then gay, then, a young man, and then a man is great. Taking all of these analyses and evaluating how each one works with the others to create a reality is when this complexity manifests.

The sixth, and final, construct is social justice. Unique to the others, the construct of social justice introduces possible ethical concerns. Collins (2019) explains that a focus on social justice means challenging the norms that have placed concepts such as justice, freedom, equality, and liberation as secondary concerns in acceptable scholarship. Social justice is crucial for a Black gay young man. Living as a multi-oppressed individual, the fight for a more just existence is always forefront to living. Therefore, while not fully valued in other forms of inquiry and analyses, social justice is the foundation of bettering the experiences of those marginalized on intersecting levels. For my study, social justice appears through the Black gay young men's displays of agency.

Summary

It is my belief that understanding an individual as a Black gay young man in Eurocentric- and heterosexual-dominant culture can be accomplished through examining Discourse performances. Understanding that critical theorists look at the role power plays in one's existence, I argue that approaching their Discourses with a critical lens will allow me to understand of how their meaning making is influenced by their views of dominant culture. Through this lens, I may see the ways these power structures are challenged through the Discourse performances of Black gay young men. Therefore, I take tenets from both Critical literacies and Queer of Color Critique to inform my understanding of Black gay young men's Discourses through an intersectional lens.

Pulling from each of these theories, I seek to examine how Black gay young men use their social encounters to mold their Discourse performances. Reflecting on these interactions, I seek to understand how Black gay young men's identities present themselves when engaged in social Discourses. I use Queer of Color Critique to understand the moves they make when choosing the ways they present themselves through their Discourse choices. This notion to examine racialized experiences is particularly important among Black gay young men because of the challenge they face when negotiating their racial and sexual identities while navigating various social interactions.

In the next chapter, I provide a literature review defining discourse, identity, and agency. I also show how each manifest in discourse studies. I end the chapter showing how discourses have been used to develop identity and agency, specifically to being a Black gay man. Chapter three details the way I plan to conduct this study to understand the Discourses of Black gay young men in various social spaces. I end the chapter with an outline of the activities of the study.

2 Literature Review

“One of the lessons that I grew up with was to always stay true to yourself and never let what somebody else says distract you from your goals. And so when I hear about negative and false attacks, I really don’t invest any energy in them, because I know who I am.”

-Michelle Obama (2018)

When thinking of who we are as individuals, it’s important to view ourselves in context of our surroundings, both physical and cultural, as our identity is a concept that represents the reality of our personal worlds situated within our cultural and social realities (Holland, et al., 1998). Sri Lankan scholar and journalist Vanniarachchy (2021) explains that “people do not change... it is just that they change the masks they wear and the acts they put on, with new costumes, new dialogues, and new settings. That is human nature” (p. 7). Operating within this ideology, each combination of physical, social, and cultural existence, then, warrants a different “mask.” A different form of expression. A different dialogue, costume, dialect, etc. Zoss, et al. (2007) explain that masks are a way for people to represent their understanding of themselves. Embodying this mask concept is a way we show the people around us the complexity of our identities, similar to the mas’—masquerade and dance—performances of Trinidad Carnival. Mas’ performances are performances of resistance that produce not only a sense of identity, but also a sense of culture and community (Fournillier, 2009). They allow celebration of self that is not silencing, contributing to agency over the culture’s influence on identity. The masks that Zoss et al (2007) describe as an art form of expression and the mas’ performances that Fournillier (2009) highlights as forms of resistance, then, are metaphors to the various Discourses we perform, or “ways in which socially-based group conventions allow people to enact specific identities and activities” (Gee, 2015a, p. 4), in which we present ourselves. I believe Black gay young men wear different masks and, while not grounded in the carnival culture, engage in

series of masquerade performances as they navigate their daily social interactions marked by the group conventions present within each interaction.

I spend the remainder of this chapter first defining discourses, specifically big D Discourses, and showing how they operationalize in our experiences. Next, I show how these practiced discourses lead into the construction of our identities, or the collection of masks that we wear. Taking ownership of these masks, of the way we present ourselves, leads to liberation. Therefore, I discuss how these representations of ourselves are a demonstration of agency. Lastly, I illustrate how identity and agency are developed through the practice of various discourses while highlighting the discourses that currently document constructing the identity of being a Black Gay Young Man.

Discourse

“In all things purely social we can be as separate as the five fingers, and yet as one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

-W.E.B. DuBois (2016)

When people communicate with each other, shared language systems are created. These shared systems of communication are referred to as discourses (Mercer, 1995). Discourse theories support language and conversation as socially constructed, being reflective and reliant on the utterances of individuals and their respondents (Bakhtin, 1981). An utterance is a unit of speech and communication (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin declares utterances as not only speech acts, but also social acts. Taking utterances as a form of meaning making, meaning is formed through a speaker's relation to others, their words, their expressions, and their lived cultural environment. Discourse, then, is a cultural practice shared by a group of people (Fairclough, 2015; Gee, 2015a; Mercer, 1995), and is a collection of words and utterances that are fundamentally and historically contingent upon social and cultural constructs of community, places, people, and events (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986;

Dressman, 2004; Freedman & Ball, 2004). For example, if I say the word *trade* in the gay community, it is understood that I am referring to an openly gay man that presents the dispositions of a hyper-masculine heterosexual male, usually dressed in urban clothing. On the contrary, if I use the same word, *trade*, in a comics collector's community, I would be referring to the swapping of goods. From a language perspective, each of these social communities has a different discourse system that dictates the understanding of the utterance of *trade* used within each context.

Bakhtin (1986) uses the terms heteroglossia and polyphony (or double-voicedness) to further explain how discourse exists as part of the cultural environment; *heteroglossia* describes the words and expressions of others, and *polyphony* describes the practice of incorporating many voices. Discourses are constructed via a shared understanding of all members of the discourse community in a dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1981). People with shared discourses agree upon the meanings of utterances based on their cultural past and experiences. For example, *trade* in the gay community derives from the performance of closeted Black gay men taking on a heterosexual discourse in some settings, while attempting to simultaneously let their feminine discourses appear. They are trading their performed discourses to fit the situation of their surroundings, sometimes performing heterosexual discourses while sometimes trading this discourse for a more effeminate one. Each discourse community member pulls from their personal cultural wealth when constructing understanding of other discourse community members' utterances. My previous experience as a closeted Black gay man and currently knowing closeted Black gay men affords me the cultural knowledge to recognize the utterances of *trade* in the Black gay community. Smagorinsky (2001) refers to this type of meaning making as culturally mediated and situated where a "person's notion of meaning emerges through participation in cultural practices" (p. 144). My participation in the Black gay community assisted in making meaning of the various performed discourses.

Bakhtin (1981) labels the conditions in which utterances are spoken as heteroglossic, referencing both their present and the past conditions. The ongoing dialogic nature of utterances contributes to a double-voiced situation: as we internalize the utterances of others, taking into consideration both the speaker's cultural ideologies and their present context, we use this understanding to influence our future utterances, shifting our voice to apply to the situation. This shifting of voice to cater to the contextual situation of the utterance is what Bakhtin refers to as double-voiced. Like trade, *fish* is a term used in the Black gay community to identify the discourse performance opposite of trade. Fish describes a Black gay man who either dresses in female clothing, not to be misunderstood as transgender, or presents in a hyper effeminate manner. Some men take on a mas' persona (Fournillier, 2009) and move back and forth from one discourse (trade) to another (fish), demonstrating this sense of being double-voiced. The performer reads the contextual setting and determines which voice (Discourse) he wants to perform at the time. Therefore, taking Bakhtin's ideological understanding of heteroglossia and polyphony, discourses are socially situated identities that afford us ways of being a member of and speaker within specific cultural and social communities (Gee, 2015a). Discourse is therefore an identity toolkit. It is a way of expression that allows others to understand your identity.

Discourse is not only the words people speak. It also includes ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, and writing that are accepted as representations of specific situations (Gee, 2015a). Take Gee's example of experiencing a biker bar for instance. While asking "may I borrow a lighter to light my cigarette" may be grammatically correct, it does not fit the culture of the biker's night club scene. Instead, a person in this setting can simply say "gotta light" or "let me hold a match." This direct and less formal communication is more culturally acceptable in this context. This is language discourse specific to this culture. However, discourse is more than just words. Taking this same situation, a person may *say* the correct words when asking for a lighter, gotta light,

while also wiping the stool at the bar with a napkin before sitting down to avoid getting his freshly pressed jeans dirty. But, the act of wiping the stool is just not what's done by bikers in this setting. It's not just what you say, or even how you say it. Discourse also encompasses who you are and what you are doing when you speak words. Each of these practices—behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, and writing—act with each other to create a Discourse (Gee, 2015a).

Gee (2001) also illustrated how behaving and interacting in certain situations can differ, offering varied voices or heteroglossia through a recount of a young lady telling the same story to her parents and her boyfriend. The words she used altered to justify her social position when discussing the topic. To her parents, she explains that a character in the story was “the most offensive she'd ever seen,” respecting the situation of the parental relationship she had with her audience. With her boyfriend, on the other hand, she explained that this character was “a complete asshole,” acknowledging the parallel power dynamics present in their relationship.

One final example of how discourse demonstrates double-voicedness based on the situation can be seen in biologist Greg Meyers' (1990) choice of words when publishing research for audiences. In a professional scientific journal, he wrote that “experiments show that *Heliconius* butterflies are less likely to oviposit on host plants that possess eggs or egg-like structures” (p. 150). Describing the same phenomenon, in a popular science magazine, he wrote “*Heliconius* butterflies lay their eggs on *Passiflora* vines. In defense the vines seem to have evolved fake eggs that make it look to butterflies as if eggs have already been laid on them” (p. 150). Taking note of the shift in word choice in each, Meyers chose to take on the discourse of a professional scientist speaking with professional peers in the first, while taking on the discourse of a scientific journalist telling an educated public a story about animals and plants in the latter.

Each of the above examples of discourse illustrates a discourse that is specific to a particular social context; a biker bar, a woman speaking to her parents then her boyfriend, and a scientist

writing for different audiences. Gee refers to this as big D Discourse (Gee, 2001, 2005, 2015).

Discourse with a little “d” refers to just language in use. Moving forward, I will follow this descriptor when referencing the different levels of discourse because this study focuses on Discourse as opposed to discourse. Discourse relates to other frameworks for studying communication like Wenger’s (1998) communities of practice, Latour’s (1987, 1991) actor-actant networks, and Engeström et al.’s (1999) activity systems. Each of these frameworks places emphasis on the community in which language is practiced. Highlighting community practice, Discourse can be viewed as an *identity kit* (Gee, 2001), or socially recognized ways of communicating (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Mills, 2016). In this study, I focus on the identity kits of Black gay young men.

It is also important to note that in the above examples, Discourse is not only representative through language, but actions as well. The major focus of Discourse is the message that one gives, performing different Discourses for different sorts of roles and occasions (Gee, 2005; Goffman, 1959, 1981; Mills, 2016). For example, a man may be comfortable to act fish in a gay bar or gay Pride festivities, but feel the need to act trade in a straight bar. Because of this emphasis on the acting out of roles for different occasions, Gee (2015a) describes Discourse as

socially accepted association among ways of using language and other symbolic expressions, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and acting, as well as using various tools, technologies, or props that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or “social network”, to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful “role”, or to signal that one is filling a social niche in a distinctively recognizable fashion.
(pp. 178-179)

That is Discourses are constituted by specific actions carried out by specific individuals. The way we dress, the tone we take with our words, and the gestures we make are all examples of actions we make that contribute to the overall role we play in certain situations. This role is the Discourse in

which we are operating. In other words, Discourses are our ways of “being in the world” (Gee, 2015a p. 125). Discourse “comes complete with the appropriate costume and instruction on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role others will recognize” (Gee, 2015a, p. 127). For Black gay young men, their Discourses inform how to act out their identity.

This research uses discourse with a lowercase d to describe language usage contextual to Black gay young men’s positioning in larger social settings such as education, religion, and family, while using Discourse with an uppercase D to describe the combinations of saying, doing, and being that Black gay young men use to indicate, and be recognized, as certain types of people. When understanding the ways Black gay young men present and position themselves throughout their experiences, I focus on the Discourses they choose to embody. These practiced Discourses inform the way they view and engage the social and cultural worlds around them. The discourses they choose also demonstrate their understanding of their social positioning within these worlds. For example, studies such as those of Caputo, (2006), Kinloch and San Pedro (2014), and Petro (2015) each illustrate navigating their gay man experience through understanding their homosexual positioning within religious discourse. Positioning themselves within this religious discourse informs their ongoing practices of Discourse as a Black gay man. Therefore, because Gee (2015a) argues that discourses are identity kits that allow groups to understand and be recognized by one another, when studying the Discourse practices of Black gay young men, it is important to also look at the way they construct and demonstrate identity.

Identity

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—”

-Paul Laurence Dunbar

Identity is a term widely used in multiple disciplines, and as a result, carries different meanings reflective of the scholars who employ it. In education, researchers conceptualized identity as having two principle parts, performance and recognition (Gee, 2001). For this study, identity is defined as the aspects of a person that are defined by or representative of the groups in which they belong (Deaux, 1994; Holland, et.al, 1998; Paris & Kirkland, 2011; Dervin, 2012). Because we bring our experiences to each social situation in which we find ourselves, our identity in these situations is influenced by the way we apply our cultural influences in these moments (Holquist, 1984). Identity, then, is therefore always forming and evolving, shifting with each experience. This idea of identity can be further understood through a sociocultural lens.

Sociocultural theories emphasize the importance of cultural and ideological influences on texts, readers, and contexts. For example, Beach and Swiss (1991) explain that through their different lenses of being, “students experience different forms of ethical understanding leading to change in their social or cultural identities” (p. 148). This belief of knowledge construction means that as teachers draw attention to students’ cultural knowledge and identities, students will uncover different understandings. This point is important because, as readers of text reflect on how their understanding of their surroundings are both shaped and limited by larger cultural forces around them, such as their race, class, gender, and sexuality, they can begin to challenge the dominant interpretations of these authoritative and hegemonic spaces (Fecho, 2004). Therefore, if you can identify the social positioning of your surroundings, you can also begin to evaluate your cultural influence on these surroundings.

Identity is influenced by our cultural upbringing and constructed through our social interactions. Holland et al. (1998) explain that from a cultural perspective, identity is constructed on concepts learned in childhood. These concepts include notions of right and wrong, what it means to be Black in America, what it means to be a gentleman, etc. Therefore, identity is constructed by

developing a moral understanding of what it means to exist based on the constructs of race, class, ethnicity, and gender (Martiniello, 1995; Romanucci-Ross & De Vos, 1995; Castells, 1996). Based on this internalized cultural logic, identity, then, is a concept that is engrained in us from a very young age, in some ways, dictating how and who we should be and become. For example, a Black father teaches his son that a man takes care of the house, fulfilling manual duties such as taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, and maintaining the cars belonging to the family. A Black mother teaches her son how to act in public so as to not draw negative attention to himself by White people and the police, a sense of self-protection. Each of these Black young man learning experiences are marked by experiences that are contextual to race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

To understand identity, then, is to understand the maneuverings, negotiations, impositions, and recreations of relations of status and entitlement (Holland, et al., 1998). In other words, we construct our identity through understanding our positions during social interactions. We allow this positionality to inform our performance of identity in that moment. Holland et al. (1998) explain that identity is influenced by issues of power that are present in situations where and with whom people interact. They further suggest that power makes a difference as to whose version of identity will prevail. For example, acknowledging the power dynamics within the relationships between Black young men and the police informs the identity kit they should take on and perform in the social setting of police presence. These same power dynamics are present when Black young men find themselves in social situations maintaining the hegemonic status of White and Black people in U. S. politics. Moving from a cultural perspective of identity based on race itself (Hewitt, 1986), to a perspective of identity that emphasizes racism as an influence of identity makeup (Wodak & Reisigl, 1999; van Dijk, 1987, 1991; Potter & Wetherell, 2002), provides space to focus on the power dynamics present in social relations among people of different races and power. For example, note how racism against Black people in U. S. culture influences the way a Black mother teaches her

Black son to take on specific identity kits when performing in certain social situations. This example illustrates constructing an identity based on the cultural constructs of race and racism.

Humans operate in a dialogic nature, having the tendency to encompass many different perspectives simultaneously, regardless of their logical compatibility (Bakhtin, 1981). This dialogic perspective of identity allows us to draw from a sociocultural perspective of identity when developing our views of self. Sociocultural perspectives also suggest that when the experiences, perceptions, and relationships we value are not acknowledged, we learn that social acceptance is not exclusive, often limiting activity that diminishes our efforts to construct expanded identities (Enciso & Lewis, 20001). Viewing identity as a sociocultural construct emphasizes accounting for the complex identities that we must navigate (Lewis & Del Valle, 2009).

From this sociocultural perspective, identity, being performative by nature, is a way to enact, on a continual basis, some socially conditioned existence (Butler, 1990). Butler (1990) adds that identity as a social reality is a construct performed through “language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign” (p. 270). This performative lens also relies on the notion that identity is never stagnant. Instead, it is constantly reproduced based on the experiences of the individual acting in each social space (Allen, 1998; Jackson, 2004; Kopelson, 2002). Recent studies on Black male students have focused on the identity discourse of race and masculinity in the US racial hierarchy (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Staples, 2008; Young, 2007), emphasizing Black male masculinity and how race and gender are represented, or misrepresented, and the effect these representations have on gender consciousness (Staples, 2012; Young, 2000; Young, 2007). In each of these studies, the performative action of masculine discourse informs the identity construction of Black male students through their observance of the masculine discourses represented. Black men learn the construct of masculinity by the observing masculine representations of other Black men. These representations of masculinity are internalized as the way to perform masculinity. Therefore, these representations

become the Black young man's reality as they begin to mimic these masculine representations. This means, if a Black young man experiences other Black men who exhibit hypermasculine qualities, they will likely sustain those qualities. And, if a Black young man consistently experiences Black men who are in touch with their feelings and emotions, he will grow to learn and embody this representation of masculinity.

Don Kulick (1998) demonstrates this performative notion of identity by illustrating the tension between gender and sexuality through a study of Brazilian transgender men. Each of the men in the study, while being assigned a sex of female at birth, spent their lives creating their identity through their performances as men. These identities were created through their choices to appear physically male, enact more masculine qualities, and the social groups to which they attached themselves. Other examples in which identity presents itself through a performative manifestation is illustrated through Butler's (1990) study on mothers who once stated they never wanted children, Wilshire's (1981) comparison of the fictional roles played on stage as opposed to those enacted in real life, and organizational issues such as the managerial identities that distinctly identified the participants as holding management positions in a professional setting (Harding, 2003; Harding, et al., 2014; Learmonth, 2005; Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012). Butler (1990) explained how women who once expressed no desire to be mothers now performed the duties of a mother. Wilshire (1981) demonstrated how the fictional performance portrayed on stage often times differed from the "real" performance a gay man may give in public, on public transit for example. Each of the studies on managerial identities (Harding, 2003; Harding, et al., 2014; Learmonth, 2005; Rittenhofer & Gatrell, 2012) showed how the culture of the job and power dynamics of the managerial role dictated how the identity of a manager was performed contextually. In other words, a person's identity performance is determined by the present social setting.

Each of these studies illustrate how identity is fluid and continually constructed to situate the person in the social context in which they are performed. Therefore, when understanding identity, I find it important to theorize it through the performances an individual demonstrates in relation to the context of their social interactions because they are influenced by both their cultural and socially constructed worlds. These performances, or demonstrations of performativity, can be viewed as their identity.

In this study, I focus on the role identity plays in the Discourses Black gay young men choose to embody. I understand, though, that these identities are fluid and are theoretically constructed *through* the practices of these same Discourses. Yet, to understand this continual back and forth relationship, the question of *why* is still unanswered. Therefore, I use the phenomenon of human agency to seek the understanding of why Black gay young men make the Discourse moves they do to not only construct their identities, but to also use identity to inform their actions in the Discourse communities of which they belong.

Agency

“Why should the world be over-wise,

In counting all our tears and sighs?

Nay, let them only see us, while

We wear the mask.”

-Paul Laurence Dunbar

Inden (1990) defines human agency as the realized capacity of people to not only know about or give personal or intersubjective significance to the world in which they find themselves, but to hold the power to “act purposively and reflectively, in more or less complex interrelationships with one another, to reiterate and remake the world in which they live” (p. 23). Agency, then, is

shown through the act of reimagining and reconstructing our lived surroundings through cultural scrutiny. When thinking about agency, the notion of power arises. Power is the means through which discourse is used to construct, maintain, and subvert norms socially constructed within communities (Allen & Moore, 2016; Brickell, 2005; Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1980). For example, in the Black gay community, Human agency is what takes place when these socially constructed categories are culturally evaluated and challenged.

Inden's (1990) description of agency placed emphasis on challenging power relations, not as an opposition to power, but rather a constituent of power (Giddens, 1976; Sewell, 1992). Sewell (1992) declares that "to be an agent means to be capable of exerting some degree of control over social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree" (p. 20). As people develop conscious conceptions of themselves in socially and culturally constructed worlds, they use these senses of themselves as means of control over their own behavior (Holland et al, 1998). Holland et al. (1998) declare this tool of self-control as a tool of agency by encouraging social change. Therefore, the goal of agency is not to bring noncompliance, but to equalize power dynamics in social spaces.

To have agency is to have the ability to shape and control one's life without allowing the power of oppression to dictate your existence (Kincheloe, 2007). Moreover, to have agency is to be able to critically and consciously transform the world (Mills, 2016). According to Freire (1970), we have the capacity for conscientization, or "the process through which agents gain a deepening awareness of the socio-cultural reality that shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (p. 65). Understanding agency is to understand that social capital changes according to the social positions of those who hold power and determine social value. Therefore, when we position ourselves in spaces of authority, we create opportunities in which we can construct a reality recognized by others. Through conscientization, Freire emphasizes the relationship between the

oppressed and the oppressor. Blurring the lines of the two is central to raising the level of awareness of liberatory possibilities and actions against forms of oppression. Having this level of awareness allows actors to take control over their realities, transforming existing inequalities through acts of resistance (Apple, 1995; Darder, 1995; Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; Luke, 1992; Shor, 1992, 1996).

Performativity is a way in which we demonstrate agency. This demonstration of agency and identity is a way of negotiating and reconfiguring notions of power (Moore, 2017). Holland et al. (1998) explain identity as a performative action to create agency with their theory of identity in practice. According to Holland et.al identity in practice has four contexts of activity: the figured world, positionality, the space of authoring, and making worlds. The figured world is the space in which interpretations of human actions are negotiated. While socially identified, these actions, or figures, are not a simple analysis of the expressions being made by the actor. Instead, agency demonstrated through the figured world context of identity depends on meaning making via the interpretation of disposition, social identification, and personification. Each of these contexts of activity are forms of both social and cultural work. Therefore, when interpreting each context and acting upon them, we, too, are offering degrees of distinction, placing ourselves and others in social fields of relation identifiable others (Holland et al., 1998). For example, take labeling in the Black gay community. Fem, masc, trade, fish, top, bottom, and verse are all identities present. Each identity is relational to the expressions made by the actors in the space. A masculine man may be referred to as trade or masc, while a feminine man referenced as fish or fem. Also, Black gay men operate in relationships based on their sexual position being top, bottom, or verse. In each of these situations, the labeling of the individual's identity is contextual to the figured world present. Creating these figured worlds where relational identities are negotiated opens the discussion of positionality.

