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The Strong Black Woman Schema: How It Informs the Gendered Racial Identity Development of Black College Women/Non-Binary Students and Their Navigation of PWIs

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**THE STRONG BLACK WOMAN SCHEMA: HOW IT INFORMS THE GENDERED
RACIAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF BLACK COLLEGE WOMEN/NON-
BINARY STUDENTS AND THEIR NAVIGATION OF PWI'S**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science, Psychology, Experimental

By

Whitney Akalugwu

May 2023

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Psychology

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Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

The strong Black woman schema (SBW) is known to be a salient aspect of Black womanhood. This culturally specific schema can be understood as a protective factor against the social inequities that Black women are subjected to. However, not much is known on how the SBW schema informs Black college women's gendered racial identity development and how it informs their navigation of PWIs. The purpose of this study is to explore the strong Black woman schema and how it informs the gendered racial identity development of Black college women/non-binary students and their navigation of PWIs. This study will also address the SBW schema and its implications on the mental health. This study consists of fifteen participants between the ages of 19-22. Their experiences were examined in regard to their gendered racial identity development, navigation of PWIs, and mental health as it pertained to the SBW schema. The results revealed (1) participants are redefining the SBW schema to better fit their gendered racial identities (2) participants are seeking out community and mentors to build upon their notions of strength while navigating PWIs (3) participants are navigating PWIs with their redefinitions of strength (4) participants are developing adaptive coping mechanisms to fight against the SBW schema.

KEYWORDS: strong, Black, women, identity, development, navigation, PWIs, mental health, non-binary, college

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	Page 1
Literature Review	Page 1
Theoretical Framework: Black Feminism	Page 1
Black College Women’s Experiences at PWI	Page 3
Black Women’s Identity Development	Page 4
The Strong Black Woman Schema	Page 5
Perceptions of the SBW Schema	Page 7
Strong Black Woman Schema and Mental Health	Page 8
Purpose of the Study	Page 9
Methods	Page 11
Methodology: Black Feminist Thought Grounded Theory Approach	Page 11
Study Sample	Page 11
Procedure and Sources of Data	Page 12
Data Analysis	Page 13
Results	Page 15
Theme 1	Page 15
Theme 2	Page 21
Theme 3	Page 23
Theme 4	Page 25
Discussion	Page 29
Strong Black Woman Perceptions and Gendered Racial Identity Development	Page 29
Navigation of PWIs Informed by Personal Definitions of Strength	Page 30
Developing Adaptive Coping Mechanisms to Fight Against the SBW Schema	Page 32
Implications	Page 33
References	Page 35
Appendices	
Appendix A: IRB Approval	Page 40
Appendix B: Themes and Categories	Page 41

INTRODUCTION

The realities of Black college women's gendered racial identities put them at the nexus of gendered racism which is experienced at the individual, interpersonal, and structural levels (Loyd et al., 2022). In lieu of these inequitable social divisions, the strong Black woman schema (SBW) is known as a culturally relevant gender schema that tends to manifest a specific set of behavioral and cognitive characteristics (Abrams et al., 2014). The characteristics associated with the SBW schema are known to exemplify Black womanhood in the face of adversity. While increased self-efficacy and agency are known advantages of endorsing the SBW schema, evidence exists that strong Black woman discourse comes with significant disadvantages such as the internalization of negative stereotypical imagery and psychological distress (Nelson et al., 2016; Platt & Fanning, 2022). Despite the paradox that is the SBW schema, its endorsement among Black college women attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) may shed light on the salience of the schema.

As Black college women and non-binary students continue to navigate PWIs, their gendered racial identities play a pertinent role in their experiences. The SBW schema may serve as a protective factor allowing Black college women to manage the negative effects of gendered racialized stress experienced in PWI's (Shahid et al., 2018). The purpose of this study is to explore the strong Black woman schema and how it informs the gendered racial identity development of Black college women and non-binary students and their navigation of PWIs. This study will also address the SBW schema and its implications on the mental health of Black college women and non-binary students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminism

