

Spaces of Expression and Growth for QPOC Students in Higher Education and on Social Media

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I. Abstract

Using an ethnographic approach and student development theory framework, this paper explores the experiences of queer students of color at UC San Diego as they navigate the spaces of higher education and social media. Through this project, various themes of self-expression, growth, community, learning, and culture, and identity emerge in conversation to highlight the important aspects to the lived realities of queer students of color. To conclude, I emphasize the importance of the researcher-subject relationship, calling attention to the intersubjective exchange that comes from examining students' experiences.

II. Introduction

A. Project Background: The Roots of My Research

Growing up, my mom taught me the importance and value of education. Her childhood in Nicaragua was plagued by a war between the Contras and Sandinistas in the 1980s. However, the war didn't stop her from pursuing knowledge and going to school, also taking English classes outside of school to learn another language. With support from her own mom, she could afford English classes, which strengthened her success in academics. When she was 19, my mom was set to go to a university in Nicaragua after having graduated from high school—something that not all of her seven siblings were able to do. She was ultimately unable to do so because she had to immigrate to California with her family instead. My mom's story is one I have thought deeply about in many of my academic journeys. Because of her history, I have garnered a high respect for my mother and for education. I go to school not only for myself, but for all of my family members who did not have the opportunity due to outside political forces.

In December, my mom said that “bisexuality is not real.” As someone who identifies as bisexual, this was painful to hear, especially because I have not yet told her about my sexuality. Personally, I am conflicted because I want to succeed in higher education for my family, while also living truthfully for myself. Being at UC San Diego, with more independence from my family, I have been able to explore my identity as bisexual more than when I lived at home with my parents. It is interesting to be in a space that allows me to be freer, but also makes me highly aware of how my identities are different from the people around me. For one, being Central American and born in the United States, I have been asked by students what part of Mexico I am from. Because of experiences in high school, I sometimes wonder if my peers think less of my intelligence due to my ethnicity. Because bisexuality is a new part of my identity that I came to terms with in college, I think about how others feel when I bring it up casually in certain situations. Considering these intersections, I reflect on how my experiences can differ from others in various spaces. For example, I have only ever had white professors in my Psychology classes. I have to consider how the lack of representation in various forms contributes to the disconnect I feel with that department, which contrasts with much better personal encounters in the Communication Department. In my Communication classes, I have fortunately had experiences learning from a more diverse group of faculty. When I experience isolating feelings of disconnect in classes and other circumstances, I turn to social media (specifically Twitter) to remind myself that I am not the only one with these experiences and identities. Through social media, I was able to find a gay Central American journalist from whom I have learned from and whose stories and I have connected with.

Because of my identities as a bisexual Latina in higher education, I want to explore the experiences of other queer students of color at UCSD. They are an interesting group to explore because of the ways the three identities as a student, queer person, and person of color combine

and intersect to shape their lived experiences and their navigation of higher education and social media spaces. Intersectional identities are crucial to look at because they are often seen as singular identities that have no effect on each other, when the opposite is true. In light of my own tendency to use Twitter as a supportive social resource, I want to know if other QPOC (queer people of color) students make a similar decision. With all of the complicated factors that tie into the idea of diversity on a college campus, I am doing this project to examine how QPOC students approach their learning and sense of self. Does the combination of social media and higher education spaces in a QPOC student's life have an impact on how they approach their own identities? If so, how? Considering that the environment one navigates can be complicated depending on the institutional structures in place, I want to know how these complications drive certain behaviors and actions taken by QPOC students to find ways to thrive. Have queer students of color adopted any practices to enhance their learning and identity formation? If so, which ones? Furthermore, when acknowledging the ways universities want to (and should) provide resources to students, it is also necessary to think about the kinds of support they can offer to QPOC students, a group whose needs are often overlooked and ignored. Because of these points, I want to finally ask: What are educational institutions doing to account for social media's role(s) in a queer student of color's sense of self?

B. History of Student Development Theory

Race and ethnicity are still social problems rooted in inequality and inequity that need to be addressed on college campuses. For one, many students' realities are affected by their racial and ethnic identities, as they navigate various communities and spaces on and off campus. Identity development ties into this: Due to the vast amount of change associated with college, students experience many changes within themselves and their identities; this is known as

student development theory (Torres, 2003, 3). This paper will primarily focus on the ways in which students of color in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community on college campuses navigate their educational spaces while also considering if/when their identities are shaped by their institutional environment. I will additionally investigate the impact of social media: Does the mixing of social media and higher education in a student's life have an impact on how they approach their own identities? As part of multiple communities that are underrepresented on college campuses (and specifically at UCSD), queer students of color must learn to navigate educational spaces that do not provide support catered to them, let alone acknowledgement of the intersections between their identities. The article "Why Should Higher Education Be Concerned with the Identity Development of Diverse Students?" references many different studies to show how lack of acknowledgement of differences and inequities present in education or the creation of discomfort in an educational space by the facilitator (namely, the professor or educator) is due to the fact that facilitators apply tactics and support systems that have been tested only on white students. I am incorporating social media to analyze when/if LGBTQ+ students of color cope with the lack of an inclusive educational environment by adopting online spaces as a way to feel a sense of self throughout their college experience.

Student development theory has experienced many shifts in research in response to new media and changes in what is considered "knowledge." In "Evolution of Student Development Theory," Jones and Stewart examine the ways student development theory has evolved over time, using the concept of "waves" from feminist theory to describe how the ideas have changed. They assert that student development theory is primarily influenced by critical and poststructural perspectives, but that the theory is constantly changing and being expanded upon as researchers

and educators in student affairs continue their work in learning more about student development. As a third wave of student development theory comes into light (Jones, 2016, 18), it is noted that societal oppression and internalized marginalization impact the ways individuals view “systems of oppression,” that in turn may have an impact on that person’s identity and sense of self. Constructivist developmentalism, which was a prominent aspect in the first and second waves of student development theory, highlights the impact of community on an individual’s sense of self and ability to accurately describe their knowledge of themselves and others (Jones, 2016, 23). For QPOC students, we must address and recognize how they build community and how this influences their sense of self and others, whether that be online or in in-person settings.

Jones and Stewart, in their conclusion, assert that it is important for current and future theorists to focus on the liberation and healing that is prevalent in newer student development theory. Taking inspiration from bell hooks, Jones and Stewart say, “... when theories are created through a critical lens, the possibilities for healing, liberation, and radical social change are revealed” (17). Education and learning can impact a student’s perception of the world. In my research, I look into when social media can tie into this healing, learning, and liberation for queer students of color on college campuses. Does social media allow for this healing and liberation, and if so, how? As a researcher working in the context of student development theory, I am mindful of this idea because the research I am doing is centered around social issues and students from underrepresented groups. Are there practices implemented by queer students of color that allow for liberation and healing and if so, what do they look like? Are students with these intersecting identities aware of the concepts of liberation and healing, among others? Jones’ and Stewart’s research also brought up the idea of the cycle of liberation, in which liberation is one of the final components of understanding oneself and one’s social identities within a system of

oppression. Can recognizing this cycle have an impact on how a student perceives themselves?

Where do students receive liberating and healing learning that centers their identities and development as QPOC students (whether online or in an educational institution)? And can these strategies have an impact on their growth and expression?

QPOC students must navigate generational shifts as people of color, while also navigating LGBTQ+ spaces. They face social and academic isolation due to their recognized intersections in identities, and need more support than what is currently available. In “Review of Queer People of Color in Higher Education,” J. Michael Denton wrote: “Higher education researchers have often found that queer college students of color often employ complex and diverse strategies and ways of knowing, feeling, and being to overcome racism, sexism, and queer- and trans-antagonism” (2018, 230). Students’ efforts and strategies must be acknowledged in higher education because it deeply ties into the theories of student development. These ties impact the ways students navigate civic participation as citizen-scholars.

C. Institutional Spaces and Sense of Self: Higher Education

In “Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation,” Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger assess the ways people learn outside the context of educational institutions and in the social world, and how this learning can directly lead to identity conceptualizations (1991, 53). They find that this participation in non-institutional learning, which they call “legitimate peripheral participation,” is an essential component for the long-term evolution of individuals in their communities and their community-specific, knowledgeable skills (depending on the community) that take shape through apprenticeship and learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991, 53). Lave and Wenger refer to these communities as “communities of practice” (1991, 55). Students often utilize the skills they develop in their communities of practice to navigate their educational

institutions and the adoption of learning practices, as they intertwine with their racial identities and sexuality. In her work "Body Projects of Young Women of Color in Physics: InterSections of Gender, Race, and Science," Maria Ong talks about women of color in science whose identities are constantly distinguished from their male, white counterparts. Using an ethnographic framework, Ong followed ten women of color in science academia. She found that the women in her study practiced "fragmentation strategies" (also known as gendered and racial passing) and "multiplicity strategies" (known as stereotype manipulation and performances of superiority) to maintain their identities as competent scientists (2005, 595). While navigating this performative aspect of their academic space, these women of color also had to abide by standard sociocultural boundaries within their communities of scientists. The idea of "standard" becomes much more complicated as academic spaces primarily dominated by white men become diversified by people with other identities; Ong thus argues that these challenges push women of color in science to modify existing cultural practices in their community (2005, 611). Using the practices that Ong identifies, I employ the framework of "intersectional practices as situated learning" to explore if and when QPOC students at UCSD navigate their intersectional identities and employ similar community practices, explored by Lave and Wenger, as they exist within the institutional space.

