

DESIGNING OUR FREEDOM: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY AND VISUAL RHETORICAL
ANALYSIS OF BLACK WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS DIGITAL CONTENT STRATEGY
ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

By

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores the role of race and identity in Black women entrepreneurship and how each of these play a part when developing content for online audiences. The purpose of this study was to better understand how our intersecting identities are important to draw upon or consider, when conducting research in work-place studies or entrepreneurship for technical and professional communication scholars. And with the rise of digital platforms, I wanted to better understand if the entrepreneurial journey factors into the design process of developing content for online audiences. To answer these questions, I used a narrative inquiry approach to conduct 5 separate interviews for each of my participants. The purpose of the interviews was to amplify the voices of each of my participants drawing from Patricia Hill Collins and the Combahee River Collective's Black feminist theory. I then conducted a content analysis of 3 images from each of my participants business Instagram profiles, to demonstrate how design and cultural background can play a role in developing content. The results from this study revealed 3 major outcomes from each of the interviews and 4 emerging themes in the images used for all 5 participants content analysis of Instagram. Together, the themes and outcomes show a direct correction of race, culture, and design in content strategy. Using this data, I was able to develop tenets to help scholars and practitioners imagine a culturally centered design framework for developing content for diverse audiences and situation

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Chapter 1: BLM, A Pandemic, & Black Owned Businesses Response

A timeline of events reported by the New York Times (Taylor “George Floyd Protests: A Timeline”) cites the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man from Minneapolis as the beginning of the mass protests spanning 140 cities across the United States and several countries worldwide that stood in solidarity against police brutality. Although this is not the first time we have seen mass protests that were sparked in response to unjust killings of unarmed black men (and women) in our nation; 2020 was different. Not only did we have to grapple with the global public health crisis brought on by Covid-19, but additionally, the heightened engagement from discussions of racism and police brutality that have been ongoing in Black communities across the United States. What made this moment so significant? In the digital age we live in with all of its technological advancements, the rise of social media and impact on how information is learned and then circulated allows for people to see in real time the continual acts of police brutality and racial violence impacting BIPOC communities. Although the George Floyd protests ignited a nationwide call to action in the form of protests, riots, and social media activism - the culmination of several other deaths and acts of racial violence over the last decade illuminated the importance of this moment. Not only did the mass protests and riots impact businesses and individuals, the global pandemic ultimately shut down states, schools, private and public entities forcing them to pivot to virtual services. And in these very moments I too was greatly impacted in more ways than imagined.

The Remix: A Dissertation in a Pandemic

The nature of this study and the participants I planned to interview were something I had to take into consideration when the pandemic hit. I asked myself, how would I approach each

individual with empathy and care care, while having to rethink my initial questions of identity and empowerment with the ongoing riots taking place in cities across the United States. Secondly, and more importantly, I had to ask myself, how was I doing with everything happening in the world, and how would this moment affect me? As a Black woman, with a Black father and brother, living in a world that too often disregards the effects of traumatic events such as shootings and racism towards Black and brown individuals. I took a moment to ask myself how was I doing as a student researcher, and how would I go about this project while being attentive to my own mental health and overall well-being. These kinds of questions are important not only to researchers, but for Black women as Baker-Bell (2017) describes in her autoethnography on navigating the tenure track as. Black woman with a family and the countless demands that comes with that behind the scenes. Though I did not realize the effect of the aforementioned events would personally have on me because I wanted to put my participants first, I realized soon after defending my proposal to begin this study I needed to pause, reflect, and better understand what was taking place in the world and how might I respond.



Figure 1. BLM Protest at the White House May 2020.

One of the ways I decided to respond to the moment in a way that was meaningful to me, was to use my voice and join hundreds of others on the streets of Washington D.C. to march for Black lives (Figure 1). The Black Lives Matter movement mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes (BLM About). With this in mind, and with the recent death of George Floyd, I wanted to become an active participant in standing up against police brutality, racism, antiBlackness, and white supremacy. What I thought was an intentional “pause” to my dissertation research, actually became part of the story my research participants would also tell. No longer did I want to sit on the outside looking in, I too wanted my voice to be heard. And unbeknownst to me at the time, many of my participants felt the same.

As a Black woman who spent majority of her childhood and youth in Yokosuka Japan as my father served in the United States Navy, I recognized what it was like to have to grapple with multiple intersecting identities. Hearing stories of how my mother and father had to “survive” the streets of Detroit, and ultimately get out of their city to create a better life for themselves and their family shaped my own perception of what it meant to be Black in America. Their story ultimately became part of mine, and during the early summer of 2020, I marched for Black lives, while having my own realization of what it meant to be Black in America. And as this intentional “pause” from my dissertation wrapped up after the summer protests of 2020, I then began to rethink with care, how to proceed in an honest, ethical, and careful way with revised questions and approaches to my dissertation study on identity and social media branding strategies as a Black woman entrepreneur. With this in mind my research questions became:

- 1) How do Black women entrepreneurs enact their identities through social media branding and rhetorical practices?

- 2) In what ways does digital content in social networking sites (SNS) bring our attention to issues of race, culture, and identity?



Figure 2. Graffiti art in D.C during the BLM summer 2020 protests.

The remainder of this chapter will provide a brief literature review on the history of Black entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in technical and professional communication (TPC). This will provide further context into the need for a study grounded in entrepreneurship but specifically focusing on the Black woman's experience and the intersections of race and culture in digital spaces. Throughout this study, I explore how Black women entrepreneurs in the United States are historically positioned to enact their various identities. I examine this by demonstrating how the internet and digital platforms such as blogging and social networking sites have become a space for not only Black entrepreneurs to start a business, but also Black women in the blogosphere and on other digital platforms. Each of these areas have informed parts of my study. Chapter two lays out the methodological and theoretical choices made to conduct this study, and will provide deeper context and explanation into the chosen methods. I

will then briefly present supporting theories and methodology across disciplines such as African and African American studies, Communication and Media Studies, Technical and Professional Communication, and Rhetoric and Composition. These are just a few examples of the interdisciplinary nature of conducting research within this topic area, and not representative of every industry one may draw data from.

Chapter three presents findings from the visual rhetorical analysis conducted with the five participants in this study. Chapter four is an in depth look into the entrepreneurial journeys of the five participants and thought process behind their business content strategies. In the spirit of Black feminism and narrative inquiry, I focus chapter four largely on documenting snapshots of meaningful moments throughout each interview conducted. Finally, in chapter five, I conclude with a discussion on how the visual chapter alongside the narratives reflect a need for a design approach that is intersectional, cultural, and participatory in nature by providing 3 tenets that can be used in future research at the intersections of culture and design in writing studies and TPC.

Literature Review: Entrepreneurship in TPC

As a field, scholars have explored praxis and theory in a variety of workplace and social environments that better inform our students, industry spaces, and the field as a whole. The work done in Technical and professional communication (TPC) is valuable because as a field, [we] seek to solve problems through disciplinarily, pedagogy, practice, social change and a variety of multimedia tools. And while many scholars approach TPC work from industry related practices and workplace settings, there is a growing need to understand how individuals have taken it upon themselves to “solve problems” with innovative solutions. This is where we can look to entrepreneurial writing and design/composing practices to better understand the significance and unique experiences and methods entrepreneurs employ while performing their identities while

online, and in digital spaces. But why entrepreneurship, and more specifically, Black entrepreneurial rhetorical practices online?

The growing interest of entrepreneurship and its role in the Black community has been explored by technical communication scholars and in other fields such as sociology, Black studies, media studies, and economics. During the 50th anniversary of National Small Business Week, the congressional Black Caucus discussed why entrepreneurship matters to Black America. During this discussion on the white house floor, Representative Donald Payne Jr. gave remarks citing that, “historically, Black entrepreneurship has meant opportunities for equality, equity and a vehicle out of poverty. Throughout the years, Black entrepreneurs have harnessed economic power to strengthen the Black community, create jobs and develop a voice to advocate for wellbeing of Blacks in America” ((CBC). Rep. Payne Jr.). During that gathering, other representatives in the Black Caucus also discussed the challenges facing many businesses that fell under the category of “minority owned business”, consisting of access to capital and knowledge to grow their business, which is echoed and discussed further in this paper. From bloggers, to media and tech founders, and local startups, Black women entrepreneurs are worth examining to better understand how the landscape of entrepreneurship is shifting when we move online.

Within these growing conversations however, there is a lack of attention to the women at the forefront of the entrepreneurial movement in not only Black communities, but throughout the United States. Building on this conversation, we find that entrepreneurship as a topic has only recently been explored by scholars in professional and technical communication. In the Introduction to the 2017 special issue on rhetoric of entrepreneurship, Spinuzzi focuses on the varying layers of entrepreneurship, extrapolating the interdisciplinary nature of entrepreneurial research that crosses conversations in rhetoric and writing studies. Spinuzzi defines

entrepreneurship as “the process of discovering and conceptualizing problems and then solving those problems with innovative solutions” (31) but also shares the complex and more nuanced definitions that come with being an entrepreneur. There are some who identify as a *cultural entrepreneur*, and others who would call themselves a *social entrepreneur* (277) He introduces these specific terms, while also presenting other concepts that people may not associate with entrepreneurship such as open innovation, intrapreneurship, and open-source projects to show the many ways we can begin to understand entrepreneurship as a sector. The special issue also addresses the different focal areas in entrepreneurial research that can be looked at, such as identity, culture, and communities amongst others.

For instance, the three articles within the special issue each explore entrepreneurship from a different vantage point. Fraiberg (2017) explores the start-up world in Israel, examining practices that disrupt the workplace and national models through a network of actors. Because Israel contains a massive population of startup companies and innovation hubs for entrepreneurs which Fraiberg calls an “ecosystem” we begin to see the role of networks, drawing from activity theory, globalization, rhetorical narratives, and the impact this has on the actors themselves. Jones (2017) presents more nuanced issues about entrepreneurship in her article “Rhetorical Narrative of Black Entrepreneurs: The Business of Race, Agency, and Cultural Empowerment” (2017) In this piece, she identifies the role of culture, rhetorical agency, and empowerment in twelve black business owners to demonstrate how a narrative inquiry approach can inform scholars in rhetoric and professional and technical communication. To do this, she draws upon the narratives of 12 black business owners, examining how they resist “the damaging domination narrative and perceptions about the weakness of and challenges to black entrepreneurship” (320) which then creates space for cultural empowerment within the community. Finally, Vealey &

Gerding (2017) explore civic entrepreneurship to better understand the rhetorical choices made in the construction of a recreational pool. While this special issue is limited in areas and scope, it allows readers to get a glimpse into the kinds of conversations happening locally and globally, while bringing in conversations of race, gender, class, and geography.

Further research in TPC and entrepreneurship has been done by Spartz and Weber (2015) who examined writing practices of entrepreneurs in which they conducted an electronic survey of 101 entrepreneurs in Wisconsin and North Alabama, which has also been used widely to engage conversations around entrepreneurship in technical communication. The goal of the survey was to see how entrepreneurs write the documents needed before and while operating their business. The authors examined the skills valued by each entrepreneur in addition to the audiences they consider when writing. By analyzing the results, the authors found that 90% or participants found writing to be extremely or very important to their business. The results demonstrate that entrepreneurs highly value writing and rhetorical skills, produce a huge range of documents, and require distinctive genres at different stages of their ventures. While this large study covers a substantial amount of ground, what the article does not account for is the different kinds of writing based on specific industries, as well as the digital landscape. It got me wondering, how race and culture might impact the feelings and rhetorical choices made by the entrepreneurs when it comes to their personal writing practices and how business writing practices sometimes present constraints due to larger systemic issues.

An avenue that is worth furthering the conversation and focusing on is Black entrepreneurial writing and communicative practices online. Across these perspectives, the importance of multimedia tools to solve problems has led to the inclusion of interdisciplinary perspectives and genres that have traditionally not been looked at as artifacts of study. And while many scholars approach TPC work from industry related practices and workplace settings, there

is a growing need to understand how entrepreneurs, specifically Black women entrepreneurs, have taken it upon themselves to “solve problems” with innovative solutions due to the growing number of ways we have seen them using technologies to grow personal brands, blogs, and businesses. Through this research, we can better understand entrepreneurial writing and design practices while taking into account the significance of the unique experiences and methods entrepreneurs utilize while performing in online and digital spaces.