Black women experience differences in privileges and societal positions that make their encounters with discrimination vastly unique (Almeida-Junco & Guillard-Limonta, 2020). The societal complexities that Black women face must be examined through a specific theoretical lens. Black feminism epistemology arose to contextually analyze and organize the social divisions of sexuality, age, culture, religion, and beliefs that have structured the lives of Black women (Mirza 2018). Historically, ideas about Black womanhood have been manipulated by 'elite' groups to control the narratives of what should be deemed socially valuable (Collins, 2000). The 'mammy' and 'superwoman' are examples of two historically controlling images of Black women that emerged to assist in the subordination of Black women. These two images depict Black women as being subservient to others, tending to the needs of others before their own, and showing little weakness (Castelin & White, 2022). This type of imagery can be seen carried over into more modern societal iterations of Black womanhood.

While the controlling images of Black women have shifted over time, the narratives remain the same. Popular media has played a role in the dissemination of stereotyped images and messages that shape viewers perception of the real world (Jean et al., 2022). With the continuous reconstruction of controlling imagery and subordination of Black women within society, Black feminism aids in the deconstruction of such ideologies. Black feminism is a strategy that is used to signify Black women's experiences to counteract the hegemonic paradigm of mankind as white, while making visible forms of subordination, denial and assimilation in which Black

women have been victims (Almeida-Junco & Guillard-Limonta 2020). A proponent of Black feminism, Collins (1986), theorized Black feminist thought which consists of ideas that are produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint that is of and for Black women. Black feminist thought asserts that the realities of Black women have commonalities regarding social inequities which serve as a common place for their experiences to be examined and cultivated into our understanding of Black womanhood.

Black College Women's Experiences At PWI

For Black college women and non-binary students, attending predominantly white institutions (PWIs), their journeys through higher education are informed by their intersection of multiple social identities. Coined by Crenshaw (1990), intersectionality is referred to as the intersection between multiple systems of oppression and power that Black women experience based on their race, gender, social class, age, and sexual orientation within political and social systems. Furthermore, intersectionality theory posits that the combination of multiple social identities can shape not only how we see ourselves but how others view and treat us (Shahid et al., 2018). Higher educational institutions, PWIs specifically, can be a common place where many biases against Black women are played out. In a social context, educational institutions have a critical role in socialization, some of which were based upon socially constructed systems that worked to invalidate the lived experiences of marginalized people (Mims & Williams, 2020). While many PWIs in recent years have made conscious efforts to become more inclusive, the realities of Black college women and non-binary students speak volumes to the campus climates they are subjected to routinely. Of the social spaces that Black college women navigate frequently, sexist and racist ideologies, misogyny, hypervisibility, invisibility, microaggressions

and stereotypes continue to detract from their social and educational experiences (Payne & West, 2022). These adversities make the navigation of PWI's increasingly more challenging for many Black college women.

Microaggressions can be understood as a commonly encountered form of individualized racism among Black college women which include; brief everyday exchanges that send indirect derogatory messages regarding lack of belongingness and inferiority (Loyd et al., 2022; Williams et al., 2021). These microaggressions are often hinged upon biases, stereotypes, and misogynistic viewpoints in which others hold about Black women. Furthermore, Black women attending PWIs have reported feeling unsupported, being held to lower expectations than their peers, being dismissed or overlooked in the classroom, and harboring fear about their competence surrounding their academic abilities (Shahid et al., 2018). These feelings are direct results of the hypervisibility and invisibility that Black women are exposed to simultaneously while at PWIs. Alongside marginalization within the academia, Black women are assumed or expected to contribute to topics that are race related which can further exacerbate feelings of unbelongingness (Mowatt et al., 2013). Regardless of how these institutional inequities might show up, Black college women are disproportionately impacted by multiple forms of oppression, which may lead them to turn towards the strong Black woman (SBW) schema to cope with the challenges of the Black woman experience (Anyiwo et al., 2022; Loyd et al., 2022).