Whereas the figured world of people defines the relation of people to others, positionality emphasizes the power, status, and rank that are present in these relational realities (Crotty, 2015;

Holland et al., 1998; Morson, 2004). Positionality deals with entitlement to social and material resources privileged by society. These privileges, though, are distinctive to the figured worlds we create, and because some identities we bear are more durable than others, such as race, ethnicity, and class, we find ourselves enmeshed in multiple figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998). Because these positions of identity are more rigid and fixed, and we bear them in multiple figured worlds, we find our privilege prominent in some worlds and less in others, yet all positions depend upon the symbolic and socially marked capital in each. For example, as a Black gay man, I may appear to have more privilege in a homo-affirming space than I do in a space known to be anti-gay. My positionality in each warrants a different privilege, or lack thereof. Even if both spaces are homo-affirming, I may have less power in a predominately White establishment because of the rigidity of my identity as Black, than I would in a predominately Black establishment. Positionality leads to a sense of fluidity. It is because of this fluidity of privilege that it is important to position yourself in a space of authoring.

As humans are constantly finding themselves in a state of being addressed, they are, as a result, also constantly finding themselves in the process of answering (Bakhtin, 1981; Holland, et al., 1998; Holquist, 1990). Through this answering process, they are placed in situations where they can author, or create, their positionality. Authoring ourselves requires us to navigate between our intimate discourses, inner speaking, and bodily practices of our past and the discourses and practices to which we expose people, both willingly and unwillingly, in the present (Holland, et al., 1998). This navigation is what Bakhtin references as the space of authoring (Bakhtin, 1981; Holland, et.al, 1998; Greenleaf & Katz, 2004). Furthermore, this process results in the presentation of the meaning we make of ourselves. Being placed in positions where we can author the world around us, we are able to reshape our lived realities and the meanings we make about those realities. We are able to arrange social discourses and practices that align with the way we want others to perceive us. We are able to

control the narrative. As a professional Black gay man, I can author myself through the way I perform as well as the way I look. For example, in professional settings, I can still dress in clothing that society deems as professional—shirt, tie, and blazer—while still letting my flamboyant identity shine with various color combinations that are not traditionally viewed as professional. As a Black gay man, I can also author myself in the gay community by not conforming to the masc/fem ideologies, expressing characteristics of both in the same social setting. Having this authority of authorship leads to our capability of creating, or making, the worlds around us.

The making of worlds is a concept that pulls from Bakhtin's (1981) *authorship* and Vygotsky's (1987) notion of *social play*. Social play works with authorship to construct new worlds through the imaginative characteristics social play provides. Social play is the space in which children make pretend worlds based on their imaginations. Through this collaboration between social play and authorship, humans create *new* figured worlds (Holland, et al., 1998). These new figured worlds differ from those described earlier because in these new worlds we have developed, or authored, new social competencies and newly imagined communities. Making worlds also allows free expression. Having autonomy of expression and cultural media directly correlates to agency (Hall, 1996). Agency, then, is marked by presenting yourself as the sociocultural being you have created in each figured world, ultimately making new worlds of existence for yourself. Like positionality, we position ourselves in these new worlds. The difference comes when we use our positions to create new existences and communities in our image. For example, I attend a church affirming of homosexuals, led by a pastor who is also a homosexual. Imagining a place of worship and creating it for ourselves (the Black gay community) is an illustration of new worlds created as a result of authorship and play.

Each of these contexts of identity in practice leads to and depends on the act of improvisation to promote human agency (Bourdieu, 1977; Delp, 2004). Improvisation is the in-the-

moment reactions people create in response to particular situations that are mediated by negotiating past and present cultural and social dynamics (Holland et al., 1998). A human's social interaction practice creates a repository of experiences including actions, figures, and contexts, using them to mold the way they respond in future social encounters (Bourdieu, 1977). Therefore, taking note of improvisation when evaluating the act of human agency illustrates how these in-the-moment reactions shift power relations as the "powerful" is rarely able to *control* the "less powerful's" acts of resistance in these moments (Haraway, 2020). Haraway (2020) adds that to improvise is to demonstrate a level of liberating resilience that further highlights the resourcefulness of humans to piece together existing cultural resources and apply them to present conditions and problems. Taking on this ideology, improvisation is the core to Holland et al.'s (1998) theory of identity in practice.

Improvisation informs figured worlds through our interpretations of the worlds in which we find ourselves. We interpret these worlds based on the social and cultural dynamics present. These dynamics are created through the improvisations made while acting in each figured world. We use these improvisations to create the figured worlds we operate in, ultimately making them what we desire. Improvisation also aids in positionality through the ways it leads to the creating of spaces through our reactions to social encounters. Having autonomy over these reactions through our ability to author, we then have autonomy over the way we position ourselves in the worlds we find ourselves. Improvisation assists in self-authorship through this sense of autonomy. We use these improvisations in a dialogic manner to author the sense of self we both desire to show and have the desire for others to see and experience.

In this study I use Holland et al.'s (2014) theory of identity in practice and performativity to understand the way Black gay young men demonstrate their existence to others. Taking on this performative view equally relies on attention to the importance of "reading the room" and

improvisation. Muhammad (2020) explains that understanding self in local and broader contexts of power and reading the signs of the time informs our actions and behaviors. She also defines identity as “notions of who we are, who others say we are (in both positive and negative ways), and whom we desire to be” (p. 67). The idea that focuses on *desire* is the driving factor for human agency. The ways Black gay young men use improvisation via the Discourses they embody to position their desired identities and to combat oppressive social forces, is a way they demonstrate human agency.

Developing Identity and Agency Through Discourse Practices

“This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.”

-Paul Laurence Dunbar

Taking on Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogic perspective of identity allows the understanding that a group of people can perform multiple discourses at a time. This sociocultural view of identity and Discourse introduces the idea of *passing*. Passing means to be accepted in one group based on characteristics that do not typically align with your expressed identity (Hobbs, 2014; Fordham, 1993; Siebers, 2004; Woodard, 2015). For example, a Black gay man that does not perform his feminine characteristics will be able to pass as a straight man in a heteronormative setting. The act of passing is parallel to that of code-switching, which Baker-Bell (2020) describes as the use of one dialect, register, accent, or language variety over another, depending on the social or cultural context, to project a specific identity” (p. 23). A person may also combine multiple Discourses during one social engagement to present themselves in the desired light for the social context in which they find themselves. Passing is an example of identity being embodied and practiced (Woodard, 2015). For example, a Black person may feel the need to speak in a dialect other than Black English in career

settings in order to pass as what White society deems as professional. Black gay men who use the terms *bitch* and *girl* as terms of endearment to one another may not use such terms in familial settings to pass as what Black society deems acceptable cultural behavior. Passing, or the resistance of the expectation to pass, is a way we demonstrate human agency (Hobbs, 2014).

The use of various Discourses to pass in different social settings, or the resistance to pass in those same settings, is a way in which we use these Discourses to represent ourselves (identity) and assert our positionality (agency). Understanding this complex use of Discourses to create identity and agency means to also acknowledge and understand Discourse as being leveled and complex. Katherine Wade (2017) used her research on the science identity development of African American middle school girls to describe discourse as consisting of three levels. The interconnectivity of each level—macro, micro, and meso—operationalized the way girls used discourse in different ways to create the identity (Wade, 2017). At the macro level, discourses practiced at the societal level highlighted larger social constructs such as school, church, family/home, and career. The meso level funneled the social influence on identity construction to a more intimate level. For example, at the meso level, the influence of school became more focused on the classroom, the influence of church became more focused on specific denominational religious practices and beliefs, the influence of family and home becomes more focused on the specific familial makeup of the home (i.e., single-parent, same-sex parents, blended family, only child, multiple children), and the influence of career became more focused on the type of career held. Finally, at the micro level, an emphasis was placed on the individual, moving the focus from classroom discourse to how the individual embodies being a student in that setting, from religious practices and beliefs to the understanding of how they contributed to the makeup of the institution, from familial discourses to how the individual created their positionality in the family, and from the emphasis on a specific career path to the individual's personal contributions to the profession in the above example. Each level warrants a different set of

Discourse practices resulting in a complex practice of combining multiple Discourse uses in one setting. Continuing Gee's (2001) notion of d/Discourse, big D Discourse does not appear until one moves to the meso level, acknowledging the cultural influences present in each setting. Little d discourse remains at the macro level of discourse.

Fairclough (2015) argues that Discourses are driven by social structures, and these structures reflect the various power relationships within society. Acknowledging the power relations present at each level of discourse allows for the fluidity of identity and Discourse usage as we navigate the complexity of understanding self at each level. Butler (1993) describes the discourses at the macro level as those that are “fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements” (p. 45). She adds that the roles of exclusion and differentiation are markers that define the spaces of this level, further facilitating the creation and upholding of power dynamics. For example, in religious spaces, markers of religious denominations are discourses present at the macro level. The Catholic performs rituals in a specific way. The Baptist performs rituals in a specific way that may resemble or differ from the Catholic. Religious rituals of the Buddhist, Muslim, and any other religious group may also overlap, widely differ, exist in one group and not another; in each case these practices embody macro discourses within these communities.

Previous research shows macro level discourses subjecting hegemonic expectations onto oppressed people (Guerra, 2016; Haddix & Rojas, 2011; Martinez-Roldan & Malave, 2011). For example, Guerra (2016) examined macro level discourses through an exploration of the language practices of Latin-American students in academic settings upholding the standardization of White mainstream English. He found that the institution of education shunned individuality and preserved assimilation to White culture and asserted that White culture as the standard for educational settings. This discourse expectation of the overall educational setting was justified when the Spanish-speaking students in the study were told that the “clash between [their] languages and [their] cultures was

going to create an identity problem that [they] would have to deal with for the rest of [their] lives” (p. 26). The expectation that all students would assimilate to these social practices in all educational settings confirmed the notion of standardization at the macro level of discourse usage. While standardization and assimilation are the goals of this level of discourse (Wade, 2017), the students in Guerra’s (2016) study demonstrated human agency and identity positioning through critical language awareness and code meshing, asserting their home cultures and languages as equally important, continuing to practice them through language communities throughout the school.

Morris (2007) added to the discussion of minority students in educational settings by uncovering the practice of encouraging African American female students to be more feminine to achieve academic achievement. Yet, the students, described by the teachers in this study, who were also African American women, continued to “be loud and wear inappropriate clothing” (p. 502) despite the teachers’ encouragement to be more quiet and passive learners. The girls of this study demonstrated macro-level agency through their opposition to fall into the notion of being seen and not heard, asserting their identities as both important and dominant to their existence in the space. Youdell (2003) continued this discussion of embodied discourses in academic settings, describing how institutional discourses of race created “identity traps” (p. 5) for students who developed African American youth/street culture identities. In this study, students observed embodying this identity were seen as anti-social and needing additional surveillance and bodily control. Yet, by continuing to perform their cultural identity embodiment, the youth demonstrated agency by being true to the identities they chose to construct.

The meso level of discourse pulls from one’s existence within figured worlds as described through Holland et al’s (2014) theory of identity in practice. Discourse at the meso level is evaluated by examining how individuals participate in various ways within different figured worlds and how their positioning in these figured worlds can impact identity development (Barton & Tan, 2010).

Zoss (2009) describes how agency can be attained in the figured world of a secondary literacy class marked by arts integration by allowing students the opportunity to “express their ideas in dynamic ways similar to the shifting and fast-paced modes of communication they use outside school [settings]” (p. 193). This practice of identity inclusion through arts integration further aids in student agency to position themselves in a figured world that models a “responsive and inclusive approach to literacy, rather than a dismissive and exclusionary approach to composing and reading texts both in and out of school” (p. 193). Having the opportunity to express themselves allows both a demonstration of agency and honors the continuum of identity development. Allowing students the opportunity to express themselves as a form of identity construction and agency was also present in Tyner’s (1998) juxtaposition of students’ identities through their usage of technology in the school figured world and the home figured world. She explained that students’ identities were reflective of their positional understanding, thus allowing them to utilize the multimodal, nonlinear digital literacies available in each figured world. Zoss (2009) and Tyner (1998) each illustrated how the figured world in which a person finds themselves dictates the discourse they use, ultimately contributing to the identity they enact and embody in that space. While the meso level of discourse usage is influenced and marked by a person’s positionality in a figured world, their existence in the micro level of discourse is solely relational to how they’ve chosen to perform identity.

Micro level Discourses are those Gee (2001) refers to as big D Discourses. They are the ways individuals perform and recognize being a member of a specific social, or Discourse, group. At the micro level, a Discourse is defined by a set of actions, including ways of being, acting, talking, and dressing. This level of Discourse also embodies Holland et al.’s (2014) theory of performativity. Discourse is an action, a performance. This level of Discourse is demonstrated through the ethnographies of Mitchell Duneier (1999), Ann Arnett Ferguson (2003), and Mary Pattillo (2007). Duneier (1999) highlighted the experiences of local Greenwich Village street vendors in New York

City and how they embodied and performed the act of being a street vendor, thus asserting the vendors' position in the community. He found that being a street vendor was more than just selling goods to the local residents. Instead, it was also the pleasantries they offered those passing by, the acts of comradery they shared with one another, the doorman-like appearance they all agreed upon as the unspoken official uniform of the Black street vendor, and the language codes they developed to "talk the street vendor talk" (p. 108). This embodiment remained stagnant as the Discourse of the street vendor regardless of the context they found themselves, making this a perfect example of micro level Discourse. If these men were to leave their stationed street post and traveled to another part of the city, those familiar with the Greenwich Village street vendors would still recognize and acknowledge them as a Greenwich Village street vendor, thus making being a Greenwich Village street vendor a Discourse community.

Ferguson (2003) spent time in an elementary school on the West Coast observing how a group of boys aged 11 and 12 labeled as "at-risk" and "troublemakers," constructed a sense of self and community despite adverse circumstances. Acknowledging the stigmatizing images of Black males as either "criminals" or "endangered species" (p. 20), He found that not only were the majority of boys being sent to the office and labeled as troubled and at-risk Black, but also they had embraced this grouping and developed a sense of community around it. These boys had a "bad boys" handshake. They each wore the same color shoes to school each day. They even began to use the same vernacular in their spoken and written language. Each of these characteristics embodied by these boys are markers of the "bad boy" Discourse. Even when continuing to be sent to the office and punished for their expression of this identity, they did not waiver and continued to embody this Discourse. This act of nonwavering was a demonstration of these young men's agency to exist as they were. Ferguson added that no matter which hall the boys were on, whose class they were in, and which neighborhood they lived, they were always known as the bad boys based on the distinct

Discourse markers they created for themselves. Their desire and agency to perform that identity was always present.

Patillo (2007) explored two contrasting Discourse communities: the Black Bourgeoisie and the Truly Disadvantaged of the Chicago Oakland and North Kenwood neighborhoods. Marked by the social activist efforts of the community members themselves, Patillo showed how agency in self positionality. Once riddled with gangs and poverty, many community members desired to, and accomplished, the revitalization of the North Kenwood neighborhood. Yet, some community members felt they better embodied the lifestyle as is, desiring no change. Therefore, when revitalization occurred, they maintained the Discourse community of the Truly Disadvantaged and moved north to occupy the Oakland neighborhood. The act of some to stay and take on the characteristics of the revitalized created a Discourse community of the Black Bourgeoisie, while others maintained the traditional Discourse community characteristics, is an example of an illustration of agency through Discourse and identity. With this separation, the Truly Disadvantaged Discourse community maintained the discourse many associate with poverty and gangs while the Black Bourgeoisie Discourse community operated in a more polished and gentrified identity discourse.

This multi-leveled understanding of Discourse highlights the complexity present when evaluating both what Discourse practices are present as well as how they influence the development and embodiment of identity while leading to human agency. When examining the Discourse practices of Black gay young men of this study, it is not only important to acknowledge the complex laying of Discourse itself, but also the complexity and multiple layers involved in being a Black gay young man.

Discourses of (Be)ing a Black Gay Man

“We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries

To thee from tortured souls arise.

We sing, but oh the clay is vile

Beneath our feet, and long the mile;

But let the world dream otherwise,

We wear the mask!”

-Paul Laurence Dunbar

When considering the Discourses Black gay young men embody as a member of this social group, it's important that you first understand the complexity of their identities. Highlighting how each layer can be isolated—Black, gay, and young adult—provides a different set of nuances that work in tandem with one another to create the being of a Black gay young man. This intersectional view of the Black gay man's identity allows for the dynamic examination of their individual experiences that further calls attention to inequality, disparity, power, privilege, and access (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014). Individuals belonging to this social group have to navigate being Black, being a man, and being gay simultaneously. Therefore, taking an intersectional approach to understanding their Discourses also allows for an understanding of them in a sense of wholeness (Wijeyesinghe & Jones, 2014), as opposed to taking their identities apart, and diminishing them to a single-faceted being.

In addition to an intersectional approach, it is important to continue to employ Wade's (2017) theory of multi-leveled discourse. When performing their identities, Black gay young men navigate their positionality at systemic, cultural, and personal (individual) levels. Take, for instance, Alexander's (2005) study on the Black gay body in the classroom as embodied text. He recounted a

student's performance in an Oral Interpretation class. The student decided to perform drag. This performance of drag is a great example of a multi-leveled, intersectional discourse because the student challenged both the notion of what school was and the institutional expectations of demonstrating mastery. As opposed to simply getting up and providing an oratorical response, Alexander explained the student "pranced into the performance space on six-inch heels like a high-stepping carnival performer-his stylized version of femininity" (p. 255). This performance also pushed back on the constructs of classroom discourse through his "working the room" as he gave his oratorical rendition of an overly exaggerated, hyperbolic drag queen, in contrast to what Alexander explained most students did: stand at the front of the class and performed their pieces. This student demonstrated Discourse by "resisting to shave his facial hair" but circulating pictures of him "done up—his face beat with make-up and full dark lips, wearing a larger-than-life black wig and a form-fitting black dress that emphasized his ample bosom" (p. 255). Showing that he chose not to shave his face and put on makeup, but providing evidence that he was capable of creating this look, illustrated this student's self-authorship of his identity in that space. Through this performance, the student demonstrated a resistance discourse, a Discourse of the drag culture, and a student discourse. Each of the Discourses explained is a way in which this student positioned himself in the moment. This performance discourse of the drag community was also easily recognizable by those both within and outside. The "faux breasts" and "larger-than-life wigs" are visual cues of the drag queen Discourse community. Performances continue to show how Black gay men position themselves in different Discourse communities. Black gay men are afforded opportunities to make themselves who they want through their performances.

Cohen (2005) provided a figured world discourse example, focusing on the discourse community of queer activists. She explains that this discourse community was marked by a demonstration of critical consciousness, embraced self-definition and full expression, and embodied

the reconstruction of heteronormativity (Cohen, 2005). In the queer activist figured world, these Black gay men “boldly fight oppression; homophobia, racism, misogyny, the bigotry of religious hypocrites and [their] own self-hatred” (p. 33). Understanding this discourse community’s practice through an intersectional lens was important for highlighting race, class, gender, and sexuality as well as the relative power, or lack of power, and privilege one gets from being a man and/or being Black, and/or being gay (Cohen, 2005; Collins, 2019; Lyiscott, 2020).

Shedding light on the intersections of being male as part of the Black gay man’s identity can be done through observing masculinity discourse. Scholars such as Kirkland (2013), Sarson (2020), Speice (2020), and Ravenhill and de Visser (2017) all discuss the discourse of masculinity and how it relates to a gay identity through the lens of Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Associating femininity and homosexuality with intellect is a common practice in the Black male community (Kirkland, 2013; Newton & Onesimo Sandoval, 2015; Tatum, 2006; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Hypermasculinity in the Black male community suggest that if you demonstrate high levels of intellect, you are feminine and likely gay. The participants of Kirkland’s (2013) ethnographic study appeared to sustain this practice when teasing one of the participants, Sheldon, for finding pleasure in reading, stating the only people who enjoy reading are “girls” (p. 108). When challenging this notion, the others told Sheldon to “quit crying like a little bitch” (p. 110), using “bitch” as a derogatory reference to a female, positioning the dominant hegemony of patriarchal linguistics. This view of hegemonic masculinity upholds the notion that masculinity looks a certain “way”, while the embodiment of homosexuality often does not appear in this image.

Speice (2020) found masculinity worked as a measure of acceptance for gay men in the workplace by their heterosexual counterparts. Learning from their narratives, he found some Discourses of these gay men were deemed “acceptable” while others were “too gay.” Rodney, one of Speice’s participants, explained acceptable masculinity in the workplace to him meant to “be more

reserved, and talk less” (p. 1873) while “wearing more loose and less fitted clothing” (p. 1871). In contrast, Barry, another participant, explained he embraced his effeminate side within his speech patterns, mannerisms, and dress, and avoided his closeted “brother’s” pleas to “tone it down” (p. 1874). This practice upheld the notion that gay men were accepted in professional settings as long as they “conform to a particular set of behaviors to be considered professional, [including] styles of dress, use of gestures or mannerisms, and what makes for appropriate conversation” (p. 1875). Masculinity in this sense is tied to the performance of hegemonic, stereotypical male behavior.

Ravenhill and de Visser (2017) placed value on masculinity in the form of masculine capital. Masculine capital, pulling from Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of symbolic capital, refers to the social power one is afforded by their individual relativity to masculinity. This study, observing the dynamics on a rugby team comprised of both homo- and heterosexual men, revealed straight men on athletic teams viewed gay masculinity as having no capital because their femininity, “like women, do not function in the [masculine] power hierarchy” (p. 326). One participant shared his value system, believing gay men had power on the team because they were “smaller in stature and less hairier” and more “emotional” (p. 327). The openly gay men in this study voiced their sense of identity by their softer voices, manicured bodies, and connection with their emotions. This notion of masculine capital also presented itself in Sarson’s (2020) study on gay men engaging in hegemonic masculine speech to appear “straight” on online dating apps. Operationalizing masculinity in a virtual, online format, speech played an important role toward embodying masculine practices. Sarson (2020) found effeminate speech such as “dishing” was negatively tied to the gossip stereotype of women. Therefore, “dishing” became “dicking” where “‘dick’ signified the masculinization of dish and also the goal of gay masculinity” (p. 900). These studies show that masculine capital and the power it affords can influence Black gay men’s Discourse performances.

While many of the studies on masculinity offered implications that stereotypical gay discourses don't fit into the discourse of masculinity, resulting in homosexual men finding themselves, both intentionally and unintentionally, conforming to heterosexual norms, the gay ballroom scene is where Black gay men find themselves able to openly express their identity through a variety of discourse practices (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Bailey, 2011a, 2011b; Telander et al., 2015). Ballroom is a community in which *houses*, or social groups treated more like family, engage in balls where members of the houses offer competitive performances to a variety of categories (Bailey, 2013), including *butch queen*, when the actor blends both masculine and feminine energies together, *face*, when the actors accent their natural facial features as an image of beauty, and *runway*, when the actors use the space to highlight the full package of identity. Therefore, Discourse in ballroom is marked by performance and appearance. Bailey (2013) emphasized performativity as a notion of Discourse, giving performers the ability to “‘play’ with gender categories at the balls” (p. 21). Bailey also identified performance as being the glue that holds the Black gay ballroom together. He mapped the complex ways in which people in the ballroom challenge dominant ways of knowing and performing gender and sexuality through vogue and “realness.” *Vogue* calls for the actor to contort their bodies in rigid angles while *realness* describes the actor's ability to pass within each category. All described ballroom categories are performances that allow the actor to create the identity they desire through embodiment.

Continuing to build on the concept of identity through the Discourses of the ballroom scene, (Arnold and Bailey, 2009) explained the ballroom scene to be the place to “have proper guidance and mentorship” (p. 182). Members of the scene take on the familial makeup of traditional families, with a mother and a father (Spears, 2010). In the houses, fathers are said to be concerned with personal development such as education and abilities to get a job, whereas mothers are often concerned with promoting healthy sexual decision making (Spears, 2010). Continuing the

line of discourse inquiry, Spears (2010) attributed ballroom culture to physical modes of Discourse expression through the performance of drag. Drag allowed men to embody their feminization of masculinity through their wearing of “dresses and mini-skirts” while still sustaining modes of masculinity deemed by society such as “wearing a full beard” (p. 32). In ballroom spaces, Black gay men can take on and perform the full spectrum of identities and Discourses they have and want to embody.