From Black Wall Street and Beyond

Black entrepreneurs in the United States refers specifically to entrepreneurs who identify as African or of African descent across the diaspora. As mentioned earlier, technical communication as a discipline related to writing studies has begun to consider the racial and cultural factors associated with being an entrepreneur, but only few have considered the overall racial, cultural, social, and political implications of this community in writing studies (Jones 2017; Williams 2017; Williams & Pimentel 2014) It is important to consider race in business communication settings because, “Race continues to affect how business is conducted, talked about, and studied. Further, race matters a great deal in relation to business creation and sustainability. Race-based economic inequity has been persistent and continues to affect the success of black businesses, even at the start of the business- ownership process. In this way, economic systems continue to be oppressive institutions for minority business owners” (Jones 322). Paying attention to the link between economic systems and race offers the field of TPC a new perspective. In her study, Jones (2017) considers the role of race, agency, and cultural empowerment, demonstrating the impact this has in the lives of twelve black business owners. She provides some historical context to situate the rise of Black entrepreneurship in America, tracing the history and legacy of racism and systemic oppression in America that caused an economic and social shift in the capitalist system we live in. examining how they resist “the

damaging domination narrative and perceptions about the weakness of and challenges to black entrepreneurship” (320) which then creates space for cultural empowerment within the community. Although the participants in her study did not directly say cultural empowerment was an important aspect to them as an entrepreneur, they discussed ways to help other black entrepreneurs through education and instructional ways. The narratives conducted by Jones also show the ways Black entrepreneurs navigate systemic oppression, such as race-gender, and social justice concerns. Similarly, Bogan & Darity (2008) describe the value and importance of being a Black entrepreneur in America began with enslavement. As Bogan & Darity remind us, “due to slavery, the starting point for the economic progress of Blacks in the U.S. was extremely low”(2018), and “the early Black entrepreneurs were freed slaves functioning in personal services and trades that Whites perceived to be too menial” (2002). The Black entrepreneurs of this time were concentrated in occupations such as hauling, local moving, restaurantship, and hotel keeping. Without getting into a more in-depth historical account of the trans-atlantic slave trade and enslavement in America and its effects on Black families, Bogan & Darity addresses the effects of slavery created disproportioned, unequal, and unethical approaches to capital and success in Black families and communities. Although in many cases across the U.S other business owners who identify as a historically oppressed ethnic group are likely to experience similar challenges, Bogan & Darity argue Black entrepreneurs have to contest with racism and discrimination even more than their counterparts like Jewish immigrants.

This positions Black entrepreneurs in a unique space when compared to not only their white counterparts, but other people of color as well. Over the last 40 years we have seen a rise in Black entrepreneurial success and even an increase of interest in Black business ownership rising during the late 90s. A study (Walstad & Kourilsky 1998) surveying entrepreneurial attitudes of black and white youth ages 14-19 revealed there is a need and desire to learn and

pursue entrepreneurship, even back in the late 90s when the survey was conducted. What was particularly interesting from the research study was that the Black youth were found to have the highest interest in starting their own business, and also identified with being an entrepreneur as a way to give back to their community.

The Legacy of Black Owned Businesses and Entrepreneurs

For many Black entrepreneurs, business is more than just an avenue of success for their families, but also a way out of systemic poverty and a vehicle to give back to the community. A model that is mirrored in many nonprofit organizations. Similar to what the youth in Bogan & Darity's survey revealed, high profile figures in popular culture have also spoken out about the role of entrepreneurial success in the Black community. For instance, the late rapper Nipsey Hustle was known for promoting the importance of economic and financial freedom, something he demonstrated through his music and business ventures from his Marathon Store in Crenshaw, California to investments in several technical companies. In an interview with Forbes contributor Julian Mitchell (2018) Hustle discussed the importance of culture and capital. In so doing, he echoes a narrative championed by other prominent rappers, like Jay-Z and Kendrick Lamar, who argue that power in ownership is the only way to bring success in minority and lower income communities.

The phrase "Buy Black" can be seen trending at any given moment on social media to encourage consumers to support Black owned businesses, According to Danielle Butler (2019), "Black business directories like the Negro Motorist Green Book, and the Simms Blue Book listed Black businesses and services available in Chicago and other major cities. While everyone from Booker T. Washington to Richard Nixon cited black business ownership as the best vehicle for Black self determination, the earliest known coinage of "Buy Black" as a slogan and economic development campaign can be attributed to Black Nationalist and Marcus Garvey

mentee Carlos A. Cooks”. While this model encourages Black communities to support one another, there have been critiques by scholars such as Ross Coleman (2019) claiming the encouragement from Black businesses owners and community members to “Buy Black” won’t change the economic injustices faced by Black and Brown people. Coleman address that rappers and celebrities promoting a Black capitalistic model should remember that high insurance rates, lack of access to funding, regulations that are exclusionary still affect the majority. Coleman’s criticism of the “Buy Black” and “support Black businesses” campaigns is not meant to diminish the value in start-up endeavors and the launching of a business, but to get them to see the bigger picture in eradicating the disproportioned economic wealth gap in America . He believes that the Black capitalistic model will only truly help the upper or middle class Black community, but low income communities will still suffer. Similarly, Butler cautions the promoting of “Buy Black” campaigns because “The exclusively celebratory conversations surrounding black entrepreneurship neglects tackling the reasons Black people are flocking to self employment — to escape racist treatment in the workplace, wage gaps and prolonged unemployment. Although Butler and Coleman offer valid critiques on the downside of focusing our energy to only #BuyBlack, they understand the benefits of it, and hope that it will bring more attention to larger systemic issues regarding economic wealth that need to be addressed.

We must remember, however, the success that has come out of Black entrepreneurial communities in the past, to be hopeful as Nipsey Hussle and so many others are. In 1921, one of the most affluent Black communities in the United States was Greenwood Oklahoma. As many called it, “Black Wall Street” had a population of 100,000 black people and was home to luxury shops, over two dozen restaurants, grocery stores, a hospital, movie theater, and the list goes on. Business in this town was booming, largely due to Jim Crow laws that prevented Blacks from shopping outside of the community. Jim Crow essentially kept the wealth in the community but

created unexpectedly amazing opportunities for this Black community to thrive because they were forced to support their own and only buy from each other. (Brown Washington Post). The Tulsa Riots are said to have occurred due to growing envy and animosity from the outside towns White neighbors who were envious of the wealthy middle class living in Greenwood. The massacre wiped out majority of the businesses and killed over 300 people, injuring several hundred more.

Racism, Entrepreneurship, & The Digital Landscape

When situating the Black entrepreneurial experience into the digital landscape, although community can be formed across platforms and amongst individuals and networks, it cannot be ignored that navigating the digital world brings into the conversation issues of race, space, embodiment, and rhetorical practices. As Lisa Nakamura (2002) informs us, “the internet is a place where race happens” (1) but it’s not always clear how those conversations on race, ethnicity, and identity shift when we go online. What Nakamura brings to our attention, however, is navigating one’s identity while online shows just how complex belonging to one community or network based on your racial or ethnic background is. In her discussion on Gregory Stephens essay *On Racial Frontiers: The New Culture of Frederick Douglass, Ralph Ellison, and Bob Marley*, she explains in depth his analysis on racial categories that are frequently designed to help people identify and join into a specific community when registering an account on different digital platforms. This traditional, dropdown menu function however can lead to further marginalization for mixed raced or multiethnic people to choose a “box” to fit in. Furthermore, she explains “when race is put on the menu...it is cybertyped in such a way that mestiza or other culturally ambiguous identities---such as those belonging to hyphenated Americans---are rendered unintelligible, inexpressible, and invisible, since they can’t be (or rather aren’t) given a “box” of their own” (120). As a business, or individual brand, despite these complex identity

markers, for entrepreneurs thinking about the digital solely to build their businesses brand, Rhynesha Byng (2018) tells us the importance of getting your brand online, but the difficulty many black businesses have in doing so. Some of these reasons include general lack of understanding how to do online marketing and advertising or finding the technologies too complex. While these are likely sentiments felt from many new business owners who have not previously engaged with using online platforms such as GOOGLE APPs, the Digital Coaches Program lead by Daraiha Greene is bridging the gap to reach black, brown, and LGBTQIA+ and other underrepresented minorities. Because consumers are 38% more likely to engage with a business that has an online presence, the work of Google Digital Coaches at the time of this article had already reached over 15,000 small businesses in major cities like L.A, Detroit, and Atlanta. When thinking about the challenges Black entrepreneur already face, its initiatives such as these that speak to the value of the internet as an entrepreneur despite the research that shows how many spaces are designed unequally.

Design & Content Strategy in Writing Studies

As content strategists, TPC scholars can play an instrumental role in a business's overall success in achieving their mission and goals by partnering with them to employ a proposed content strategy. Although content strategies in entrepreneurial communities has not been widely studied with a focus on the role of race and identity, content strategy as a whole is not entirely new to writing studies discipline. Scholarship surrounding content strategy specifically in the workplace settings has been an area of study by scholars such as Dush et al (2016) Flanagan & Getto (2017) amongst others. Even still, when considering scholarship in the discipline, Flanagan notes that, "the majority of the technical communication literature on content strategy comes from industry sources" which is not entirely bad because both industry and academia can, and *should* inform one another. Although helpful to technical communication experts, these sources

emphasize the benefits of developing and implementing content strategies (e.g., cost savings and consistent communication). Moreover, these industry sources use language and concepts that an audience, composed largely of people whose background is not technical communication, would probably struggle to grasp” (58). Clearly, there is a mandate within the discipline to steer this conversation in a way, and using languaging, more palatable to individuals other than technical communication experts. And According to Redish (2012), “people don’t come to websites... or mobile apps or social media for the joy of navigating or searching. They don’t usually come to admire the design. They don’t focus on technology. They come for the content that they think (or hope) is there. People come for information that answers their questions or helps them complete their task. They want that information to be easy to find, easy to understand, accurate, up to date, and credible (2). Reddish makes valid points here, emphasizing the vital role pure content plays in reaching and communicating to audiences online.

There are several definitions as to what counts as design and one of the more widely known definitions within writing studies broadly since the emergence of multimodal composing comes from the New London Group (1996). While this definition does traditionally inform multimodal scholarship, what can be applied from it is the move towards a social justice orientation. In the text, *Writer / Designer* (2018) we learn that “the word multimodal is a mashup of *multiple* and *mode*. ...Multimodal describes how we combine multiple different ways of communicating in everyday life (3) Its important to note that although the images I will be analyzing are digital, multimodal does not necessarily constitute as a digital image and can come in many forms. The New London Group, composed of multimodal composition scholars introduced us to 5 modes of communication: linguistic, visual, aural, gestural, and spatial. The linguistic mode is how language is being used, written or spoken (14). Visual mode refers to use of images and other characteristics readers or onlookers see (14). Aural focuses on sound or

sound effects (16). Gestural emphasizes movement and how body language, expressions, or interactions between people can make meaning (19). Each mode can be carefully studied and applied when analyzing digital texts on Instagram due to the variety available to creators. In their explanation, designers are positioned as, “inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning and at the same time active designers of meaning. And, as designers of meaning, we are designers of social futures - workplace futures, public futures, and community futures” (65). But how can technical communication think of designing social futures which allows for Black entrepreneurs and other minorities perform identities and claim space for themselves? User Experience (UX) research can bring us a little closer to that, but specifically, user localization. Agboka (2013) and Sun (2012) help us to better understand concepts of design from a technical communicator standpoint. Although they both approach conversations on design and localization from a technical communicator standpoint, the social connection are still there. User localization when building products is important because “ideology, power, economics, knowledge, politics, law, and ethics all as dimensions of a locale, not separate from it” (Agboka 29) In the same way, as Banks (2006) suggests an African American design aesthetic sees “design practices as an important element of larger struggle, of offering ways to resist the stubbornness of racism and racialized exclusions” (130) and “Those of us who care about ending systemic oppressions must design new spaces ,even as we point out problems in our current ones (118). This has been explored by scholars at the intersections of rhetoric, technology, and writing studies.

In Banks’s (2006) body of work, he challenges readers to rethink what has traditionally been called “the digital divide” for minority groups in America, particularly those of African descent. What many have thought to be an issue of access to computers and information literacy that causes this divide, Bank’s argues, “the divide itself is a rhetorical problem at least as much

as it is a technical or material one, and because technology issues have always functioned as a metaphor for imagining collective Black futures” (39). Drawing from African American rhetoric and digital theory, he argues the ways in which African Americans have used technology in the past draw from a rich language and literacy tradition. And In order to better understand the divide, we must rethink the definition of technology to include systems of knowledge, tools, networks of information, economic and power relations that enable how a tool is used (40). Bank’s echoes what many scholars looking at the intersection of race, technology, and the digital divide have been saying to show that the internet has been used by Black individuals across the diaspora in ways not discussed, which continues to promote a deficit-narrative about the so called digital divide. Everett (2002) explores this same argument in depth, taking an Afrocentric approach while tracing African Diasporic engagements of what she calls “cyberspace” to acknowledge the many ways we can find traces of African histories on the web. Of particular interest to this conversation in her study is the citing of popular magazines in which she identifies as “Black cyber presses” (142). These magazines we see evolving from the mid 1940’s to present day are Jet, Ebony, and the Black Tribune to name a few.

The emergence and advancement of these Black publications came during a time where mainstream publications and media did not focus on the Black experience. To combat that, we have seen these popular publications re-invent themselves and transform as technologies began to advance, and journalism recognized the need to migrate platforms to the digital. As the demand for print subscriptions declined, various forms of blog-style magazine were birthed, and today, the blogosphere has become one of the mainstream avenues for many Black intellectuals, influencers, and entrepreneurs. But particularly, Black women have found a space on the internet that impacts the ways we understand, identify performance and production.