Black Women's Identity Development

An exploration of Black women's identity development is needed to further understand why a schema such as the SBW schema is so pertinent in the lives of Black college women. Black women tend to view the world through a gendered racial identity lens where multiple

marginalized identities interact to influence their experiences (Payne, 2022). This world view paired with gendered racial encounters contribute to how Black women perceive and conceptualize their intersecting identities (Williams & Lewis, 2021). Continuing off the work of Williams and Lewis (2021), the four phases of Black college women's gendered racial identity development include: (1) hyperawareness of intersecting identities, (2) reflection into the stereotypes that surround them, (3) rejecting parts of their gendered racial socialization, (4) learning to navigate gendered racism. This identity development process illustrates how Black women come to form their own gendered racial ideologies. Black college women attending PWIs have continuous identity processing that is filtered through the world around them and are renegotiating their understanding of themselves in the new context of a PWI (Williams et al., 2022). The Hip Hop Feminism Model of Multiple Identities (HHFMMI) and Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women (MIDBUW) also speak to the identities of Black college women and how their identities are shaped and influenced by salient environmental factors such as cultural and familial influences (Payne & West, 2022; Porter, 2017). Given the context of PWIs, their identities as Black women become salient (Williams et al., 2022), thus increasing Black college women's experiences with gendered racism. These experiences could very well lead Black college women and non-binary students to adopt gendered racial ideologies such as the strong Black woman schema to better navigate their campus environments.

The Strong Black Woman Schema

The strong Black woman (SBW) schema is a culturally specific gender schema that characterizes Black women as strong, self-sacrificing for others, and resilient (Anyiwo et al., 2022). The SBW schema promotes a narrative of resilience that Black women are often expected

to uphold within their lives. The SBW schema can further be understood as a social and self-schema that helps Black women to understand who they are, how to engage with the world, and how to cope with life stressors (Jones et al., 2021b). While somewhat used as an internal navigation system, the SBW schema can impact the emotionality of Black women due to its historical underpinnings.

Past research associates the development of the SBW schema to historical legacies of gendered racial stereotyping, oppression, spiritual values, lessons from fore mothers, and a personal history of mistreatment, disappointment, and abuse among Black women (Anyiwo et al., 2022). In response to the mistreatment experienced by Black women, the SBW schema can be considered a survival tactic that has emerged to mitigate the effects of such inequities. Overlapping with similar images of Black women such as the “superwoman” and “modern mammy”, the SBW schema is universally known for ascribing strength and caregiving with Black womanhood (Donovan & West, 2015). The SBW schema is a central aspect of Black womanhood yet has been critiqued for being a controlling image in the lives of Black women (Stanton et al., 2017). The centrality of this schema in Black womanhood may stem from the schema's repetitive endorsement that has been passed down generationally.

With racial socialization and gendered racism being at the forefront of Black women's sociocultural experiences, the endorsement of the SBW schema may be a byproduct of those experiences. Past research has referred to racial socialization as being “the transmission of parents’ world views about race and ethnicity to children by way of subtle, overt, deliberate and unintended mechanisms” (Mims & Williams, 2020, p.8). Racial socialization in essence is modeled behavior and ideologies that are typically transmitted to youth during key developmental stages. Gendered racism, another component of Black women's sociocultural

experience, is known as the simultaneous and compounding forms of oppression that Black women experience based on their race and gender, that typically consists of harassment, race-based prejudice, and violence (Jones et al., 2022; Vance et al., 2021).

These two experiences taken alongside other sociocultural characteristics, such as socioeconomic status and educational disparities, can exacerbate the endorsement of the SBW schema (Platt & Fanning, 2022). Furthermore, early endorsement of the SBW schema may also be linked to the adultification of young Black girls. This adultification places expectations onto Black girls' maturity levels, how they are to engage with others, and how they should be treated. As identified by Epstein et al., (2017), adultification has two forms; (1) the socialization of young Black girls to function at a more mature developmental stage due to situational contexts and necessity, (2) social or cultural stereotypes that influence how adults see children. It should be noted that adultification of young Black girls and the expectations placed upon Black women are heavily informed by popular media.

Popular media has an influence on the manifestations of cultural beliefs and the portrayals of Black women as matriarchs, breadwinners, resilient, independent, nurturing, and selfless which reinforces the SBW schema narrative (Abrams et al., 2014). These depictions of Black women can be seen carried across multiple modes of media such as through social media and the music industry. Several song lyrics promote the independence, perseverance, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance as positive aspects of the Black female persona (Abrams et al., 2014); whereas social media platforms such as Instagram are known to shape racial identity ideology (Li, 2022). It is through these mediums that Black women are subjected to depictions of how others perceive them and how they are to perceive themselves.