Black gay young men Discourses are performances of identity kits. These performances influence their positionality and identity construction. Yet, through a deep inquiry dive, I found very few studies that focused on Black gay men that fell within the age range of 18 to 25. More specifically, an exploration of *why* this group embodied certain Discourses in certain spaces was missing. Therefore, this study seeks to both identify and define the various Discourses Black gay young men embody while exploring their self-defined reasons for why they choose these performances. The next chapter provides details about how I plan to uncover Black gay young men’s performances of Discourse and why they choose to embody their identity kits.

3 Methodology

Viewing Discourse as an extension of literacy, the methodological approach for this study reflected a theoretical framework rooted in sociocultural and critical literacies theories. Sociocultural theories explain knowledge and literacy practices as constructions of particular social groups rather than attributions of cognition alone; therefore, these theories describe ways of thinking about and existing in cultural contexts (Street, 1984, 2003). Critical literacies fit this study because of the ongoing critique highlighting the debate of what is considered literacy and by whom (Barton et al., 2000; Mills 2010). This critique maintains the understanding that existing in cultural contexts is driven by Discourse performances (Gee, 2015a). Gee (2015a) described Discourses as socially recognized ways of using words and other semiotic codes, as well as ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, and speaking. In other words, he believed Discourses to be instantiations of identity.

Sociocultural theories also focus on the message one “gives off” (Mills, 2016, p. 16). These messages include the wide range of actions that are characteristic of a person's identity as they participate in social life, including facial expressions, eye contact, gesticulations, length of responses, volume, pacing, tone and expression of voice, grammatical choices, hairstyle, clothing, and so on. This notion of “giving off” coincides with Gee’s (2005) understanding of language and identity as encompassing other semiotic codes. Therefore, it makes methodological sense to consider sociocultural theories when studying the Discourse practices of Black gay young men, understanding their Discourses to be socially constructed and reliant upon their social spaces and experiences.

Still missing here is the question of why. Why do these Black gay young men engage in the Discourses they do in the various social spaces they find themselves? Answering this question relied on another layer of analysis. Seeking this answer required a critical approach towards understanding. Taking the critical stance of scholars such as Luke (1988, 1998) and Street (1999), Discourses are

ideological and must be interpreted in relation to larger social contexts and power relations. Critical approaches consider the social structures and power relations that give rise to, maintain and reproduce, and limit access to formal discourses for certain groups (Fairclough, 1989). Attending to power relations in Discourse studies, within and across communities, has yielded significant evidence of patterns of marginalization that are socially and historically constituted (Mills, 2016). It was important to consider power relations when studying the Discourse performances of Black gay young men because of their marginalization from multiple angles; being Black, a man, and gay. Therefore, I took a critical view of Black gay young men's Discourses that required an ideological approach to uncover how they mastered the codes and conventions of their communities, which have different degrees of alignment with the Discourses valued by dominant, white heteronormative culture (Kincheloe, 2007; Luke & Freebody, 1997)

The goal of this research was to both uncover how and why Black gay young men choose to perform certain Discourses in the different social settings they find themselves as well as to understand how they use these reasonings to position their personal identities in these same social settings as a sense of agency. To uncover these phenomena, this research is guided by the following questions:

1. How are Black gay young men using social Discourses to define and present themselves?
2. How are Black gay young men demonstrating agency through the Discourses they perform situated in a variety of social settings?

Crystallization

Trustworthiness and credibility are vital to the process of qualitative research. Studies are trusted when they are "conducted in a rigorous, systematic, and ethical manner" (Merriam, 2009, p. 24). To demonstrate both trustworthiness and credibility, I pulled from Gordon's (2018) explanation of *crystallization*, based on Ellingson (2008) and Richardson's (2000) critique of triangulation.

Triangulation refers to the use of at least three data sources, methods, or informants to strengthen the research. Yet, it limits the ways of knowing and representing the data. Instead, crystallization “provides a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000, p. 934). Ellingson (2008) adds that crystallization “combines multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts” (p. 4). In other words, crystallization offers several different ways of collecting, analyzing, and representing data.

Qualitative research studies that utilize crystallization typically have one or more of the following characteristics:

1. Offer thick descriptions and complex interpretations;
2. Reflect multiple, often contrasting, ways of knowing;
3. Use more than one genre of writing; and
4. Reject positivist claims that knowledge is “singular” and “discoverable” (Ellingson, 2008, p. 10).

I offered crystallization in this study by (1) providing thick descriptions and complex interpretations through the varied data sources collected, (2) pulling from intersectionality, Critical Discourse Analysis, Queer of Color Critique, and Critical literacies all to understand the participants’ ways of knowing, and (3) insisting that knowledge of the participants’ Discourses were socially constructed and everchanging. I used Wade’s (2017) theory of leveled discourse and Fairclough’s (2015) tiered approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to further crystallize my view of the data, constructing my knowledge around it from a layered approach. The result of a research design of this complexity was a multidimensional, crystallized study with multiple possibilities.

Credibility is established when a study’s interpretation corresponds to “the way it is within the phenomenon being investigated” (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 140), being as close to reality as possible. I used Riessman’s (2008) approach to narrative analysis, keeping the participants’ stories

intact, staying true to their identities, to increase my credibility. I re-told their stories in the dissertation using the language they chose so that I could honor the ways that they told and shared about their identities and performances. Caring for the young men's vulnerabilities through thoughtful representation of their stories and keen attention to them as persons during the interviews helped me attend to the potential power dynamics with me as the researcher and helped further establish credibility for my study. My attention to participant selection, participant vulnerability, data collection, and data analysis all worked together to ensure my study of Black gay young men's discourses was both trustworthy and credible.

Research Design

Crotty (1998) defines methodology as “the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (p. 3). When planning to study the Discourse practices of Black gay young men, I chose to take on a qualitative methodology because qualitative research is interpretive (Grbich, 2013), forcing me as the researcher to acknowledge my own subjectivities and how they come to bear on my interpretations and meaning construction (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). I took up a qualitative line of inquiry also because of its naturalistic nature, situating the research in the everyday spaces that people engage in routine discourse events and practices (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

Narrative Inquiry

There are a variety of qualitative methodological approaches to explore human experiences. Case study, phenomenology, critical ethnography, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry all seek to understand the experiences and stories that make up who people are (Merriam, 2009). One characteristic that binds these qualitative approaches together is that of the personal story and experience as a valuable data source and sometimes an exclusive data source (Merriam, 2009).

Placing these stories and experiences as the central focus of this study, I chose narrative inquiry as the approach to guide my study. Narrative inquiry allowed me to

1. position the participants as the narrators of their own stories (Rogan & de Kock, 2005),
2. address my subjectivities as a researcher and acknowledge how they are intertwined with the study (Riessman, 2003),
3. share power with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000),
4. acknowledge their stories and experiences as a valid reality (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000),
5. build relationships that move beyond researcher and participant (Wetherell & Noddings, 1991), and
6. present the findings in a way that honors their stories and voices (Garvis, 2015).

Because the voices of Black gay young men and their stories are the epicenter of this research, a narrative inquiry methodology complemented the purpose of this study.

Clandinin (2013) described narrative inquiry as “an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). It requires the researcher to “be open to embracing their own memories, critical events, experiences, ideas, and feelings that intertwine our personal and professional lives” in order to further understand the experiences of the participants (Sisk-Hilton & Meier, 2017, p. 11). While there are multiple ways scholars define and describe narrative research, I found Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) theory of narrative inquiry as both “methodology and phenomena” (p. 16). Therefore, I adopted this approach to also guide my approach to narrative inquiry.

Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) theory of narrative inquiry as both methodology and phenomena pulls from Dewey’s (1938) theory of experience, asserting that narrative inquirers must approach the research process as relational, continuous, and social (Poindexter, 2019). These tenets build upon Dewey’s belief that experiences are crafted by the interconnectedness between continuity

and interaction. “Continuity is the idea that our experiences, interactions, and meaning-making are continual processes; they are residual and spill over from one to the next” (Poindexter, 2019, p. 76). Put differently, what people learn “in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow” (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). Therefore, believing continuity and interaction to be tools of experience, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) interpreted Dewey’s ontology as “transactional,” showing the possibility for narrative inquiry to both generate a “new relation between a human and her environment—her life community, world” (p. 39), as well as shape the participants’ and the researcher’s future experiences and life stories (Clandinin, 2013). Complementary to narrative inquiry, intersectionality as critical inquiry, Queer of Color Agency, and Critical literacies each contributed to the methodological approach of this study, highlighting the experiences of the study’s participants in different contexts.

Intersectionality as Critical Inquiry

Intersectionality as a framework includes both critical inquiry and praxis, interrogating the ways people, either as individuals or as a part of groups, produce, draw upon, or use intersectional frameworks oh knowing (Collins & Bilge, 2016). As critical praxis, intersectionality explicitly challenges the status quo to transform oppressive power relations. As critical inquiry, it aims to understand the experiences and struggles of people from marginalized groups. Intersectionality as a framework uses inquiry to gain knowledge from the experiences of oppressed people to challenge the power systems that oppress them with the explicit purpose of empowering oppressed communities and individuals to create change (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

Intersectional methodologies rely upon cultural knowledge and intuition (Ahmed, 2017; Delgado Bernal, 1998). They challenge authoritarian conceptualizations of credibility and validity while attempting to center the cultural experiences, values, and beliefs of the research participants, including the researcher themselves (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022). Using intersectionality as a

means for examining and interpreting complex relationships, cultural artifacts, social contexts, and research reflexivity maintains the sociocultural underpinnings of this study that there are “multiple ways of existing in the social world; therefore, there are multiple ways or knowing it— understanding, navigating, and interpreting the social world” (p. 22). Sustaining this sociocultural focus, intersectional methodologies approach the research process seeking to more effectively comprehend

1. how power and authority are concurrently fixed and static within and across social contexts,
2. how individuals and groups resist, confront, and/or placate oppressive authority and structural power,
3. how space (social and spatiotemporal) affects how social actors perceive and enact power, and
4. how one’s place in history and contemporary society influences their approaches to qualitative inquiry and forms of knowledge production. (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2018)

Research on the way Black gay young men use various Discourses, depending on the social situations in which they find themselves, to both mold their identity and position themselves, required a framework that acknowledged the effects of race, gender, sexuality, and other factors that shaped their identities and experiences. Each of these social constructs also present a notion of power relations. Having a framework that addresses how power relations influence the moves a person makes is also important. For this reason, I included intersectionality as a means of critical inquiry to understand the experiences of the young men of this study, then wove its foundations throughout the data analysis. Taking on this intersectional approach allowed me to understand how

the participants leverage their identity to position themselves and display human agency within various social contexts.

Queer of Color Agency

Queer of Color Agency is grounded by the larger theory Queer of Color Critique (Brockenbrough, 2015). Queer of Color critique highlights the dialogic relationship between hegemony and resistance that shape the lives of queer people, seeking to reveal the social and historical forces that have produced Queer of Color marginality (Brockenbrough, 2013, 2015). The intersectional foundation of Queer of Color Critique lends itself to aligning with other resistance theories, focusing on interrogating complex power relations and anti-normativity that comes from multiple angles (Lakhani, 2020). Using Queer of Color Critique as a catalyst to identify and understand Queer of Color Agency allowed me to explore

1. the politics of knowledge production,
2. the experiences of intersectionality, and
3. the politics of queer visibility. (Brockenbrough, 2015)

Historically, politics of knowledge production have marginalized queer people of color. Combating this issue, Queer of Color Critique works to resist these exclusionary practices by openly critiquing the heteronormative racial narratives that produce the invisibility of queer people of color in critical scholarship (Cohen, 2005; McBride, 2005; Walcott, 2005). From this practice, scholars center the lives of queer people of color as “worthy of critical scholarly attention” (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 33), uplifting a sense of agency, allowing queer people of color to engage scholarly discourses on their own terms as queer people of color. This agency is strengthened as queer people of color learn to resist oppressive ideologies through acts of knowledge production (Munoz, 1999). Understanding the politics of knowledge production is important to understanding the reasons Black gay young men in this study engage in the Discourses they do. It allows for the understanding

of the agency created through these methodical moves to resist the hegemonic heteronormative ideologies they face.

Understanding intersectionality as an intersect of a person's individual cultural identities (race, gender, sexuality, etc.) in relation to power, producing experiences unique to that intersection (Crenshaw, 1991), has led to the analysis of queer people of color through their experiences.

Scholars such as Decena (2011), Manalansan (2003), Ascensia (2009), Johnson (2008), and Strongman (2002) have collectively contributed to a body of work that illustrates the

decisions regarding self-articulations of race, the performance of nonconforming gender expressions, levels of queer disclosure, and the endless array of other negotiations that queers of color must perform as they position themselves in strategic and agentic ways across social contexts. (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 35).

I used Brockenbrough's (2015) tenet of Queer of Color Agency to explore the experiences of the Black gay young men of this study through an intersectional lens, with a goal of making space for their narratives to be representative of their multiple and intersecting identities as well as representative of how they chose to define and express their complex selves.

Further understanding the ways Black gay young men position themselves in society through their performed Discourses can be accomplished through an analysis of their understanding of queer in/visibility. Queer theory credits the act of a queer person *coming out* a liberatory act, reflecting a White middle class epistemological bias nonreflective of the experiences of queer people of color (Ross, 2005). Bringing race, class, and culture to the forefront when discussing the politics of queer visibility sheds light on the unlikelihood people of color share those same liberatory effects of coming out, resulting in the performance of varying degrees of queer invisibility (Brockenbrough, 2015). Brockenbrough adds that queer invisibility marks the act "where queerness may be completely hidden or, if visible, is not openly acknowledged" (p. 37). Acknowledging the cultural

influences of identity, queer invisibility can be viewed as an agentic practice for queer people of color who prioritize connectedness with family and racial community over coming out. Using this Queer of Color Agency tenet when studying Black gay young men will allow me to understand their perception of *being gay* and how their perceptions of being openly gay influence their performances of identity and the Discourses they use in various social settings.

Critical Literacies

Critical literacies aim to disrupt hegemonic discourses about what counts as literacy and for whom. They require an understanding of the way in which literacy pedagogies function in the process of social struggle, whether tied to race, class gender, belief, or other identities, and how literacy pedagogies may also legitimate or alternatively critically challenge the continued privileging of dominant groups (Apple, 1982). This critical consciousness plays a role in either enabling or constraining individuals' possibilities for action in social contexts (Mills, 2016). Additionally, from a meaning-making perspective, this critical consciousness allows examination of those who hold domination over what's valued, those who are often unaware of their falsehood, and those who do not honestly examine their reasons for perpetuating them (Marx & Engels, 1968; Mills, 2016).

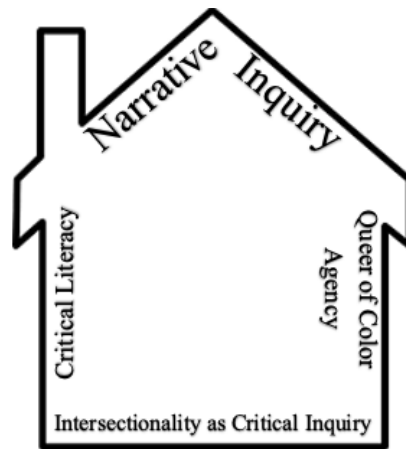
A critical literacies approach to inquiry allows the examination of our ability to "read the world" (Freier & Macedo, 1987). *Reading the world* refers to acting on the world around us rather than being passively unreflective of the positionality of texts and people in it, and the social configurations of power that shape how certain texts and people are used to benefit certain groups (Mills, 2016). In other words, we are able to critically evaluate how the literacies used to make up the identity kits in our Discourses are valued and how they are exchanged for status in different spaces (Luke & Freebody, 1977). Critical literacies is important to this research because it provided conceptual tools necessary to identify and critique cultural omission within Black gay young men's figured and authored worlds.

Critical literacies affords a space in which debating, unpacking, and learning can occur. It enables the learner/participant to become conscious of their historical location in power relations with views of democratizing formal education (Shor, 1999). It also provides a space for analyzing language with the awareness of social constructions of identity and power. Therefore, taking on a critical literacies lens afforded me as the researcher to unveil how Black gay young men use their narratives to critique spaces acknowledging how their identities are present and acknowledged or how others omit or deny the presence of their identities from the description of the space.

These four approaches to social inquiry provide a layered approach to uncovering the Discourses of Black gay young men and how they use these Discourses to maintain their identities while positioning themselves in various social spaces. Conceptualizing how they work together, I use the analogy of home construction (Figure 3.1). Each of these lines of inquiry is rooted in the intersectional experiences of Black gay young men. Therefore, intersectionality as critical inquiry served as the foundation of the house. Both critical literacies and Queer of Color Agency provided insight on ways to uncover how these young men use their intersectional identities to influence the Discourses they use in these various social settings. Therefore, they each function as the walls of the house. Lastly, holding everything together is narrative inquiry, serving as the roof of the house, or connector of all other structural components. Narrative inquiry connected the stories of the experiences of these Black gay young men, allowing them to serve as illustrations of intersectionality, critical literacies, and Queer of Color Agency in practice.

Figure 1

Inquiry Framework



Research Setting and Participants

This study was situated in a mid-sized metropolitan city in the Southeast region of the U.S. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person interactions were limited, with most interactions taking place via videoconferencing (detailed below in the data collection section). In narrative inquiry style studies, Kleiber (2004) suggests using between two and seven participants to ensure there are enough narratives to assist the researcher in constructing themes; for this study I sought to have a total of eight participants. I made this choice based on the time commitment I was asking of my participants during the summer months. I knew the summer was when many young adults travel back home from college, work, summer jobs, or travel to explore the world. Therefore, I recruited eight men with the hope that all eight would participate, but with the understanding that some may not complete the study. At the very beginning, one participant had to drop out due to work obligations requiring travel and a second one stopped responding to my communication efforts to schedule the first interview. Therefore, I ended up with six participants, which I refer to collectively as the *Sensational Six*. I use this term because this is not an ordinarily curated group. They are a phenomenon that shed light on issues white heteronormative society and historical Black cultural

norms have tried to keep hidden. They will use their stories to provoke public attention and outcry. Readers will hear of their stories and yearn for more. This group used their pain, suffering, joys, and celebrations to excite a sensation for more attention from those watching. They were, in some ways, the sacrificial lambs of this line of inquiry, allowing the reader into their bubbles. For my part, I was mesmerized at the tenacity and flexibility each man demonstrated just to exist. Therefore, I refer to them as the sensation they are: The Sensational Six. I explain next the criteria and recruitment I used to bring the Sensational Six together.

Participant Selection Criteria

I used purposeful sampling techniques to select my study participants (Bodgan & Biklen, 2007). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research means to be intentional with participant selection in order to yield information-rich data that help answer the research questions being explored (Patton, 2002). I used purposeful sampling in this narrative inquiry with the expectation that each participant would provide unique and rich information valuable to the research questions. I also used criterion-based sampling (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Because I am interested in a specific population, it was imperative that I deliberately recruited participants from that population. Criterion-based sampling allowed me to operate with the research-supported assumptions that constructs such as race, gender, and sexuality creates an intersectionality that informs the Discourses of Black gay men (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Bailey, 2011a, 2011b; Cohen, 2005; Collins, 2019; Lyiscott, 2020; Telander, 2015).

For selection in this study, participants had to meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as Black or African American,
2. Identify as gay, and
3. Be between the ages of 18 and 25.

It was important the participants self-identified with the above identities because embodying these identities informed the inquiry stance of this study. I confirmed these criteria during the initial interview. By choosing young men who met these criteria, I was able to focus on their intersectional identities of race, gender, and sexuality as they relate to their Discourse practices. From this selection criteria, I was afforded the opportunity to get to know Giovanni, Jumeux, Salem, Elliot, Patrick, and Derrick (listed by age). These pseudonyms were chosen by each participant. I chose to ask the participants to choose their own pseudonyms to maintain their agency is how they are represented. Table 1 identifies basic demographics of each participant.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Education Level	Career
Giovanni	23	Some college courses	Army Reserve/Retail
Jumeux	23	Associate degree	US Navy/Entrepreneur
Salem	24	Bachelor's Degree	Retail Management
Elliot	24	Some college courses	Retail Management (transitioned to Healthcare data management during the study)
Patrick	25	Bachelor's Degree	US Government Employee
Derrick	25	Master's Degree	Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist

Participant Recruitment

Upon IRB approval, I began participant recruitment in Summer 2022 using an IRB-approved flier. The flier, located in the appendices, briefly described the study, listed the participant criteria, and provided my contact information. I began by distributing the flier to individuals I knew who met the criteria. These individuals primarily consisted of those young men who I taught during their junior and senior years in high school and have leaned on me as a friend and mentor after high

school graduation. Distributing to this population increased my chances of receiving participants that already share a sense of rapport with me. This prior rapport aided in the openness of each participant when sharing their experiences on a very vulnerable topic. From this recruitment effort, I yielded three of the final six participants. From there, I began snowball sampling (Handcock & Gile, 2011), relying on the networks of the young men who agreed to participate. Through this method of snowball sampling, I was able to secure the final three participants to make up the Sensational Six.

Researcher Positionality

As a Black gay classroom teacher teaching other Black gay young men, I have always had an inquisitive nature about how Black gay young men navigate life being openly gay. As a researcher, it is important to pay attention to my positionality as both a researcher and mentor/role model. I have served as a mentor and role model to these young men because I did not have a Black gay mentor in my early adulthood. I rarely saw positive Black gay representation, and even when I did, the society around me ridiculed such existence. As a result, I did not come out to my family until I was 24 and in an established, long-term same sex relationship.

It wasn't until I moved to a metropolitan area of the Southeastern US and began teaching at a high school with a significant amount—enough to create a community of support—of openly Black gay young men that I became intrigued by their decisions to live in their truths at such a young age. I began to wonder how their identity played a part in the relationships they built, and they remained true to themselves in these relationships when facing oppression. After being coined the cool Black gay teacher, I noticed that they all sought adult guidance from someone “like them.” Something I had longed for so long. It was then that I realized representation mattered. Therefore, I have spent the past eight years building relationships with my current and former Black gay male students, mentoring them and serving as their role model long after graduating from high school.

These relationships have afforded me the opportunity to not only witness growth professionally, but also growth emotionally and mentally, coping with the oppressions of being a Black gay young man.

Data Collection

Following the tradition of qualitative research (Patton, 2002), I used multiple methods of data collection to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Creswell, 2004; Ellingson, 2008; Richardson, 2000). Table 2 lists the data sources and artifacts I collected. The initial interview was planned to be a photo-elicited interview asking the participants to provide visual representation of Black gay identity and expression. Yet, during this interview, each participant reported not having a visual to share due to their beliefs on Black gay visibility. Therefore, the photo-elicited interview turned into the initial, information gathering and relationship building interview. I further explore the concept of Black gay visibility in Chapters 4 and 5.

Table 2

Data Sources and Artifacts

Data Source	Artifact
Initial Individual Interview	Audio Recording
Focus Group	Video Recording
	Audio Recording
Individual Interview 2	Audio Recording
Member Checking Interview 3	Audio Recording
Field Notes	Researcher Reflection Journal
	Memos

While I list a video recording as an artifact, it was used solely for the purpose of capturing nonverbal expressions and to verify the voice and responses of each participant during the focus group. This video was not shared amongst the group, nor with anyone outside of myself.

Interview Cycle

Interviewing is a method of exploring multiple realities of the participants (Stake, 1995). Therefore, semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data to understand the Sensational Six's experiences. The interview cycle followed the flow of initial individual interview, focus group interview, individual interview, ending with a member checking interview. Each individual interview lasted approximately 90 minutes, except the member checking interview, which lasted between 25-45 minutes. The focus group lasted approximately 200 minutes. The initial times were developed based on the time anticipated to foster rich discussion of the topics while the times listed above were guided by the participant's participation in the line of inquiry. Interview protocols are located in the Appendices.