Through the advent of new media, current youth possess much more autonomy than past generations. While previous generations had more autonomy navigating the physical world (Ito, 2015, 13; Ito, 2008, 13), young people today are much more self-directed, relying increasingly on learning from peers through online media. Ito goes on further to address the roles that educators, parents, and policymakers play in the use of this new media by youth. She asks, "Rather than assuming that education is primarily about preparing for jobs and careers, what would it mean to think of it as a process guiding youths' participation in public life more

generally?” (2008, 3). As students negotiate online spaces and university environments, institutions must also identify strategies to allow for students from underrepresented groups to learn and grow as individuals with intersecting identities. One aspect of student development theory states that the years spent in college are essential for a person’s sense of self and identity (Torres, 2003, 3); therefore, one must look at how certain factors (learning settings and personal experiences) impact a student’s sense of self as a participatory citizen.

D. Social Media Spaces

Much of the work done in social media research focuses on the ways in which its usage has changed how we understand and participate in society (Kapoor et al, 2018; Schroeder, 2014; Moreno, 2013). With 2007 data collected from the Health Information National Trends Study, one study has confirmed that around 69% of American adults reported having access to the internet (Chou et al, 2009, 1). This same study also concluded that social media usage is not consistent across age groups; the authors assert that new technologies, specifically social media, “may be changing the communication pattern throughout the United States” (Chou et al, 2009, 10). A sociocultural study cited by Melton et al. found that “the ethos of Twitter encourages an open account profile that will be easily accessible to potential employers. Yet, ... Twitter does not require the use of real names, and users are more likely to be connected to their peers rather than family members or authority figures (Duggan & Bremmer, 2013)” (2018, 333). Social media has been evolving in response to the needs of its users since its creation. However, these changes in turn impact the ways social media platforms are used, especially because many people use them as a means of obtaining information or finding a community of people who share a similar interest (Ito et al., 2015, 15). Ito et al. goes on further to say, “Valuing the interests, identities and social relationships of youth is a means towards more equitable and

diverse routes to civic and political participation as well as learning” (2015, 16). Social media clearly holds power in how youth understand and view their worlds. Thus, as youth move into institutions of higher education, social media’s influence on their lives as students and people cannot be ignored.

As Mizuko Ito notes in “Living and learning with new media,” the same is true of diverse undergraduate students who, like Ong’s women scholars of color, must also develop strategies to “navigate in the familiar contexts of school, religious organizations, sports, and other local activities” (2008, 1). Ito’s research points to the ways youth use online spaces to discover new interests and niche topics they would not be able to explore in institutional academic spaces (such as a classroom). Similarly, today’s university students use social online spaces to express interest in different topics and develop themselves as informed citizens, while also contextualizing their personal realities and experiences in academic spaces. These factors create a certain internal recognition of one’s ability to learn and one’s sense of self (Ito, 2008, 10).

In a 2016 data collection by the United States Census, it was found that 89% of households have a computer and 81% have a broadband Internet subscription (Ryan and Lewis, 2016, 1). As the percentages continue to increase after 2016, social media research as it relates to a variety of disciplines is more important than ever. Jean Twenge cites a 2017 Pew study that found that 99% of those under 30 use the Web (2018, 180); thus, as social media and the Internet become more ingrained in young students’ lives, further research must be conducted to find effective approaches to support students in their learning and growth in university—especially students whose intersectional identities are often overlooked in research, such as QPOC students. “As C.J. Pascoe’s work on the Living Digital Project reveals, for many gay teens the Internet can become a place to explore their identities beyond the heterosexual normativity of their everyday lives. ... Moreover, participation in these online sites can represent an important source of social

support and friendship” (Ito et al., 2008, 18). As the Internet allows for students to expand on their interests and identities, how do their cultivated online spaces tie into the higher education environments they are dual-navigating?

III. Methodology

In order to answer my research questions, I collected three different forms of data: interviews, social media artifacts, and direct information from on-campus resources.

A. Interviews

The first form of data I collected was eight interviews conducted with undergraduate QPOC students at UCSD. They were unstructured interviews with open-ended questions that facilitated conversation; I would occasionally ask follow-up questions for clarification or more details. My interview questions changed as I conducted more interviews because I found some questions needed expansion or revision in order to account for some recurring ideas that came up in my primary interviews. I also wanted to create interview questions that did not lead to specific answers through their framing, so I modified them to provide a more open-ended opportunity for response. In order to do this, I made sure to consider the ways my questions could lead to certain responses, such as the assumption of a certain response without asking. For example, for questions 1 and 2, I initially asked, “How has your family’s cultural/racial background shaped your sense of self?” and “How has your sexuality shaped your sense of self?” which roots itself in the assumption that my interviewees’ sense of self was impacted by their family background and sexuality, without asking them whether or not it actually does.

Based on the factors listed above, my finalized list of interview questions for the last four interviews are as follows:

1. What are some things that you think describe your sense of self?
2. Do you think your family's cultural/racial background has shaped your sense of self? If so, in what ways?
3. Do you think your sexuality has shaped your sense of self? If so, in what ways?
4. Can you think of any times at UCSD where your identities (as QPOC) felt salient (more prominent)? How did you react/feel?
5. How do you use social media? With what purpose do you use it?
6. In what ways is your academic identity tied into your personal sense of self?
7. What resources (if any) do you use to promote your learning?
8. Where during your time at UCSD have you turned to find a sense of community?
9. Do you use any tools to enhance your learning about subjects you are interested in?
10. Tell me of a time that you experienced personal growth at UCSD and how that came about.
11. How aware are you of the resources UCSD has to offer? How did you become aware?
12. If you had a magic wand to make the university what you want it to be, what would it look like to you?
13. Tell me a story of a moment where your intersectional identities came into play, and this can be positive, negative, or neutral.
14. Now that you're home in quarantine, has that had an effect on how you view UCSD/resources/networks?
15. Is there anything else that's on your mind that you want to add?

There were a few limitations in my interviews due to external circumstances. One limitation is that all interviews were conducted through video chat or over the phone. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the months of March, April, and May, I was unable to hold in-

person interviews. In-person interviews would have been different from over the phone and through video chats, because I would have been in a shared, physically intimate space with my interviewees. I would have been able to read a greater range of body language instead of relying on the inflections of their voices and the body language exhibited above their shoulders. There were also occasional technical issues with Wi-Fi connectivity; it may have affected some answers due to a need for clarification or repetition of a response, as well as unclear images of the video chat.

Another limitation is the sample size I obtained. I interviewed eight students: five women, two men, and one nonbinary person. This is not reflective of UCSD's population, which is approximately 48.9% men, 48.9% women, and 0.4% data unavailable. I recognize that having more women than men may have an impact on my data because it is not representative of the gender population. There is no UCSD data available with non-binary as an option. UCSD's demographic information includes a disclaimer that says:

For federal reporting of the demographic 'sex', students who report gender identities as female or trans-female are reported as women; students who report gender identities as male or trans-male are reported as men. Students who report gender identities as Gender-queer/Gender Non-Conforming or different identity are reported according to their sex assigned at birth: males reported as men; females reported as women ("2018-2019 Student Profile.").

This means that UCSD's student profile research does not separate non-binary as a separate gender within their demographics, and thus I would not be able to obtain an accurate representation of population for non-binary and gender non-conforming students. My sample of students was also a convenience sample because I recruited interviewees through friends and coworkers, rather than randomly contacting eight students from UCSD's QPOC population. Because I have a larger number of friends and coworkers who are women, I was unable to recruit more men and nonbinary people. In a future study, I would acknowledge this and account for it.

Gender as a personal identity and way of expression came up often in interviews as something that had an impact on how the students navigated different spaces, and in a future study, it would be important to obtain a more representative sample of students in order to explore this further.

Race and ethnicity was another salient difference among my interviewees. I interviewed two Filipinx students, two Hispanic/Latinx students, three Asian students, and one Black student. Because this was something that all of the interviewees recalled as something that affected their college experiences, both race and ethnicity are important to acknowledge and center in research.