Perceptions of the SBW Schema

To deepen our understanding of the SBW schema, an exploration of how Black women conceptualize and implement it into their lives is needed. The ways in which women choose to identify themselves within the SBW schema alludes to the various perceptions that are held about it. Nelson et al., (2016) found that when asked directly whether they endorsed the SBW schema, Black women had three overarching responses: rejecting (*“I don’t like labels”*), ambivalent (*“I do and I don’t”*), and appropriating (*“By my definition”*). These responses indicate that Black women have multiple perceptions of the SBW schema which influences how they choose to define and apply it within their lives. Across studies it has been found that Black women endorse fitting the SBW image to some degree yet remain hesitant in identifying with the SBW schema as it is traditionally referenced (Jones et al., 2021a; Platt & Fanning, 2022). This hesitation could be a result of the negative connotations that are attached to the SBW schema. Black college women have characterized the traditional SBW schema reference with the following attributes: strength, assertiveness, independence, caring, and religiosity (West et al., 2016).

While rooted in historically stereotyped imagery, the SBW schema is malleable and may be shifted as women gain more knowledge about how strength manifests in their daily lives (Jones et al., 2021a). Black college women appear to have composed perceptions of the SBW schema that represent a culmination of traditional and modern iterations. Contemporary perceptions that Black college women hold of the SBW schema are linked to attributes such as hardworking, ambitious, educated, self-confident, racial pride, feminine, interpersonally savvy, and beautiful (West et al., 2016). This contemporary approach allows for Black college women to adapt to the unique struggles in their environments that they face regarding class, race, and

gender (Castelin & White, 2022). Taken together, Black college women hold various perceptions of the SBW schema and endorse it in ways that align with their views.

Strong Black Woman Schema and Mental health

The internalization of the SBW schema can provide a layer of protection against the psychological outcomes that are induced from experiences with gendered racism (West et al., 2016). Despite this layer of protection, being perceived as strong can act as a double-edged sword. The SBW schema is thought to have developed to aid Black women in navigating raced and gendered hierarchies, yet the pursuit of strength at the cost of emotional expression has been linked to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations (Vance et al., 2021). Furthermore, the SBW schema pushes the narrative that black women are to be self-reliant, which may cause women to feel that they have limited people to count on during times of need (Watson-Singleton, 2017). Low levels of perceived emotional support can lead many women to become self-reliant at the detriment of their own psychological and emotional well-being.

Jones et al., (2021b) suggests that women whose beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes align with the SBW schema are more likely to employ in disengaged coping styles. As a byproduct of utilizing disengaged coping styles, Black women engage in self-silencing behaviors which include the inhibition of self-expression to maintain relationships, circumvent retaliation, possible loss, and conflict; all of which have been identified as a mechanism within the SBW schema that contributes to negative psychological symptomology (Abrams et al., 2019). The oversaturation of the SBW imagery may also play a role in the onset of negative psychological symptomology. Specific messages and portrayals of Black women in the media are known to have consequences for Black women's self-esteem, perceptions of gender, and interpersonal

relationships (Jean et al., 2022). To combat the negative effects of the SBW schema imagery, it seems that a new perception of what it means to be a strong Black women must evolve.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the strong Black woman schema and how it informs the gendered racial identity development of Black college women and non-binary students and their navigation of PWIs. This study will also address the implications the SBW schema has on the mental health of Black college women and non-binary students. This exploration will deepen our understanding of the SBW schema and how it is conceptualized among Black college women and non-binary students. The following research questions will be explored: (1) How do perceptions of the strong Black woman schema impact the gendered racial identity development of Black college women and non-binary students?, (2) How does the endorsement of the SBW schema impact the way Black college women and non-binary students navigate PWI's?, (3) How does the endorsement of the strong Black woman schema impact the mental health of Black college women and non-binary students?