Individual Interviews

I conducted three individual interviews. Each of them were semi-structured, allowing me to change and adjust questions based on participant responses and the opportunity to seek elaboration and clarification. The first individual interview was planned as a photo-elicited interview. Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photo into a research interview (Harper, 2002). Photo-elicited interviews sharpen participants' memories and elicit longer, more comprehensive interviews (Banks 2001; Collier, 1967; Harper, 1997, 2002). It was also intended to be an information-gathering and rapport building encounter allowing each participant to explore how they self-identify, describe the communities they grew up in, and describe how they have learned to situate themselves in social spaces based on their identity as a Black gay man. This moment in the study was crucial for building community and rapport with the participants, promoting feelings of comfort, trust, and belonging (Saldaña, 2016). To accomplish this goal, the semi-structured format of this interview allowed the participants to discuss some topics in more detail, based on their comfort level. The semi-structure format also afforded participants the opportunity to skip

questions if they did not wish to answer. Witnessing this process provided me with insight on their comfort level with discussion topics such as race, racism, gender, and sexuality.

The second interview took place after the focus group. The intention for this strategic move was to afford the participants the opportunity to discuss some topics that may have come up in the focus group, but they were not willing to share with the whole group. The final individual interview was a member checking interview. Member checking is the process of soliciting feedback from a study's participants about the data collected and the researcher's interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Conducting this interview ensured I fully heard the narratives of each participant and gave them another layer of comfort when thinking about the representation of the findings.

Focus Group

After the first individual interview, I conducted a focus group. Focus group interviews are group discussions organized around a single theme (Vaughn et al., 1996). The idea of the focus group was to create a space for the participants to engage in conversation with other Black gay young men and discuss their experiences and the way they present themselves in a variety of social spaces. Ideally, one participant says something that promotes a memory of another, and the conversation continues in that manner. Therefore, during their discussion, I served as the facilitator of conversation, focusing questions on the topics they discussed during their individual interview. Allowing the young men to lead this discussion allowed them to also share their personal knowledge, creating wisdom through dialogue and making new meaning of their experiences as a community (Collins, 2015).

Building on the relationships established with three of my participants prior to the beginning of the study, it was important that I, as the researcher, chose a setting that does not subconsciously play into the power dynamics I once held with them as their teacher. It was also important that I chose a location that was neutral for those participants with whom I shared no prior rapport.

Therefore, I chose to conduct the focus group at an Airbnb. This move allowed me to still foster an intimate and relaxed setting, but also a neutral one where everyone, including myself, was in new territory. Disclosing this location as an Airbnb also served as an icebreaker-type conversation starter for the Sensational Six, because many of them were meeting each other for the first time. I consciously chose a home-like setting with the intention of the comfort it brought allowing them to move their voices from the margins of educational discourse to the center (Carmona & Luschen, 1968). In thinking through this component of my study, I acknowledge the level of vulnerability I am asking of both myself and my participants (Seiki, 2014).

Field Notes

Throughout the study, I used a journal to collect my notes and thoughts. This journal helped me track my thoughts and assumptions and allowed me to focus on the participants' experiences rather than my own biases and ideas (Smith et al., 2013). These notes included the nonverbal messages shown through body language and facial expressions which the audio file was not able to capture. Each memo captured details necessary to create rich descriptions of the participants' experiences while also recording the emotions they used to express their stories. Memoing created an interactive space for me to hold conversations with myself about their narratives, possible codes, ideas, and hunches that may arise during the interviews and focus group and as I reflect immediately afterwards. Memo writing will also prompt me to analyze the data and begin analysis early in the research process.

Data Analysis

The narrative itself is a widely-held form of both data collection and analysis within narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995). Because of that, there are multiple narrative analysis approaches (Riessman, 2008; Rogan & de Kock, 2005). Using both deductive and inductive approaches to coding, data analysis began from the moment I collected data and continued long after the

interviews concluded. Ensuring depth in my analysis, I reviewed the data using a layered approach to coding that also involved Thematic Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2008) and methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2015) in a recursive process.

Coding the Data

After each interview, I immediately began transcribing and making notes in the margins based on entries from my researcher journal. After each transcription was complete and labeled, I imported the document into the analysis software program Dedoose for coding. While the interview process allowed the participants to tell their stories, these transcriptions could be considered as “raw” data because they were not already in narrative structures (Riessman, 2008). Instead, the transcripts presented as questions and answers, with multiple stories told in one session, often not necessarily relayed in chronological order. Therefore, it was my role as the researcher to craft the participants’ stories into a text where meaning could be derived by an audience or readers (Rogan & de Kock, 2005). To achieve cohesive story development and respond to my research questions, I completed three rounds of coding: 1) Open Coding, 2) Axial coding, and 3) Selective Coding. Table 3 describes the steps I followed in the coding process.

Table 3

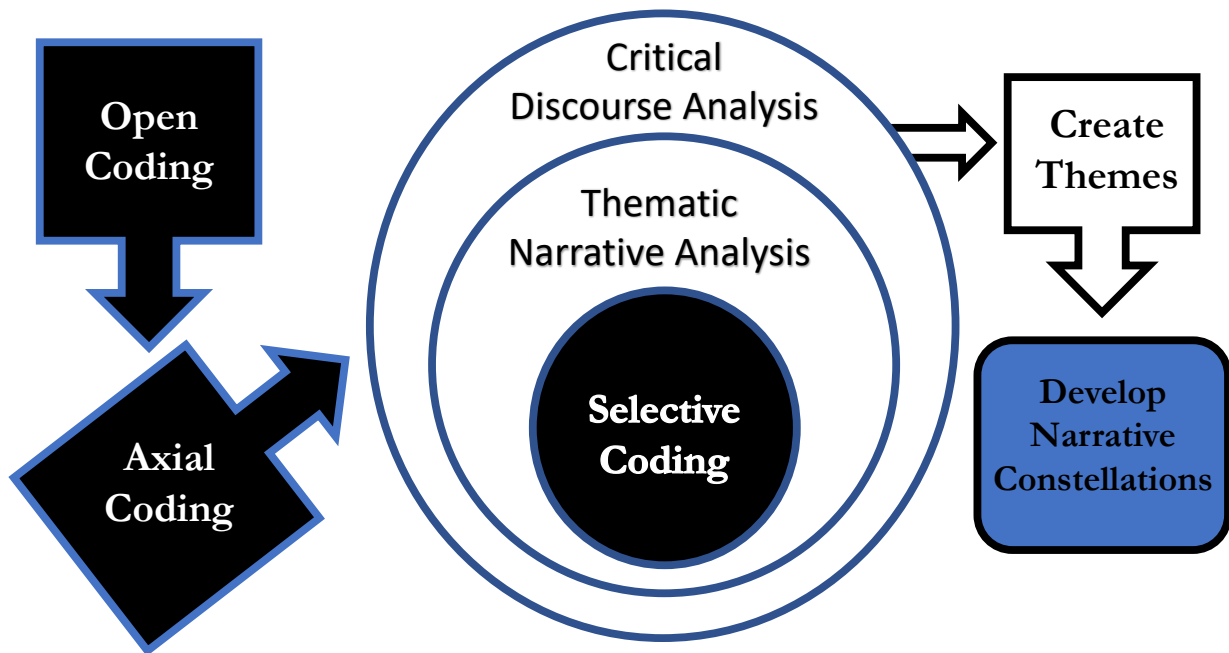
Steps in the Coding Process

Step 1: Open Coding	I examined the data, selected segments of data and identified them as units of thought (Zoss et al., 2007), then created codes that described what was happening in these segments.
Step 2: Axial Coding	I looked for similarities amongst the codes using “constant comparison” (Charmaz, 2014; Ezzy 2002) and grouped codes into categories
Step 3: Selective Coding	I chose specific units of thought that illustrated the participants’ use of identity and Discourse to position themselves in the social space through Thematic Narrative Analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis lenses

The third round was completed in a recursive process analyzing the data first from a Thematic Narrative Analysis lens and then a Critical Discourse Analysis lens. Figure 2 illustrates the flow and recursiveness of my analysis process.

Figure 2

Data Analysis Process



Perceiving the Data

I worked through my three rounds of coding and analysis first through open coding, perceiving the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) as presented by the Sensational Six as a whole, in its raw form. Then I used axial coding to further organize the initial codes created through open coding. Lastly, I used these codes to perceive the Sensational Six's stories through specific lenses. I used open coding, axial coding, and selective coding to not only identify and organize units of thought, but to also look at these units of thought critically, applying the theories of Queer of Color Critique and intersectionality.

Open coding is used in qualitative studies because it affords the researcher the opportunity to create a starting point in data analysis and get a picture of where the data may lead you in future cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016). Open coding also allows you to break down qualitative data into discrete parts, or “chunks,” by labeling it with a word or phrase to describe what is taking place in the data (Creswell, 2014). I created these chunks by identifying segments of data, what Zoss et al. (2007) explained are units of thought. A unit of thought included parts of and sometimes whole stories told by the Sensational Six from the first interview, through the focus group and the second interview. Saldaña (2016) described open coding as “an opportunity for you as a researcher to reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of your data,” (p. 115). I thus looked at the data inductively during this stage to identify stories that the men told me.

In my second round of analysis, I used deductive coding to begin identifying ways that identity, agency, power, and Discourse showed up within their stories. I used the process of axial coding to determine which codes were dominant and which presented as less important through the participants’ stories (Saldaña, 2016). This process required looking for similarities and, through constant comparison, grouping the codes I created from open coding into categories. For example, when exploring the social settings in which the young men found themselves, I categorized them as 1) familial settings, 2) educational settings, 3) community settings, and 4) religious settings. Table 4 provides a list of open codes that I used to create the axial codes.

Table 4

Open and Axial Codes

Axial Codes	Open Codes
Familial settings	Interactions with parent
	Interactions with sibling
	Interactions at home
	Family’s display of acceptance
	Family’s display of rejection
	Family ain’t always those blood-related

Axial Codes	Open Codes
Educational settings	Interactions in class/learning environments
	Interactions with teachers
	Interactions with classmates
	Interactions with classmates' parents
	Family's plea for <i>acceptable</i> school behavior
	Teacher's display of acceptance
Community settings	Teacher's display of rejection
	Interactions with friends
	Interactions at the barber shop
	Interactions at retail locations
	Interactions at friend's homes
	Friend's display of acceptance
Religious settings	Friend's display of rejection
	Interactions at church
	Interactions with church folk
	Acknowledgement of a God
	Acknowledgement of a higher being
	God loves me
	God hates me
	Being gay is a sin
	Only God can judge me

Doing both inductive and deductive analysis required both intention and attention.

Throughout the process, I had to be intentional to ensure that I perceived the data as is and with my full attention. This process required time and awareness as I shifted among the different approaches to analysis. For example, during the first round, I found myself unintentionally approaching the data deductively. Making this realization forced me to figuratively discard the analysis and go back to the data, making the mental note that I was only looking at what was present, with the intention to not perceive the data through a specific lens. In other words, I needed to hear what the men had to say for themselves and them alone. This unintentional deduction was not a one-time occurrence. I found myself having to go back to the data and start over at least six times. Continuously referring to my researcher's journal assisted in ensuring any and all preconceived thoughts and beliefs were bracketed in my inductive analysis. The benefit afforded by forcing myself to go back and *do it right*, inductively, was that it allowed me to view the data multiple times, allowing me to see things that I

may have overlooked with just one or two views. It also allowed me to have a robust set of open codes to use when creating the axial codes.

During my third and final round of analysis, I used selective coding to further identify the ways my participants used Discourse to demonstrate their positionality and agency. I used tools of Critical Discourse Analysis to identify their uses of Discourse and Thematic Narrative Analysis to determine how those Discourses demonstrated their positionality and agency. One benefit of using open and axial codes to create selective codes was that it forced me to become extremely close with the data through multiple readings and exploration. To approach selective coding, I first reread each transcript and re-examined the stories in relation to the four social settings identified in the axial coding. I then reviewed these units of thought looking for instances when the participants described negotiating stereotypes and instances or experiences with oppression. Lastly, I highlighted instances where the participants acknowledged the way race and/or sexuality and/or gender influenced their understanding of their social positioning and how they negotiated their expression of identity as a result of this understanding.

Selective Coding Through Thematic Narrative Analysis. A thematic narrative analysis involves examining the data to determine and understand the broader themes that span the participants' stories. Within a thematic narrative analysis, it is important to keep the participants' stories intact, and in chronological order, differing from other approaches to narrative analysis where a researcher may break down the data into units and reorder them under a theme (Riessman, 2008). Keeping stories in chronological order of which they are told is important to my study because the way they are told informs the positioning of the participant's identity. Their stories are depictions of themselves. Changing the sequence of their stories would be changing their identities from the researcher's perspective. I would essentially be rewriting their realities without their permission, asserting a sense of researcher-dominated power dynamics.

Conducting a thematic narrative analysis allows for the process of establishing themes to be informed by prior theories. Therefore, I pulled from intersectionality (Collins, 2019) and Queer of Color Critique (Brockenbrough, 2015) to guide my analysis of the narratives. These lenses allowed me to examine the young men's stories in terms of identity, race, gender, and sexuality. Both intersectionality and Queer of Color Critique pull from the larger critical theory and sociocultural theories of learning. Therefore, using these lenses was conducive to the principles of narrative inquiry, because each theory values individual life experiences (Clandinin, 2013). I used the tenets listed in Table 5 as a guide to highlight, code, and arrive at larger themes, in preparation for a later discussion of implications.

Table 5

Tenets of Intersectionality and Queer of Color Critique That Led to Inform Data Analysis

Tenet	Explanation
Challenging oppressive power relations	How are the participants as marginalized people explicitly challenging the status quo to transform oppressive power relations present in experienced spaces
Self-Expression	How are the participants choosing to express themselves as an intersectional being; How do they show up as Black, a man, and gay
Relationship between hegemony and resistance	How are the participants engaging in the dialogic relationship between hegemony and resistance; How do they navigate navigating oppressive spaces through resistance

During this stage of thematic narrative analysis, I began by identifying instances where the participants expressed any notion of power relations. I also identified any instances where the participants expressed their resistance to oppression. For example, I identified Elliot saying “why do I have to pretend I’m attracted to women to fit in here [referencing work]” as him challenging oppressive heteronormative workplace culture. I also looked for examples of self-expression during this stage of coding. Many of the participants spoke about clothing and wardrobe. So, during this

stage I identified every instance that included clothing and discussion of what they chose to wear as moments of self-expression.

Since I already had the data labeled with codes from my first round of open coding and axial coding, I reviewed all those codes and began grouping them according to the tenets in Table 5. I focused on reviewing the intersections of how the participants challenged oppressions through their appearance. For example, when Jumeux spoke about dressing up as a female to vex his mom and push back on her negative perceptions of homosexuality, I coded this unit of thought as a way of challenging oppression through his chosen appearance.

Finally, during the selective coding phase, I sought to identify phrases that demonstrated the ways the participants demonstrated having a sense of agency over the way they presented themselves in the face of oppression. In this phase, I looked to identify ways the participants negotiated their authentic identity in oppressive spaces and chose to still, regardless of the outcome, presented themselves as who they desired to be. This part of the analysis allowed me to explore the *what* motivated these participants to be agentive in these spaces of oppression.

Following this same sequence of coding, I went back to my axial codes in a recursive manner and reviewed them using tools from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

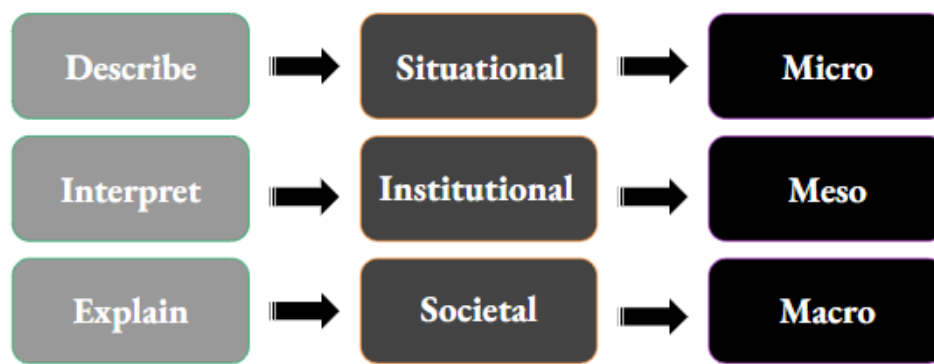
Selective Coding Through Critical Discourse Analysis Tools. I used tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explain the Discourses these Black gay young men perform in various social settings where “language is centrally involved in power, and struggles for power” (Fairclough, 2015, p. 51). I used tools of CDA to examine the power dynamics present in each participant’s social interactions and how this power dynamic influences their performed Discourse. In many cases, members of dominant social groups construct the social order and the orders of discourse within society. I used tools of CDA to examine the potentially contrasting ideologies represented in the

various social settings of the participants' stories, highlighting how the performed Discourses either reflected or rejected the power dynamics historical to the context of the society.

To accomplish this goal, I pulled from Fairclough's (2015) three-tiered model of CDA that describes, interprets, and explains discourse on the situational, institutional, and societal levels. The *situational* condition takes place in the immediate, local context. The *institutional* condition represents the broader context in which the discourse takes place. The *societal* condition represents the broadest context in which the discourse takes place. To examine these conditions, I employed multiple levels of analysis—description, interpretation, and explanation. The description level analyzes the situational context, identifying those discourses that shape the person's knowledge and beliefs. The interpretation level analyzes discourses in the institutional context, highlighting discourses that shape the person's social relationships. The explanation level analyzes discourses in the societal context, focusing on the discourses that shape the person's social identities. At each level, researchers acknowledge influences of power. I also used this method of CDA because of its parallelism to Wade's (2017) macro, meso, and micro levels of Discourse: macro being parallel to societal, meso parallel to institutional, and micro parallel to situational. Figure 3 illustrates how I used Fairclough's three-tiered model of CDA and Wade's levels of Discourse to guide my analysis of the data.

Figure 3

Connecting Fairclough's Three-Tiered Model of CDA to Wade's Levels of Discourse



Focusing on the Micro level of Discourse, I identified instances in which participants' described their self-determined identities. I viewed the ways they chose to self-identify as Discourse at the situational level because it is at this level that Discourse is viewed as the most immediate and personal. In these situations participants created their identities. I next connected the Micro and Meso levels of their Discourses.

Reviewing the data at the Meso level placed participants' interactions in the broader context of the institutional tier. During this phase of analysis, I focused on the way the participants interpreted their identity in the social spaces they found themselves. I highlighted the ways they negotiated their positions in these spaces as either homosexual or heterosexual, or the fluidity of switching between the two. I then took this understanding and applied it to my analysis of their Discourse uses at the Macro level.

While I focused on the Sensational Six's Discourses at the Macro level, I highlighted the ways they negotiated their identities as a means to challenge and resist oppressive norms, ultimately showing signs of agency. Viewing their Discourses at this macro level allowed me to explain how the participants' Discourses were present and operated at the societal level. Here I also highlighted the presence of power and hegemonic oppression based on the intersectional identities of the participants. By looking at the data from a macro level, I could also recursively look back at the micro, situational level. This move allowed me to further understand and explain why the participants felt the desire to enact their identities and Discourses present at the situational, more personal and intimate, level.

By analyzing what took place on the situational, institutional, and societal levels, I was able to make meaningful connections between how the participants created their personal identities, how they negotiated these created identities in oppressive spaces, and how they used these created identities to challenge and resist unbalanced power relations. From this recursive process that I used

to code and analyze the data through multiple lenses, I developed four themes to help me explain what motivated these young men to perform their identities: (1) authentic expression, (2) visibility, (3) being both queer and spiritual, and (4) community. I go into greater detail about these themes in Chapters 4 and 5.

Chapter 4

Keeping the voices and stories of the participants as the focus of the study, this chapter both explores the themes I found when analyzing the data as well as highlights the stories told by the Sensational Six: Elliot, Salem, Patrick, Giovanni, Jumeux, and Derrick. Each section discusses the theme I constructed based on the interviews with the Sensational Six, then offers space to uplift each individual's experience. I present these experiences in the form of narrative constellations (Garvis, 2015), where each narrative includes a dynamic depiction of the stories told by the participants during both the individual and group interviews. In addition, I provide insight on my positionality as a Black gay man by sharing *my story* relating to the theme of each section. To differentiate *my story* from theirs, *my positionality* appears in an italicized font. Lastly, following the narrative inquiry methodology of Clandinin and Connley (2000) and keeping the participants' narratives intact, I have arranged the themes to depict a complete package of each participant, maneuvering from coming out to loved ones to their current agentive state. Living in their truths. Taking in and owning all of the blessings God showers on their gay souls.

Dear Mama, I'm 100% "Dat Bitch"

Coming out is an experience that haunts many members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the members of the Sensational Six were not exempt from this haunting. Each man shared recollections of the fear they experienced when navigating the choice to live their truths. "Being kicked out of the house and having to live with my aunt made me stronger," explained one Jumeux. "I saw your little letter, Salem. Is there something you need to tell me?" were the words he heard blurted from his mother's lips as she stood in the doorway of his bedroom. Giovanni relived the turmoil of being outed by his brother. "My mom was my best friend. Losing that connection changed who I was forever. It made me hard. It made me closed off. Honestly, it made me mad as hell." *Waiting until my mid-twenties to openly express to my mom that I was gay was a decision I must live with for*

the rest of my life. I don't have regrets, but I often wonder what would have been if I wasn't fearful of being "cut off" by my mom if she knew I was gay. I was a 23-year-old dependent and afraid of having to fend for myself, all alone, if I came out to my mom. What the hell?!

While coming out was an experience that each member of the Sensational Six remembered as an emotional roller coaster, each expressed how the one person that they wanted to know, but didn't know how to tell, was their mother. Each young man expressed the closeness they shared with their mother and how the shift in these relationships was the sole memory they associated with coming out as openly gay. This shift in maternal relationships was also the association the Sensational Six had with being the agentive men they present themselves as today. They went from being the latched, effeminate mama's boy to the self-proclaimed, bold, and bodacious bad bitches of the south (explained in the section When We All Get Together). The following vignettes detail the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and epiphanies the Sensational Six experienced when coming out, or being outed, to their mom.

Meet Elliot

Elliot is a 24-year-old who chose a professional life after high school as opposed to college. During the course of this study, he transitioned from a retail store manager to healthcare administration at a local hospital. *I met Elliot by association with Salem. They once tried dating, but quickly learned they were better off as friends.* Elliot is a chocolate-complexioned 6' slender young man. He wears glasses and has a polished appearance. He believes in a casual look with chinos and a polo as his normal every day look. He expressed that he had minimum street wear and sneakers. Elliot is the quietest and most reserved of the Sensational Six, but when he speaks, he is well received and respected due to his calming and eloquent speech.

"We don't talk about it. I live in a truly don't ask, don't tell household," Elliot explained. When Elliot began to explore his interest in same sex relations, his mom caught him, at the age of 9,

engaging in promiscuous acts with an older boy from the neighborhood. “I didn’t know it was wrong. All I knew was after we got off the bus each day, one of my neighbors used to come over and we would play together. My mom never had an issue with it and even though he was older, he was 13, we always had fun,” he continued. “One day we were wrestling, and I felt his dick get on hard. I was surprised at first, but then mine did too,” he began to tell the story of the first time he got aroused by the touch and thought of another boy. They played it off and continued to play with each other daily. Then weeks later, after continuous erections, often multiple in one play session, they began to explore each other’s bodies. “It was like a ‘I’ll show you mine if you show me yours’ type of thing,” explained Elliot. “We were the perfect example of the saying ‘getting caught with your pants down’,” he laughed. “My mom walked in on us and immediately yelled ‘GET THE HELL OUT MY HOUSE!’ I knew something was wrong because my mom didn’t curse. I just didn’t understand what the problem was at the time.” Elliot and his neighbor never played again. He was forbidden to talk to or see him ever again but was never explained why.