What we find through various interactions Black women and entrepreneurs have had online is communicated directly through Catherine Knight-Steele's work, specifically her (2018) research on Black female bloggers and online discourse. She describes the role the internet plays for her participants while addressing similar sentiments expressed through the work of previous writing, rhetoric, and technology scholars saying, "The Internet does not create a unique experience regarding community interaction. Instead, like other communication technologies, the Internet has the potential to be used by marginalized communities to challenge, extend, and refashion already existent resistant communication practices" (122). This resistance has been documented not so much from self-identified entrepreneurs, but from many Black and Brown activists, specifically in the wake of police brutality within the last five years. Moments of activism we see online and the discourse that comes with it focuses predominantly on social movements and activism, such as Richardson (2018) Florini (2014) Sanjay (2013) to name a few. These communicative practices bring to our attention not only performative rhetoric, but the role of language and literacy practices, and how businesses are reaching their audiences online

When we consider the landscape of entrepreneurship and all that can be explored from professional and technical communication scholars, a critical consideration to be made is the theoretical and methodological decisions of researchers, especially when working with digital platforms and minority groups. Building on the social justice turn (Walton, Moore, & Jones, 2019), diverse, community-engaged scholars are pushing the epistemological boundaries of the field to include the rhetorical, languaging, and meaning-making practices that come from historically marginalized groups (Moore 2018, Gonzales 2018, Shelton 2019, McKoy 2019). Shifts in our understandings of what counts as knowledge means applying methods that are centered on social justice outcomes, but also, looking to other fields to see what discussions have

been overlooked, or not given as much attention to. One of the ways this is already happening is through feminist rhetorical practices (Royster & Kirsch 2012), and specifically, Black feminist approaches in TPC (Moore 2018). We've seen this through other popular blogs and websites for women of color such as ForHarriet.com, The Crunk Feminist Collective, MademeNoire, amongst others.

As referenced earlier in this paper, Latoya Sawyer helps us to see the need to examine Black women in the blogosphere. She further explains the need to study black women because, "Despite claims that the United States is now "post-racial," there are several contemporary examples of negative perceptions and hostile receptions to Black women's discourse and literacy practices (4).. Catherine Knight-Steele (2018) and her work on discourse communities of Black women online revealed that in using rhetorical strategies, bloggers and their communities create spaces that serve different purposes for the African American community, including preservation of culture, public resistance, and strengthening of group institutions" (123). Although each blogger did not directly identify as an entrepreneur, many bloggers do engage in entrepreneurial activities such as selling merchandise on various platforms, taking on brand sponsorships, and even building a personal brand to monetize off of in the future. As Knight-Steele suggests, "The blogs were a mode of entrepreneurial enterprise for many of the bloggers in the sample. The spaces they have created provide financial gain for themselves and their families" (121). With the current influences that affect Black women and minority entrepreneurial efforts, an intersectional approach drawing from Black feminist theory is one way to address questions of identity and performance within the digital landscape.

Looking ahead, an intersectional critique when researching Black entrepreneurs and Black-owned businesses, "provides liberatory potential for those who seek to understand power

structures that control the lives of so many, among them, Black people across the diaspora.”

(Nobel 2) And as someone who has not previously centered my own scholarship using Black feminist theory, I now see the power and value in doing so within this dissertation project. It is an avenue for more inclusive, equitable research that can examine the layers of oppression in discriminatory sites, while providing new ways of freedom, especially on the internet.

Chapter 2: Theory & Methods

All African-American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a Black women's standpoint.

-Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought

When embarking upon this dissertation study, it was important to me to not only center, but amplify the voices of Black women. Over the past four years as a Black woman researcher, I have come to realize that my own positionality and experiences provide a unique perspective and approach to this project. Prior to attending graduate school I traveled the world, spending the majority of my young adult years in Japan while my father served in the Navy. Growing up in Japan as an African-American woman, I understood the complexities of my identity of being “Black” largely due to the fact that it was something that my parents discussed with my siblings and I, and how we would need to navigate the world. Some may call this a form of “double consciousness” a term derived from W.E.B Dubois “One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Dubois, 1897). This double consciousness however is even further complicated through the lens of being a woman, and being Black. As the quote aforementioned by Patricia Hill-Collins, there is a shared experience by Black women / women of African descent. Though each experience is certainly not expected to be the same, as a whole, there is a history that unites us. As Hill-Collins further suggests, core themes such as the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism (22). However, having shared historical experiences does not suggest we all respond to them in the same way, which Collins

explains is due to factors such as social class, sexual orientation, ethnicity, region of the country, urbanization, and age (24). But what is most important is the consciousness Black women as a whole have.

Exploring these themes through an interdisciplinary approach drawing from the following disciplines: professional and technical communication, African American rhetoric, and Black studies research guided me in developing the following research questions for this study:

How do Black women entrepreneurs enact their identities through social media branding and rhetorical practices? Additionally, I wanted to know in what ways does digital content in social networking sites (SNS) bring our attention to issues of race, culture, and identity?

For the remainder of this chapter I will discuss the specific theoretical approaches I choose to draw upon to answer these questions, the design of the study, and how data was collected and analyzed.

Theory: Black Feminism

Black feminism provides a way to understand identity formation and initiatives for social change, offering a useful and anti-essentializing lens for understanding how both race and gender are constituted through historical, social, political, and economic processes ,creating openings for challenging research questions and new analytical possibilities. (Nobel 2016). Patricia Hill Collins also outlines the ways in which black women are uniquely positioned between multiple systems of oppression; including race and gender. From this position of ‘intersectionality’, she argues for a Black Feminist Epistemology which preferences: personal ways of knowing and writing, narrative and dialogue rather than debate, validation of emotion and personal accountability.

These communicative practices bring to our attention the role of language and literacy practices, how people can perform their activism online, and how to get audiences involved.

These practices can directly be seen in business settings when creating content and selling your products online. In her own study of Black women's language practices on digital platforms, Latoya Sawyer states the significance of studying Black women because "Findings on Internet use and social media participation by the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that African Americans and women are among the top users of social media sites" (Sawyer 13). She goes on to explain the need to study Black women because "Despite claims that the United States is now "post-racial," there are several contemporary examples of negative perceptions and hostile receptions to Black women's discourse and literacy practices in addition to the aforementioned example of Sandra Bland." (4). But particularly, Black women have found a space on the internet that impacts the ways we understand identity performance and production. This, however, is not a new phenomenon but with the advent of social media and the digital era [it]represents the potential for the continuation of... reclaiming media spaces as sites of Black intellectualism and rhetorical practices in digital and public spaces traditionally not recognized in writing studies scholarship" (Wourman 2020) In the few, aforementioned digital communicative practices from Black women online, the stories of these women are what unfortunately gets lost through the digital space. In the same spirit of reclaiming space and amplifying voices, a narrative inquiry approach to collecting these stories

There are several reasons we can think of that would justify centering Black women's voices in scholarship.

- 1) As Beverly Guy-Sheftall asserts, Black women experience a special kind of oppression and suffering in this country which is racist, sexist, and classist because of their limited access to economic resources.

- 2) This “triple jeopardy” has meant that the problems, concerns, and needs of black women are different in many ways from those of both white women and black men.
- 3) Black women must struggle for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously.
- 4) There is no inherent contradiction in the struggle to eradicate sexism and racism as well as the other “isms” which plague the human community, such as classism and heterosexism
- 5) Black women’s commitment to the liberation of blacks and women is profoundly rooted in their lived experience.

Considering these five vantage points, using a Black feminist lens to explore the intersections of identity, entrepreneurship, and social media content places this study in alignment with the social justice turn in TPC (Walton et al, 2019).

Finally, in the spirit of Black feminism this study acknowledges and draws from the work of Black feminist scholars who created the Combahee River Collective Statement which states:

- 1) A commitment to the liberation of oppressed groups, especially Black women. ○
Commitment to gender equality ○ Commitment to liberation/freedom/equality for Black and minority groups regardless of age, sex, nationality, and economic status.
- 2) Commitment to social change.

Theory: Triple Quandary Theory

Applying a specific cultural lens such as the triple quandary theory can be beneficial when conducting research to understand the role of identity when considering the digital landscape of Black women entrepreneurs. In *Research Methods in Africana studies* (Mcdougal 2000) Boykin explains the triple quandary theory which can be used to understand the patterns and behaviors of African American culture. This theory argues that there are three central

concepts that represent the realms of African American culture: 1) mainstream, 2) minority, and 3) Afro-cultural. Although there are many theoretical approaches to understanding the significant aspects of what makes a culture, such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) or Cultural Theory, and even Afrocentricity; the “triple quandary theory” argues each of the three areas of African American culture are reflective in everyday experiences.

For the mainstream, Boykin describes this attribute as the beliefs, values, and behavioral styles consistent with the majority living in the United States. Minority consists of coping strategies and defense mechanisms used by any minority living in an oppressive social-environment. And lastly, the Afro-cultural concept represents the link between contemporary people of African descent and traditional African cultural patterns of thinking and behavior (Mcdougall 48). Similar to African American rhetorical theory, the quandary theory identifies nine interrelated dimension of African American culture which are spirituality, harmony, movement, expressiveness, music, dance, high levels of sensation, orality, and understanding that social time is based on perception (seen as passing through, not material). This theoretical framing can be useful in better understanding the ways in which Black entrepreneurs navigate day to day life and the values we see emphasized through their digital communications.

Method: Multimodal Visual Design

Visual rhetorics studies have historically been used to account for the rhetoric at play in images such as still photographs, but what happens when we take images to the digital? In visual culture studies the central question of concern is commonly establishing meaning. This is not always treated as something to be gleaned solely from the image itself, but from the inter-textual dimensions of specific images and the social practices of which they are a part, becoming meaningful in viewing and circulation” (Mayer and Weller, 216)

A common issue I found, in not only this project but previous studies involving mixed media and images is interpreting meaning and culture. In fact, this kind of work is indeed difficult because “many of the problems faced by social media researchers – how to assess meaning, how to develop critique, how to identify continuity and discontinuity...” (216) I found that using a Black feminist lens to apply my own interpretation to the content developed on each site would not only be limited, but likely bias and possibly misrepresent the true meaning. Research in visual culture studies has addressed this common issue, and was helpful in many ways for me to approach the social media analysis part of the study.

Gillian Rose's (2012) articulation of the three ‘sites’ where the meanings of images are made argues for researchers to consider the following when analyzing images:

- 1) the site of production, including the technologies, genre conventions, and socioeconomic conditions shaping that production
- 2) the site of the image itself, including its meanings, its composition, and the effects it is thought to have, and
- 3) the site of ‘being seen’ by audiences, including how it is being interpreted and by whom, the range of viewing options, and the ways it is circulated and displayed (216).

I used this approach when analyzing the different types of content on each public Instagram page, ranging from static images, videos, multimodal graphics, and text based images/quotes. From there, I created common themes that were seen from each page that reflected the business values and ideals. Similarly, after transcribing the interviews conducted I was able to identify common themes across the interviews based on recurring key words and phrases that were said. Although this approach is useful, what my final analysis revealed was, in both analyses, there was a I realized there is a component that needs to be added when analyzing digital artifacts and images that directly makes room for the cultural background influences.

Method: Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a methodological and analytical approach that affords the researcher a unique sensitivity to participants' epistemological and ontological perspectives by tapping into their lived experiences. Ideally, participants guide the meaning-making process by sharing their own stories in their own voice. (Jones 2018) Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research that emphasizes the importance of lived experiences in research across a number of academic disciplines. It is a method of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data. This data collection, analysis, and reporting all rest on a focus on participants' telling of narratives (participants' voice), the co-construction of the meaning of narratives by the participant and researcher, and the presentation of findings in a narrative form. Finally, as Jones (2016) states, "narrative inquiry as a process and research tool acknowledges that narrative is powerful because it allows all individuals a unique voice. Privileging voice and reading silences is an important consideration for a feminist approach that moves toward social justice. Giving voice and agency to participants and populations that are potentially oppressed and othered is well within the capability of narrative inquiry" (480)

One of the ways of engaging a narrative inquiry would be to apply the five dimensions listed below during the interview with participants. As Jones (2016) shares, "Clandinin and Connelly present four dimensions of a narrative inquiry: inward, outward, backward, and forward. A fifth dimension of place also helps to situate the four dimensions in a concrete setting.

These dimensions allow a researcher to more fully capture participants' narratives and experiences. The authors describe each of the dimensions as follows:

Inward: "toward the internal conditions, such as feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, and moral dispositions'

Outward: “toward the existential conditions, that is the environment;”

Backward and Forward: “temporality—past, present, and future;” and

Place: “attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes.”

These dimensions, when examined together, present a more full description of an experience” (480). Finally, “ narratives deconstruct that researcher–participant binary by allowing researchers to “view themselves as narrators as they develop interpretations and find ways in which to present or publish their ideas about the narratives they studied ...” which aligns well when drawing from a Black feminist framework.