METHODS

Methodology: Black Feminist Thought Grounded Theory Approach

Grounded Theory is a systematic, qualitative research methodology that analyzes aspects of different experiences through the composition of theories and concepts to offer an abstract understanding of one or more core concerns in the studied world (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2021). Research using this methodology involves obtaining data from observations, interviews, videos, and other similar means (Corbin, 2021). The data is then broken down into codes and pieced back together to build theories by grouping similar codes into categories. Grounded theory in combination with Black feminist thought allows for a deeper exploration into the impact of the SBW schema on the gendered racial identity development of Black college women and non-binary students that is guided by their own experiences, perspectives, and narratives. Black feminist thought is known as the construction of ideas produced by Black women to clarify a standpoint that is of and for Black women (Collins, 1986). The experiences of Black women outside of the traditional feminist context are highlighted within Black feminist thought.

Study Sample

The participants in this study are from a larger research study that explored the role of Hip Hop, identity, and social media on the experiences of Black adolescent girls and college women. Conducted in a suburban midwestern city in the United States, the lead researcher partnered with a local high school to implement a youth participatory action research (YPAR) mentor research program for Black adolescent girls. The program ran from March 2022-May 2022, providing Black girls and college women with an identity affirming space to engage in

critical conversations as it pertained to Black girl/womanhood. From the study sample, 15 participants between the ages of 19-22 were utilized as participants within this study. Thirteen of the participants identified as Black women and two of the participants identified as queer/non-binary. To answer the questions of the current research study, semi-structured pre- and post-program interview data will be used. The names presented in the results below are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

Procedure and Sources of Data

Following the approval from the university and school district research review boards, the lead researcher recruited Black college women as mentors and Black high school girls as mentees to participate in the after school Black girl mentor research program. For the purpose of this study the data and results were drawn from the pre- and post-semi structured interviews from the Black college women and non-binary mentors as it pertained to their identity development and the SBW schema. Prior to the start of the program, the mentors participated in semi structured pre-program interviews that explored their ideologies and experiences as it pertained to Black womanhood. Sample questions from the pre-program interviews include: (1) What does being a Black woman mean to you?, (2) Describe how Black women are represented in our culture today?

Following the semi structured pre-program interviews, the mentors and mentees took part in a ten-week program, twice a week, for two hours. At the end of the program, the mentors and mentees participated in post-program semi structured interviews. During the post-program interviews, mentors were asked similar questions to those of the pre-interview providing further elaboration of their thoughts. The mentors were prompted to share their ideologies regarding the

Strong Black woman schema as well as building upon their concepts of identity. Sample questions from the semi structured post-program interviews include: (1) Describe what the strong Black woman schema means to you?, (2) How has the strong Black Woman schema impacted the way that you navigate the world and handle situations? See Appendix A for IRB approval of the current study.

Data Analysis

The pre- and post-semi structured program interviews were transcribed using a transcription service. The data was analyzed using a three-stage grounded theory thematic analysis approach alongside constant comparative analysis of each interview (Corbin, 2021; Saldaña, 2021). Specific questions pertaining to the strong Black woman schema and gendered racial identity development within the pre- and post-semi structured interviews were analyzed for the purpose of this study. The participants' words were analyzed to capture their perceptions of the SBW schema and how it informs their gendered racial identities, navigation of PWIs, and mental health. The researcher primarily explored codes that were related to the SBW schema (i.e., how it had been modeled in their lives, personal definitions of the schema, etc.), gendered racial identity development, and mental health.

This study employed a three-stage analytic coding process: (1) initial, open coding, (2) focused coding, selecting codes into categories, (3) theoretical coding, reducing categories into overarching themes (Saldaña, 2021). Coding is an interpretative process that allows researchers to derive concepts and meaning from data (Corbin, 2021). Dedoose software was used during the first stage of the coding process. The researcher first engaged in line-by-line initial open coding where each line of the interview was given codes to describe the participants experiences and

beliefs. During this stage, in vivo, process, values, and emotion coding were used to draw out various meanings from the participants words (Saldaña, 2021). In vivo coding allowed the researcher to use terms and concepts to define the experiences of the participants. Process coding enabled the researcher to explore the actions of the participants. Values coding aided the researcher in capturing the participants perspectives and worldviews. Lastly, emotions coding enabled the researcher to label or infer the emotions experienced by the participants. After initial coding each interview, the researcher went through and began analytic memo writing which drew connections between the codes in each interview. Memo writing allowed the researcher to further develop their thoughts and create a foundation for future thematic analysis by transcending codes into possible themes (Corbin, 2021; Saldaña, 2021).