College is, for most, two or more years in the same institutional setting, and all of my interviewees were in different years and time in their college experience, and therefore in various states of mind. Growth is an ongoing process, and this is no different in college, where a first-year undergraduate student may think much differently from a student in their final year of college.

Below is a chart of each of my interviewee's general demographics surrounding race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and year in college:

	Race/Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender	Year (in college)
Interviewee #1: Jenn	Black	Bisexual	Woman	Third-year student
Interviewee #2: Cameron	Asian American	Gay	Man	Third-year (graduating this spring)
Interviewee #3: Alex	Filipinx American and White	Sapphic lesbian	Non-binary person	Third-year student
Interviewee #4: Nicole	Filipina American and White	Bisexual	Woman	First-year student
Interviewee #5:	Latinx	Lesbian/	Woman	Fourth-year student

Tori		queer		
Interviewee #6: Ariana	Latinx	Queer/ bisexual	Woman	Second-year transfer student (2020 graduate)
Interviewee #7: Tyler	Asian American	Gay	Man	Fourth-year student
Interviewee #8: Ava	Asian	Bisexual	Woman	Third-year (international*) student

*I included this modifier because it was frequently brought up in her interview regarding various topics.

(All names have been changed to maintain anonymity.)

B. Social Media Artifacts

The second form of data I collected was social media artifacts obtained through the undergraduates I interviewed. After the interviews, I reached out to my eight interviewees and asked all of them to send examples of social media posts that they felt encapsulated their experiences using it. I left it open-ended; for one, I did not request a specific amount of posts or screenshots from each person, so the amount ranged from one to over 20. Furthermore, I did not specify any particular social media platforms so that they would send me artifacts from their preferred platforms; I received screenshots from Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. In a future study, I would modify my method to ask all interviewees for similar post quantities, in order to maintain consistency in data analysis. It was interesting to see the amount of social media posts each person sent me, but in the interest of interviewee participation as well as data organization, I would ask for three to four posts. Limiting the number of posts that the subjects send means they

have to limit their choices to three to four ideas that they feel best encapsulate their experiences, and thus may be more telling than receiving more than five. In other words, having the interviewees limit their posts would push them to put more thought into what specific posts they send me, and would ultimately be more accurate to their experiences than a broad array of artifacts.

In addition to the social media posts, I also asked my interviewees about the intentions behind their choices, which I included as another part of my analysis. This was through messaging applications after they sent the actual artifacts, so the explanations are all in writing rather than spoken word (as the interviews were), meaning that interviewees' thought processes may differ from the one used during their interviews. To clarify, these responses are a different form of data compared to the interview questions because in these answers, the students were able to think about my question and type it out before sending it, meaning they had an opportunity to edit or modify their responses before sending them. That is, the wording they used may be more polished and intentional because of the more straightforward form of digital communication (direct written messaging). Also, because this request came after the interviews, my interviewees were responding in the context of the interview and potentially thinking about it as they typed out their responses. See Appendix A for their raw responses.

C. Information from On-campus Resources

The final form of data I wanted to collect was successful in some ways and unsuccessful in others, but I believe it is important to note both successes and failures and the ways I attempted to collect it. The data I wanted to collect was primary source information about on-campus UCSD resources (i.e. directly from the programs themselves), rather than through websites, to question whether they provide any support specific to QPOC students. I sent the

Office of Academic Support & Instructional Services (OASIS), the Teaching and Learning Commons, and the Student Promoted Access Center for Education and Service (SPACES) the following email (replacing [resource] with the program I was contacting):

“Dear [Resource] Staff,

My name is Melissa Posada and I am a fourth-year Communication and Business Psychology double major. I am in the Honors Program in Communication, where I am doing a research project on QPOC (queer people of color) students and their experiences navigating higher education spaces and social media spaces as a means to support their learning and personal development. In particular, I am looking at the ways QPOC students obtain support, whether that be through the university or through outside means. I am emailing you to ask about whether the [resource] has resources dedicated to promoting the learning of QPOC students, as well as what resources you provide in general for UCSD students. I am open to meeting through Zoom to talk about it, or you can answer through this email. Please let me know what is better for you.

I appreciate the time you take to read through this and answer my questions. I hope you and your loved ones are all safe and well during this time.”

Through this, I received one response with infographics detailing some resources and a QTPOC Retention Coordinator position offered by SPACES; one response saying that the program would follow up with answers (no follow-up was received); and one with a planned interview with an interim director that I received no response from after offering times to meet. I also planned an interview with the director of the Cross Cultural Center, but received no follow-up about when the interview would be. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online

learning at UCSD, it is possible that many programs may not have been as responsive to emails that didn't concern student support in learning and the resources they offer. Furthermore, as one of the respondents remarked, I sent messages to the emails that were specifically for the resources, which are not monitored as frequently as personal UCSD emails.

D. Ethnographic Approach

While I took on the role of researcher for this study, I am personally tied to all of the students I interviewed, either through work, friendship, or acquaintances. Some are students I have known and interacted with for a fair amount of time in college, while others were acquaintances who I met through mutual friends and had varying amounts of contact with. Many researchers who conduct interviews have to establish rapport with their interviewees because they are entirely strangers. As Beth L. Leech advises:

Without rapport, even the best-phrased questions can fall flat and elicit brief, uninformative answers. Rapport means more than just putting people at ease. It means convincing people that you are listening, that you understand and are interested in what they are talking about, and that they should continue talking (2002, 665).

Building rapport, especially because my research is centered around student stories, was essential to the success and depth of my interviewees' answers. For this research, I had a range of interactions with all of my interviewees before the interviews were conducted, which meant that their responses were more open than they would be if I didn't know them at all. Some of the students I interviewed are students I have known for a year or more, and with whom I have had similar conversations about intersectionality, social media, and the navigation of higher education spaces. I find this interesting to note because it implies that these students (interviewees #1, 2, 3, 6, and 8) already have experience and feel comfortable thinking about and discussing these topics.

As a bisexual Latina myself, I identify with the community I am researching, and thus am conducting “native ethnography” in that I may have similar experiences to some of my interviewees. While I am a native member of the group I am looking at, I want to acknowledge how ethnography is a field chosen by the researcher; there is no singular way to conduct (native) ethnography (Harden, 2011, 151). Being part (or not part) of the identities I am studying means less than the intentions of my research; a sincere approach to the study provides the participants and I (the researcher) with a shared common ground—“the fundamental human desire to be ‘heard’ and valued” (Oikonomidou and Wiest, 2017, 59). Incorporating this intentional practice and addressing the challenges of conducting native ethnographic research—that is, “Embracing rather than being confused by the multiple levels of understanding native researchers bring to studies of their communities...” (Abdulrehman, 2017, 152)—will allow my research to progress in a more conscious manner and provide more opportunities for understanding. My research in particular intends to analyze how QPOC students navigate higher education spaces and social media, in order to address strategies to support them in institutions.

Because I worked with human participants whose lived experiences are my primary data, I was highly aware of how I asked questions and conducted participant observation. I drew on Clark and Sharf for guidance, who write “[a]s qualitative researchers... cho[se] to enter the lives of others ... with intentions of both giving voice to the depth and richness of individual experience and accomplishing socially relevant changes within the context examined” (2007, 399). Because my research is focused on higher education, I also needed to be mindful of the intentions of my research, as well as how it might serve the population I am researching. My primary goal was to address how educational institutions can better serve all of their students. This is critical because as Ito et al. note: “Valuing the interests, identities, and social relationships of youth is a means towards more equitable and diverse routes to civic and political

participation as well as learning” (2015, 16). Considering that higher education spaces are seen as modes of development, learning, and personal growth, it is important to analyze how QPOC students, whose lived experiences are not commonly examined in research, are impacted by college.

IV. Intersectional Identities and a Sense of Self

A. Independence from family

In many of my interviews, the idea of independence from family was frequently alluded to as a theme. The importance of independence from family emerged as a result of the physical distance my interviewees experienced from their families by attending UCSD. Multiple students, noting a sense of disconnect from their cultural communities (many of which they said placed various cultural expectations on them), finally felt that they had the opportunities to explore themselves as individuals in the college environment. They had the chance to explore their sexuality more than they were able to when living at home. Coming into college meant, for many of the students, a shift in communities of practice, where the idea of oneness and individuality became a critical component of their experience.