Elliot and his mom never talked about what happened that day, but he had been changed forever through his interactions with his neighbor. “The question always comes up when talking to straight people. ‘Do you think something happened that *made* you gay’,” he revealed. “My answer is always no. I knew I was attracted to boys and liked playing with dolls and was more feminine than my brothers and male classmates. I just didn’t know what it meant at 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, or hell even 11 years old. I just knew I liked being around the boys more than girls, and it wasn’t because they smelled good or I was interested in sports.” He recounts how he tried to be straight and date girls. He even lost his virginity to a girl and had many relationships with them.

When he was in 10th grade, his mom moved to Maryland. He begged her to let him stay. He was established in his school and didn’t want to leave his friends. He wanted to graduate with them. Understanding the importance of friendships, she agreed and let him move in with his dad and step-

mom. His dad and stepmom lived a strict religious lifestyle. They went to church three times a week. They prayed twice a day as a family. They ate dinner together and thanked God for the many blessings bestowed upon them, including the food they to eat. “Another prayer! That’s up to three daily now,” he joked. So being gay, or even bi-sexual was not acceptable in this house. “I just lived my little double life in peace and went on my merry little way.”

Living so far apart, Elliot’s mom tried her best to foster a close relationship with him. Because of that, she has began to somewhat accept his attraction to men. “I just got tired. I slipped up and revealed to my brother that I was out of town meeting with a nigga and the levy broke,” he explained. From there, he openly expressed to all of his family about his sexuality. His brother immediately expressed what all little Black gay boys in the south wanted to hear: “I don’t care who you love. I still love you. You are my brother.” His mom asks about who he’s dating and has even met one of his exes. Elliot still lives with his dad and stepmom and is very active in the church. They know about his sexuality, but they don’t ask him about it and he doesn’t volunteer any information. “What’s understood doesn’t have to be explained,” he chuckled.

Meet Salem

Salem is the last of the bunch that I had the privilege of witnessing grow at school. I also taught him during both his junior and senior years of high school. Having experience looking from the outside in, it was interesting learning his perspectives of his life, identity, and displays of agency. A 24-year-old recent college graduate, Salem stands at 5’ 9” on a slender frame. Navigating adulthood and the stressors of finding a job in the field he earned his bachelor’s degree in, he tends to be extremely playful in social interactions to camouflage not being as professionally established as he feels he should be. He made silly jokes to avoid serious conversations. He became touchy during interactions. He also leaned into ignoring questions to avoid talking about something he found that brought him displeasure. He has a caramel

complexion and no defined sense of fashion. He just goes with the flow. Salem often seeks approval from his close peers but doesn't care what people whom he has no invested relationship with think.

"I sat in my room, laying in my bed with the covers over my head," Salem recalled about the moment he came out to his mom. He was a timid 8th grader who had had enough: enough lying, enough hiding, and enough hurt. So what did he do? He wrote a letter to his mom letting her know he was gay. He remembers leaving this letter on the kitchen table for her to see when she walked in the house from work. As soon as he heard her car pull into their garage, he ran to his room and jumped in his bed. "I was sooooo scared," he said. "I didn't know what to expect." She walked into his room and sat on his bed. "I love you and I don't care, Salem" is what she said to me without even pulling the covers from my face."

"We fight, but it has nothing to do with my sexuality," Salem described. "She's my best friend," he added. Salem recalled countless memories with her, his mother's connection, and her acceptance of him as a young Black gay boy. She allowed him to date, bring boys over for dinner, and even the occasional overnight guest. They had to sleep in separate rooms, of course, but they were allowed to stay over. "I feel like she understood ME," Salem added. "She saw the hurt I carried as I pretended not to be gay around her." He described how he attempted to hide his true feelings, but, like most moms, she says she always knew. "She also saw the happiness that I began to exude once I finally let it come out of my mouth to her about my sexuality. That is the reason I love her unconditionally to this day. She knows who she birthed and who she's raised the past 24 years."

Meet Patrick

I met Patrick his senior year of high school. I didn't officially teach him, but he was one of my many mentees and one of several who has stuck around over time. At 25, Patrick is what the girls would call a tall redbone. He has a fair-skin complexion and stands at 6' 2". Patrick tries to come across as having a hard exterior, as a defense mechanism, but is truly a big goof-ball. After earning his college degree, he

decided to move back in with his mom while saving money from his federal government job with the intention to either move to the West Coast or purchase a home in his current location in a Southeast metropolitan area.

“I was kind of, you know, forced to come out to my mom,” Patrick started with a devilish smirk on his face. “What the hell I was thinking, I don’t know. All I know is I wanted some attention,” he added. He continued to tell the story about how his mom caught him sneaking a boy in the house when he was in the 10th grade. A naïve 15-year-old, it didn’t register to him that his mom had a security system, including cameras, throughout the house. Instead, he focused on the older boy, whom he liked from school, who could drive, wanting to come to his house after school and “chill.” This is the moment Patrick’s mom fully learned of his attraction to boys. “Learning that I was not only sneaking people in the house when she was gone, but also that I liked boys, was enough to light a fire under her ass when it came to me,” he joked. “I couldn’t do anything after she found out about my infatuation with boys,” he added.

Patrick’s mom monitored each and every move he made. She drove him to school. She picked him up from school. She dropped him off at home. She went back to work. She even changed the alarm code so he could not leave the house while she was gone. “Everyone would always compliment how nice my eye lashes were” he began. “One time, I let my friends convince me to put on mascara. I swear it was one of the many mistakes I made in high school,” he joked. He went to school one day and let his friends sit in class and put mascara on his eye lashes. He always knew he had long eye lashes, but he really liked what the mascara did to his overall physical appearance. What he didn’t know when he said yes was that it was water-proof mascara. He had to go home that day. His mom could not see him wearing mascara when she picked him up. “I scrubbed and I scrubbed and I scrubbed,” he explained. “It just wouldn’t go anywhere. I literally began to cry thinking of my mom having to come pick me up. I did not want to hear her mouth

about how much of a failure I was and how God was not pleased and how I would be sent to hell.” Tears began to fall down his face. *It was at this moment that I recalled the many days Patrick would sit in my class during his lunch and during my planning period and just cry about how his mom would treat him. He would cry. I would cry. We both would hurt. I loved my students, especially my Black gay boys. I saw myself in them. When they hurt, I hurt. I remember being a Black gay boy in an area when I felt like I was the only one and no one neither loved me nor understood me.* He continued to express the fear of having to get in the car with his mom with this mascara on. Fortunately, he and his friends got some Vaseline and rubbing alcohol and got it off. “‘What’s wrong with you’ she asked me as soon as I got in the car’,” he remembers her asking, acknowledging that his face and eyes were really red. Then he smiled as he recollected the lie he told her about his allergies bothering him because they went outside in Agriculture class that day.

It wasn’t until his senior year when he received a little slack from his mom. After countless conversations and emotional breakdowns from each of them, she finally began to come around. She, too, noticed the strain her non-acceptance was putting on their relationship. It was just the two of them. He had no siblings and she and his father were not together. They were all each other had, and she was not willing to lose her son. Since graduating and practicing ongoing transparency, Patrick was excited to announce that he and his mom are best friends again. She encourages him to date and find his soul mate. She gives him dating advice now because she wants him to be happy.

Meet Giovanni

23-year-old Giovanni stands at 5’ 9” on a very slim frame. With a butterscotch complexion and an eclectic personality, he tends to be the most laid-back member of the Sensational Six. He tends to find joy in abstract art and grassroots music. A little shy at first, but he opens up as you get to know him. *I had the pleasure of teaching Giovanni during both his junior and senior years of high school. He was the same then as he is now, quiet and observant at first, then once he scopes out the room, he turns into a very talkative*

young man. Giovanni has spent the last 5 years since graduating high school in the Army National Guard and pursuing a professional career in hospitality management.

“It was the worst day of my life,” explained Giovanni. “I’ve come home to my mom questioning me about rumors of me being gay from school.” Giovanni continued to explain how his older brother overheard kids from the school discussing his little brother being gay. So, what did his brother do? He went home to tell their mother and ask if this was something she knew, but was keeping from him. Being hit with the reality of what Giovanni suspects his mother already knew, as soon as he got home from school, she immediately confronts him. An overwhelming number of Black gay little boys fear the moment they are prematurely outed to their moms or maternal figures, the ones they value the most. The possibility of losing the connection they share is unfathomable. He stood there in awe with nothing to say. How did she find out? Who had betrayed him? “I wasn’t ready. Hell I didn’t even know what ‘gay’ was. All I knew was I liked boys, I had a little switch in my walk, and I damn sure wasn’t playing no sports,” he explained.

“From that day forward, our relationship has not been the same,” Giovanni remanences. “She was my best friend. I could go to her about anything. Well, I *thought* anything,” placing an emphasis on thought. Giovanni descends from a Caribbean background. His mom is first-generation Caribbean-American. She was born to Jamaican immigrants and spent much of her adolescent and teen years in Queens, NY. After visiting a high school friend attending Spelman College and meeting a man who attended Morehouse, she decided the South was the place for her. Mixing her Caribbean rearing and her deep South living, having a child that was gay was not acceptable. “Therefore, what was I supposed to say when she asked was I gay?” he cautioned. All he recalled was arguing and bickering for the next nine years of his life. He was 12 years old in the seventh grade when he was outed by his brother, and one of four siblings, still to this day Giovanni does not have a genuine relationship with his brother who shared a secret that wasn’t his to share.

Over the course of these nine years, Giovanni understood and acknowledged that he was a guest in his mom's house, and he had to follow her rules. Yet, it didn't necessarily translate to him that he must hide who he was. Since he was now out to his mom, he was determined to live his truth, regardless of how she felt. "I remember one time she grabbed me and, she says I fell, but I remember her shoving me on the ground. My stepdad stepped in and came to my rescue. Ever since then, no matter how heated it got between me and my mom, he made sure I was not harmed by her. The issue is, he was a typical Black man and only saw harm as physical, not recognizing the emotional and mental harm she was doing to me." He continued stating "It wasn't until I graduated high school and joined the military that she realized I had grown up, I had an identity that was separate of that she attempted to create *for* me, and I was no longer dependent on her and. So guess what. Just as I've done for the past however many years, I was going to do and be ME."

Meet Jumeux

Jumeux is the youngest of the group. Yet, at 23, he seems to be the most established. Immediately after high school, he joined the Navy. Since finishing his four years of active duty, he currently owns two companies, both tech start-ups, and manages another. *I met Jumeux through Giovanni because they are currently in a committed relationship.* Jumeux is 5' 9" and also has a slender build. He has a darker complexion and has a outspoken personality. He is animated and exuberant when interacting with others and definitely doesn't mind speaking what's on his mind. It's like he has not learned the caution older people would provide: You don't always have to let what you're thinking come out of your mouth. He's also very respectful, as he tried to sensor his speech during the initial interview out of respect for my role in the study as the researcher. *Witnessing him both physically and mentally navigate being respectful shed light on his level of maturity at such a young age.* After assuring him that this was a safe space and I was, in fact, not an authority figure, he opened up and demonstrated his boisterous personality.

“Man, living in the South and being gay has been hell. Coming out in the 9th grade was even harder,” Jumeux began to express. “My mom kicked me out and sent me to live with my aunt in Alabama. I guess she thought if I wasn’t in such a gay area, then I would not have had any temptation. Girl, was she wrong,” he joked. He explained that being in the rural South, there was nothing more for him to do but be promiscuous. His time spent in Alabama made him more curious and experienced with his sexuality.

“My relationship with my mom is still not the best. She tolerates me because of my financial status, and she needs me,” he explained. He describes their relationship more so as a sponsorship. She comes around when she needs something. Yet, whenever he brings up his dating life, she avoids the conversation. “I remember this one time,” he joked “I came in the house and told her to come downstairs because I had purchased her a gift while I was out shopping at the mall. She rushed down the stairs, so fast that she stumbled a bit and almost fell down the stairs. When she got to the bottom of the stairs, to her surprise, I was in full drag. I mean, hair, make-up, lashes, heels, dress, and all. A bitch was cute, too.” He went on to explain how liberated he felt to show his mom that there were levels to his sexuality, and no matter which means of expression he chose to display, he was going to be respected because he was an adult—a hardworking, successful adult, at that. No matter how she felt about his sexuality, she was going to learn to respect it or get lost.

Meet Derrick

The last of the Sensational Six is 25-year-old Derrick. *I was introduced to Derrick by a mutual friend.* Derrick is what the gays and Queen Beyonce would describe as thique. He stands at 5’10” and prides himself in his physical appearance. He is someone that people talk about that dresses their body well. He has a handsome face that compliments a stocky body. He knows this as well. He is not cocky, but his confidence shows in the way he carries himself. He has a Bachelor’s degree in

Philosophy and a Master's in Strategic Leadership and Organizational Leadership. Yet, his true passion has always been dance and theatre.

“Girl, I feel like Shugg on *The Color Purple*, ‘See Mama! Boys dance, too’,” he began talking about his passion for dance. Derrick’s parents were not cultivating him to become a professional dancer or Broadway star. First they said there was no money in the profession. Then they flat out told him that Black men do *not* dance. Therefore, they let him know that they would not finance an education focused on dance and theatre. “It was at that moment when I decided that I would just live my life as me. They would get what I gave and figure out the rest on their own,” he explained. Derrick’s parents forced him to pursue a more practical career. Therefore, when he graduated high school, he was also a licensed phlebotomist and medical technician. After high school, he received degrees in the humanities because he was interested in understanding people and the way they operate. *He kind of reminds me of me and this research study. I remember a professor telling me my first semester in the doctoral program that “research in MEsearch.” It seems that Derrick has done the same with his career path. His parents didn’t understand him, so he wanted to do the work to help others understand themselves.* Wanting to help others understand and better themselves, Derrick works as a Senior Talent Acquisition Specialist. In this role, he works with people helping them not to only secure employment, but also take a reflective look at themselves, and learn what they want out of life. He then helps them come up with a plan to achieve their goals.

“I haven’t really come out to my parents. I just do me,” he explained. “I don’t talk about my dating life. I don’t express my love for men to them. I don’t bring my boyfriends home to meet them. None of that.” But he’s confident that they know. He follows the mentality of Elliot of “what’s understood doesn’t need an explanation” He describes his sense of style as fluid. He carries handbags. He does not try to emasculate his demeanor when around his parents. Each of these are reasons he is confident that his parents are aware of his sexuality but they do not speak of it. “I tried,

one time, to tell my mom about a boyfriend. She ignored me and changed the subject. I was like ‘okay, girl. I see what we’re doing. Two can play that game.’ From that day forward, I lived my life to the fullest, and a full gay ass life is what I have! Because I’m 100% dat bitch”

Coming out is often a hard thing to do for some gay boys in the Black community. There are a lot of emotions they go through during this time. One of the considerations that continue to haunt many is being labeled by those around them. The next section explores how the Sensational Six feel about the various levels of being labeled as a Black gay man.

Only My Clothes Wear Labels

Some people reference the LGBTQ+ community as an alphabet soup, ridiculing all the various identities that make up the queer community. Yet, what is *queer*? By definition, queer simply means different. Therefore, is being Black not also being queer in a hegemonic white society? Is it not *queer* being a Black man in the white female dominated profession of education? Is it not *queer* to practice a religion other than Christianity in the Bible Belt of the south? Each example illustrates a mark of difference, or queerness. Therefore, why is queer most associated with the LGBTQ+ community? The Sensational Six express their opposition to being labeled as queer, gay, or any other othering from society. *I’m not masculine. I’m not feminine. I’m a little bit of both, wrapped in a tailored pant and finished with a sickening hard bottom. I like to be heard when entering spaces and admired when I finally catch your gaze. A coworker spoke the following words to me and they have been my mantra for the past 6 years. She said, “When you walk into the room, you don’t let the people in the room change you and how you move. You command the space to be what you desire it to be!” That’s how I have moved ever since. I don’t subscribe to societal labeling just because I identify as gay. I’m ME!*

Each member acknowledges in conversation that being gay automatically means that you will be judged. Judged not only by those who have othered you, but by those within your own LGBTQ+ community. Are you fem or masc? Are you a top, bottom, or verse? Are you gender conforming or

non? “Why can’t I just be me?” expressed Elliot out of frustration. “Why do I have to let somebody else know how I’m feeling? What I present to you on any given day is dependent upon how I feel when I wake up that morning,” explains Giovanni. “Baby don’t label me! The only thing that has labels in my house is my designer wardrobe. One of which many of these girls can’t even pronounce the pieces in my closet,” Derrick boldly stated as he sat with his chest out and head high. Instead of the dividing labels within the LGBTQ+ community itself, each of the Sensational Six describes how they shape their appearance through fashion to serve as their visual identity.

Please Don’t Clock Me

“A lot of times I don’t feel gay, or at least gay enough,” explained Elliot. “I reflect on the many representations of gay in the media and think ‘that’s not me. What the hell is wrong with me?’ Then I think, is that who I *want* to be.” Elliot reported that he was aware that he is not the most comfortable in his sexuality. He knows and believes that he is meant to be with a man, but he struggles with openly expressing this feeling to the outside world. This lack of comfort with his sexuality further explained the depth of the conversations he described having with his family surrounding this area of his life. It also equipped me with a better understanding of his frustration when coming out to his brother, and the sigh of relief he said he experienced after hearing his brother’s response. “I make sure I don’t have too-fitted clothing. I make sure I don’t wear clothing with too many colors or patterns. Basically, I try and keep it simple. The less attention I draw towards me with my clothes the better.”

“I’m aware I have feminine tendencies. I personally have no problem with it. But with my religious background and feeling disowned by my mom, I tend to suppress them when I’m around others.” Elliot explained that his expression of being a Black gay man surrounded not being able to be *clocked* as a Black gay man. No one really needed to know his sexuality just by his existence or presence. To him, being a Black gay man represents itself when you, a Black gay man, reveal that

detail explicitly to others. Not when others can identify you as such based on appearance alone. He begins to discuss a metrosexual man. “Think about it. A man who is metrosexual may be called a faggot by the toxic masculinity in the Black community simply because he is in tune with his more feminine side. But, just because he’s metrosexual in appearance doesn’t mean he’s homosexual in the sexuality field. That’s why I don’t like labeling people based on their appearance. And to keep the peace, I try to present myself in the most neutral way possible. It’s just better for me and my mental health that way.”

It All Depends

“It looks like me. What you see on any given day is what I think of as gay.” Salem went back and forth with the idea of what it looks like to be gay. “I’ve never thought about it,” he states. “I just be me. When you ask me what it looks like, I immediately begin to think about what I decide to wear each day. I’ve never been one to wear tight clothes, no offense to those who do,” as he looks at me with an expression of respect. *Everybody who knows me knows I love my tight pants; so, I couldn’t help but smile on the inside thinking of how Patrick tried to respect me and my sense of stylistic expression.* He continues, “But I also don’t wear super baggy clothes. I don’t particularly dress preppy, but I don’t dress super casual, you know basketball shorts and a tee, either. I sometimes dress in both of those attires, but it’s situational. Yeah, I think that’s it. My style is situational.”

The idea of situational style began to do a little damage with Salem’s thought process. He contemplated his practice of situational expression and if he is true to himself. “Am I fake if I choose to dress a certain way because of the setting I’m in?” he questioned. “Am I not a ‘REAL’ gay if I’m not shoving it in your face at all times? Am I a disgrace to my fellow gays? Does it look a certain way to be gay and I’m just missing it?” Salem went down a rabbit hole of questions regarding expression as a means of gay identity. Then he got back to, “That’s just not me. I’ve never subscribed to the ideas of the stereotypical gay.” Salem explained that he’s not masculine, but he’s

also not feminine. He's not trade, but he's also not the "rainbow flag carrying gay." He operates in typical Salem fashion: goofy, playful, and carefree. These same qualities of goofiness, playfulness, and carefreeness are represented in how he presents through dress as well. "I like not falling into the stereotypes of being a gay man," he expressed. "It's like, why do I have to accept those quote-unquote *norms*. It's bad enough that we are always referred to as the LGBTQ+ community. Why can't we just BE?"

I Hold the Power

"I hate questions like this," Patrick expressed disdain regarding my question of the presentation of homosexuality. "I mean, why does being gay have to look a certain way?" he questioned. "I don't look like every other gay man just like every Black person doesn't look or present the same. So does that mean I'm not a representation of gay? Absolutely not!" Patrick, like each of the other members of the Sensational Six, expressed uneasiness with the inquiry about what it looks like to be gay. He homed in on the negative stereotypes of homosexuality in itself as well as the oppressive stereotypes within the Black community. He wanted to focus more on how he as a Black gay man appreciates individuality in identity expression while still identifying as a Black gay man.

"I don't dress a certain way because I'm gay. I dress in a way that makes me feel not only comfortable, but powerful." Patrick explained that this power comes from a sense of knowing he is true to himself. "Many say I have a 'Plain Jane' style of dress, but that's what makes me different. I don't have to have the flashy pieces. I don't have to wear label from head to toe. Don't get me wrong. I love a good garment. But it doesn't have to have the designer's logo plastered on it," he explained. "I get pleasure in knowing I have on designer. Not the fact that everyone knows what designer I'm wearing. It makes me feel good that my gay ass, the one that almost all in my life told me I wouldn't amount to anything, has the means to purchase the clothes that I do." He described

this feeling as empowering. This empowerment for making his own sartorial choices and having the means to buy the clothes he wants is what he associates with his expression of identity. His gay identity is represented through his sense of self-proclaimed power.

I'm Different, and I Love It

“Yea. I like to consider myself fashionable. But my fashions are different,” Giovanni joked. He describes his sense of fashion as eclectic. “People try to figure me out all the time and pinpoint my fashion as a direct correlation to my sexuality. It can’t be done. Sometimes I dress like a traditional boy with loose jeans, a t-shirt, and a fitted cap. Others I have on a cute short and a crop top. Honestly, it depends on how I feel that day.” He also explains his desire to wear bandanas like in the 90s. “They are like my cape. They make me feel different, and I like being different. Being different is my expression of self. Different is unique. It’s my definition of queer. And if I had to subscribe to a label, it’d be queer and not gay.”

Giovanni associated *different* as not a negative term but a good thing. “If we were all the same, we would all live miserable lives,” he cautioned. “This is why I feel I am queer when asked, am I gay.” He believes that there are so many negative stereotypes and ideas of Black gay men that he desires not to be labeled as gay. Instead, he believes queer is the better term, and the uniqueness that queer represents can be achieved through his appearance. “I let my physical appearance speak for me. When I walk in a room, all eyes are sure to be on me. If it’s an all-white party, I’m going to for-sure add a pop of a loud color in the mix.” He described the desire to go against the grain. “The only time I am in compliance with any type of restrictive wardrobe guidelines is when I dress for work. I get in trouble when I don’t wear the proper uniform when I am dressed out,” he joked referencing his career as an Army Reserve member. “I like to be different and go against the grain, but ain’ about that life of rebellion when it comes to the military.” This feeling of being *queer* as opposed to *gay* introduced a shift in the conversation with me since the study title focused on the

Discourses of Black gay young men. Through dialogue Giovanni explained while he doesn't specifically feel gay fully represents him, he also acknowledged the cultural universal use of the term gay in the Black LGBTQ+ community to identify men who sleep with only other men. Therefore, he agreed to continue his participation in the study because he "view[ed] this study as more than just about labels. It's about identity, and that's what I like about it. I now have the opportunity to school the girls on queer versus gay," he said with a smirk on his face. "So when you asked me 'what it looks like to me to be gay,' it doesn't look like anything," he explained. "Being gay is a label that describes who I'm sexually attracted to. It has nothing to do with my physical appearance. That's my queerness!"