Following the completion of stage one, the researcher discussed initial codes and memos with advisor for interator reliability to certify consistency among codes and reduce any biases. Next, the researcher began stage two, focused coding, which entailed selecting similar and the most frequent codes into categories. Once this process was complete, the researcher discussed those categories with advisor to ensure agreement upon the categories. Stage three, thematic analysis was then ensued, and the researcher worked closely with advisor to reduce categories into overarching themes (see appendix B) using theoretical coding. The themes will be discussed in the results section below.

RESULTS

Four themes were found that highlight how the strong Black woman schema informs Black college women's and non-binary students gendered racial identity development, navigation of PWIs, and mental health: (1) Redefinition of the SBW: (Re)considering personal, familial, and cultural constructions of strength (2) Seeking community and mentors to define and build strength to navigate PWIs (3) Navigating PWIs with self-awareness, vulnerability, and intent (4) Developing adaptive coping mechanisms to fight against the SBW schema. For a complete list of themes and categories see Appendix B.

Theme 1: Redefinition of the SBW: (Re)considering Personal, Familial, and Cultural Constructions of Strength

Answering research question 1, and similar to the gendered racial identity development process described in Williams and Lewis (2021), all the participants in this study mentioned or demonstrated reflection upon their own identities as it pertained to external and internal definitions of strong Black womanhood. The participants' redefinition of strength builds from the foundation of their personal, familial, and cultural constructions of strength. This redefinition process is comprised of three components: (1) evaluating multiple sources for SBW, (2) rejecting traditional SBW definitions, (3) reconstructing the SBW schema to fit identity.

Component 1: Evaluating Multiple Sources for the SBW schema. The evaluation of generational influences on the construction of what it means to be a strong Black woman is pertinent in this redefinition process. The participants within this study were socialized from a young age by their parents, family members, and those close to them on what it means to be

strong. Porter (2015), found that the strength and values that many Black women carry are due to their maternal and familial influences. This notion can be seen reflected multiple times throughout the data within the present study. For example, when asked when her understanding of the SBW schema began to form, Sunni stated the following:

My mom, she was a single mom and most of the women in my family are independent women. So it's been since, I would say since birth, I've always had strong female role models around me, strong black women around me.

While it appears that, her mother was a primary influence on her understanding of strength, she also emphasized the impact that other Black women within her family had on her definition of strength. Similarly, when asked what being a Black women meant to her, Grace discussed the influence that her grandmother had on how she believes strength manifests:

I would say that I really learned that from my grandmother, how you carry yourself. You carry yourself with grace, with strength, with intelligence, just not really letting the things that happen in your life, become your identity and overcoming anything that life throws at you.

For Grace, her strong Black woman role model was her grandmother who appears to have had a large influence on how she not only defines strength but how she carries herself as well. It is during this part of the redefinition process that the multigenerational influences on the participants foundational understanding of strength is being examined. The participants also examine outside sources such as social media that influence their understanding of strong Black womanhood. For example, Beyonce states:

Just relating back to the TikToks, as a black woman, I feel like we're always constantly strong, and we have to accomplish the whole world and do this and

that. But I think like seeing other black girls who are in college, just taking the time to take care of themselves, having self-care, trying something new, that's definitely been my biggest influence.

Beyonce looks towards other Black woman representations on social media to help guide her through her own understanding of what it means to be strong. The various representations of Black women within the media adds to Beyonce's understanding that strength can manifest and look differently in the lives of Black women.