Study Design

I conducted five 1 hour zoom interviews for this study in the summer of 2020. For the participants, I selected the self-identifying Black women based on who I had access to on my social media platforms based on their public platforms, and Black feminist criteria I developed that will be explained in the remainder of this section. Additionally, it is important to note that each woman was an individual I had built some form of relationship over time by engaging with their business and personal brands online, or in person. This was important for a few reasons. I wanted to be intentional in crafting this dissertation. Before selecting women to interview, I wanted to ensure my procedures and criteria for selection reflected as best to my knowledge a Black feminist perspective and social justice orientation. I also had further access to each participant from either a personal relationship, or virtual connection that has grown from interactions online. As a Black woman I am also aware of my positionality in this study, and tried to eliminate any bias that was likely to occur by not inserting myself or my own perspectives throughout the interviews. Finally, each participant for this study was someone who

self identified as a Black woman or of African descent, and an entrepreneur as stated earlier in this chapter.

For the remainder of this chapter I will provide an overview of the selection criteria and rationale, question prompts, and gathering and analyzing methods. In doing so, I will show how the varying methods and theories used ultimately address a need for a social justice / culturally centered orientation to analyzing digital multimodal artifacts.

Selection Criteria

In order to determine a criteria to narrow down my search of potential interviewees, I first created a list of Black women I followed on social media, specifically Instagram and Facebook because they are the ones I most frequently use. Ultimately, each participant was selected based on having a public Instagram profile due to the visual modality of the social media platform and its high popularity from business owners. After selecting a few women that had public social media business pages I then narrowed down industries that spanned from Health/Beauty/, Travel/Service, Graphic Design, and Apparel. Within the Black community, these industries are common and several have been popping up over the years. Finally, after contacting each woman who fit the aforementioned criteria, I made my final selection based on the length of time they had been in business, ranging from 1-10+ years, and having a mission that aligned with Black feminist theory.

The criteria I used to determine what constitutes as a business whose mission/values align with Black feminist and social justice values depended on what was made public through their websites and social media platforms. I read each mission statement, biography, about page, and any other identifying section to find parallel words or statements that aligned with the Combahee River Collective Statement which states:

- A commitment to the liberation of oppressed groups, especially Black women.

- Commitment to gender equality
- Commitment to liberation/freedom/equality for Black and minority groups regardless of age, sex, nationality, and economic status.
- Commitment to social change

Given this final criteria, the five participants detailed below were selected.

Participant Overview

Denishia Macon, Owner of Macon Designs. Denishia Macon is a visual communicator who specializes in branding and graphic design. She is the founder and CEO of Macon Designs, a branding company she started in 2017 although her creative journey began in 2013 (MaconDesigns.com) She is a trained visual communicator with a degree from the University of South Carolina. Her occupation as a graphic designer was unique in that I was able to draw from her expertise during our conversation and the visual analysis of her images found in chapter three.

Nancy Young, Owner of “Delicate Beauty Therapeutic Spa (DBTS Skin Bar). Nancy Young is the owner and founder of Delicate Beauty Therapeutic Spa, better known as DBTS Skin Bar. An entrepreneur with over ten years of experience in the skin care and wellness industry, has created her own line of products that have been featured in stores such as the well known chain, Macy’s. A Michigan native, DBTS focuses on getting you “proven results”. With a background in Psychology, she realized early on she wanted to help people in another way. According to her website, the spring of 2011 Nancy developed the ultimate tool for educating her clients on how to maintain and achieve optimal skin health Dbts Skin Bar, which was originally developed as an educational site that broke down in detail skin types, diseases and how to treat them. Nancy has 12+ years of skin health/wellness experience. She completed her

600 hour certification in Aesthetics from the Douglas J Aveda Institute & currently she holds over 1,000 hours of post graduate courses, making her a Master Aesthetician. She is a Michigan Board Certified Aesthetician & Certified in Nutritional Counseling & Wellness.

(DBTSSkinBar.com)

India Young, Owner of “Buttercreme Beauty, LLC. India Young, owner of Buttercreme Beauty had the idea to create an organic skin care line after her own struggles with eczema. At the time of this study, India has been operating her business for two years, but her journey began a few years prior. After developing eczema in 2017, India began researching natural ingredients and formulas to help combat the skin issues she was experiencing. A Flint, Michigan native, India has created a brand that is in high demand from her customers due to their natural ingredients and unique smells, which she calls “the dessert for your body” (buttercremebeauty.com). As a Black owned business, India provided a unique perspective on how her identity as a Black woman operating a Black owned business during the pandemic shifted her perspective on how she saw herself making an impact in the community.

Brittany Floyd, Owner of & Travel Co. Brittany Floyd, owner of several businesses and most recently &Travel Co. is an entrepreneur of over five years in the travel industry. Self-identifying as an “accidental entrepreneur” she has traveled to dozens of countries across the globe while being a flight attendant. She fell into entrepreneurship by organizing trips for large groups of friends, and was encouraged by those traveling alongside her to consider charging people because of her highly crafted experiential itineraries. Soon, & Travel Co, a lifestyle travel company for professionals (andtravelcompany.com) was created.

Angel Reynolds, Owner of The Saved Chic. Angel Reynolds is the founder of The Saved Chic, a Christian clothing apparel line and lifestyle brand. She has been an entrepreneur for four

years (at the time of this study). Her clothing line provides uplifting messages that are not only centered on faith but encourage, inspire, and uplift both men and women due to their growing unisex product line. Angel's presence on social media is what drew me to follow her page, years ago due to the unconventional approach to marketing her Christian brand. Out of the five participants, Angel was the only one whose religious background directly influenced the business she started, which made for a unique examination when understanding the role of being an entrepreneur as she calls herself a "Christian entrepreneur" with a goal to reach men and women regardless of their background or religious affiliation.

Using a narrative inquiry approach to help guide the interview I created three categories (themes) each with a range of questions to discuss. I found it helpful to create themes or categories for the set of questions that guided my interview. The three themes in addition to basic demographic questions were based on the set of questions: 1) Identity 2) entrepreneurial journey 3) social media strategy and branding. I created a coding schema based on recurring key words and phrases from each interview.

For each themed category I had 3-4 questions, with a total of 10 questions in all. *See table below. In addition to interviewing each participant, I was curious as to how they used their social media platforms to engage with customers, sell products, and acknowledge past, present, or current social/cultural issues that may or may not be directly related to their business's brand. By cross examining their public social media posts along with the interviews, my goal was to better understand how narratives and images inform one another, or perhaps tell a different story. In order to do so, I analyzed posts made within the last 5 years and selected the final images that told similar stories drawn out from the narrative interviews. Because each image was selected

from Instagram, when it comes to analyzing social media artifacts, a multimodal approach is one way to account for the varying modalities at play.

In the remaining chapters, I will present the common themes that appeared not only in the interviews conducted but throughout the digital artifacts across the participants social media platforms. Finally, I will present a new approach to consider when analyzing digital artifacts that account for cultural references within an image.

Table 1. Categories and Questions for Narrative Interviews.

Category	Demographic Questions	Theme: Identity	Theme: Entrepreneurial Journey	Theme: Social Media Strategy & Branding
Questions	Name Age Business type Years in business	How would you describe your different identities Ex: Race, Occupation, Hobbies/Interest Can you tell me a story of a time time where you became aware of your “blackness” or identity as a woman throughout your career	Tell me how you got started in your business Tell me a time you felt successful Tell me a story about a difficult moment in your journey to becoming an entrepreneur	Talk about a specific moment or moments that you have found social media to benefit you as an entrepreneur What decisions or though processes have helped you decide on how to create personal and business pages on social media platforms We are in a pandemic and have experiences national civil unrest, can you tell me how you feel when posting content . How do you navigate posting content that resonates with your

Table 1. (cont'd)

				mission, during the current climate. Take me through your thought process of building your personal brand identity online, is it connected to your business or separate.
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Chapter 3: The Stories Images Tell: A Visual Rhetorical Analysis of Multimodal Images on Instagram

"It is also critical that African American rhetoric engage the possibilities available in design, because for all of the conversations that have taken place about design in rhetoric, composition, and technical communication, all of those talking and all of those talked about have been white and almost all have been male" Adam Banks, 2006

Have you ever wondered the story's images tell? Storytelling as a rhetorical activity is not uncommon and is explored in works such as *Letting Stories Breathe* (Frank 2010) and *The Truth about Stories* (King 2003). However, when we begin to focus on the stories behind visual & digital content, an additional lens is necessary to perform a concise content analysis that captures the affordances and constraints of the images being examined. Considering the impact of narratives alongside the visual and the stories they tell, for this study, I performed a visual content analysis of two Instagram posts from the five participants' social media business pages. In addition to the narrative interviews later explored in chapter four, I was curious if there was any correlation between how the participants discussed the role of identity and content strategy vs what is being presented online. For each participant, I choose two images that reflect their overall brand, based on the content they had posted over the last five years. In browsing the displayed content on each business page, I was particularly interested in pulling out images that might speak to broader societal issues that were outside the traditional business services they offered. In studying these images, I was able to draw conclusions as to how they can inform onlookers and audiences that visit their page on broader social and cultural topics, or if there was no apparent outside connection to broader issues outside of their business dealings. The

businesses I will discuss below are Macon Designs (www.macondesigns.com), Buttercreme Beauty (www.buttercremebeauty.com), DBTS Skin Bar (www.dbtsskinbar.com), & Travel Co. (<https://andtravelcompany.com>), and The Saved Chic (www.thesavedchic.com/).

The second part of my data collection and analysis appears in chapter 4 will then focus on the individual interviews I conducted with each participant, to provide a first hand account between how identity and brands speak to one another. Through detailing this analysis, I was able to learn how each business developed a personal brand strategy that goes beyond what people may assume is simply a “pretty” Instagram aesthetic but is what I call *more than aesthetics*. For the first analysis I choose to focus primarily on the design, and the remainder images chosen will focus on areas connected to the emerging themes.

Design & Visual Rhetorics: A Brief Overview

Design is a rhetorical function that plays an important role in each of the canons of rhetoric, most obviously related to style (particularly in terms of visual rhetoric), but also of organization. Instead of saying what design is, most design theorists describe what design does. Donald Norman describes how design should function, arguing that it should make conceptual models visible, including showing required or alternative actions and their possible results, and should do so easily and naturally for the user. These design approaches are easily applicable to physical and digital objects" (Douglas and Ball 11).

Understanding the rhetorical functions and being able to name them is where I see the importance of multiliteracy coming into play. In terms of technical communicators, we cannot leave out the impact of design in making local, national, and global change. Whether this be in our schools or communities- it all has to do with how things are being designed for social engagement. Being so widely influenced by visual imagery every day, having the tools and competency to analyze what we see, makes change possible. Now historically, images have

always played a major role in developing consciousness and the relationship of the self to its surroundings (Helmets and Hill 1). Images are a part of our everyday lives and play a role in how we understand and engage in everyday activities. Their functions, traditionally overshadowed by written discourse, are agents in themselves and can be linked to several social movements that relied heavily on visual imagery such as the civil rights movement, Vietnam war protests, and the fight to end police brutality (Wourman, qtd in *Becoming a Writing Researcher*).

Though rhetoricians have acknowledged the importance of visual rhetorics as a viable area of study, there are many strides and advancements to be made when thinking about cultural influences to visual rhetoric frameworks. If visual rhetorics is a viable area to help students and scholars understand the importance of visual communication, how do we consider conversations of race, representation, and culture when creating content for public audiences on social networking platforms, particularly on Instagram? Considering the quote posed in the opening chapter, a greater question to consider however is if Banks' call for an African American design framework can better help us understand multimodal images and the messages they tell? The data analysis in the next section will show how I was able to explore this while unpacking the themes found in the content strategy of my five participants.

Visual Analysis of Brands Content Strategy: More Than Aesthetics

Macon Designs (figures 3-4) is a graphic design company run by Denishia Macon. At first glance of their business page on Instagram that has a total of 6,800k followers¹ you find an assortment of colorful multimodal posts ranging from image and text, reels, animated images or “gifs”, and Instagram video clips. From scrolling through Macon Designs profile page, their

¹ This number, and each number stated for the remaining participants was documented in April 2021 and may have changed by the time of publication .

services offered to clients range from flyers, logos, business cards, and t-shirt designs as far back from 2016 and beyond. When I was searching for graphics to analyze that represented her brand over the last five years the images that stood out were two that reflected the development of what appears to be her content strategy from 2016 to 2021. This can be found in Figure 3. Described below.



Figure 3. Macon Designs branding graphic.

The second image is one that almost all participants had in some fashion in line with “Black out Tuesday” (Figure 4), a day where many businesses participated in not posting on social media to take a stand against injustices and show solidarity for the many Black lives lost from police brutality. Throughout 2020 many communities and individuals became more vocal than we have seen in the past few years when it comes to injustices facing the Black community, but particularly the killings of unarmed Black men and women. With social media being an integral part of a brand’s identity, I was particularly interested in discovering what Brands took

to their social platforms to raise awareness directly or indirectly to the social movements of our time.