Sissy That Walk

"I may be super gay, but I definitely believe in being polished. There's a time and a place for everything, you know," Jumeux explained. He explained that being gay does not mean you have to dress a certain way. You don't have to wear make-up or weaves, or even if your hair is genetically long, it doesn't have to present in a traditionally female style. Jumeux expressed his style in a fluid way. As a business owner, he knows the importance of image and representation. But as a proud Black gay man, he also acknowledges the importance of individuality and expression. "I, you know, mix it up at times," he stated. He may wear a crop top and shorts to the park with friends after wearing chinos and a polo shirt to lunch with his business partners. He described mixing it up as an example of his ability to practice fluidity presenting as both super gay and polished depending on his audience.

"I don't look at it as acting straight or acting gay. Instead, I acknowledge that with each interaction I have with someone else, it is, too, a transaction. I need something from them and vice versa. Therefore, just as I expect a level of respect from them, I deliver a level of respect to them." As a business owner, Jumeux views identity as a means of representing professionalism,

effectiveness, and resilience to others while also being true and authentic to his expression of self. Rejecting oppressive labeling of society, he does not self-identify as either gay or straight. “I’m just me,” he said. “I don’t have to label my existence. Hell, it’s almost impossible to do so if I tried. I’m never in the same space. I’m always evolving, and not the man that I was the day before. That’s why I let my presence do the talking for me. How you perceive me is up to you. What *is* up to me is how I present myself, and that will always be dependent upon how I’m feeling about the situation I put myself in.” Jumeux explained that he creates the spaces in which he finds himself. If he wants a more professional space, he presents himself accordingly. If he’s “feeling a little cunt,” as he described, then he presents as such. To him, a cunt style is a style that was more risqué and feminine, similar to the example of a crop top and shorts he presented earlier in the conversation. Similar to Salem’s situational style, Jumeux’s stylistic decisions are determined by the situations, or spaces, in which he operates. “In the words of Henley, ‘I am the master of my fate. I am the conqueror of my soul,’” he stated with a little smirk *to let me know that he is also well-read*.

You Get What You’ve Paid For

“Chy, I’m gay, straight, fish, masc. I would say trade, but we both know that’s the furthest from the truth. But, hey, if that’s how you wanna view me, then I’ll take it. I’ll take it all. In the words of Smokey, ‘I don’t give a fuuuuck,’” Derrick joked when asked about labels within the gay community. “One thing you’ll learn about me, if you don’t already know, is that I’m going to do me, regardless. I’ve spent so much time hiding myself and who I am from not only the world, but also those whom I love and claim to love me, I don’t have time to worry about other’s perceptions of me. I have to focus on what makes me happy.” Derrick further explained that happiness is a feeling that he’s done so much work to obtain and maintain—through self-evaluation, meditation, therapy, and prayer—that he refuses to jeopardize falling prey to the subjection of society.

“That’s why,” he cautioned “when asked how I position myself within the community, I think about me as a baby gay, fresh on the scene. This during the whole ‘no fats, no fems’ movement. Hell, if you think about it, that’s me! I’m both fat and fem. So, fuck them. Fuck the community because the community fucked my ego!” he screams and bursts into laughter. *I see what he’s doing and I’m here for it. He’s using popular Black films to pay homage to the role Black culture plays in his understanding of self. First Friday, now Soul Food.* “But all seriousness,” he recentered the conversation—*you can tell he’s serious and passionate about the topic, but also likes to have fun in the moment—* “we’ve done so much damage to our own people within the community that we can no longer allow labels to dictate our worth. That’s why the only labels I do are those I’ve paid good money for.”

As Salem and Jumeux explained, expression of identity can sometimes be situational. You don’t have to present the same in every situation. This concept of fluidity can also be applied to the way these young men view the way they position themselves in society. The next section further explores this fluidity through a discussion of the Sensational Six’s conceptualization of visibility.

Code Switching to Be Both Invisible and Hyper-visible

When thinking of their positioning in society, the consensus of the Sensational Six began as being either seen or not seen. During their time together in the focus group interview, part of the conversation began to surround how they negotiated their presence in specific settings. This group interaction allowed them to fully experience other Black gay young men in a conversation focused on something other than pop culture. Some of the topics that came up were questions: In the barber shop, do they attempt to present more masculine? In clothing stores, do they only shop in the men’s section? *Almost everyone in the room, including myself, reported having purchased clothing from the women’s section at least once.* Still, what does it mean to be visible in society? Does it mean that they present as gay? Does it mean they present as heterosexual? Does it mean that for those that can’t make themselves *passable* as heterosexual, *like myself*, have to position themselves in the background when they are in

non-affirming spaces while those who can are allowed to fully experience the interaction by being at the center of activity? Do Black gay men have to decide on being either present or not?

“Why choose one when I can be both,” Jumeux questioned as the rest of the group burst into laughter. *Verse* is a very popular term in gay culture. It’s short for versatile and has a sexual connotation. Being verse in a gay relationship means that you are both the top and the bottom, the giver and the receiver, during sexual encounters. It marks the act of playing both sides of a game, straddling both sides of a fence. Playing off the vocabulary of gay culture, verse in this section, unless otherwise directly stated, references the act of being “the life of the party” or “a fly on the wall.” Just as *verse* describes performing both roles in sexual encounters, being both the life of the party and a fly on the wall describes a person’s agency to position themselves as either the center of attention or a mere spectator, the two extremes of group socialization.

I don’t always have to be the center of attention,” explained Salem. Patrick added “I like going to places and people not knowing who I am or expecting me to be a certain way just because I’m gay.” *It depends on who I’m around and what vibe the setting is giving. I may be loud and giving you all the keekee or I may be on the wall sipping my cocktail and observing. It’s my prerogative.* “Some consider it code switching, but I think of it as being me,” explained Derrick. The group continues to develop a sense of consensus around the idea of code switching and how it looks in the way each presents themselves. There is a societal image of what being gay looks like. Yet each of the participants expressed no interest in conforming to the stereotype of gayness. Instead, they reflect on a life of opportunistic self-expression through versatility in visibility.

That Nigga Fine

“Working retail, I always felt the need to conform to more heteronormative ideals when at work and dealing with the public,” Elliot explained, reflecting on times when he felt the need to code-switch, or mask his sexuality. “You never know how people are going to react to you knowing

that you're *different*." Even his co-workers expected him to be straight based on his demeanor and he hated it. His manager asked him why he didn't try and get women's numbers when they tried to come on to him. "Why can't I just say, 'Naw bruh, ion want her number, but the nigga that was in here a few hours ago was fine as fuck', you know? Why do I have to give up my chances for a boyfriend just to hide who I am from my coworkers. Shit just ain't right."

Having a strong religious lifestyle, Elliot also felt the need to not be himself around his family and community. "I'm always putting on this front for people," he whispered as tears filled his eyes. "I can't just *be*." He explained that the only time he truly felt like himself was when he was with his female best friends and with whatever man he was dating at the time. "When I'm outside of my comfort zones, I feel like I don't exist. I'm fully visible as *me* when I'm in a position where I can speak, talk about, and live my true gay life."

No New Friends

"I don't think I code switch to exist in various settings. I'm naturally laid back and am that way at all times," Patrick explained. "I'm not really with all of the ra ra," he continued. He explained that because it's always just been him and his mom, and his mom is a modest and mild woman, that he's just inherited her demeanor. "I guess you can say I blend in with my surroundings," he states. Patrick feels the most comfort in social situations where he is not the center of attention. He likes to mix and mingle with his close friends and to be left alone by those he doesn't know. "I'm the poster child for 'no new friends'," he joked. "I'm a bit socially awkward. I'm not sure if it's because I'm still learning who I am as a Black gay man, or if it's truly because I just don't like people. What I do know, though, is that I fully enjoy camouflaging into the background."

A Group of Bad Bitches and a Sissy

Giovanni's idea of versatility lies in the notion that there are situations that you will have to jeopardize yourself to be not only comfortable but also safe in that space. "Some may view it as a

negative thing, but I think of it as a means of survival,” he explained. He remembered a scenario when he was physically threatened simply because of who he was: a Black gay boy in the 9th grade. He was dropped off at the mall to go to the movies with his friends, who were all female. While there, there was another group of friends, similar in age, but from another school and comprised of all boys, that he noticed were following them around. Eventually the group of boys approached them and began to call him names. “I remember plain as day,” he began. “They walked up to us and asked one of my friends ‘What do you call a group of bad bitches and a sissy?’ I immediately thought ‘Here we go...’ I tried walking away but one of my friends was really big on standing your ground and not letting anyone run you away from happiness. Then another one of the boys chimed in and said ‘A group of bad bitches and a faggot ass nigga who wishes he was a bad bitch, too.’ I was humiliated. I just wanted to call my mom to come get me and sit in the corner and cry until she came. It was at this moment that I learned that, sometimes, I’d have to fall into the background to avoid being hurt.”

Who You Want Today?

“I’m not even going to lie to you, I code switch like a motha,” admitted Salem. He recalled his experience working at Target while completing his undergraduate degree in south Georgia. This was his first time outside of a large metropolitan area. He had been so familiar with the culture and societal mentalities of metropolitan people, being in a more rural setting was a culture shock. “I remember my first day at work and I called myself being cute with my khakis and red polo,” he joked. “My pants were a little tighter than normal, but this was a college town and who knows who would be shopping that day. So I had to be ready. My husband could have been a customer during my shift.” Yet, his expectations were furthest from the truth. The looks that he got from the customers were what he describes as disgust. “After that first day, I was a totally different person at work than I was on campus,” he explained. “I tried to hide behind the scenes while I was at work.

You know, go and do my job, then go home. But baaaaaby, when I was on campus and out and about with my friends, it was a different story. I wasn't, you know, cross dressing or anything like that, but I was definitely more in tune with my sexuality and flamboyant, in your face."

Fitting In to Fit In

"This is a funny topic to me," Derrick chuckled. Working in corporate recruiting, he observes individuals behaving in certain ways during the hiring process to get a job and then behaving differently once they have been hired. "I've always vowed to be true to myself at all times," he explained. "That means that no matter what, I will always lead with my identity. People always ask why I feel the need to introduce myself as the gay Black man. Because, yes, while people can see the Blackness first, instead of being a Black gay man, I say I'm a gay Black man because I connect with the gay culture more than I do with Black culture." He acknowledges that, yes, he's Black, but the Black culture oppresses him for being Gay. "I refuse to hide who I am to fit in with someone who doesn't appreciate who I am."

"I'm the type of person where I can fit in with any crowd," he explains. "I can be the one who has the party going non-stop, or I can be the one who you wouldn't even know was there until the next day and I told you all that happened." Derrick holds a mentality of versatility. It's okay to be both individuals. Some situations warrant one way of being while others warrant the opposite. "You have to do what you have to do to enjoy yourself. If being the life of the party, the one who positions gayness in the face of the nonbelievers, and the one who forces others to acknowledge your presence is what makes you happy. Then, do just that. If being in the background, observing your surroundings is what makes you comfortable and happy, then that's okay, too."

Don't Hide Dat... Divide Dat!

"There'll always be a time and a place for everything," he shares. With that mentality, Jumeux shared his belief that code-switching is necessary for success in life. "You have to conform

to your surroundings, especially if you're entering into someone else's space. I would want people to respect my space and operate within my expectations if they entered my space. Therefore, I try and give others that same grace. Do I hide my sexuality, and who I am, no. Absolutely not. But, what I do do is respect how other individuals view homosexuality and, often times, not be so 'in your face' with it.

He goes on to say, "I like to think that there's a good balance with me and my expression of identity. Sometimes I'm the gayest Black boy you'll meet. Others, you may not even be able to tell I'm gay if I don't tell you or you know me personally. Is it me trying to hide myself in certain situations and not in others? No. Just like I've said before, it depends on the vibe I'm giving at the time." He did, however, mention that the mood he decides to give is determined by the type of setting he's in. He's more reserved and less flamboyant when he's in a professional setting. He reports to still be gay, but a more reserved gay. "My professional colleagues definitely know and respect that I'm gay. But what they can count on me being is presenting myself as a man. *I've always struggled with this notion of presenting masculine in spaces when that's not who you are just because it's expected by society. I view being a man in any setting, including those deemed as professional, as being an individual of integrity and often times, society associate gayness with femininity and "acting like a woman."*

The fluidity of visibility the Sensational Six described demonstrates the way they exercised their agency in the way they are presented to others. They chose to either be highly visible or barely visible. This voluntary presentation was not always the case for these young men, though. The next section details the moments these young men were placed in positions where their positioning was determined for them and how they overcame the feelings they experienced as a result of this power being taken away.

Just Because I'm Present Doesn't Mean I'm HERE

"I can't believe he got on stage and did that."

"He is not a girl. Why does he want to be on the dance line."

Those are the words that crept from the mouths of adults about one of the boys from my high school. He was very effeminate and lived in his truth. He was bold. He didn't care what anybody said about him. He was out and proud and if you didn't like it, oh well. Meanwhile, me on the other hand, I tried my best to suppress my inner feelings and desires. I remember singing in the high school gospel choir. It was the day of our concert. This was a big concert, too. We had it professionally recorded and sold the DVDs. I sang in the alto section. I loved singing alto, too, but I was the only male in the section. I remember as we walked in, one of my classmates' grandmother grabbed my arm and asked me "What you doing walking in with them? You're supposed to be in the back with the tenors (i.e. the boys)". It was so hurtful, but I had to laugh it off and go forth and do the work of the Lord, SING. I did a lot of "laughing it off" in school. I was not as bold as the only out gay boy. Reflecting on my high school classmates, there're a lot of us who have since come out. But why not then? Why not build from one another and create a community amongst ourselves? Why were we all content with being present but not fully there?

The Sensational Six shared similar stories of their time in formal education settings. While each of them were openly gay in each of these settings, they still didn't feel seen. They shared feelings of displacement. "I didn't have anyone I could talk to, for real," explained Elliot. "My friends were only my friends when at school. Their parents wouldn't let them be associated with 'the sissy'," reflected Jumeux. *I feel like many of my teachers suspected me as gay because of my all-girl friend group and mannerisms, but they didn't speak on it out of their own plight in the community and remaining professional.* Yet each of the Sensational Six credits a teacher for their successful completion of high school. "I had you," explained Patrick, Giovanni, and Salem *because each of them were my former students.* It was Derrick's theatre teacher. Elliot had his school counselor and Jumeux had a history teacher who wasn't even "his" teacher. Each of these adults created space of acceptance for these young men.

Yet, each explained this space to be temporary and a go-to safe haven when things got too overwhelming. The spaces these educators created for the Sensational Six and the feelings they fostered were not the standard for the young men. These educators allowed the Sensational Six the opportunity to be fully themselves in the space, while others only allowed them to be present.

Just Trying to Make it Through the Day

“My safe space... That’s a tricky one,” he said as he smirked at me. *Patrick was introduced to me by his literature teacher and one of his friends. They both came to me asking would I talk to their friend because he was struggling with his sexuality. Of course, I couldn’t say no. My purpose on this earth is to better develop Black gay young men.* “I really had two individuals that helped me get through my high school days: You and Ms. Stevens,” he explained. Ms. Stevens was his first line of defense when it came to being openly gay. *I was not working at CA during the year he had Ms. Stevens as a teacher. I came to CA the following year. Prior to my joining the CA staff, Patrick’s only support was a straight woman. Representation of an open Black gay man was not present on campus.* “I remember sitting in Ms. Stevens’ class not paying attention at all. All I could think about was how my mom was going to beat my ass if I didn’t get this mascara off before she picked me up. I have no clue what she was teaching, but because we’re cool, I knew she would tell me what I missed.”

“Not knowing what was going on in class was a regular occurrence for me. I often find myself drifting off into random thoughts. Sometimes they about the bad parts of being gay. Others, they were about what it would be if I came out to my mom. I even began to think about how life would be different if I had left CA.” explained Patrick. “One thing I do know, though, is that I was not thinking about $y=mx+b$, theme, nor Newton’s Law of physics.” Academics was the last thing on his mind. He was just trying to survive.

I'm All I Got

“I tried my hardest to not let it bother me, but I really yearned for friends.” Elliot traveled from class to class throughout the day wishing he had a core group of friends that would help him get through the struggles of teenage life. “I went to school because it was what was expected of me, and I did understand the importance of getting an education. I just didn’t feel like I belonged there. There was no one that I connected with. We were all just there to get an education, in my mind,” he explained. This mentality resulted in his practice of getting to school on time, going to each class, then going home at the end of the day. “There was just nowhere where I felt welcomed”

“Each class I went to, I answered roll-call and sat there quiet for the remainder of the period. I barely participated, and never engaged when we were put in small groups. For a confused gay boy, school was not the best situation for my social growth.” He shared that teachers would always try and figure out who he was and why he never participated in class. “I remember telling my US History teacher just because I came to class daily and sat there quietly, doesn’t truly mean I was present.” Elliot explained that he would go to class and do what everyone else expected of him to avoid the attention being on him. But he was unhappy, and borderline depressed. He so deeply desired a space where he could just *be*. Many of his classmates had teachers that they could talk to and depend on for moral and emotional support. “I didn’t,” he explained. “I was just left to fend for myself. That is the reason I didn’t have connections with neither my colleagues nor my teachers.”

I'm Not Going to That Class

“Skipping is what I mostly focused on. I hated being in one place for a long time,” explained Salem. He’s the type of person who needed to always be busy or on the go. “I used going to the restroom, going to the front office to call my mom, or really just anything I could think of, as an excuse to leave class.” Yet, over time, his teachers began to catch on to what he was doing and stopped letting he leave the class. “I remember one of them [teachers] telling me ‘You can hold it.

You're only in here for 56 minutes.' and I was livid. How dare she not let me leave the class. Guess I was to start skipping her entire class.”

“I’ve never really sat and thought about it,” replied Salem when asked why he skipped class so much. Now having to think about it as an adult, Salem faces reality. He felt that if he was not in one place for an extended period of time, he lessened his chances of being the topic of discussion. Even when he was in class, he tended to be the class clown, or the one continuously disrupting class. “If I wasn’t the center of attention, I tried my hardest to blend into the background. Therefore, I started going to my classes, but I was just there to say I was there.”

Not All Superheroes Wear Capes

“School was the one place that I felt most comfortable being myself,” shared Giovanni. Home was a very bad place for him. When he was at school, he was able to be around people that genuinely loved and cared about him. When he went home, his mom acted like she hated his existence. His brother despised him for “humiliating him in front of his friends.” School had safe spaces for Giovanni, but school in general was not overtly welcoming to him. “You know, when I think about it, you were one of the few adults that made me comfortable,” he says as he looks at me. *I was one of his teachers during his junior year. He had to transfer schools during his senior year, but we kept in touch.* “I remember feeling horrible, like no one cared, no one understood what it was to be a Black gay boy. Then I get to your 3rd period American Literature class and I texted my friends, “who is this girl as my teacher?”

“I struggled in school. I’m sure you remember,” he joked. “It was very hard to go to class, other than yours, and focus being in a learning space and actually learn.” Giovanni shared how his focus was typically on being the life of the party or the class clown. He figured that if he kept his classmates laughing and having a good time, he would not be the target of ridicule and the ugly “b” word, bullying. “It’s because of my lack of focus that I had to leave College Academy (CA) my

senior year,” Giovanni reminded. *College Academy is the school where I taught Giovanni. The students had to maintain a 3.0 GPA to continue enrollment at the school. This requirement caused nearly half of each incoming freshman class to be forcibly exited by the end of their junior year.* “Having to leave CA was devastating news for me. All of my friends were there,” he explained. “That also meant that I had to abort the bond we shared that got me through so many hard times.”

“Transferring my senior year, I thought, would be the worst thing that could happen to me. I knew only two other people at my new school. None of the teachers knew me, so I was afraid that they would look at me as the new gay kid and treat me differently. This was a really hood ass school, so I went in with the mentality that I would have to fight for my safety every day.” Giovanni continued to explain the dynamics of his new school the first week he was there. “I guess it was okay starting in August with everyone else. That way, I wasn’t the only new student in the building. Still, I was hella nervous. Then, to add insult to injury, they had placed Army JROTC on my schedule. Who said I wanted to do anything physical? Sweating was not for me.” Little did he know at the time, but JROTC would save his life during senior year. “My Sergeant would take your (*referencing me*) place for me. I would go to her whenever I needed to vent, when something was going wrong, and even to celebrate my victories with. She seemed to be the one that understood me the most. I could let my hair down and be myself when I was around her. She was like my superhero cape. When she was around, nothing could stop me.” If he wasn’t in the JROTC room, he was thinking about being in the JROTC room.

More Than Just Existing

“School as an institution caused me the most stress and depression than any other organized gathering,” Jumeux explained. “I was never one to hide my sexuality, but to hear the teachers support everybody else’s differences, but condemn mine, was disheartening. How am I supposed to learn from you when you don’t even acknowledge my existence? OR when you do acknowledge my

existence, you are talking negatively about it?” He recalled a moment when his US history teacher was covering human rights and, with the knowledge of him in the class, openly expressed disdain that the United States would do such a thing as making it okay for same-sex couples to be legally married. “After that day, I assumed all my classmates had that same mentality. Reflecting on it as a 23-year-old, I know that was wrong; but my 17-year-old maturity wouldn’t let me believe otherwise. They were all stupid hoes,” he chuckled, trying to mask the hurt that was evident through observing the glassing of his eyes as he looked away and dazed for a few seconds of silence.

Enrolling in two different schools made attending school even worse. Jumeux would spend an academic year with his dad in Alabama and the next with his mom in Georgia. “Because I was always changing schools due to my parents’ divorce, it was hard for me to foster genuine friendships. Fortunately, I was able to spend my senior year with my original crew and support, including my math teacher.” His math teacher was older, compared to many of the other teachers in the building, but still hip with all of the teenage drama. “There was this one day I was leaving her class, she looked at me and asked ‘Boy when you gon get you a man?’ I was shook, you hear me, but I knew then she was with the shits,” he explained. He viewed this question as an invitation to be himself. This question opened a door that he so desperately needed.

From that point on, he did more than just existed. He thrived. “I went from hating school, to excited to go because I was going to be able to not only see my friends, but finally have an adult that was in my corner. Mrs. Strong helped me get back on track both socially and academically. When I was struggling in my classes, she would go to my teachers and advocate for me and take ownership of my success. After meeting with them, she would come back to me and we’d sit and come up with a plan. I even talked to her about my friend drama, my family drama, my dating life. Everything.” Jumeux explained that nothing was off limits when talking to Mrs. Strong. “She was my saving grace that year.” He credited Mrs. Strong to the success he has today.

Leave it All on the Stage

“I loved school,” Derrick shared with the biggest smile on his face. “School was the place I could fully exist. I was an artist and school allowed for that artistic expression that was not allowed at home. It allowed me to achieve happiness.” As mentioned earlier, Derrick had a passion for dance and theatre. Unfortunately, his family would not support this passion past more than just a hobby. Yet, Derrick had dreams and aspirations to become a Broadway star. “I had what it took, too. I was really good, and what we in the theatre world call a triple threat. I could act, dance, and sing; although dance was my favorite form of expression.” He continued to joke how he was Mr. Sing’s favorite performer.

Mr. Sing was Derrick’s drama teacher. Mr. Sing, like teachers from each of the Sensational Six’s educational pasts, was Derrick’s savior at school. “Mr. Sing got me through some very rough times. ‘Just throw it all on the stage and walk away’ he would yell. That was the best advice he could have ever given. I was always a good student academically, but my mouth and attitude would often derail my success.” Derrick explained that he would get smart with his teachers when he didn’t seem to be getting his way from his perspective. He would deal with being bullied because he was not only a theatre buff, but a gay theatre buff, by fighting; and although he was, at the time, skinny, he learned at an early age the need to know how to fight. Therefore, he would always beat up those who attempted to bully him. Each of these ultimately resulted in Derrick’s grades beginning to fall and Mr. Sing was not having that for his star performer. “Mr. Sing pulled me into his office and had ‘the talk’ with me. The talk that everyone needs. The talk that forces you to pull your shit back together. This is when we sat and collaborated on a plan and he told me to ‘just throw it all on the stage and walkaway’. From that day forward, if I was having a bad day, during class transition, I would go to the tech room, that’s where Mr. Sing’s office was, and say ‘I need a moment.’ That ‘I need a moment’ was our cue that I was spiraling and need to deposit some stuff to the stage.”