Alex disclosed their cultural background as half white and half Filipinx, but their maternal grandmother is Filipina, who played a major role in their upbringing. A few times, my interviewee mentioned expecting to be a “perfect Filipina woman” because of their grandmother and culture. As Shelley P. Harrell writes, “Family structure and dynamics shape the nature and quality of social relationships, communication style, and strategies for dealing with conflict...” (2000, 50). In many cultures, there is a requirement to follow the community and perform certain gender roles, especially for women (however, my male-identifying interviewees also

acknowledged cultural expectations), which has an impact not only on how students view their cultural communities, but also on how they view themselves. Their queer identities thus create an unintentional disconnect between the gender roles placed on them in their familial cultures and their own gender and sexuality preferences. There were some instances where, because of this expectation, students felt that they were expected to fulfill certain roles specifically for their community, putting that association before their own self-interests. As queer identifying, students were especially at odds with the expectation of providing a familial legacy through children. One of my male interviewees (Tyler), disclosed: “The idea of having future children, getting married [in a culturally traditional and heteronormative sense with a wife] has been placed upon me more than once.” Similarly, Interviewee #4 felt a certain pressure from family, saying, “family structure stays together.” She described the pressure of providing for her family financially and saying that it would be “hard to imagine moving away.” Both express the idea that they have other people, specifically in their family, to think about when considering their future.

At the end of the interview with Nicole I asked her if she had anything else she wanted to bring up. She told me about her friend who is a lesbian and won't come out to her parents until she graduates from medical school. While my interviewee already came out to her parents, she reflected on her friend's different situation and explained how many students feel that they must be financially independent from their parents before they can openly reveal their sexuality, out of a fear of not being accepted and subsequently financially cut off. Tyler revealed a similar situation, where he felt a certain pressure to finish his education because he wants to be financially independent. In his first year at university, he didn't give it much thought, but as he made progress in college (now being a fourth-year student), the possibility of coming out became

more real and scary. Not only does he want to be financially independent because of his sexuality, but he also doesn't want to be dependent on his parents for care in other ways, saying that "they've done a lot for me." Similarly, Cameron said that his ethnic identity tied into performing well in school. While he has felt that the expectations placed on him by his parents have relaxed since he came to college, he detailed how his Korean culture emphasized the idea of not being a burden or liability, which drove him to be someone his family could be proud of (i.e. someone on an "acceptable" career path). However, he was able to find a compromise between parental expectations and personal goals. Discussing his switch from a major in computer science to a major in cognitive science, he touched on having to "ease" his parents into the idea, but admitted that his major change is still in line with what his parents expect out of him: working at a technology-based company. Many of the decisions these students make are based on what their parents, family, and culture expect from them.

The broadening development of personal interests and hobbies also came up quite often with all subjects. In high school, Ava said she didn't have a space to explore herself, whereas in college, "you find who you are" and she could do what she wanted. She also commented on how not having family around in college meant she had a space to explore and express her interests. There is a recurring theme of a lack of individual exploration due to family pressures that holds the students back from being able to fully express themselves or think about who they are. Being away from family allows the students to open themselves up to the possibility of their individuality beyond their role in their family unit (e.g. the child or future provider, etc.). The first-year interviewee (Nicole) still felt much stronger ties to her family than most of the other interviewees I talked to. The interviewees who were further along in their college careers felt more independent and had more ideas for their plans to be alone after college. They could envision a future with more time away from their families. For example, Tori discussed

associating her family's cultural norms with her Hispanic identity, imparting that she has "tried to back away from [her] Hispanic identity because of that sometimes." The space away from family allowed her to be more reflective of familial-based cultural norms and their impact on the ways she viewed her individuality. College thus gives QPOC students an opportunity to think more individualistically, and they are allowed to come to terms with the idea that they are someone outside of the household they were raised in.

B. Expression and Stereotypes

In many of my interviews, students discussed the idea of stereotypes and modes of expression. As queer students and students of color, they observed how those identities and interactions with others were (mis)informed by the stereotypes they saw in popular media. Cameron mentioned that because of media portrayal of Asian and Asian LGBTQIA+ people, he found it "More difficult to find a space that accepts me entirely for who I am without any bias or stereotypes." Jenn told me, "I will talk to people and they will instantly know I'm Black." Nicole explained, "I took a negative stereotype [sexual promiscuity as a bisexual woman] and educated myself and owned up to it." Within all of these quotes are the real experiences of QPOC students and the ways their identities have shaped their interactions with others, and vice versa. As they navigate various spaces with their identities either on display or internally present, they find themselves thinking more deeply about themselves as a result of media portrayals and general interactions and discussions about different aspects of their identities. This idea is reflected in the findings Denton talks about when he writes that QPOC students experience their lives in a more complex and diverse way, using strategies centered around "knowing, feeling, and being" to navigate their experiences (2018, 230). Their experiences have many factors that shape them—emotion, social knowledge, others, etc.—and these factors all tie together to create a complex

and reflective state of being, especially as the students continue to grow and learn in the college setting.

There were some key differences between my first and second interviewees. One finding I noticed is that Cameron, being Korean American, had a different approach to his culture. He emphasized the ways his culture affected how he interacted with people, because Korea has a very influential hierarchical mode of honorifics when speaking and referring to others. However, he also noted the homophobia he experienced in certain instances where the group was majority Korean or Korean American. On the other hand, Jenn reflected on how her Black culture wasn't very empowering because her family didn't have a strong sense of Blackness. This, as a result, "shaped [her] to long more for that." Now that she's older, however, she cares more about having that strong sense of culture specifically because she doesn't have it. Cameron's reflection was much more external in how it affected others, while Jenn's reflection was focused more on how her lack of a strong sense of culture was mirrored in how she viewed herself. Both Interviewee Jenn and Cameron, however, articulated thoughts about stereotypes in the media and how that impacts the way they are viewed. Cameron discussed certain stereotypes perpetuated by media for gay Asian men, and how they did not at all reflect who he was. He went on further to say, "It's not about focusing on one or two of my identities, but more [that] they shouldn't make a big opinion about who I am as a person. ... Liking me as gay is circumstantial." For Cameron, he recognizes how his social identities are a part of him, but he wants to emphasize that he (and the characters who also have his identities) are more than the social identities they have. On the other hand, Jenn recounted her project on media portrayal of disabilities, and how the majority of the characters she examined were white. She said this was because being a person of color was, in a way, a disability itself because it is not considered the standard white that is predominantly seen in the media. There is no intersectionality in these characters, instead only having one

aspect of them that would not be considered the average white, straight, cis male, which is what she explained to me about her project. It is interesting that she revealed this to me because, being a person of color herself, she has a specific understanding of how the media views Black people, as well as how they view people who have intersectional identities. Considering that she did a project about the intersections of being a person of color and having a disability, it is crucial to think about how this intersectionality is thought about by students (and professors) in academic settings.

Cameron also discussed being more in tune with himself because he came out as gay in high school. He unveiled that, because of this, he had to develop and mature faster, and thus felt like he went through what a lot of people go through in college, in high school (primarily, finding oneself and developing a personal sense of self). I found this interesting as it reflected what my first interviewee said about becoming more aware of social issues through the identities she had. Because they have certain identities, they are able to think deeply about the issues that affect those communities they are a part of. Interviewee #5 discussed how, coming to college, she wasn't hiding her sexuality from anyone. Thinking about the setting of being in college, she said, "Once you see other people be open about it you can be open about it." Having been in a different setting with the same identities she had in high school, her experiences molded and became more thoughtful and reflective of how she could fit her identities into the navigation of a peer-influenced environment she was in before arriving to college. With the environment of high school, some of my interviewees felt that they either developed faster, or could not be themselves until they reached college, tying back to Denton's research in the lived experiences of QPOC students.

Nicole, my first-year interviewee, discussed the time when she came out to her parents and her family. She explained that they would try to translate her sexuality in a way that they could understand. For example, her grandma told her, “so you’re like Ellen DeGeneres” even though she is bisexual, when she was trying to understand my interviewee’s bisexual identity. She also explained how the fetishization of lesbian couples has an influence on how people view LGBT people, specifically when comparing gay couples versus lesbian couples. For example, she said her dad would be okay with his son being gay, “as long as he’s the top,” which ties into toxic masculinity and the reinforcement of gender roles. Within all of this, the ways students are being perceived by family is heavily influenced by the media, as many family members use it as a way to attempt to understand their experiences. When I finished many of my interviews, they told me that they really enjoy talking about QPOC things.

Throughout the conversations with my interviewees, it was clear that all of them have thought deeply about how their identities are experienced externally and thought about by others. With the portrayal of their identities reflected in the media, they begin to think about how they want others to view themselves, including beyond their social identities of their race, ethnicity, and sexuality. When it comes to representation in media, the portrayals lead to generalizations and one-dimensional thoughts and ideas about their lived realities where they are thought of as Ellen DeGeneres instead of who they actually are as people.