Figure 4. Macon Designs black out Tuesday graphic.

Taking a close look at figures 1 drawing from Gillian Rose's articulation of the three 'sites' when analyzing images: (1) the site of production, including the technologies, genre conventions, and socioeconomic conditions shaping that production, (2) the site of the image itself, including its meanings, its composition, and the effects it is thought to have, and (3) the site of 'being seen' by audiences, including how it is being interpreted and by whom, the range of viewing options, and the ways it is circulated and displayed (216), I focused on the production, image, and site of being seen for each participants images. In figure 1, the site of production reveals a standard type of post which is typically across a variety of Instagram user pages: image with text on top of the image, or simply a image with a caption. Applying this type of method was useful in that most visual rhetoric scholarship does not account for newer digital

artifacts since the emergence of social media platforms allowing for multimodal content. In this particular post, the visual mode reminds us to focus on color, layout, style, size, perspective, and framing. In doing so, we can better understand the effectiveness of the site of production from any type of content created by a brand, regardless of the medium being used.

The visual modality in figure. 1 reveals significant information about the brand itself, based on the color, layout, and composition. Macon Designs displays a colorful color scheme, which consist of purple and pink for cold font colors. This consistent color scheme allows for audiences to associate a certain aesthetic to the business even with her company servicing others. This is important to note when describing the kinds of posts you can find on her page. Similar to the 4 other businesses, there are a range of modalities found in each post- ranging from static text and image posts, to animated images, to short video clips such as “reels” or “tik toks” that allow for sound, text, and visuals. The site of production provides space when analyzing an image to associate technologies, genre conventions, along with the image itself to better understand what is happening. Aside from the color scheme in Figure 3., what is crucial to pay particular attention to is the meaning behind the words displayed “Define what your brand stands for: core values and tone of voice. Communicate that consistently.” This particular message can be reflective of Macon Designs entire brand because as they service other clients, that is ultimately what they are helping them do by providing graphics, flyers, logos, business cards, and other designs. The challenge in being a graphic design company is being able to do this while helping others, and Macon design has uniquely set themselves a part by establishing a brand theme, while also displaying customer products they have designed.

Alongside the image and text, you will also notice a small cartoon icon, which is a graphic of the founder herself. As many companies tend to watermark their images, smaller

brands have taken it upon themselves to develop a more personalized approach, from initials, to logos, and also a more traditional watermark. After going back through the last five years of Macon Design's posts, there was a noticeable change that this icon was not used until January 2019, which also was when more educational and helpful tips were being displayed on colorful graphics along with the associated captions. This development in their content strategy signals an awareness the brand recognized the value in offering more than one form of content to their audience. This brings me to the first common theme found in each overall business content strategy:

Theme 1: Content Strategy Apparent for Each Participant

Content strategy can be easy to notice simply by doing a quick glance at what an individual sees taking place on a website, or social media feed. For instance, Buttercreme Beauty (figures 5-7) has a consistent color palette that is noticeable over the years when scrolling through their Instagram profile feed. Choosing primary and secondary colors of black and yellow helps audiences identify with the brand when they see it on the site or elsewhere. While different, there was some kind of pattern they followed having primary and secondary colors to remain consistent with their brand. Identifying this color schema in any visual analysis is important, especially when thinking about how a company brands themselves. By identifying certain colors within a brand, it alludes to not only how the business wants to be remembered, but how they also want customers to feel.

Buttercreme Beauty, known as "the dessert for your body" is a Black owned, natural skin care collection offering a variety of face, lip and body food to promote self-love and selfcare. Currently, their product line includes a range of scents for their bestselling body lotions, body butters, lip scrubs, fragrance roll on oil, and beard oil for men. Reaching over 1,4000

followers on Instagram Buttercreme Beauty is known for their all-natural ingredients that will also cater to your skin care needs.

Though many brands and businesses will first focus on the visual aspect of their content strategy, an important theme that emerged that was consistent throughout each brands content was the diversity of content that not only centered on their products, but on cultural and social issues. Figures 5-7 of Buttercreme Beauty are examples of how this brand was able to develop a consistent content strategy that focused on aesthetics while also bringing attention to who the core audience might be (figure 5). Additionally, we see through (figures 6-7) a direct coorelation of content and brand colors speaking to relevant social issues and moments in 2020 such as “Black out Tuesday” and a awareness to the ongoing pandemic while fighting for Black lives.



Figure 5. Buttercreme Beauty brand photoshoot.

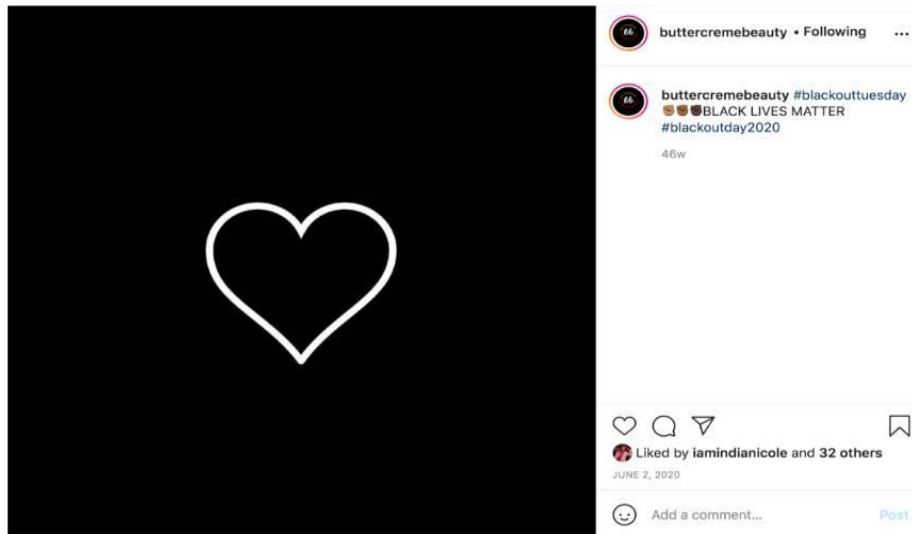


Figure 6. Buttercreme Beauty black out Tuesday graphic.



Figure 7. Buttercreme Beauty BLM graphic.

Theme 2: Culture and Social Issues Reflected in Content Strategy

The national corporate response to the civil unrest felt across the nation cannot go without addressing the overwhelming digital marketing seen throughout social networking platforms.

From Black Lives Matter to Black Out Tuesday, $\frac{3}{5}$ brands directly made a post for #BlackOutTuesday but as you can see, each business brings in culture in some way in their content strategy.

As content strategists, TPC scholars can play an instrumental role in a business's overall success in achieving their mission and goals by partnering with them to employ a proposed content strategy. Although content strategies in entrepreneurial communities has not been widely studied with a focus on the role of identity, content strategy as a whole is not entirely new to writing studies discipline. Scholarship surrounding content strategy specifically in the workplace settings has been an area of study by scholars such as Dush et al (2016) Flanagan & Getto (2017) amongst others. Even still, when considering scholarship in the discipline, Flanagan notes that, "the majority of the technical communication literature on content strategy comes from industry sources" which is not entirely bad because both industry and academia can, and *should* inform one another. Although helpful to technical communication experts, these sources emphasize the benefits of developing and implementing content strategies (e.g., cost savings and consistent communication). Moreover, these industry sources use language and concepts that an audience, composed largely of people whose background is not technical communication, would probably struggle to grasp" (58). Clearly, there is a mandate within the discipline to steer this conversation in a way, and using languaging, more palatable to individuals other than technical communication experts. And According to Redish (2012), "people don't come to websites... or mobile apps or social media for the joy of navigating or searching. They don't usually come to admire the design. They don't focus on technology. They come for the content that they think (or hope) is there. People come for information that answers their questions or helps them complete their task. They want that information to be easy to find, easy to understand, accurate, up to date, and credible (2). Reddish makes valid points here, emphasizing the vital role pure content plays

in reaching and communicating to audiences online. This was evident throughout each business profile analyzed.

As I searched through & Travel Co.'s Instagram feed, what was noticeably different than the other four participants, one thing that stood out was how this particular brand did not directly address current issues taking place in the United States that were affecting the Black community, but a quick glance of their Instagram page reveals this is another aspect of their mission: education, cultural diversity, and social awareness. As a travel company, &Travel co's website states they are a company that "curates quarterly immersive experiences for young professionals and creatives between 25 – 39 years old. Our main purpose is to build community, champion responsible travel, and go off the beaten track.(andtravel.com). Through their immersive trips, that were unfortunately put on hold during the 2020-2021 pandemic, figures 8-9 are just two images that speak to the overall mission of the brand.

If you look at figure 8, the statement "What's Going on in Congo" with use of the hashtag #CongoIsBleeding raises awareness of a very specific issue that may be particularly interesting to followers that like to travel internationally. And while & Travel Co.'s mission does not directly state a goal to educate their consumers on world issues, it does make sense that there would be a added component to their content strategy that informs travel enthusiasts on what is taking place in the world.



Figure 8. & Travel Co. What's Going on in the Congo Graphic.

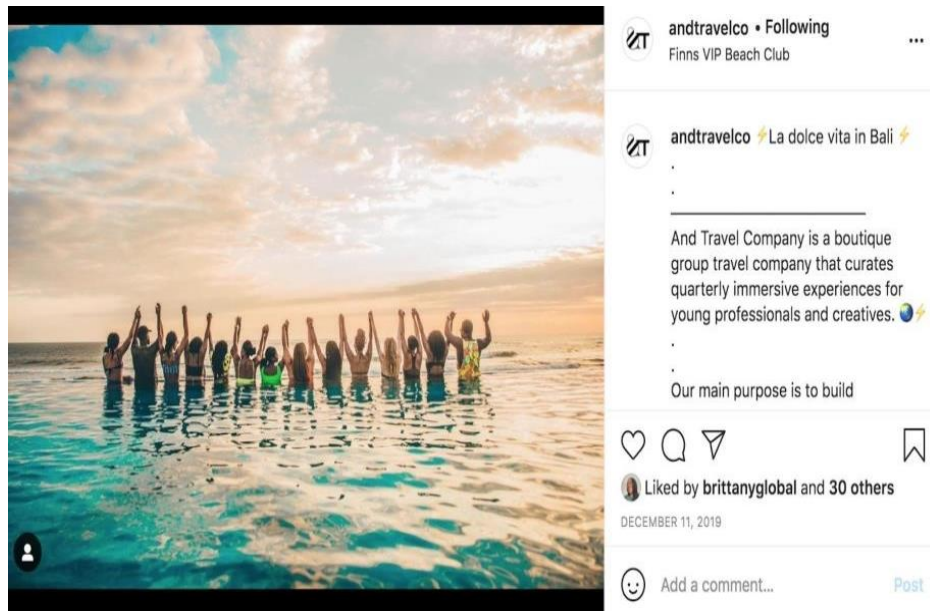


Figure 9. & Travel Co. Photo of Destination Travel Group.

This is also similar to DBTS Skin Bar, (Figures 10-11) which most of their Instagram feed is centered around skin care products and global wellness practices that can be attributed to an overall healthy routine and lifestyle.



Figure 10. DBTS Skin Bar Glowing Skin Graphic.



Figure 11. DBTS Skin Bar Buddha Graphic.

Theme 3: Content Strategy Displayed Through Use of Multimodality

We cannot talk about content strategy on Instagram or any social media platform without a discussion on the role of multimodality. As mentioned before, multimodality is not new to the discipline of Writing studies, and multimodal design is a format we see consistently across Instagram feeds. Each participant incorporated different mediums available on Instagram to reach audiences such as reels, tiktoks, gifs, etc. After surveying the participants business pages, a recurring theme was their use of integrating different modalities into their content strategy. According to Instagram.com, they offer a wide variety of features for users. Some of these features are known as Reels, the “Story” feature, DM (direct messaging), IGTV for long form video, and more recently, the shop feature for businesses and brands. The importance of taking advantage of as many features as possible on Instagram and other social networking sites is essential for business and marketing success. This was especially noticeable on Macon Design and The Saved Chic’s page.

While each participant did incorporate some form of video, and standard image with text content, Macon Designs and The Saved Chic used a variety of tools to reach their audience, leveraging the range of multimodality and the impact it can have when you create content that speaks to different forms of learning. A multimodal approach in design and content creation benefits all users because it draws upon the senses and different parts of the brain that help with the meaning-making process. Although I could not present some of the moving images or videos within this chapter, I wanted to note the recurring use of multimodality on social media.