Derrick admits that had it not been for Mr. Sing investing in his success as a person, he would not have made it as far as he would. “Although Mr. Sing recognized my theatrical talents, he knew that not many people from rural Georgia made it to Broadway. Not because of the talent, but the exposure and support. He knew, of course through our conversations, or as I like to call them, therapy sessions, that my parents would not let me pursue that as a career. But he never abandoned me. We worked together to develop a plan to still enjoy my passion, but to also use it as a way to propel me to life’s success.”

The members of the Sensational Six each shared how their relationships with at least one person helped them get through the oppressions they faced at school. I further explore this idea of having the support of another person or a group in the next section, where the men explained the importance of having a community of people around them.

When We All Get Together

Community plays an important role in Black gay identity. Many LGBTQ+ persons are disowned by their families when they begin to live their truths. This is especially true for Black LGBTQ+ persons because of the antiquated and religious-based traditions the Black community uplift as cultural norms. While the Black culture has made significant advances in the acceptance of their LGBTQ+ community members, there’s still a bit of work to do. I created a space where the Sensational Six could come together and be amongst other affirming and agentive individuals. Throughout this study, I have referenced agency and the Sensational Six’s acts of demonstrating agency. I describe these moments as those times when the young men were being *agentive*. The following story combines each of their reflections on this experience. During this section, in addition to my positionality being presented in italics, I reference myself as Doc when directly engaged in conversation with members of the group. I chose this pseudonym first because it is how Salem addressed me as a joke when we first gathered and began building rapport among the group.

This pseudonym seemed fitting also because the group picked it up and addressed me as Doc as well throughout the time spent together, thus affirming their support of this study and me becoming Dr. North at its completion.

“I can’t believe the conversations went the way they did,” expressed Patrick.

Many of the members agreed. “It’s rare that you get a group of young gays together and they can have intellectual and deep conversations,” added Derrick. “Often times when we do get together, we talk about sex, Beyoncé, and other surface-level topics. But this. This was different.”

“What do you think was different about this experience other than the topics of discussion,” Doc questioned.

“I like that I could just be me,” Giovanni began. “Sometimes I get in spaces and feel like I’m either too gay or not gay enough. Here, I didn’t feel judged or anything. Although we all have different personalities, I felt welcomed from the time I walked in the door.” “And this place is niiiice,” joked Salem. *I rented a high rise Airbnb to conduct the group gathering. I wanted an intimate space where the members of the group felt comfortable to be themselves but also a neutral space where everyone was coming for the very first time.*

“I have to admit. This was different and I was nervous coming into this space today,” Elliot began. “I get nervous getting together with a lot of gay men. This is actually my first time. When I think of getting together as gay men, especially Black gay men, I think of the pettiness and cattiness. Throwing shade at one another. But thank God this wasn’t one of those situations. The conversations were so uplifting and affirming. I can see how each of you lean into your gayness and use it as a step as opposed to a veil.” Elliot continued to express how this experience gave him a better sense of expression and authenticity when it came to his gay identity. He had positive representations in the room of and interactions with Black gay excellence—and not just Black gay excellence, but Black gay excellence from his generation.

“Thank you for sharing that,” Patrick added. “I, too, get anxious when going into spaces with a lot of gays present. It get’s overwhelming at times.”

Doc noticed everyone not participating in the closing reflection of the group. “Salem, you’re quiet. What’s on your mind? What do you think of this experience?”

“I truly don’t know,” Salem replied. “I’m taking it all in, to be honest. I’ve had good experiences with gay groups. I’ve had bad experiences with gay groups. This experience, like they said, has been very different. Everyone was so welcoming and uplifting. We all not only spoke well, but spoke substance. Like Derrick said, often times when we get together, the conversations are very shallow. Yall brought some heat to the table today and I’ve got some reflecting and growing to do when I get home.”

“This was like group therapy,” Elliot said.

We all burst out laughing, but then it got quiet. *It’s like they thought it was funny, but then, as they thought about what was really said, it made perfect sense.*

“You know what,” Jumeux added. “I agree with that. This experience helped me get a lot off my chest and with people who could relate and engage on the same level of maturity that I’m on.”

“When’s the next one,” Giovanni asked. Doc replied, “Well you guys, I only planned to have one of these with you. But... Each of you have access to each other’s phone numbers through the text group I created with each of you with the details for today. You can always keep in touch with each other and plan something. If you do, don’t forget to invite me. I’d love to come.”

Since this experience, many of the Sensational Six have developed and maintained relationships outside of the group setting (further discussed in Chapter 5). I have also removed my researcher’s hat and continued to interact and engage with each man individually. This experience mimicked the family structures the Black gay community creates through the development of *houses* by joining together as a shared collective. These collectives operate as chosen families and members

reference themselves as a *house*. Each house has shared values and members support each other in all areas of life. Each house also has a figurative Mother and Father, with each not following gender norms. For example, the mother of the house may be enacted by a male-identified person, just as the father could be enacted by a female-identified person. The beauty of houses is that there are no traditional norms upheld by the members. The members of the house create the space to be as they desire and need it to be. This idea is shown through the Sensational Six's time together reflecting on their decision to refer to me as Doc. They chose to identify, position, and affirm me in this co-constructed space. This encounter was our temporary house. A house of limitless possibilities.

Having a community that surrounds, supports, and sustains you and your identity as a unique individual was proven through the Sensational Six's perceptions to be the catalyst to authentic self-acceptance and identity performance. The next section details the group's reflections on the result of surrendering to who they truly were and living in that truth unapologetically.

And the Promises of God are “Yes” and “Amen”!

“Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

“For I know the plans I have for you” declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’ (Jeremiah 29:11).

Each of these scriptures speak to me when it comes to authenticity. There're endless possibilities once you realize truth shall set you free and once you start living and walking in that truth, the plans God has for you are unimaginable. While each member of the Sensational Six did not have as strong of a religious affiliation as Elliot, each of them shared a bit on how a relationship with Christ influenced their lives. Either their parents had a strong faith and instilled it on them, or they either now or previously had a relationship themselves. While their current relationships with Christ all vary in severity, each of them give Him credit to where they are currently in their lives.

At the end of their last individual interview, I asked each young man to give three words, or phrases, they believed described Black gay excellence. Their final stories, and demonstration of agency, begin with these short, but profound, words.

God's Preparing Me

“Passionate, Present, Perseverance”. Those were the words Giovanni confidently spoke when asked for words that describe a Black gay man’s agentive state. “Once you start living your truth, you will present as each of those things. A Black gay man has to be passionate about something. We go through so much and face so many obstacles, our passion is what keeps us going.” He added that when you are passionate about something, you can accomplish anything you desire. “You know, I’m not as religious as you. You had us listening to gospel and having praise and worship in class,” he joked. *I did always have music playing in class and gospel was often in the rotation. I let students choose the genre of music, though, in my defense. LOL.* “But growing up Caribbean, my mom would always make sure we knew the teachings. We didn’t go to church, but she made sure we read our Bibles as a family.” He recalled a time when they were studying and he just got emotional. “I don’t really know what happened. It came out of nowhere,” he explained. “We were reviewing... Well I can’t really remember where it came from, but I know it was talking about living your truth. At the time, I knew I was *different*, but I didn’t know how it affected my life.” He continued to reflect on how living in your truth just resonated with him, but he didn’t know why at the moment.

“Now, after being asked this very simple, but deep question, I can almost understand why I got emotional. That was God’s way of preparing me for the life he planned for me. While walking in your truth, you will face oppressions. But walking in your truth will require you to not only be present, but also persevere past them [the oppressions faced].” He added “once I started ignoring what others thought about me and living in my truth, everything started aligning for me. I flourished in the Army Reserve. I have a great job in civilian life. I am even considering becoming a teacher

now. I truly believe that because of my passion, presence, and perseverance, there is nothing I cannot achieve.”

Patience Grasshopper

“You must be confident! You must be secure! You must be minimal!” shared Patrick. “The Bible teaches of a modest lifestyle. You don’t have to be flashy. You don’t have to be loud. You just have to exist. That is why I think it’s important to be minimal, no matter what your sexuality or lifestyle is. Pleasure comes from the blessings of God, which are not all the time materialistic.” He explained that accepting yourself as a minimalist, especially in the gay community, which can more times than not, be pretentious, also requires confidence and self-security “because the girls will try and break you down, honey,” he joked, but was serious at the same time. Continuing by shedding light on the journey, he explained that living the lifestyle of a minoritized person, i.e. being Black and gay, requires you to be so confident and secure in yourself that regardless of what the fans (people talking about you behind your back as opposed to being transparent and honest in your face) say, you walk with your head held high, shoulder back, and authority in your speech. “My mama taught me that,” he said proudly.

“Once I understood the concept and became comfortable enough with myself, I began to walk in my truth and *be* just because I just wanted to *be*. Once I started that, everything started to align. I got into the college of my first choice. I received my degree. I was aligned with the right people—my mom, lol—to get me a good government job. I have amazing friends and mentors. Everything seems to be working out just fine. The only thing I feel is missing is me living on the West Coast. But I am practicing patience and acknowledging that everything doesn’t have to come all at once. I have a long life to live. God will provide when he is ready.”

What's the Context?

“To be Black and gay requires you to be brave, multi-faceted, and multidimensional,” Salem shares. “You have to think of gayness as a video game. Not in the sense that it’s not serious, but in a sense of ‘there’s levels to this shit’ kind of way.” Salem loves video games, so it’s no surprise that he would associate wholeness with playing games. “Think about it, you develop and grow from not knowing and understanding who you really are, to, prayerfully one day, a person who doesn’t care what others think. That not caring is the level that we all seek to reach.” He continues to explain the different levels along the journey of Black gay self-acceptance. When you are on this journey, you must be brave. There’re some things that are designed to scare you and send you back to square one. For example, take the Bible thumpers of the South. No matter what level you are on, they will let you know that ‘JEEESUUS SAAAIID, you going to Hell’. Therefore, being brave when faced by this demon also requires being multi-faceted. You gotta know how to pivot and be brave enough to carry out that pivot. I like how I’ve heard you talk Bible with Bible. Someone gives you a scripture, you have one that goes along with it to make them look stupid or the English teacher comes out and you teach them of the importance of context, shedding like that they are interpreting the text out of context.” *Not be just placed a mirror in front of me? But I love to hear that they are watching and are learning how to fight their battles.*

“I appreciate the requirement of being multidimensional in Black gay America. It forces us to face our identity in a space where it isn’t appreciated. Yet, we are afforded opportunities to position ourselves and create our own experiences. Had I not had to learn to pivot and express myself in various ways, I probably would not have graduated college. Without the ability to evaluate the ‘dimension’, or level, I was operating in, I would have stayed at my first college, failed out, and not have been a college graduate today. But God had another plan,” he laughed. *Salem hasn’t been to*

church since he was 7, but through his relationship with me, he knows a lot about Christ. So he laughed, not to be funny, but to, again, pay homage to the influence I've played in this growth.

Change is Good

“I’ve spent so much of my life questioning God and his purpose for my life that I realize that I just have to let go and let him do what he does best. FATHER. Therefore, the best three words I can come up with that describes Black gayness are understanding, acceptance, to just BE.” Elliot continued, “We have to understand that this life is not ours. We are just here to uplift the glory of God.”

Elliot reflected on the story of him coming out to his brother, which started a ripple effect amongst the rest of his family. “Once I did that and accepted who I was as a Black gay man, everything began to align in my life. I became a manager at my job. I re-enrolled in school while also being a manager. Sidenote, that was hard work, juggling both. But I know I was able to do it because of God’s protection around my life. Sadly, even after juggling the two seamlessly, I learned that I’m one of those that school just isn’t for. But still, since ending my education career prematurely, God still continued to provide and bless me. You know when we first started talking for this study, I was the manager of the store. Well, I am happy to announce that I have started my career in the medical administration field with an offer with one of the best hospitals here.” He was so proud to announce this transition. *This is a true testament of letting go and letting God be God. We do not have control over our destiny. HE will have the final say.*

Blossoming into Something Great

“Bold, Fearless, Authentic,” are the words that Jumeux’s proudly proclaims. Jumeux is the most outspoken and bold of the six. Therefore, I was not surprised by the words he chose. “Being Black and gay means that you face adversity head on. You are bold with your actions and don’t back down from nothing. You are fearless. Nothing scares you. We go through a lot as Black gay men, as

I'm sure you are aware. We can't afford to scare easily. If we did, we'd spend our entire lives running with our tails between our legs." Continuing, he explained the power that comes with being bold and fearless: "When you are those things, they will leave you alone. Trust me. You will have a presence that says 'get byke! Ain the one you want.' And it's not a bitchy get back, but more so of an 'I know who I am, my worth, and what I deserve, and will not accept anything less' get back."

"Authenticity is also a key component to success as a Black gay man," he cautioned. "Once you begin to be authentic and true to who you are, you open doors that you wouldn't think were even accessible to you. Look at me. I'm on all ends of the gaydar; and I operate in them all. But when I accepted that, lived in that truth, and stopped trying to hide it from certain people, my life began to explode. I own two businesses and I consult with another. I have plans to purchase a home within the next two years and I finally feel like I have a boyfriend that loves me for me and not just for what I can provide. God is truly showing out in this season," he stated as he gazes off in a sense of reflection.

I May Bend, but I Won't Break

"Identity, fierce, resilient. Those are my words. Yupp, that's them," boasted Derrick. Derrick explained that being a Black gay man, you have to know who you are. "Not having a true sense of identity holds you back from growth," he warned. Therefore, being a successful Black gay man begins with a true expression of identity. "It's one thing to know who you are, but it's another to walk that truth. Walking that truth leads to my next word, fierce. Being fierce means to own your identity. When you exist, you exist in your fullness. You don't let anyone, or anything sway you from being your authentic self. You walk into a room and you own it. You get out of bed and you are operating in your best self. You are on your sick bed, but baby, you are the sickest—sickening with your presence—sick person in that hospital, you hear me? You show up in all areas of life, no matter what life throws your way. That is what I consider fierce. They know you will always be on point."

“Lastly, being a Black gay man requires you to be resilient. While you may be confident and fierce, life will throw you some curve balls that you weren’t prepared for. That fierceness that you exude is also represented in how you bounce back from being knocked down,” said Derrick. He applauded the gay community as a whole on their resilience. “We as a community face so much adversity. But as a community, we get through it. Without resilience, we would make it nowhere as neither a community nor individuals. Think about it. I had my mind set on being a Broadway star. My parents built the Wall of Jericho around that dream and dared me to march around it. That’s when my resilience kicked in. I knew the lifestyle I wanted to live as an adult. So, what could I find that allowed me the joy of doing it, but also the finances I needed to live? That’s the practice of resilience that I practiced to get to where I am today. I’ve achieved two degrees, multiple collegiate and corporate professional positions, and published two, soon to be three, books. I think God has shown out in my life these first 25 years.” He, too gazes off to reflect on his accomplishments.

Obedience is the word that I will choose to describe my journey as a Black gay man. All of my life, I knew I was attracted to the same sex. But growing up in the Bible Belt of the South, I saw no light at the end of the tunnel of true acceptance and authenticity. I can remember watching TV with my mom and whenever a gay scene or character appeared on the screen, she would make negative comments of disgust. Was this her way of deterring me from coming out? Hell, I was not the most masculine and I did very few traditional boy pastimes. All of my friends were even female. She knew. So what was this open expression of displeasure of the lifestyle? I ran from my truth. Hid my emotions. I even attempted to have girlfriends. If you know me, you know how that went... Hair and makeup! LOL. It wasn’t until I became obedient to my true calling of authentic identity expression that things began to align.

I think about my favorite Bible story, the widow’s olive oil found in 2 Kings 4. This lady was left as a widow with no way of paying her late husband’s debt. She cried out to God for guidance and help on what to do. The Prophet Elisha asked her what she had in her house. Initially, she said nothing. Then she remembered she had a small jar of olive oil. He told her to go to all of her neighbors and ask for their empty jars, collect as many as she could, and fill

them with the oil from the one jar she has at her house. Once they were filled, Elisha told her to sell them and use the money to pay off her family's debt. She thought Elisha was crazy. How could she fill the empty jars of everyone in the neighborhood with the little that she had. But she had prayed to God, and He sent her a Prophet. So, she was obedient and did as she was told. After collecting the empty jars of her neighbors, she went in her house, closed the door and windows, and began to pour. One after one, the empty bottles began to fill. She didn't know how, but she had eventually filled all of the collected empty bottles with oil from her one small jar. She sent her sons to the rest of the neighbors to get more bottles. They came back with bottles and as she poured, the oil continued to flow, filling each of them as well. After selling all of the now filled jars of oil, she had enough money not only to pay her late husband's debt, but to also continue to live.

This widow's practice of obedience is how I like to view my life. After being obedient and living in the truth God ordained for my life, everything began to fall in place. I moved to a metropolitan city and flourished, getting away from the oppressive mindsets of the small city I was living in. After moving, my career blasted off. I met the love of my life, got married, purchased a house, and we are planning to have a child. I have a successful private education consulting business. I have family and friends who love me for who I am and not who I pretended to be for many years. I am healthy and free of all communicable diseases. All of these successes are metaphorical to the jars of oil the Widow poured and sold. The more I was obedient and walked in my truth, the more God poured into my life.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Throughout this dissertation study, I examined six Black gay young men's uses of social Discourses as a means of demonstrating agency. Using Clandinin's (2013) narrative inquiry as a methodological approach, I worked closely with Giovanni, Patrick, Salem, Elliot, Jumeux, and Derrick to center their experiences as the basis of understanding this phenomenon. As the researcher, I purposefully built a relationship with each participant, allowing us to enter the narrative inquiry process together. I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each participant and one focus group over the course of two months. During this time, the participants shared their experiences as a Black gay young man living and operating in spaces that are often oppressive to queer persons of color.

During this study, we explored the many ways the participants positioned themselves within their social communities. The findings of this study add to the body of research that addresses the intersectionality of identity, Discourse, and agency within the Black gay male community. The findings further explored the factors that contributed to the agentive states the participants found themselves in at this moment in their lives. I used multiple lenses to create a crystallized, multifaceted study. On the one hand, I applied intersectionality as critical inquiry (Collins & Blige, 2016) to the stories presented by the participants to understand their power, authority, resistance, space, and place (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2018). Then, I applied lenses of Queer of Color Agency (Brockenbrough, 2015) and Critical literacies (Freire & Macedo, 1987) to further understand the nuances of the men's experiences.

The narrative methodology and theoretical framework allowed me to make meaning of the young men's experiences and understand their views on the importance of (1) authentic expression, (2) visibility, (3) being both queer and spiritual, and (4) community. I use the term "queer" in my

discussion to be inclusive of the many ways the members of the Sensational Six chose to identify themselves. While most of them identified as just gay, I asked if they were opposed to me using the overarching term queer when referring to the group as a whole within the theme on being queer and spiritual. Each of them agreed to this marker as they each understood and appreciated my desire to be inclusive and respectful to each of them.

I next present a discussion of my findings in relation to these four themes and in the context of the lenses I used. This discussion provides an inductive synthesis of the study's findings, honoring the knowledge of the participants as Black gay identity experts. Additionally, I further highlight the participants' voices by using their words in the discussion to capture the shared practice of meaning making. I then end this chapter with the study's implications and suggestions for further research.

Resistance through Authentic Expression

The first theme I identified from the participants' stories described their sense of resistance to oppressive stereotypes and behaviors from others through their authentic expressions of self. Each man, while some more prominent than others, expressed a sense of "being" regardless of what those around them may have thought or felt. They viewed their authenticity as an "in-your-face" expression of their existence. Take Jumeux for example. Thinking through his story of surprising his mom with what she thought was a gift, but in fact was him dressed in full woman's attire, illustrated his boldness to live and exist authentically based on his self-proclaimed identity. While he did not identify as a woman, or a man who desired to be viewed as a woman, he acknowledged his mom's disdain for his more flamboyant ways and resisted her displayed non-acceptance by forcing her to view the son she birthed and loves in this uncomfortable light. Some may view Jumeux dressing in women's clothing to force his mom to see him as a gay man as not authentic because he did not identify, nor desired to identify, as a woman. Yet, Jumeux described that his sense of gay expression

also did not conform to gender norms. Instead, he presented himself appropriate for the settings in which he finds himself. If he engaged in a setting where he felt the desire to be feminine, he dressed and acted the part; just as he would do the same if he found himself in a setting where he wanted to present himself as more masculine. For example, if he went to a gay bar where there were men in drag and others throwing 8-counts like they were on an HBCU dance team, he would present himself as more feminine. Likewise, he told a story of being in a heterosexual club and presenting as more masculine, not to hide his authentic identity, but to mesh with the Discourses of the space. He explained that his authenticity wasn't compromised in either setting. He *was* both of those Jumeuxs. He just had levels to his forms of identity expression. Therefore, when he constructed the setting with his mom, he sought to expose the inaccuracies and misconceptions of his mom's current views of homosexuality. He reported that as a result of this theatrical move, his mom "began to open up more and accept [his] existence as a gay man whose masculinity is fluid." In this experience, Jumeux resisted his mother's expectations and created a space for himself to be fully expressed in her home.

Like Jumeux, Giovanni and Patrick both explained how their moms did not fully accept them as gay men, but their choices to display authenticity and to be themselves also resisted their moms' desire for them to not "be" gay. "I got tired of being treated differently than my other siblings," explained Giovanni, while Patrick explained he "couldn't live in misery any longer trying to keep [his] true identity from her." Both young men explained pain and self-hatred toward the person they were presenting to their moms as the catalyst for them living authentically in their presence. This authenticity illustrated their ability to resist the oppressive tactics of those they cherished the most; in their case, their moms.

Elliot's experience working in retail encouraged him to begin questioning his authenticity in the workplace. He wondered why he felt the need to pretend like he was straight to get along with the customers and management he interacted with daily. "Why couldn't I express my desire to be

with the fine man that came through my line?” he questioned. While he didn’t report to live out that truth in this scenario, his questioning and wondering served as his way of beginning to resist these heteronormative beliefs in the workplace. In questioning his authenticity in the workplace, though, encouraged Elliot to explore his authenticity with his family, and begin resisting their religious opposition to his sexuality.

Each of the provided examples of resistance illustrated a level of agency the men employed to express their authenticity. These acts of resistance also demonstrated how they challenged the heteronormative norms posed by their families. This level of resistance and performance showed how, regardless of the oppression experienced or from whom that oppression was imposed, they had a choice, and they chose to live authentically and unapologetically.

The acts of resistance the Sensational Six discussed were examples of operating in a Discourse of identity performance. These examples of Discourse at the micro level (Wade, 2017) illustrated how the participants positioned their identities in the figured worlds in which they found themselves and in relation to those with whom they shared space (Holland et.al, 2014). Understanding these spaces in which they operated was an important skill for these young men to have. It was important to understand the world around them as they began to negotiate their identities in those spaces (Freier & Macedo, 1987). Sojourner Truth is reported to have once said “I don’t read such small stuff as books, I read men and nations.” The men in this study were keen readers of the people and the social situations around them.

Queer Visibility

In addition to authenticity as a form of resistance, the members of the Sensational Six showed that being visible as a Black gay man was an important marker of their agency. Within the institutions and social worlds they operated in, each young man spoke of the importance of representation, which I translated in this discussion as visibility. This visibility is something that

Pritchard (2017) described as living a life that is stable but not fixed; a life where one belongs but is not possessed. bell hooks (2000) added that everyone has the right to be free and live fully and well. What both Pritchard and hooks described mirrored the feelings the members of the Sensational Six recounted when they told their stories of being fully visible as a Black gay man.