V. The Higher Education Space

A. How to Be Together: Infrastructure that Organizes Relationships and Access

Throughout their time in college, my interviewees disclosed to me the ways in which the environment has allowed them to grow personally and professionally. The infrastructures in

place at colleges that have allowed my interviewees to grow have included on-campus housing spaces, on-campus jobs, and student-led organizations. Many observed the importance of community to foster growth not only in themselves, but in the students around them who have differing viewpoints, identities, and personalities. Cameron confessed that they wished UCSD did more to produce people of a society that are not only educated but also socially aware. When referencing UCSD as an institution and the power it has, he said that people in power can make choices and actually help out the communities that they build. Many students that I interviewed believe that UCSD has the responsibility to educate its students beyond academia; they believe that the higher education institution should also teach them “life skills” (which include leadership, communicating effectively with others, time management, etc.) and help them understand the idea that not everyone is the same and has the same lived experiences. This is also reflected in Jones’ and Stewart’s work in student development theory, where they emphasize liberation and healing. Through the liberation and healing of students, these same students can learn from each other and learn about themselves in spaces that encourage growth through collaboration with other students, which in turn builds community. In many of my interviews, they raise the idea that providing the space for students to meet each other and share individual experiences has been helpful in their own growth and acceptance of other students and people, which will lead to this radical social change that is discussed in student development theory.

a. Living Spaces

With on-campus housing spaces, my interviewees have pointed out being “forced” (in a positive tone) to talk to each other, and even appreciating the differences between them and the people they lived with during their time in on-campus housing. Jenn, along with Cameron, Nicole, Tori, Ariana, and Ava, felt a strong sense of community in the living spaces they

occupied, all of which were created through random placement (rather than a system in which the university purposefully chose certain students to be together; this is not in reference to themed housing, but rather general housing). Because all of my interviewees lived on campus their first year (and some their second year as well), they felt that they were able to meet people and find a sense of community in that. From this, I gathered that the act of providing an on-campus living space for students (dorms and residential halls) is important in creating a feeling of belonging on a college campus that goes beyond their identities and academics. Students were able to feel like part of a community because they had the opportunity to live on campus and experience what it is like to be part of a community different from the one they lived in growing up.

Tori, when asked about what she thinks would make UCSD better, said that it should provide free housing to all first years. Currently, on-campus, UCSD housing is guaranteed for two years, but has various costs, depending on the selected package. For many students, living on campus is inaccessible due to economic circumstances, and thus they are not allowed the opportunity to experience on-campus housing. If UCSD provided free, on-campus housing for all of its first-year students, many more would be able to find that sense of community that my interviewees discovered in their own first-year and second-year living spaces.

b. On-campus Jobs

For on-campus jobs, many have attributed personal growth and certain skills to the jobs they have had on campus, as well as a space to connect with people and make friends. With university campuses, it is important for them to provide student employment opportunities beyond economic gain and work study, because on-campus jobs provide a supportive space for growth and personal development for students. They can build their skills in an environment that

is understanding of the fact that they are students, and this is critical to consider for QPOC students, who should be provided a space to grow because they do not have many on-campus spaces catered to their needs and identities.

Alex said, “Being an RA [residential assistant] in Revelle introduced me to several LGBT people on staff.” Through their job, they were able to meet and find community with others in the LGBTQ+ community. Tyler explained, “Being part of that program [Triton Community Leadership Institute (TCLI)], as a mentor, I was able to connect with more people and got a better understanding of how to connect using more welcoming and safer, neutral words.” Not only was he able to support students through TCLI (the main goal of the program), but he was able to learn and develop through the community-based learning he experienced through his training. Through all of the interviewees, I found that on-campus jobs can provide various benefits to students that vastly expand beyond a simple paycheck. Students can connect with others who have the same identities as them, and they can feel more within that community through that experience. Alternatively, students can learn life skills that they can apply beyond their job; by learning how to connect with people better, Interviewee #7 is developing skills that will help him beyond his time at UCSD, and will benefit his relationships outside of that job.

Nicole, my first-year interviewee, along with Ariana, my second-year transfer interviewee, said that they have found a lot of growth through the job opportunities they’ve had since being at UCSD, which I have also heard from Cameron, Alex, and Tyler. Nicole is a first-year student, so she is still exploring UCSD as an institution. She said that education doesn’t prepare you “for the real world,” but rather for a career, and having a campus job has taught her skills she hasn’t learned in school. With this comment, there is the implication that UCSD as an environment has a responsibility to prepare students as much just learners, but citizens. Ariana, as a second-year transfer, has less years to develop herself and foster community at UCSD, but

through her work at one of the resource spaces on campus, has found community. Both have shared the different social connections they made working with other students and staff, finding it rewarding to be in a space that is meant for productivity. This idea connects to the constructivist developmentalism that student development theory explores, in that it shows how community can have an impact on an individual's sense of self and their confidence in their abilities beyond what they learn in classes and other settings. While on-campus job spaces aren't traditionally considered for the feelings of community they can bring for students, it is important that they are, because it contributes to their growth and confidence in themselves.

c. Student-led Organizations

With student-led organizations, Cameron, Alex, Nicole, Tori, Tyler, and Ava reported them as spaces of community, as well as spaces to enhance their personal and leadership skills. With organizations such as OSTEM (brought up by multiple interviewees), QPOC students are provided with a space to meet others who have similar academic interests and experiences. Some other organizations were college-specific, such as Muir College organizations (Muir Musical and some Muir event committees), where students felt that they could contribute to something, while also building themselves.

Nicole told me that a lot of the places she finds community are engineering organizations such as Out in STEM (OSTEM), Society of Women Engineers (SWE), and the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), feeling a sense of belonging in these organizations due to the fact that she was able to communicate with others with similar experiences. In AIChE, she was paired with a mentor who gave her "advice, a heads up on what's coming up [in her major classes], [and] someone to relate to." She was able to bond with other women in engineering, which allowed her to feel a sense of belonging and connection in her major. On the other hand,

she also stated that she tried to join a STEM sorority to look for a sense of community, but she didn't like that it was exclusive and cost money. When thinking about access and needs, this is an interesting point because it exemplifies the factors that tie into a student's desire to join a club (or to leave one). With the flexibility of other clubs, students think a lot about how clubs can offer means of support, community, skills, and growth. Tori said, "[Muir Musical] helped me grow more as a leader and be more confident in myself that way." Through Muir Musical, she was able to explore a side of herself as a leader, giving her an opportunity for growth in leadership. Student organizations, because they are led by students, are heavily catered towards their needs. They allow for students with similar interests to come together and work on projects or create spaces for each other that push them to connect outside of a standard classroom setting. As Alex put it, "Student leader-driven spaces have helped form and comfort my approach to identity." Alex in particular was able to create their own student organization, where they mentioned being able to grow a lot as a person and through the leadership skills they developed along with the organization's progression. Similarly to on-campus jobs, students were able to build community and confidence in their skills as discussed in constructivist developmentalism in student development theory, further cementing the idea that student-led spaces provide areas of growth and expression for students.

B. Responsibilities of the Institution

Alex, a third-year Communication major, shared that they are also a Sociology minor. Something they analyzed in our conversation was how they sometimes felt like they were expected to talk in some classes as a resource to educate the professor, when it's not their responsibility as a student. They explained that the professor needs to be the one to educate themselves about certain social issues, especially those that affect students and centers around

their lived realities. There was a particular instance where a professor had an incident with a student in Alex's class about how the class discussed issues directly affecting students, but the professor educated on the topic as if it was abstract. That is, they explored the ideas about the politics of bodies surrounding gender as if they were simply a theoretical philosophy, and not something that some of the students in the class experienced daily in their lives. Alex admitted that people in the affected communities sometimes have to step up to teach professors things that could (and should) be done by the university. For one, the university can implement more comprehensive training on how to make students with a multitude of identities feel welcomed and included in academic spaces, so that the rate of occurrences, such as the one with Alex, can decrease (and eventually dissipate) in number. I think this is interesting to think about because even with the Communication Department's curriculum (where an exploration of ideas centered around how our bodies exist within the world), there can be instances where professors make students feel uncomfortable through their teaching, even when there are a multitude of professors who excel in supporting their students and acknowledging how the issues affect people's realities.

It was interesting to hear Jenn (my third-year Black interviewee) say that she appreciated OASIS as a learning resource, and that she wants to become a tutor herself so that she can give back what she was given from that resource on campus. She told me that for the most part, her professors during her time at UCSD have mostly been focused on grades rather than teaching, and that has led her to have less of an appreciation for her learning and more of a necessity to meet certain grade expectations. She also said she's only had two or three professors who she felt like genuinely cared about her learning the material, and she appreciated those classes, but was sad to think about the fact that it was so few. Likewise, Tyler has had similar experiences he

disclosed to me surrounding a disconnect in learning due to professors who he felt did not have a concern for their students' learning.

Jenn also told me about her experiences using the LGBT Resource Center and how she felt a bit disconnected from the space because she didn't feel like her input was valued, and Ariana also described the Center as "cliquey." While the experiences vary among students, it is important to note how some students with more than one identity outside the focus of sexuality and gender felt this disconnect, leading to a discouragement in using the resource.