Theme 4: Representation

The final theme I want to discuss that was found throughout each strategy was that my participants were each represented in some way on their business page. This is important to note for a few reasons. One, it shows there is an awareness they have that in order to reach their audiences in a more authentic and personal way, making themselves “known” ever so often on

their Instagram business page can have a greater impact on reaching their customers or potential customers. I would like to highlight that Macon Designs and DBTS Skin Bar are unique when it comes to the other 3 brands because their business model was created with the founder and CEO in mind. For example, owners of Macon Design and DBTS Skin Bar both stated “I am my brand” during their individual interviews, so it was not a surprise to find several posts with their faces on their Instagram pages. This was an intentional marketing strategy for the other three businesses as well. When asked during their individual interviews about curating separate or mirage social media accounts, The Saved Chic’s owner responded, “if you find my personal or business page they both have to match”. This was later echoed throughout the remaining interviews with my participants, which is explored in chapter 4 at greater lengths the influence that the varying identities had on each individual content strategy. In the images for their brand (figures 12-13)



Figure 12. The Saved Chic Overcomer Sweatshirt.

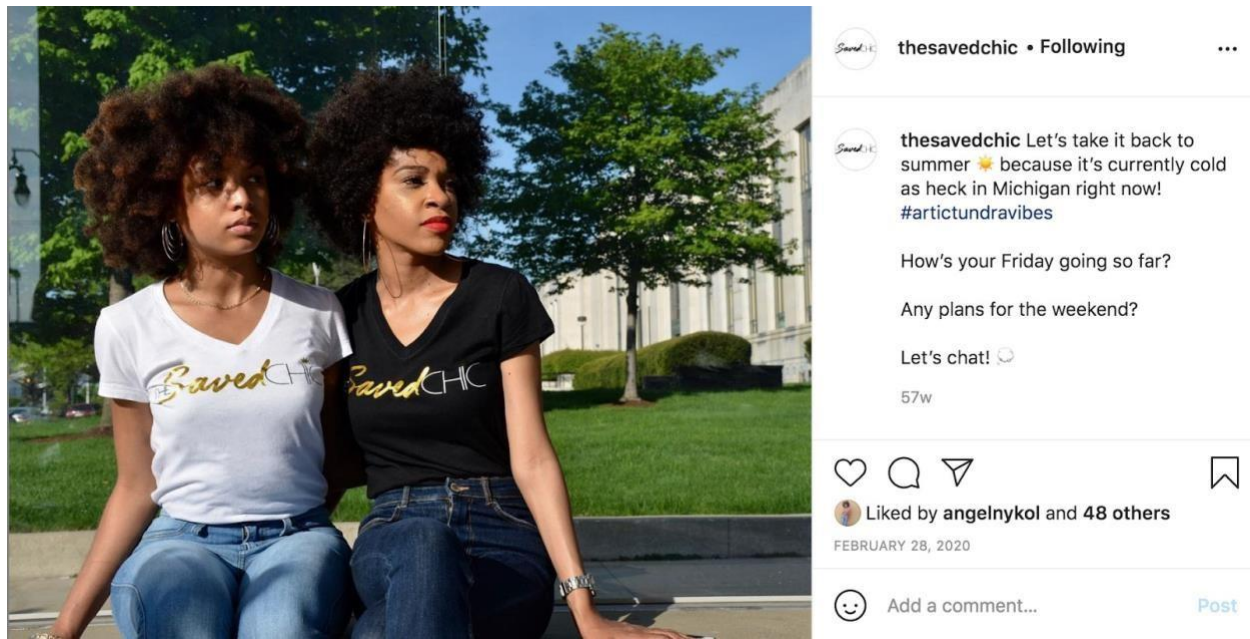


Figure 13 The Saved Chic Brand Photoshoot.

As seen above, the owner of The Saved Chic is pictured in figure 11 in the black tshirt alongside another woman. This was a common occurrence in images throughout the other participants where you may find the owner modeling their own product or describing a service they offered through the multimodal content offered on Instagram such as reels, videos, memes, or gifs.. Seeing the owner on the business profile is just another way that allows the customers to see the brand as not just a thing to consume, but a part of a movement, mission, or community. In chapter 4, this is articulated fully through the narrative journeys of each participant and how they understand their brands reaching audiences and for the various purposes.

Chapter 4: Be Unapologetic. Unapologetically *Black*

“African American women are the country’s fastest growing group of entrepreneurs”

- Netflix *She Did That* Film, 2019

If there ever was a time to honor, celebrate, and recognize the strides Black women have made, the time is now. In 2019, Netflix released the documentary *She Did That*, an uplifting documentary that explores the passionate pursuits of Black women and their entrepreneurial journeys. Executive produced by Renae Bluitt ‘She Did That’ offers an intimate peek inside the truths, trials, and triumphs of beloved entrepreneurs who continuously raise the glass ceiling for future generations. (Shedidthatfilm.org) The documentary takes a deeper look into the entrepreneurial journey of four Black women in different industries making extraordinary strides in their entrepreneurial journey. What stood out to me about this film was for the first time ever, Netflix putting the spotlight on a demographic of women who typically are overlooked or overshadowed by their white male and female counterparts. Watching the Black women highlighted in *She Did That* and hearing individual stories of resilience, perseverance, and success revealed there is a lot we can learn from Black women in entrepreneurship. Through focusing on this particular group of women, it opens the door to see what aspects of entrepreneurship that are not typically discussed in scholarship should we begin to consider moving forward in the social justice turn (Walton et al 2019) in technical and professional communication and other disciplines wanting to embrace diverse scholarly practices.

The goal of this chapter is to situate Black women entrepreneurs as thought leaders and innovators in their respective business fields, while journeying with them through personal narratives on their journey to becoming an entrepreneur. Additionally, through a Black feminist

lens, this chapter will amplify the voices of Black women entrepreneur's drawing from amplification rhetorics (Mckoy 2019) that and using first hand personal narratives to better understand the unique journey of Black women entrepreneurs and how that has influenced their brand identity and digital content strategy. According to McKoy, amplification rhetorics are defined by three tenets: (1) the reclamation of agency and ownership of embodied rhetorical practices, (2) the accentuation, acknowledgement, and validation of narratives and lived experiences, and (3) the privileging and inclusion of marginalized epistemologies (38).

Taking this into consideration and using a narrative inquiry approach to center each participants lived experiences, my goal in interviewing the five participants was two-fold. I wanted to see how my participants viewed their own business content strategy and whether they considered current events in the news and surrounding communities in the decision process of what should / should not be included as content on their social media business pages. Secondly, I wanted to better understand from first-hand accounts the journey of being an entrepreneur as a Black woman. This is vital because as Black feminist theory reminds us, "Black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, and at home has stimulated Black women's independence and self-reliance" (Hill-Collins 22). This independence and self-reliance is clearly seen throughout Netflix's *She Did That*, and also in the unique intersectional experiences that these first-hand accounts reveal.

Another term and concept I draw from throughout this chapter is intersectionality. Intersectionality, a term developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, which helps describe how the identities we carry-- our gender, class, sexuality, religion, location, and many others-- inform our experiences. Thus, understanding a Black Feminist framework means a careful analysis of the intersecting, interacting, mitigating ways these categories shape experiences. As Nobel (2016) advocates, "an intersectional approach to the internet and digital studies widens the scope

of analysis to include the inequity of global development and the financialization and circulation of global capital that the internet both engenders and is supported by.” Drawing from these two epistemologies creates more opportunity to understand the layers that need to be examined when it comes to the digital and our everyday experiences. This approach with an emphasis on Black women showcases the ways in which they have been and currently are using technology through multimodality and other literary forms. as leaders.

In Her Words: The Long Road to Success

While part of my investigation does focus on content strategy and visual analysis of my participants' content on Instagram, it is important to understand the significance of the Black women's entrepreneurial journey from her own perspective and not anyone else's. As the quote in the opening of this chapter states, Black women are the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the world. And if this statement is true, why is there so little literature focusing solely on the lived experiences of Black women in business and what we can learn from their experiences and journey, in our discipline? For instance, the widely known first Black woman entrepreneur that is typically taught in school aged children, particularly during Black History Month is Madame C.J Walker, known for inventing hair care products for Black women and the widely known invention “the hot comb”. These line of hair-care products and inventions helped her become the wealthiest Black woman of her time, many citing her today as the first Black American woman to be a self-made millionaire . In her own words, she attributes her entrepreneurial to success reflecting on her upbringing stating, “I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations....I have built my own factory on my own ground.”(MadameCJWalker.com) These

narratives ultimately reveal points of data that could otherwise not be fully conceptualized the magnitude of their experiences or accomplishments unless heard from their own words.

With this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will give a snapshot into the lived experiences and entrepreneurial journey of five Black woman business owners who know what it is like to persevere through obstacles and adversity but still obtain success. In a 2018 study, Jones examined how Black business owners worked within an oppressed system and yet enacted rhetorical agency to resist the narratives that could potentially keep them down and even negative perceptions of Black entrepreneurship. In her study she uses a conceptual framework of cultural empowerment and addresses the need for more culturally sensitive approaches in conducting research in businesses or professional organizations. Addressing this call for my own study, I answer the question *How do Black women entrepreneurs enact their identities through social media branding and content strategies* to further understand the role of rhetorical agency but also the role of cultural empowerment and how that may in fact translate to decisions made. For the remainder of this chapter, I will answer this question by sharing data collected from the five zoom interviews I conducted with each participant. The data will show that there is an interconnected thread that weaves together the business, content strategy, and identities each participant carries. After coding and taking keywords from each interview I was able to discover distinct moments in each narrative interview that show identity, branding, and the entrepreneurial journey are all connected and should be taken into consideration when conducting future research.

Outcome 1: Identity Considered as a Black Woman Entrepreneur

Identity can be defined in several ways, but for the purposes of this study I draw from Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016) and their discussion on identity and intersectionality- a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. This framing is a running theme

throughout each conversation I had with my participants and as you will see brings together the conversation on culture and digital content strategy. To help situate these terms we can also look towards Stuart Hall's (1990) second definition of cultural identity centers around being and becoming. He describes it as, "belonging to the future as much as to the past." This second position recognizes that there are also critical points of deep and significant difference between who a person is and who they have become due to the role history has played that ultimately effects their understanding of belonging in society. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. It is only from this second position that we can properly understand the traumatic character of 'the colonial experience' Hall references throughout his essay. Because the "ways in which black people, black experiences, were positioned and subjected in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalization" (225).

bell hooks (1992) also references this essay in saying that her message centers back to identity and defiance, something they both are calling attention to in their work. Both hooks and Hall refer to the effects of colonization and decolonization on Blacks across the diaspora. Both address the struggles for blacks in different contexts but with the same message, although hooks calls our attention to gender, sexuality, and patriarchy

To demonstrate how the three aforementioned intersections all played a role one of the first questions I asked each of my participants was "how do you identify?". Without providing explanation to how I understood or defined identity, I wanted to see how this terms and others is perceived from non-specialist. Each of my participants when asked about their identities responded first by saying they were 1) Black and 2) a woman. Brittany Floyd, owner of & Travel co. was very direct in explaining how she identifies as "an African American woman

from a low-income background” who also grew up in a suburb of Detroit. India Young, owner of Buttercreme Beauty also emphasized that she identifies as a Black woman first, but that did not exclude her business from reach ALL women regardless of their race or ethnic background. As she described, India wanted to ensure that her audiences knew although she is a Black woman, her business was available to all consumers, including women and men from all backgrounds. This is a reflection of how a Black feminist mindset can be applied to a business model. As the Combahee river collective reminds us, a commitment to the liberation of oppressed groups, especially Black women, commitment to gender equality, commitment to liberation/freedom/equality for Black and minority groups regardless of age, sex, nationality, and economic status and commitment to social change are all tenets in a Black feminist framework. So without directly knowing it, India, along with the 4 other participants all shared at least one or more of these perspectives which was revealed further throughout the interviews.

It is important to also note that these self-identifying moments do not point to a shared experience across the board that every Black woman entrepreneur will have as a business owner. What it does point to is an exposure to certain common experiences as African American women but as Hill Collins describes, “does not guarantee such consciousness will develop among all women (25).” This common theme reiterated throughout *Black Feminist Thought* reminds all that identifying as Black does not necessarily equate to having shared experiences and thought processes but instead shows there will at times be commonality which can be alluded to some shared experiences due to the role of identity. What was interesting in these discussions was their relationship to self and their experiences which played a role in how they viewed themselves, particularly with their self-identification with community, family, and “home.”

For the remainder of this section, I will share moments where the role of identity also appeared throughout the narrative interviews as each participant made connections from

community, family, and upbringings to being an entrepreneur. Out of all the participants, I was curious how Angel Reynolds, owner of The Saved Chic self identified being the only participant with a faith-based brand. I asked Angel how it has been for her having a faith-based brand since her religious background as a Christian directly tied to the mission and values of her business. Her response was plain and simple, “Yeah, you can't separate your faith. I do believe there is a such thing as a Christian entrepreneur and an entrepreneur”. Later, she detailed how having her business’s brand page and personal page was a difficult decision to make, because they are so closely aligned, but have a personality of its own. Hearing this response is another example of what is described in the triple quandary theory which argues that one aspect of African American culture incorporates a sense of spirituality (Mcdougall 48). For Angel, this aspect of her identity that is reflective in her business and brand “The Saved Chic.”