The visibility they described for themselves fit with Wade's (2017) discussion of Discourse at the macro level. Butler (1993) described this level of Discourse where actors are able to explain their positioning in the larger view of society. So, for the men in the study, this visibility, just like their authenticity, was one way they chose to display their identities. Take Derrick, for example. Each participant spoke on how shallow and pretentious the Black gay community could be when considering another Black gay male's appearance. They reported that you have higher value to others if you are physically fit with abs, chest, and a nice butt. The bigger you are, the less desirable you may be to others. Yet Derrick chose to live his voluptuousness out loud and proudly. "Being proud of my thickness is a sign of hope to other big boys who have not done the soul-searching work I have," he explained. Derrick claimed to advocate that being a successful and attractive Black gay man meant being in all shapes. "I could easily starve myself and workout, but what for? I look damn good the way I am!" Derrick proclaimed. Presenting this view of Black queerness illustrated his way of challenging hegemonic beliefs even within the Black gay community, thus transforming oppressive power relations and supporting his own visibility and identity.

Salem, too, believed in the importance of Black gay representation of all forms in all spaces. Reflecting on his professional career, he regretted the way he handled his identity at his first job during freshman year of college. He recalled how he allowed the community and their rural Southern beliefs to force him to make his sexuality less noticeable in quick or brief interactions. Operating in this (in)visibility, he developed a sense of self-hatred, knowing he was not being himself when he was at work. He was not as talkative. Although naturally social, he interacted less

and less with both customers and coworkers. He explained that he felt as if he had lost his sense of true identity. Fast forward to his current professional appointment in a new company, he was still in the same rural Southern area. Going into this situation, he reported vowing to be true to himself, presenting his true and authentic existence, no matter how brief his exchanges were with others. Taking this approach, he reported not only being fully welcomed by all he encountered at work, but he also experienced a sense of love towards the person he presented to others after previously feeling he had lost his sense of self and authenticity.

Lastly, Giovanni, Patrick, and Salem each reflected on their previous relationships with me as their former teacher and mentor. Having what they perceived as a successful Black gay man as a teacher served as a demonstration of the possibility of what being Black, gay, and successful could look like. While attending different middle schools, they each reported having teachers they suspected were gay, but none that were as unapologetic as I presented myself to be. Reflecting on their reflections of my visibility in a student-teacher dynamic, I acknowledge Discourse operating at Wade's (2017) meso level, which describes Discourses at the institutional level. At this meso level, Discourses were expressed to interpret the young men's positioning of their identity within the social space in which they were operating. Specifically, all three men explained that having a visibly Black gay teacher provided a new representation of Black gayness for them. In my role as teacher, they could see for themselves that there was more to being Black and gay than what both society and their families wanted them to believe. And in that institutional space of middle school, they found hope for themselves. The openly and proud display of Black gay visibility I presented served as an illustration of a Black gay man positively positioning himself in the figured world of school.

Viewing these Discourse practices as a display of identity through a Queer of Color Agency lens allowed me to identify and analyze how these young men chose to define and express themselves as complex beings, as well as acknowledge the other Black gay men they encountered

who were doing the same. The Sensational Six operated in a Discourse of queer visibility. This visibility showed the importance of not only being seen in a positive light, but also being seen as a Black gay man living his truth in all aspects of existence—at work, at home, and in the larger community.

Highlighting the importance of representation also illustrated how the Discourses of the Sensational Six allowed them to position themselves in the larger societal construct. The culture these young men have evolved in has operated in a sense of Black gay erasure (Pritchard, 2017), leaving them to believe in a monolithic view of Black gayness, that only a particular “type” of Black gay exists. Yet, each of them reported operating in a way that pushed back on these hegemonic beliefs.

Queer Spirituality

Building off the Sensational Six’s ideas of visibility and representation, religion became an emotional, yet sought-after topic in our discussions. Having their own individual concepts of spirituality, they each acknowledged that Christianity played a significant role in their rearing. Without going deep into theology, this section references both God and Jesus synonymously based on the moniker used by the participants during the study. This usage of the two words is not to be compared to the many theological perspectives that God and Jesus are two different entities. And, the Discourses I describe below illustrate the Sensational Six operating in a Discourse of Christianity.

By positioning themselves as queer individuals in religious spaces, the men created a tumultuous existence in this specific figured world of religion, and specifically Christianity in the South. Religious discourses have been rooted in the hatred of sin, referencing homosexuality itself as sin (Burke & Greteman, 2022; Pascoe, 2007). Because of this condemnation, Black queer people have both run out of steam when fighting this oppression (Latour, 2004) and ran out of breath when

operating in the discourse of social justice (Alison, 2005). Therefore, how can a space grounded in religion and spirituality be a place where these young men could find themselves practicing a Discourse that also demonstrated agency?

Elliot and Derrick were not only the most spiritual, but also the most religious members of the group that collectively emphasized the importance of having personal relationships with God. These personal relationships were fostered through consistent study of the Bible, talks with God, and engaging with other same-faith individuals. “This relationship equips you with the power to speak and act boldly regardless of the opposition faced,” described Derrick, while Elliot added the importance of having a personal relationship with God “provides solace in knowing, regardless of how others view you, He loves you unconditionally.” Operating in these religious spaces and through these discourses of agency equipped both Derrick and Elliot with the agency to present themselves authentically, challenging the status quo of these figured worlds of religion. Having this agency, then, had in return allowed each of them to author and present themselves as the Black gay young men they were.

Patrick, too, believed in the importance of a relationship with God, but his approach to understanding this relationship was a bit different. He focused his relationship with God on his “personal connection with the story of Christ.” I found it enlightening that the way Patrick spoke on his connection with God mimicked the way James Cone (1975) and others explained the intersection of Christianity and minoritization (Burity, 2016; Connolly, 2008, 2010; Pritchard, 2017). Cone (1975) provided a critical analysis of Christianity that credited the suffering of Jesus as a metaphor for the oppressions of African Americans and other minoritized people. Patrick believed if Jesus bore the cross for his salvation, what made him too good to go through scrutiny and oppression himself? “Jesus continues to show me through his reactions to countless acts of betrayal how to handle those

that don't like me and plot against me... and a lot of the times, it comes from quote-unquote religious people," Patrick explained.

While it was the case during the study, being authentic and present in religious spaces had not always been the reality for Derrick, Elliot, and Patrick. Their early encounters with organized religion, specifically Christianity, as Black gay individuals aligned with more current experiences and identity displays of Salem, Jumeux, and Giovanni. "Every time I've gone to church, I immediately notice the stares and feel judged when I walk in," explained Giovanni. Salem and Jumeux both shared similar encounters with religious people. Having the agency to choose to either be authentic in their identity expression or evolve to the institutional Discourses of the space were examples of how these Black gay young men read the world around them and determined how they would define and express their complex selves.

Acknowledging the different ways the members of the Sensational Six chose to author themselves in spiritual spaces, it is important to note the way they each negotiated their positioning in these spaces. Negotiating their positionality in these spaces (Holland et.al, 2014) not only demonstrated their practices of reading the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987), but also illustrated how these men used their positioned identities to negotiate status and power in these often-oppressive spaces. To accomplish this practice of negotiating identity and power required what Pritchard (2017) described as the "restorative literacy of *deauthorizing the written word*" (p. 171). Deauthorizing the written word in religious spaces requires actors to reimagine, recreate, and reenact what the written word means to them, thus taking away the power of other actors' interpretations of the text and reclaiming that text for themselves. It places the authority, or agency, back into the hands of the person engaged in these critical literacies practices. The clearest illustrations of this practice from the stories of the Sensational Six were those presented by Derrick, Elliot, and Patrick: Each of their

stories about the importance of a personal relationship with God provided an illustration of Pritchard's (2017) idea of restorative literacy in practice.

Understanding this idea of queer spirituality forced me to acknowledge how the oppressive spaces created by Christianity Discourses forced the Sensational Six to negotiate status and power with their positioned identities; and they actively reclaimed their agency in these spaces. In addition to illustrating how the Sensational Six claimed their agency in these spaces, the Discourses of queer spirituality also illustrate the complexity of these young men's intersectional identities. They simultaneously operated in both the Discourse of Christianity at the societal macro level and the Discourse of the Church at the meso, more institutional, level. Thus, the ways that the Sensational Six lived in, claimed, and reclaimed their queer spirituality required that they consider local and larger communities. In all of these spaces, they continued to express their faith in ways authentic to who they were and wanted to become.

Community

The ideas of power and agency extended beyond religious discourses for the Sensational Six and included community spaces as well. Cohen (1999) and McCready (2010) studied the history of power relations and oppression minoritized people have experienced and been subjected to in the U.S. Each scholar argued that the organizing powers for social justice of minoritized people have historically originated from outside of the cultural community being fought for. However, this outside influence has not been the case for Black queer social justice efforts. Black queer scholars (Cohen, 2005; Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Keeling, 2005; Musser, 2016) credit members of the Black queer community such as Marsha P. Johnson, Barbara Jordan, Ernestine Eckstein, Audre Lorde, Bayard Rustin, and Gladys Bentley as the cornerstones for the rights Black queer people have today. While the list continues to lengthen with time, the important take-away lies in crediting these members of the Black queer community and shedding light on the importance to have a sense of

and practices within the community of Black queer persons. Likewise, the stories and reflections shared by the Sensational Six emphasized the importance of having a community of peers that not only look like, but also share similar walks of life.

While I chose *community* to name this section, it is important to also highlight the nuances of the term, because the communities the Sensational Six often found themselves in yielded experiences neither of pleasure nor favor. Instead, the communities in which they existed were often oppressive, abusive, and exhausting. However, the community these young men expressed desire for and created through conversations in this study modeled the Black fugitive spaces described by Givens (2021) and Hartman (1997). These spaces are purposefully crafted to combat antiblackness and Black culture. The spaces that these young men have crafted through not only the time spent together as a group for this study, but also the relationships maintained as a result of the study activities, modelled this purposefully-curated, inclusive environment for members of the Black gay community. This fugitive space allowed them the freedom to exist and operate within a Discourse of Black gay culture that uplifted the numerous visual and linguistic expressions for being Black and gay.

“Are we going to do this again?” questioned Jumeux. “This was liberating,” added Derrick. Each of the members of the Sensational Six spoke positively about their encounter with the group of men in the study. They recalled previous encounters and perceptions of community with Black gay men of their generation as variously negative, passive, dismissive, messy, catty, pretentious, or a combination of these qualities. The convening of the Sensational Six was instead a “a group of positive gay men that look like me and are about their business” both personally and professionally. The members of the group acknowledged the value of being in such a space, crediting the short time spent together as both liberating and hopeful: Liberating to just *be* authentically and hopeful that each of them could and can live full and authentic lives of Black gay excellence.

Highlighting these young men's ideas of community and the actions they took to create these communities also showcased the intersections of identity, agency, and Discourse in which they exist. At its most foundational level of analysis, these communities demonstrated how the members of the Black gay community's sense of agency took the initiative to seek out members and create worlds that look and feel as they desired. First, they've taken their uniqueness and transformed oppression based on difference into liberation in spite of those differences. Second, they have taken the Discourses of Black gayness and negotiated them to create identities of Black gay expression and excellence. Each man described a time in which they understood the oppressive powers of the figured world in which they found themselves, but still chose to exist authentically; They used identity kits curated for themselves despite the hegemonic power relations present; and they credited the community they both belong to and which they know supports them to be in these figured worlds in all their authenticity. Last, the Sensational Six's sense of community illustrated the use of Discourse as Gee (2001) described it: As an identity toolkit comprised of ways of existing through thoughts, actions, and physical expressions that are also socially recognized as ways of communicating (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008; Mills, 2016). These communities were distinctive to the ways the Sensational Six members chose to express themselves, shifting the dialogic relationship between hegemony, resistance, and power toward honoring and uplifting their identities.

Continuing with the sense of community the members of the Sensational Six had together and acknowledging my position as the researcher, I had to evaluate my relationship with each member. Three of these young men, Giovanni, Patrick, and Salem, represented the importance of community because they were a part of this study based on our previous teacher/student, mentor/mentee relationships. I was introduced to Jumeux, Elliot, and Derrick by inquiring within my Black gay community networks. Therefore, it was important to me to continue to respect their senses of community and maintain the relationships that were both strengthened and developed

during this study. While the official inquiry of the study has ended, I have shifted in my relationships from the role of researcher to a colleague and friend, and I have maintained communication with each man. I speak with Salem and Patrick at least once a week for our weekly check-ins. Giovanni and I have a monthly chat. Derrick and Elliot have both joined me for worship services at my church. Derrick and I have also met for drinks. Jumeux and I have convened for entrepreneurial collaboration sessions. Each of them know and, I hope, can trust and believe that I am only a text away. Having that sense of security is important in a community. That sense of security within the Sensational Six extends beyond their relationships with me though. In talking with each of them, I also learned that many of them have kept in contact with each other. With this sense of community each man has had a chance to fully and authentically experience Holland et.al's (2014) sense of creating the worlds in which one operates to look and feel the way they desire. Put simply, these Black gay young men's ongoing participation in this created community highlights the intersections of identity, agency, and Discourse in which each of them exists.

The stories the Sensational Six told illustrated the ways the young men positioned their identities. They drew upon and performed Black gay culture to create the desired spaces in which they wanted to operate. The meso Discourse of Black gay culture they created also showed their understandings of what it meant to be young, Black, gay, and male in the community spaces in which they found themselves. When coming together as a group, they created a community with each conversation that extended into their lives within and beyond the study. These conversations and this community highlighted the intersections of identity, agency, and Discourse in which each of them lived their lives. Furthermore, this community both uplifted and represented the institutional cultural existence they experienced by being a Black gay man situated *within* the larger macro level of society. Therefore, while they existed in larger, society of the South, they also positioned themselves to live and be authentically and unapologetically in their fugitive space of Black gayness.

Implications

The young men in my study are the heart of the research. I sought to listen to their voices and embrace their positions as knowledge-holders over their experiences with presenting themselves to others in social spaces. Using their experiences, thoughts, and ideas, this section presents a variety of implications. I describe what is important for K-12 educators, teacher educators, and students. Because these implications focus on ways all stakeholders can move toward dismantling domains of power, these implications can improve the experiences of all members of the school community.

K-12 Educators

School is the place where the majority of a person's formal learning takes place (Fasick, 1988; Folkestad, 2006; Rogers, 2014). Because the emphasis on formality and standardization is highlighted in school spaces, sociocultural perspectives on knowledge making are often overshadowed. This study offers K-12 educators multiple stories that illustrate the importance of inclusion in learning spaces. Based on the narratives of the Sensational Six, it is clear that students need spaces where they are free to be authentically themselves; and these opportunities to be who they are may take away the desire or necessity to take on a performance identity that is not genuine to whom they believe themselves to be. Having the agency to just exist allows students to be fully present and involved in the learning experiences put before them. They are, then, not having to navigate between focusing on both the learning and their presentation to others. In these spaces, they can be and are allowed to mesh two Discourses, their cultural Discourse and their school Discourse, thus allowing them to make learning more personal and relatable.

K-12 educators can also take this study to continue learning the nuances of being a complex person that students bring into the learning environment. Clarke's (2006) Learner's Perspective Study showed how students perceived learning across classrooms; This study found that student's achievement on tasks reflected the level of self-efficacy each recalled having based on their identity

acceptance in each space. When they felt accepted, students reported having more focus on teaching and learning rather than how they were perceived by both the educators and their peers. The Black gay young men in this study made it clear that school could be a better place when they could be themselves and be seen as themselves, making it a space where the focus was on the learning as opposed to how they presented themselves and how others viewed them.

Lastly, K-12 educators can take this study as a reminder of the importance of allowing students the space to not only exist authentically, but experience curriculum that both provides inclusive representation and allows for critiquing and questioning when true and authentic representation is not present. Educators are afforded the privilege of creating inclusive spaces through both their chosen curriculum and pedagogical approaches. The curriculum chosen does not end with the prescribed curriculum, though. The unwritten curriculum teachers impose on their students through relationships and lessons of morality are also equally important to that of the prescribed curriculum. Teachers can learn from this study the importance of allowing fugitive spaces and nurturing authentic expression from their students. The Sensational Six showed these spaces for expression and authenticity to be catalysts for Discourses of criticality and agency in educational spaces.

Teacher Educators

Building on the implications for K-12 educators, creating inclusive learning environments is also an implication for teacher educators (TE). TEs have the ability to influence the moves K-12 educators make in learning environments, both for pre-service and in-service teachers. Therefore, TEs are able to emphasize opportunities for teachers to learn how to create instructional planning that honors student visibility and presence. To accomplish this goal requires TEs to also review their own pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in the university setting. To get K-12 educators to understand this practice of student engagement, TEs can model what it looks like to

facilitate learning that honors the intersections of identities in higher education students. This implication also suggests the assumption and call to action that this visibility and presence among new teachers is also important for K-12 students. It was important that several of the men in the Sensational Six had a Black gay teacher to educate them. TEs and teacher education programs may need to examine whether their practices create spaces for future teachers whose intersectional identities include Black gay and queer men.

This study also sheds light on the importance of TEs emphasizing criticality both as a skill expected of the educators they teach and those educators, in turn, to teach their own the K-12 students. Focusing on criticality, or the ability to understand power, authority, and anti-oppression, allows for transformation and liberation. Emphasizing criticality also upholds Freire's (1985, 2017) notion of reading both the world and the word, thus enabling learners to question both the world and texts to better understand the truth in power and equity. Naming and calling out the truths of power and equity in educational spaces allows learners the opportunity to exist in these spaces authentically, demanding a learning experience that is both inclusive and liberating.

Students

This study serves as an illustration for students to see the potential benefits of showing up in all spaces as themselves. The stories of liberation the Sensational Six shared offer hope to minoritized students who feel educational spaces are not, and may never be, inclusive to the cultural systems to which they belong. This study also shows students the value of practicing resistance literacy, an action that challenges those power systems built to keep them in a passive state of learning. Lastly, this study provides students a positive representation of what it means to be fully present in not only school settings, but also personal, familial, and religious settings and how to navigate among them simultaneously.

Suggestions for Further Research

I focused this study on the ways that Discourses of Black gay young men influenced the way they engaged with others as a means of agency in historically oppressive spaces. I sought to understand, also, what encouraged these young men to be agentic with the Discourses and identity kits they chose to present to others. To dig deeper and continue this line of research, studies on identifying and detailing the Discourses that make up Black gay culture and Black gay identity would be beneficial. This study focused on Black gay men living in the South, and further research with men in other parts of the U.S. may expand and provide further nuances for making this community visible to larger audiences and readers. Understanding these Discourse systems will allow society and educators the opportunity to better prepare for interacting with and including the young people in this community. Continuing and extending this research will also shed light on *how* to identify and leverage various Discourse systems and identity kits to promote agency and liberation for those who are minoritized by hegemonic beliefs.

Final Thoughts

As a Black gay man, I know very well how it feels to be looked at differently just for existing authentically. To walk in rooms and get *the stares*. To hear your loved ones whisper about you like you can't hear. To navigate and negotiate your identity and authenticity in every interaction. Yet, I've also witnessed so many Black gay men that could care less about any of that. They show up as *them*. They exist as *them*. This study was my way of trying to begin to understand their *how* and *why*.

This study explored how Black gay young men demonstrate agency through authentic identity expression. This study allowed me to take a peek into the lives of six Black gay men and learn why they make the moves they do in some spaces and potentially different moves in others. I am greatly appreciative to the diverse group of young men I engaged during this study. They represented various approaches to identity expression and ideas of authenticity and agency. Allowing

me in their worlds, each man shared their most intimate thoughts, including heartaches, celebrations, accomplishments, and aspirations. They believed and became just as invested in this study as I am. Through the stories they shared, I looked at the different ways they spoke, interacted with others, dressed, moved their bodies, and loved that made up their identity. These expressions of identity are what I call their identity toolkits, or their Black gay Discourse.

This study further evaluated how Black gay young men use these Discourses to challenge and resist hegemonic heteronormative ideologies, making it achievable for them to exist authentically in all spaces. While at different levels, each of these young men illustrated some sort of challenge to being oppressed and minoritized. They showed that they belong to be right where they have chosen to be and to exist there freely. They did not conform to the ideologies of hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, of hegemonic whiteness. They lived out loud and proud. Proud to be Blackity Black Black. Proud to be gay as hell. Proud to remind you to tread lightly when stepping to them because “Miss Mamas will get you together!” *Miss Mamas* is an expression used in the Black gay community to reference a feisty gay man.

I leave this study emotional. I leave this study overjoyed. Most importantly, though, I leave this study hopeful. These young men have shown me that there is a way to be what and who I yearned to be when I was their ages. Hopeful that generations to come after them will have the opportunities to live lives full of authentic expression and free of oppression and danger. Hopeful that even in the face of adversity, generations to come will be as rebellious as the young men of this study, pushing back and challenging any and everything that doesn't sit well within their souls. Hopeful that the Black gay culture will continue to grow to be the liberated community the young men in this study has demonstrated can be.

I end this study officially with more words penned by Queen Beyonce (2022b). Words that describe us as a community. Words to remind us who we are. Words that place the charge on us to live and live life out loud and abundantly, or burn this shit down trying!

We dress a certain way, we walk a certain way

We talk a certain way, we-we paint a certain way

We-we make love a certain way, you know

All of these things we do in a different

Unique, specific way that is personally ours

U-N-I-Q-U-E (unique)

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Pre-Screening Interview

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. Did you go to college after high school?
 - a. Did you graduate?
 - b. Are you still enrolled?
4. When someone asks you how you identify, what's your response?
5. When did you come out to your family?
6. How did you come out to your family?
7. When did you come out to your friends?
8. How did you come out to your friends?
9. What're your relationships like with your immediate and extended family?
10. What're your relationships like with your friends?
11. What does being gay look like to you?

For our next interview, I want you to bring five pictures:

1. You when you think you are at your flyest.
2. You when you are with your family
3. You when you are out with your friends
4. You when you think you are a true representation of your identity
5. An image of ANY gay man that depicts an identity you would embody if there were no constraints.

Appendix B: Photo-Elicited Interview

1. Talk to me about this picture when you were at your flyest.
2. How did you feel walking around looking like this?
3. How is this a representation of you as an individual?
4. What did others think about this look?
5. Is there anything you would change looking back at this picture?
6. Talk to me about this picture when you were with your family.
7. How did you feel walking around looking like this?
8. How is this a representation of you as an individual?
9. What did others think about this look?
10. Is there anything you would change looking back at this picture?
11. Talk to me about this picture when you were with your friends
12. How did you feel walking around looking like this?
13. How is this a representation of you as an individual?
14. What did others think about this look?
15. Is there anything you would change looking back at this picture?
16. Talk to me about this picture when you were a true representation of your identity.
17. How did you feel walking around looking like this?
18. How is this a representation of you as an individual?
19. What did others think about this look?
20. Is there anything you would change looking back at this picture?
21. Talk to me about this picture that depicts an identity you would embody if there were no constraints.
22. How do you think you would feel walking around looking like this?

23. How do you think this is a representation of you as an individual?

24. What do you think others will feel about this look on you?

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview

1. Given what you said about your experiences as a Black gay young man, and what you heard about others' experiences, what are your feelings about the way others see you as _____ Participant's Name _____ in society?
2. During our group discussion, you mentioned _____. Can you tell me more about that?
3. During your first interview, you said _____. Can you talk about how that has possibly shifted based on your interactions with the other gentlemen in the group?
4. Is there anything that came up in the group discussions that you want to talk more about in this one-on-one setting?

Appendix D: Member Checking Interview

1. I'm going to share with you some of the findings that I have based on what we've talked about. We are going to go over them together to make sure I understand what you're saying correctly. As we go, you can stop me at any time if there is anything you'd like to change, add, or take out of my notes. Do you have any questions?

(After reviewing the notes)

2. Is there anything else you think I should know for my study?

Appendix E: Data Collection and Analysis Timeline