Overall, it is clear students want to expand on the resources UCSD has to offer. Students want their professors to be more mindful in their teaching and academic practices, so that students can feel more welcome and valued in classroom settings. Furthermore, students want the resource centers that are catered to them to adopt a more intersectional approach to their programs and spaces; while one identity of theirs can feel valued, they want the other identities that the spaces don't directly cater to to be celebrated and acknowledged as well.

VI. Social Media to Create Space for Oneself

A. Interviews

Alex told me a lot about social media and the organizations they're a part of on campus. The student organization they created at UCSD, called the Multi Identity Art Collective (MIAC), aims to create a space for people to make and share art together. Proud of its growth, Alex said it started small, but it now has over 100 students in it. They told me how they used art as a way to come to terms with their identities; through art, they could physically put themselves into something they created, and see themselves in something they love. There is a significant number of media and stereotypes that make students feel alienated about the fact that they are

part of the QPOC community. In this student's case, they found a creative outlet to address that alienation by recentering themselves in art that they can show to others. When it came to sharing their art, they disclosed that they use Twitter as a platform to post their art on, highlighting the “power in representation” in what they create. As Ito et al. discuss in their research, this student utilized their online social media space to express a personal interest focused on art and representation in art (2015, 15). Ito et al. also reference Pascoe’s work which demonstrates the importance of social media in gay teens’ realities for social support and as a space to express their non-heteronormative identities (2008, 18). Not only is Alex using s social media space (Twitter) to express their artistic interest, but they are also learning first-hand about the politics of representation in art and how they can use their own agency to influence their space in a positive way. With the added layer of race and ethnicity along with gender expression, it is not surprising that they reflect on the expression of self in their art, considering the earlier discussion of media representation. Alex also said that being part of the art community on Twitter was a positive, affirmative experience. By exploring the art community on social media, Alex was able to find a like-minded, supportive, self-made community. They also post their art on Instagram, but explained that the process is much more as a “post and go” process, whereas they spend more engaged time on Twitter. Alex noted that Facebook was a place to perform their “campus self,” describing how they use that social media platform to promote their student organization. Discord was discussed as well, which is a chat application (its own form of social media, in a way), but emphasized that it is a space for students in MIAC to talk and post their art. Both Discord and Twitter are similar in that there are no requirements to include a full name; however, because Discord is a chat application, the interactions are much more direct and group-centered, while Twitter’s platform allows for a wide audience (and when on a public profile, anyone) to

interact with posts. They spoke about being able to collaborate with some of the resource centers (Cross Cultural Center and LGBT Resource Center) to create physical art galleries for the people in MIAC to share their art as well, and using social media to advertise those events.

Through the interviews I conducted, I have come to the conclusion that social media spaces are adapted to fit the needs of each individual QPOC student. Some use it to post their thoughts, some use it to learn from others or explore their interests, and some use it to engage with entertaining posts such as memes. While I initially hypothesized that students would turn to social media to find community, that was not the case; many mentioned stumbling upon it or engaging in it unintentionally. Regardless of whether or not seeking it out was intentional, online spaces still fostered students' abilities to connect with or learn from others on a platform different from the in-person environment they traditionally learn in. To conclude, the flexible formats of social media, and the ability to form various communities depending on the interests one decides to enrich (such as the people and accounts they follow) bring forth a multitude of uses depending on the individual person. There are parameters of the platform (character limit in posts, amount of photos that can be attached to posts, etc.) that limit the ways social media platforms are used, but the parameters set in place can still be bent and molded to fit various interests. The ways in which the interviewees engaged directly with social media (the platforms they use, the content they post) and cultivated their online presence was different for each individual.

B. Artifacts

In contrast to the differences in how my interviewees approached social media as platforms for engagement, I found a pattern in the students' intentions; many of them use social media for the same reasons. As seen in the Venn diagram (Figure 1) below, *learning* and *identity* were two ideas that were brought up quite frequently, throughout various responses. While the

topic of identity was a personal experience, the topic of learning was more focused on context-specific instances. However, considering that QPOC student identities are inherently rooted in ideas of social context and various environments, it is not surprising to also see the emergence of a cross-section where students can learn about “causes that are important to them” and are “encouraged to share and grow with each other in our communities.” As students explore their identities more deeply and in more nuanced ways, they begin to look to the communities that they frequent, to learn about their place in them and grow as individuals.

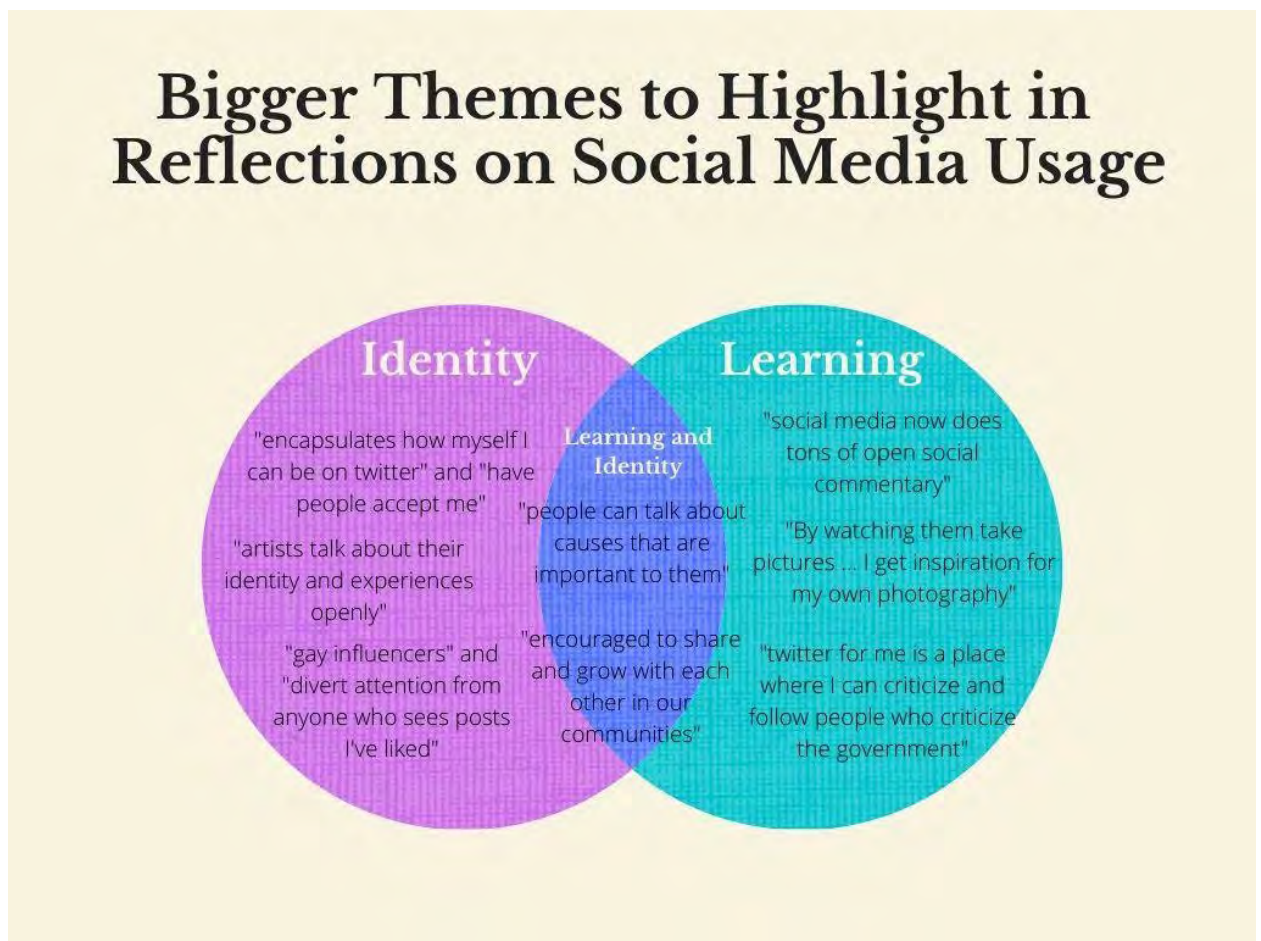


Figure 1 (Bigger Themes to Highlight in Reflections on Social Media Usage). There are two kinds of interactions on social media for my QPOC student interviewees; the one between self (identity) and the one between society (learning).