A different aspect of identity that reflects community emerged throughout the narrative interview with Brittany Floyd, owner of & Travel Co. During her interview, Brittany shared a story about- growing up in the suburb of Detroit from a low-income family. She describes this experience with a focus on how her multiple identities helped her in the formative years that inspired her to want to go into the travel industry:

I am a Black American woman from a low-income background. I grew up in a suburb of Detroit and I think that my first experience that I had when I went abroad was actually with my school choir when I was in high school. We went to Italy for a week and the thing is that when I was there, I knew that something inside me was changing and things were shifting. We were meeting people from all over the world. We were, you know, singing and going to see artwork that we had only learned about in class and I'm walking the streets of Milan and Venice and it was just like so overwhelming.

She then describes the different languages they were speaking abroad and how being around such a diverse group as a Black woman impacted her:

We went to this art school with kids (Italian art kids) and it was great because I saw that you can connect with people without having [their] language because they spoke Italian, but then we spoke English, but some of us know a little Spanish and they know a little Spanish, so we just use that to try to communicate with each other.

And then I got home and I was crying as I landed at the airport in Detroit. I literally was crying because everything inside of me had changed and I didn't quite know at the time what had changed, but for someone who grew up where I did [in a] low-income neighborhood. Who only made it on that trip because of a scholarship.

This was a pivotal moment in Brittany's story as she described the impact of traveling to Italy. At this moment, she hadn't started a travel company, but the experience alone and her relationship to "home" is what ended up being a As Brittany recounted that story, she brought it full circle and connected it to who she is today. She ends by connecting this experience to her identity:

And so I think that like a lot of my identity was tied up in it and I think that kind of right now as I stand like 40 or so countries in and out for a business and going everywhere. I realized that it's what keeps me going because I know where I came from and I know what obstacles I had to go. And I know how impactful it is for my community to see me doing these things

Brittany's personal account is an example of what bell hooks discusses in "Black Vernacular Architecture as Cultural Practice" (1996). In this chapter of her book, hooks describe the importance of spatial awareness, specifically for poor and lower-income blacks and their housing. She explores the concept of home, drawing from an assignment in grade school where

she was asked to imagine her dream home then draw it, not taking into account the socioeconomic conditions she lived in, but focusing specifically on imagined desire. As hooks explains, the assignment, revisited years later called to attention the very importance of space and place, as it relates to the African American condition. She writes about space, “to acknowledge the oppositional modes of psychic decolonization that marginalize, exploited, and oppressed black folk envisioned and to document a cultural genealogy of resistance” (147). This kind of project allows for us to consider the ways in which design invites conversations to explore the aesthetic, cultural, historical, economic, and political condition of African Americans and other misrepresented people.

The notion of family and community and the influence on their journey as business owners revealed were brought up amongst each participant in their own way when asked about how they got started as an entrepreneur. I realized early on that all the women I interviewed have a unique story on how they got started but it was personal and responded to an issue they wanted to address. For instance, Nancy Young, owner of DBTS Skin Bar describes the importance of her journey as an entrepreneur has a lot to do with creating generational wealth for her family and specifically daughters. With already having three businesses started in their name, Nancy connected her passion for skin care and wellness, with what it means for her bloodline and generations to come.

For Denishia, owner of Macon Designs, her explanation of identity was moreseo connected with her education. As she describes:

my journey was just entirely different from what they presented as the typical, I guess college student journey. It was just the opposite. I didn't have this great financial system. Everything I've built his from scratch and I think that's kind of ties into your experiences as well. Like how you grew up. Up and different things like that. So I would say that kind

of that kind of builds into your identity as you get older. I would say, you know my growth as you know from a young child on up, that helped to build me into who I am now cause I think I probably wouldn't have worked as hard as I got things handed to me. So I'm thankful things weren't handed to me and I probably wouldn't be as appreciative. So because that's probably why I'm so humble now.

This notion of perseverance, overcoming, and resilience are all forms of empowerment, which overwhelmingly became a theme amongst all participants.

Outcome 2: Setbacks, Triumphs, and Resilience Lead to Empowerment

Being an entrepreneur inherently comes with risks, triumphs, and setbacks. It is how you deal with each moment however, that reveals a level of resiliency and empowerment for oneself and others. With the unexpected onset of Covid-19, additional challenges presented themselves to each participant. Delays in supplies due to merchandise being shipped overseas and suppliers having to take extra precautions in handling merchandise. Also, the demand for online shipping caused another obstacle that typically would be seen as good for business, but when the supply is on backlog certain items are unable to be sold to customers due to availability. When faced with obstacles such as the COVID-19 Global health crisis, each participant persevered in some way, and actually each participant stated how business thrived in one way or another once they pivoted. For many, the struggle was not new to them, so they used this moment to strategize. For others, their business already had an online platform which made things less difficult when the world shut down.

My next question regarding the pandemic was, *We are in a pandemic and have experienced national civil unrest, can you tell me how you feel when posting content . How do you navigate posting content that resonates with your mission, during the current climate?*

Surprisingly, I received mixed responses from each. As chapter 3 emphasized, performative marketing and branding was at an all time high in 2020 and currently, due to the social movements taking place. I was curious if my participants felt compelled to engage in any way, and if so, why? Angel was the only one who specifically said, no. In her words, “I don't for two reasons. One, when all this of this chaos happened, I did not have the proper knowledge. I had to become educated on what was happening.” This response was an eye opening because it speaks to this notion that Black people have been saying for years. We are not a monolithic culture. It also affirms what Hill Collins describes as Black women having a shared experience historically, but that does not equate to a shared consciousness. What Angel described for her reasoning however put it all into perspective:

I grew up in Ann Arbor, so it was five percent black in my high school. If anything [I] had to deal subtle racism like microaggressions. Everything was segregated at my highschool...I did not feel pressure to [speak out] because I knew if I were to speak it was because somebody wanted me to speak and not because I actually knew what I needed to talk about because I didn't in all honestly, that was a topic that I needed to be educated on and still is. I admire people that have become so passionate about this topic I was learning in the midst of the [everything]and the only time I felt like I needed to post something was on Blackout Tuesday. I posted the black Square on the Saved Chics page to show that we were a Black-owned business, but I'm the type of person that's not going to speak on something that I don't know about.

This feeling of having to educate outsiders about systemic issues is something many individuals who have historically been oppressed is nothing new. There seems to always be a tendency to educate everyone, when in fact, the amplification of Black Lives does not solely rest

on the groups being marginalized. McKoy reiterates this further in arguing that, “Amplification Rhetorics asks how elements of embodiment can make our field more inclusive in our knowledge-making practices and does not rely solely on the marginalized to explain or do the sole labor of making the field more inclusive” (19).

Another participant had a similar but slightly different perspective with how she has understood advocacy while being Black. In Denishia’s response to the question regarding speaking out, she said:

I'm not going to post a lot of opinionated stuff unless it's directly to a personal friends list on Facebook or something. But even then, certain things I just don't talk about so I limit myself to what I present [to] people [online]. Anyway, unless they're people I consistently talk to then we'll talk about whatever but in the public eye for me I'm representing my business.

We have freedom, but there are repercussions to certain things you say as we can see in the media, people doing things and they're losing their whole careers over it. So, what you say [and] how you treat people effects of other people,. I think my main thing is respect. I want to respect others and I want them to respect me. So that's kind of how I approach social media as well. I try to keep it respectful and I try to keep it as educational or inspirational.

This perspective goes back to the power of visuals and how our content can speak for us. As Denishia also emphasized, being a graphic designer, her designs speak for her and the issues she is passionate about. Sometimes her clients will want a design that is empowering Black individuals, and sometimes she will create a graphic based on her personal views.

In that same positionality, Nancy Young of DBTS Skin Bar shared her experience about transparency and always being vocal about her opinions if it pertains to something she is passionate about. Her response to speaking out was simply, “Its not my responsibility to teach you. Its your responsibility to do the research. I will post what I want. If I want to post on my Facebook about the protest I will do that. I am a Black woman. If you have a problem with what I share maybe we are not a good fit for you to be my client.” This response echoes once again the position many African Americans and people of color have taken, even if it is not said directly this way.

What I found most interesting from each response was the reasoning behind sharing something or not. It took me back to this idea that just because it is something everyone is doing doesn’t mean you have to do it. Angel was honest in that she needed to educate herself more on the issues, so instead only participated in the days geared toward businesses, or #BlackoutTuesday. And finally, India Young of Buttercreme Beauty made it known that this had been an area she previously struggled in when it came to posting about issues surrounding the Black community and social justice, because her identity was so wrapped up in it. She responded by saying:

I've kind of found a conflict in that....like before I didn't post off of [being] a black owned business you know, because I feared that my caucasian customers will run away or my Asian-pacific customers wouldn't come to me. And so now, after you know, recent events and everything, I've become more proud of being a Black owned business and so I boasted about that and now I attach Black owned business to my name”

For India, the events of 2020 were a moment for her to not only reconcile within herself how she wanted to take a stand on her platforms, but also, an opportunity to feel empowered to be Black,

unapologetically. I believe India's comments demonstrated her internal desire to demonstrate what it means to embrace cultural empowerment (Jones 2017) as a Black woman, but also, a moment of recognizing the intersecting identities at play that ultimately reflected her journey as an entrepreneur. Or even defined what it meant for her, to be an entrepreneur This is explained at greater length when I realized, several other participants had also revealed through their story the role of intersectionality for them, as an entrepreneur.

The final outcome is shared throughout the conversations I was already having with the participants, that led me to realize their content strategy and brand identity were intertwined. So for the final outcome I will go in depth into how these three areas of branding, identity, and content strategy are indeed intersectional.

Outcome 3: Branding, Identity, and Content Strategy all Intertwined

Technical communication as a field tends to position technology as something inherently apolitical/neutral. However, technologies are inherently political. Johnson-Eilola argues that students and writers in technical communication need to see technologies as political, as defining "allowable ranges of action, hierarchies of power, and appropriate ways of communicating in "Wild Technologies". Johnson-Eilola says that technology is often viewed as either instrumental or substantive. The instrumental view sees technology as only a tool and the substantive view sees technology of having powerful agency that dictates how we live. The problem with these thoughts about technology is that they oversimplify its complexity. This notion of technology gets to the idea that is further explored in Shelton (2019) study and introduction to what she calls *A Techné of Marginality* which is kinds of labor that go unpaid and often unrecognized as work despite the time, effort, and knowledge that are required to produce said labor (99). Shelton goes on to describe social movements as a type of *techné* because it is easy to see the outcomes, they produce but typically the work that goes on behind the scenes is rarely documented as such. This

shift out of neutral (Shelton 2020) allows technical communication and writing studies scholars an opportunity to begin reconsidering the kinds of studies and kairos moments that indeed help us to revision what counts as scholarship and what has been lacking. What Shelton brings to our attention is essentially what I am advocating in this study and reflected in how the participants share the effects of aspects of their identity when thinking of creating content on social media. When it came to questions directly linked to content strategy, the participants were clear on why they decided to separate or keep their personal or business pages the same. I asked each participant to detail that process for me and specifically, *Take me through your thought process of building your personal brand identity online, Is it connected to your business or separate?*. Angel of the Saved Chic responded with a very practical reasoning for wanting to keep them separate, “well, I made them separate at first because my first thought was to drive traffic to the page like once you make the announcement to have a place for people to go. Granted, I could make them together.” In her mind, having two separate pages ultimately would lead people to want to not only follow her on social, but to follow her brand The Saved Chic.

For Denishia of Macon Designs, it was clear what she wanted to do because her business is named after her and as she put it, “my business is me so its hard to separate it” Nancy Young of DBTS Skin Bar described her business as being “her first child” and went on to say, “I think its important sometimes to intertwine your personal and business brands. If people can identify with you and what you’re talking about, your brand will be a lot more successful.” There is a lot more that could be said into the benefits and/or difficulties when having to run both your personal and business social media pages but the takeaway here is each participant saw themselves directly linked to their business identity, so ultimately, having a business page means making sure they are also present on that platform and not hidden because their consumers will view them as being their brand whether they like it or not.

Having the narratives of the five women as a way to better understand their personal entrepreneurial journeys, as well as how they approached content strategy (directly or indirectly) revealed a wide range of considerations. Each experience pointed to a rhetorical strategy used throughout the process of deciding what to post or not to post that was based on their values and identity. Simply put, each woman considered rhetorical canons in building their brands such as audience and how certain topics would be consumed. The participants asked questions of themselves to help make decisions on posting, but also drew upon past experiences which shows there is an inherent strategy that takes place even if it is not explicit. Another takeaway revealed was each participant felt Black people shouldn't feel compelled to speak directly to Black Lives Matter (BLM) racial violence, or injustices. Ultimately, it's by choice and how you decide to use your platform does not mean you are not aware of what is taking place. This is because Black people are not a monolithic and our experiences are not the same. As Angel of The Saved Chic so clearly said. "I needed to educate myself. I grew up in the suburbs of Ann Arbor." and while Brittany of &Travel Co. grew up in a suburb as well, that same environment is what empowered her to launch into business, taking her identity of being Black and from a low-income home as a moment of empowerment against potentially destructive narratives. Whatever approach taken when it comes to addressing social, political, or culturally sensitive issues, authenticity is what matters most and is something big corporations and smaller businesses should take into consideration when wanting to put out their own statements of solidarity or stance. Instead of jumping to show support or create statements of support when their business has not reflected a diverse or equitable work place in the past.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

“I believe that the building blocks of a black design aesthetic are scattered across many disciplines and will be found in unlikely places. For instance, some of the best examples of the potential for a black design vocabulary are found in the work of white designers who have been inspired by black culture and take advantage of the market for black expressive styles.”

-Sylvia Harris, 1998

The late graphic designer Sylvia Harris said it best when she described the difficulties in crafting a Black design aesthetic in an industry that is rooted in western traditions. Similarly, when considering the landscape of research in technical and professional communication, this research project addresses the need for the continual inclusion of Black Tech Comm practices that includes diverse ways of understanding images, and accounting for the narratives and lived experiences of Black women entrepreneurs. Black TPC, as defined by the Black Technical and Professional Communication task force is:

Including practices centered on Black community and culture and on rhetorical practices inherent in Black lived experience. Black TPC reflects the cultural, economic, social, and political experiences of Black people across the Diaspora. It also includes the work of scholars in the academy and the contributions of practitioners. In all, Black TPC contextualizes the experiences and cultures of Black peoples through research, teaching, and scholarship (Black TPC Position Statement)

After identifying the limited scope and approaches that have been taken up in within entrepreneurial research in TPC, there is a clear separation between culture, identity, and approaches that account for the intersections of both . For one, there is limited scholarship that

focuses on Black entrepreneurship but specifically women. The issue with that rest on the simple fact that there are several types of entrepreneurs and each sub-culture requires a different kind of approach to understanding their experiences in the field. Secondly, there is even fewer accounts of the unique journey and experiences Black women entrepreneurs have, and how that directly impacts their branding strategies online. Furthermore, this study reaffirms the need for a new approach for research methods and design practices in TPC that can happen when we begin to draw from Black TPC scholarship and Black rhetorical practices. In doing so, it allows for a more culturally inclusive framework for conducting research and analyzing multimodal images and content on various social media platforms which is important to most businesses today when thinking of ways to market their products online.

Applying Black TPC approaches to analyzing digital artifacts will also help scholars and practitioners be able to understand more than the aesthetic, but the cultural, social, and personal elements influencing the content strategy on social media platforms. In conducting the analysis of my participants social media in chapter three, as I attempted to account for the aforementioned elements, I became keenly aware that incorporating solely a multimodal methodology (Rose 2012) was not enough to better understand the cultural and sometimes sociopolitical elements taking place in each of my participants content that they also addressed in some fashion during their individual interviews.

The limiting factors however with using a multimodal analysis framework or design-thinking approach specifically stems from a lack of methods that speak to identity formation - a recurring theme found not only in the images, but through the narrative interviews conducted with each of my participants. And since our intersecting identities play a role in how we create content and design, a new approach to studying images would be useful moving forward with future studies. In an attempt to carve out a potential framework, I have begun to parse through

the many fields and subfields we can begin to draw from when creating such a framework, which are demonstrated through the tenets I have developed from this study that would include:

- 1) A Look into the role of Black language practices and the African American rhetorical tradition
- 2) Application of Black aesthetic principles from various time periods
- 3) A re-examination of Black design practices across various disciplines & industries

This is what I believe is at the heart of a Black centered design framework which will allow for us to create technologies and spaces that address the cultural and historical nuances of past, present, and future moments.

One way this has been described in past scholarship is described in literary movements, what Black Renaissance artists have referred to as, a “Black aesthetic”. The late graphic designer Sylvia Harris also speaks to a Black aesthetic, describing its components as encompassing more than a visually appealing feel but encoding cultural and historical aesthetic that embraces the rich history of Black artists. This is done in her essay as she traces different moments from the 1930’s-90’s” to show how black artists and designers were making influential contributions to the field even if it was not widely attended to or documented (1998). According to Harris, “the graphic design profession is driven by visual innovation” and that “Black designer are working at a disadvantage when they do not feel a kinship with existing design traditions and also have no evidence of an alternative African or African-American design tradition upon which to base their work” (125).

Understanding the rhetorical functions and being able to name them is where I see the importance of multiliteracy coming into play. In terms of technical communicators, we cannot leave out the impact of design in making local, national, and global change. Whether this be in our schools or communities- it all has to do with how things are being designed for social

engagement. Being so widely influenced by visual imagery every day, having the tools and competency to analyze what we see, makes change possible.

Rethinking Design Thinking

According to IDEO U, an award-winning online design school that takes a human centered approach, design thinking is a process for creative problem solving. It encourages organizations to focus on the people they're creating for, which leads to better products, services, and internal processes. They describe this process of design as having three different components: desirability, viability, and feasibility. All centered around what is best for what the audience desires, and what is technologically feasible (Ideo.com) This approach to design has largely been accepted across industries due to its approach to decentering what the designer/creator wants and centering the consumer. Design thinking has also been taken up by professional and technical communication scholars (Wible 2020) but there is a noticeable gap in this approach. When there is a lack of attention to culture, reading an image or creating a product for a certain audience or demographic can become difficult or even obsolete. In the remaining part of this section, I will introduce an approach that considers the cultural heritage of participants, and chapter five will conclude with the building blocks of a framework to be considered in future projects.

When it comes to rethinking design approaches in technical communication as a field, its important to note that we must consider how the practices of composing and design in the African American rhetorical tradition do not follow the same rules as universal design or human centered design practices, which our field typically draws upon. This is due to the fact that, “design principles in this tradition are cultural, historical, and politically situated.” (Wourman and Mavima, 2020). Black artists back in the day as mentioned before called this “the Black aesthetic”. As Sylvia Harris reminds us in the opening section of this chapter, “the building

blocks of a black design aesthetic are scattered across many disciplines and will be found in unlikely places” (126). She goes on to say that because the lines of designers and artists was blurred in the 1920’s, we can look to black-owned journals as the best example because these designs were likely influenced by European cubist painters who had been influenced by African art (127). What she says lets us know that Black owned publications encode European aesthetic while ultimately promoting their own agenda.

Towards a Black Design Approach: Three Tenets Proposed

In thinking of a reimagined design approach to understanding the intersections of identity and culture that emerged through my participants narrative interviews and content analysis, I propose three tenets scholars and practitioners can approach in their research and on the job when wanting to reach various audiences and better understand different approaches to designing and creating content when wanting to reach a global audience.

Tenet 1: A Look into the role of Black Language Practices and African American Rhetoric

In this first tenant, one of the first ways we can reimagine conducting research at the intersections of visual design in TPC, digital rhetoric, and content strategy that is liberatory and accounts for linguistic diversity is to consider the role of African American rhetoric. Design principles in the African American rhetorical tradition are cultural, historical, and politically situated, oftentimes curated with hidden messages. They have been embedded in artwork, education systems, hush harbors, essays, and documents to name a few. Though the terminologies are not always named “design” African Americans have been designing their world since ancient civilization. Sometimes it has been directly to push against colonial oppression or blatant discrimination, and other times it is simply to celebrate the rich culture in which African descendants have come to know. Through African American rhetoric we can learn more have Black people define design for themselves

Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin' and Testifyin: The Language of Black America* describes the modes of African American rhetorical discourse as 1) call-response, a series of spontaneous interactions between speaker and listener; 2) signification, the art of humorous put downs 3) tonal semantics, the conveying of meanings in Black discourse through specifically ethnic kinds of voice rhythms and vocal inflections, and 4) narrative sequencing, the habitual use of stories to explain and/or persuade (Richardson and Jackson 14). Signifyin(g), which was expanded upon by Henry Louis Gate's Jr. in his piece *The Signifying Monkey* describes signification as "the tropes of tropes" because "the speech of the Monkey exists as a sequence of signifiers, effecting meanings through their differential relation and calling attention to itself by rhyming, repetition, and several of the rhetorical figures used in larger cultural games" (558) The monkey as the Signifier represents black vernacular which is practiced in many African American communities. It is a way to make "meaning within a Black rhetorical world that exists alongside and in relation to a white one" (Gilyard and Banks 56).

This contribution and tenet provides theory on Black culture in terms of language practices, the tropes used, and how to make sense of the communicative practices of Black folks from different genres. We can apply these tenets simply through identifying tropes in visual communication such as signifying, call and response, etc, and accounting for the linguistic diversity that Black language speakers use, knowingly and unknowingly.

Tenet 2: Application of Black Aesthetic Principles from Various Movements

Historically, African American rhetoric has focused on oral and written traditions, making it difficult to see where design might fit. Adam Banks in *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* describes what a framework might look like that is reflective of the Black struggle for liberation and is participatory in nature, reflecting principles of harmony amongst one another. We find moments of this reflected in art movements such as The Harlem Renaissance or "Black

Renaissance” as well as the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Several other cultural movements that reveal a type of Black rhetorical practice can be found through an examination of The Civil Rights movement, specifically looking at the chants, music, fashion, and aesthetic that encompassed this time period. From art movements, to social movements, and even the contributions Black musical artists have made over time, these varying movements can help us better understand what Black aesthetic principles are liberatory and culturally situated. As we examine these movements, this brings me to my last and final tenet that can help us better understand what a Black design framework could look like.

Tenet 3: A Re-examination of Black Design Practices Across Various Disciplines & Industries

In addition to re-examining artifacts in the field with a new lens, we must take a look at what other disciplines, industries, and lesser known practices and inventions can teach us about design in this new approach. As Bank’s suggests in *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology* “the lessons of Black quilters and architecture, encapsulated in these principles for an African American rhetorical design, show that not only is such a rhetoric of design possible, but that design can be an important site of continued pursuits of justice and inclusion” (130).

In addition to the different art movements that can help us understand how design is reflected in the African American rhetorical tradition as described in tenets one and two, architecture and spatiality is another area that invokes how the land we live on is a reflection of larger systemic power structures. bell hooks (1996) asserts that the space we occupy is always “politically about who controls and shapes environments” (146). This kind of project allows for us to consider the ways in which design invites conversations to explore resistance, economic, and the political condition of African Americans and other misrepresented people. Furthermore, hooks argues for more studies that look into housing and the construction of “projects” that are

state-owned and designed for the economically disadvantaged (150) to better understand architecture and design as it relates to African Americans.

Hush harbor rhetoric is another site of analysis when considering the practices of design within Black communities and how specific spaces can be examined to better understand their rhetorical functions. It is a rhetoric of commonplaces, defined by Vorris Nunley as “a rhetorical tradition constructed through Black public spheres with a distinctive relationship to spatiality (material and discursive), audience, African American Nomoi(plural for nommo), and epistemology” (222). They are oftentimes overlooked in rhetorical theory but through careful analysis can help distinguish a link between design and spatiality. As a genre, hush harbors become ‘Black spaces’ because African American nommo are normative in the encounters that occur in the location (224). Modern day hush harbors are everywhere and function in similar ways as they did historically. Examples of this are barbershops, beauty salons, fraternities, sororities, and Black churches to name a few (Nunley 234). Examining these kinds of businesses and spaces with a rhetorical lens will allow for researchers to account for the cultural nuances and historical significance.

Bringing it All Together: Where do we go From Here?

At the beginning of this dissertation in chapter one, I addressed the complexities this study took from the initial writing stage, due to Covid-19 and the summer 2020 BLM protests. And while these are just two major events that occurred throughout 2020 and into 2021, the social and political climate in the U.S drastically had me re-think how to ethically approach a dissertation when my participants were also directly being affected as Black women and business owners. Taking all of this into consideration and having conducted the interviews in late 2020, another major shift happened which also shaped the final aspect of this study.

Black TPC Virtual Workshop

After participating in a Black technical and professional communication virtual workshop on November 30 hosted by Virginia Tech University, I realized this study was also what my colleagues and I were describing as “Black TPC practices”. As defined earlier in this chapter, Black TPC centers culture and rhetorical practices in the Black community, with an emphasis on lived experiences that reflects the economic, social, and political for all Black individuals across the Diaspora. After interviewing the women for this particular study, and cross examining how their Instagram content also speaks to broader issues, I was able to develop the start of a Black design framework that takes into consideration Black TPC practices. My goal with the tenets developed in this chapter are to guide researchers and practitioners in rethinking new methods for doing digital research, content strategy, and working with diverse groups that have been historically underrepresented. In addition to creating new content, the tenets proposed can also help current business owners and those in relevant fields examine the rhetorical and cultural messages their brand is conveying. We can no longer ignore the role of lived experiences and cultural backgrounds of our audiences in TPC. Because when we do, something or someone will always be left out.

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