Many of my interviewees shared various social media spaces with me where they felt like their identities were uplifted or could be openly conveyed. Many of the students mentioned being able to express their interests and identities on social media in relatable ways or in ways that empower them to express truth. Alex recalled having to be a community representative in classroom settings because they were the only classmate who was a part of the queer community, let alone QPOC. In contrast, Alex explained that sharing and growth are important components of the online spaces they use (see Figure 2). This discussion and expression of identity online is a choice, whereas their representation in the classroom setting is more of a required performance, and meant for others rather than themselves. When asked about it, they sent me a message that said:

the first one i picked [Tweet on the left in Figure 2] to kinda show how artists talk about their identity and experiences openly through their art on social media that people can relate and gravitate too!

and for the second [Tweet on the right in Figure 2], i think it encompasses like artist circle culture where we are encouraged to share and grow with each other in our communities, such as like sharing our progress through the year!!



Figure 2. Alex shared two posts centered around the art community (right) and how art is used to talk about identities and experiences (left).

Clearly, Alex has utilized the online space of Twitter to share and be in community with other artists whose identities are reflected in the art they create and post online. As Melton found, Twitter as a platform encourages people to be open on their profiles in a way that only highlights what they want others to find; that is, they do not have to include full name, and can monitor their posts and biographies to include information that attracts a certain community (in Alex's case, the art community). Additionally considering Ito's emphasis on the importance of social media as a means of finding community, it is clear that social media usage is being done in a way that makes those within the online community feel valued and more open in acceptance of identities.

Jenn, as quoted above in the Venn diagram, stated that she identify herself on Twitter as bisexual and people will accept it (see Figure 3). She was also the same interviewee who talked to me about how her bisexuality is not something one would know just by looking at her, but being Black is something that people notice right as she walks into a room. The important characteristic of online social media spaces that I have noticed from my data is that there is an added layer of acceptance that students feel online due to the ability to shape their own space (that is, their profile, who they follow, what they post) more than in their university setting; in school, their primary role is a student working towards earning their degree and they are a part of a community of peers who share academic experiences but not necessarily other interests. While the interviewees are constrained by social media platforms' designs and features, they are not constrained to any one online community within them. They are allowed to choose the communities they frequent, post for, or even just lurk in.



Figure 3. Jenn’s tweet about her bisexual identity.

Learning is another key dimension that emerges through the interviews. Through the platform’s ability to choose certain people to follow, users can feel less alone in certain identities, or they can find communities that have the same or similar interests to them. An example is Tori, who uses social media to enhance her photography skills and take inspiration from other photographers. She exemplifies what Ito discusses in her research: Tori uses her social media to discover and expand on topics that she has a personal interest in. This is a more learning-focused usage, and she describes it by saying, “... I use the examples of [other photographers’] social media presence and how they go about showcasing their work now that I am trying to make a photography Instagram.” In order to build on her interest and facilitate its growth online, Tori uses Instagram (as well as YouTube) to learn how to do just that, showing that one can begin to research a skill that one is interested in learning more about through a less formalized, online setting. Furthermore, she is able to learn from other accounts within the same community and collect resources that she can use to improve her own account: “I also look [at] their website links in the [Instagram] bios for [inspiration] for my website.”

While many mentioned the positive influence of social media on identity, one participant (Tyler) explained a negative aspect of social media, where he maintains a certain image that often comes into conflict with his desired usage of social media. He described his experiences as they were centered more around his process of liking and following certain people and accounts on Instagram:

There are certain gay influencers I follow and something I do is if I liked their post, I'll immediately keep scrolling to find another couple posts to try and divert attention from anyone who sees posts I've liked. There's that Activity section (the heart symbol) where you used to be able to see posts your friends like or new followings. I just looked at it today and it seems IG no longer keeps me posted on what others like but I'm sticking to staying cautious.

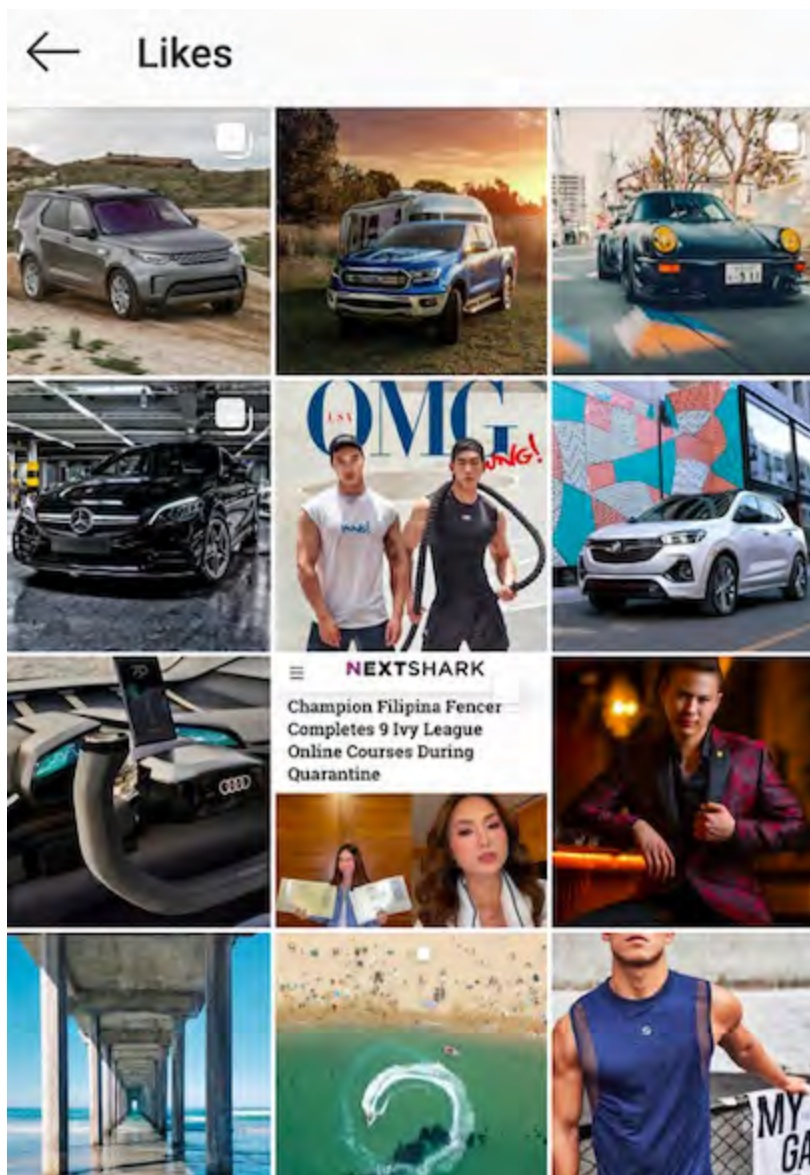


Figure 4. Tyler showing an array of his likes from Instagram, which include posts from gay influencers he follows.

As we see from the previous quote, Tyler monitored not only what he posted on social media, but what he publicly liked, in order to maintain a certain image for his followers, which involves concealing his sexuality. He makes sure that his followers do not notice the content he likes centering around his sexuality, by liking extra posts so that they get buried in the likes. I found this interesting, because Instagram, for him, is not considered a space where he can like posts unconditionally. For him, he must consider who may be viewing what he likes, and

performs certain actions outside of the general liking of gay influencers in order to use Instagram for his own preference, while also taking into consideration the fact that others can see what he likes. For many who like posts, they may not have been aware of that function, or they do not think much of it beyond making sure to not like things that others would judge them for.

However, my interviewee consistently takes into account his identity when he does this process. I find it interesting that he does so much in order to hide his interest in gay influencers, rather than simply enjoying the post without liking it. It shows that Tyler recognizes and still wants to support the gay influencers by liking the post, because on Instagram likes are important for influencers' success. However, he understands the mechanics of Instagram's exposure of its users, and constantly thinks about this when participating actively (i.e., liking posts, posting, etc.) on the application.

Between the two categories of learning and identity, I have found that they are not binary; they blend and mix in ways that allow for students to learn about and express their identities, and also learn about issues that affect the communities they are a part of. Four interviewees discussed how they learned about social issues that affected their communities and pertained to various aspects of their identities (for example, race, class, nationality, ethnicity), showing examples of posts that included commentary on social issues. Furthermore, Jenn stated, "science memes make me feel like I am learning something [because] I understand a lot of [a user's] posts and they are funny." In this way, she feels validated in her offline education through memes online. Social media has allowed students to either learn more about various topics or feel understood in the learning they are doing in school, which shows how social media is a space for exploring beyond the classroom setting in universities.

VII. Conclusion

“We need a voice to get the resources we need as students.” –Jenn

“People in power can make choices and actually help out the communities that they build.” –

Cameron

“UCSD is lacking the community work to pull things together.” –Alex

“Even though UCSD has its flaws, I do recognize that a lot of the growth—my sense of self, really—happened because I came to UCSD.” –Ava

QPOC students have unique realities in university settings and online. With the deep self-reflection and exploration centered around their intersectional identities and the communities they are in (institutionally and socially), it is clear that there are many factors that influence these students’ life paths, choices, self-expression, and growth. Being in higher education, these students realize the importance of maintaining and creating a sense of individuality that incorporate their sexualities. They want to be given a choice in how they provide for their communities, rather than being pushed and encouraged to take certain roles. A large amount of growth happens in college, and these students are proof of that. They recognize their place within their educational institution, and recognize that more can be done to support students of diverse identities. While there are certain formal programs in place (living spaces, on-campus jobs, student-led organizations), many of the interviewees believe that UCSD can implement a proactive approach in facilitating the growth of its students to become participatory citizens.

Throughout this research, I have learned the importance of listening to students’ voices. As I interviewed eight students from over 30,000 undergraduates at UCSD, I realized that listening to their stories not only allows for the university (and myself) to be more aware of students’ needs and experiences, but the students themselves as the people of a powerful

community. Students become more aware of their identities as peers on campus, as well as on social media. Both online social media and higher education are interesting spaces for QPOC students as their identities may feel more salient in certain contexts. With the COVID-19 pandemic occurring as I conducted this research, many of my interviewees thought critically about the response UCSD had in light of the situation. They thought institutionally, and clearly in great detail, about how UCSD does or doesn't support students, beyond just themselves. For QPOC students, whose intersecting identities are scarcely acknowledged in universities as needing support, their thoughtfulness and consideration show their commitment to their communities beyond their own gain. They advocate for support past their own needs, and envision what that support can look like to create change within the entirety of the UCSD community. By listening to their ideas, liberation and healing can take place within the institution, if those who create change in the university consider themselves as deeply as the students who frequent the campus.

To conclude, I want to discuss the ways that students are at a very unique point in their lives. Students are within a specific learning-focused environment that allows for growth, while they become increasingly aware of the world around them beyond their educational institution. For QPOC students in particular, who navigate multiple communities, one must look at and be cognizant of their experiences in order to understand their individual realities that influence their existence in college. Negotiating the physically visible and internally present identities of race/ethnicity and sexuality, QPOC students are in unique positions with lots of thought surrounding how they approach their lives in college. While my research explored social media and college experiences, it is important to continue this research surrounding QPOC students, as there are many factors that tie into their growth and expression. Because college is a place of

growth and development, it is important to understand all the avenues through which this formation of individuals is happening.

As students, we exist within an institution that claims to “value” diversity, and yet has shown through its (non)actions that it does not regard students’ needs during unprecedented times. With COVID-19 spreading throughout the country and the Black Lives Matter movement becoming a very prominent part of the media and political change, what does that mean for the institutions responding to historical moments? How are students at universities being supported or not supported? As I began to write this paper after conducting the research, Jenn reached out and talked to me about how her Black identity feels more prominent due to the Black Lives Matter movement tweets circulating on social media. She specifically reached out to me about this with the intention of helping inform my research, and I found it interesting that through her participation in my research, she is thinking more deeply about her Black identity in the context of social media and proactively reached out to me. Within this very specific context of social media, where Jenn is learning and experiencing a lot surrounding the movement, she began to consider how that impacts the ways she views herself. She is also thinking about her role as a student, and how current events are affecting her ability to handle the responsibilities that come with that. Not only does this reflect an instance of deep thinking about her Blackness as a student and as a person, but it also exemplifies the interesting relationship one can build (as a researcher) with a subject. Because of our interview earlier in the process, I was reminded of the mutual exchange that comes from doing ethnographic research. She had an opportunity to hear herself verbally articulate her experiences as a QPOC student, because she was provided with opportunities for reflection and metacognition through our discussion. This research, I have realized, is important not only for learning from students, but also for providing them a platform to explore themselves in a deeper, more cognitive sense.

For future research, it is important to consider gender as a formative aspect of queer students' identities. I think it would be interesting to conduct research specifically with transgender students of color, as they also have a unique experience in higher education settings and on social media. However, I also believe that this research is foundational and can be expanded on in many ways. Student voices must always be listened to and their experiences must be seriously considered in order to give students a voice to facilitate change. Through research, students are allowed to share experiences that can lead to social change to take place within the institutions they and future students embody. While change takes time, using storytelling, listening deeply, and thinking holistically about these lived realities will lead to a more equitable future for higher education.

Appendix A. Raw Online Responses to Social Media Artifact Explanation

	Number of artifacts	Responses
Interviewee 1	(6 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The instagram one I feel like I primarily use to share music or to get music recommendations on people's stories - the trump one I sent because I feel like twitter for me is a place where I can criticize and follow people who criticize the government - which the onion is really good at - same thing with the "contagious" tweet - The bisexual one I just feel like encapsulates how myself I can be on twitter and share my identity and have people accept me - My black identity + criticizing the government is the last one - oh the cytoplasm one, I love that guy's account I feel like the science memes make me feel like I am learning something bc I understand a lot of his posts and they are funny
Interviewee 2	(1 artifact)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I feel like social media now does tons of open social commentary on things they don't see online, and its exposing the flaws of the world all the time - A simple video of another country is enough for ppl who see it to make a strong social commentary about America
Interviewee 3	(2 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ahhh here are two posts about my social media experience! second photo is a pic from my own account - the first one i picked to kinda show how artists talk about their identity and experiences openly through their art on social media that people can relate and gravitate too! - and for the second, i think it encompasses like artist circle culture where we are encouraged to share and grow with each other in our

		<p>communities, such as like sharing our progress through the year!!</p>
Interviewee 4	(3 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A post I used to interact with friends, a post I found funny, and a post about a social injustice - I picked the first one because it's an example of me sharing personal details about my life and interacting with friends (poll) because I feel those are really important to social media - I chose the second one because it's funny, and I think social media is also an outlet for entertainment - And the last one because, like I mentioned in the interview, social media is also a place where people can talk about causes that are important to them, and class issues are one of the most important/prevalent to me
Interviewee 5	(21 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - These are more in the realm of resources/ interest. By watching them take pictures of looking at like the concert pi I get inspiration for my own photography. Also I use the examples of their social media presence and how they go about showcasing their work now that I am trying to make a photography Instagram. I also look their website links in the bios for inspo for my website. - Lots of the instagrams are examples of what I would like my aesthetic to look like

Interviewee 6

(5 artifacts)

- okay the 1st one is of a day at ucsd where a good amount of brown students showed up to the brown issues pop which is a non profit org that goes to schools & empowers all types of brown students by having an open discussion of issues brown folks have & how we can be supportive of/to one another
being brown is a part of who i am & all the brown students are part of my community & that day i knew that i was part of a community of students on campus that wanted the same things i wanted
- 2nd one is of a pictures when i went to go visit my cousins with my dad & brother & brother's gf at oregon
for me it captures 4 cousins who built a snowman, had a snowball fight, & then destroyed a snowball
it's a picture of my experience w/ my cousins
- this picture is of an experience of me being me biking around with my family & stopping to take a break
i like exercising & having a good time
i like the peace sign a lot lol
- with twitter it's more about expressing my thoughts & beliefs about what i have strong opinions about however i also use twitter for content that is wholesome, peaceful
i find twitter to be like a journal of a record of things throughout my life
- for example that tweet is about everything that is going on with covid-19 & how some governors are opening their states & i don't think they even care about the people they are suppose to be serving in their state
- a little bit more about that 1st tweet is that i think u.s citizens elect government officials that don't represent or even care about them if we elect ppl based on our biases then government reflects who those people are

if people don't care our government won't care
either & vice versu

Interviewee 7	(11 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My last 120 likes? Haha - General categories are cars, friends, social media influencers, social justice - Instagram is the easiest in terms of showing what I like quickly. I'm on it everyday for at least 15 minutes - Oh yeah and another tidbit. There are certain gay influencers I follow and something I do is if I liked their post, I'll immediately keep scrolling to find another couple posts to try and divert attention from anyone who sees posts I've liked. There's that Activity section (the heart symbol) where you used to be able to see posts your friends like or new followings. I just looked at it today and it seems IG no longer keeps me posted on what others like but I'm sticking to staying cautious - This is an example. Two of those posts are from an influencer followed by likes of several other pics. Usually followed by cars because that's what I usually get in my feed.
Interviewee 8	(2 artifacts)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - i think for the first one reflects how i tend to find humour in serious situations or situations that make me uncomfortable and this was something that i actually was working on with college because i wanted to take things more seriously, and then for the second photo, i grew up not wanting to tell my family what i was going through and i think especially now that im overseas ive been keeping things to myself bc i dont want them to worry and i've never rly had a proper convo w my parents about my mental health, so im trying to work things through on my own, so i guess for this image i just thought it was really entertaining and relatable hahah

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