Component 2: Rejecting Traditional SBW Definitions. Upon evaluating familial definitions of strength, another key aspect of the strong black woman redefinition process is the rejection of traditional strong Black woman definitions. Referring to stage three, rejecting parts of gendered racial socialization, of Williams and Lewis (2021), identity development model, the rejection of traditional SBW definitions pairs well here. For many of the Black women in this study, their rejection is informed by gendered racial identity conflict, the fight against stereotypes, and rejecting the façade of strength. As previously mentioned, cultural definitions of strength include more traditional iterations of what it means to be a strong Black woman such as displaying selflessness, independence, resiliency, and nurturance towards others (Abrams et al., 2014). However, more traditional iterations of the schema fail to recognize gender nonconforming/non-binary individuals and how these implications might impact their gendered racial identity development. For example, when asked how being a Black woman has influenced their life Lucy responded with the following:

But as in an internal experience for me, just being a black woman for me now, has been trying to find myself and my role in the community. Especially with being

black and I'm considered trans, non-binary ... Gender nonconforming, Black and gender non-conforming is very difficult.

Lucy discusses the difficulties that they face when trying to find their role within the community as a gender nonconforming Black individual. This process of self-exploration can be exasperated and impeded upon by the social pressures, roles, stereotypes, and in this case schemas that are placed upon Black women. Due to the gender specific nature of the SBW schema the pressure to ascribe to the schema as it is traditionally referenced could be a contributing factor to the gendered racial identity conflict that Lucy seems to be experiencing as they are learning to navigate their community. There is also an apparent fight against stereotypes that adds to this rejection component of this redefinition process. The participants in this study discuss pushing back against the stereotypes that do not align with their identities. For instance, when asked what being a Black women meant to her, Chelsea responded:

Being Black ... Stereotypes or different things that they feel Black women are. So, it's like you're always fighting those opinions, but you just have to keep your head tall, and just staying strong. But just saying who you are and not letting any of that deter you from your path.

Similar to stage three of Williams and Lewis (2021) identity development model and the HHFMMI (Payne & West, 2022), Chelsea displays that she is aware of the stereotypes that surround her identity and is resisting monolithic representations of Black womanhood. Alongside this fight against stereotypes, the façade of strength is also being rejected. The façade of strength refers to this idea that Black women use strength as a mask to cover up the true emotions they are experiencing that do not align with traditional definitions of strength. Beyonce discusses how

this façade of strength is no longer necessary and wants to move away from this narrative by stating:

What people see as strong is not really strong on the inside. It's honestly a lot of people who are strong black women are not strong. They're just continuing to endure pain or enduring things that they shouldn't have to end endure, that got them to that point. And I think that encourages like other Black girls to be okay with pushing that boundary when it's just not necessary.

Beyonce believes that it is no longer necessary to remain strong at all costs which illuminates the shift of perceptions regarding the SBW schema and makes way for new and more self-fulfilling definitions of strength to emerge. Overall, this stage heavily supports the findings of past research (Platt & Fanning, 2022; Jones et al., 2021a) where Black women have been found to reject the schema as it is traditionally referenced.

Component 3: Reconstructing the SBW Schema to Fit Identity. The third and final component of this redefinition process is the reconstruction of the SBW schema to fit identities. The participants within this study describe what strength means to them and how it is enacted within their own lives. The redefinitions of the SBW schema within this study coincide with the resilient, gendered racial pride, and new wave themes found in Jones et al., (2021a)'s research. Each of those themes represent the meaning that Black college women attribute to the SBW schema. For example, Keke speaks on resilience and notes that for her strength manifests in the way that she handles situations:

It's not necessarily about being strong all the time, it's about like how you handle situations.

As defined by Jones et al., (2021a) gendered racial pride is having a sense of self assurance and confidence. When asked to describe how Black women are represented in our culture, Grace's response reflects this notion of gendered racial pride:

We're gaining more confidence and everything. Over the past few years, black feminism has just changed. And we're taking all the world we don't care. We don't care what people say. And that's what I love about it now because it doesn't matter how you represent it in the culture because we are the culture and we're going to keep shaping it and changing it.

In this quote, Grace expresses immense amount of pride towards Black feminism as a whole and how Black women are not only the culture, but also have the power to shape the culture. Lastly, Jones et al., (2021a) defined the new wave theme as responses that critique or challenge the strong Black woman image. Kelly reflects this updated ideology and expresses the following:

I also feel like we also need to normalize Black women having other emotions than just being strong. And I think even when we're not strong ideally, whatever people consider that being, I think that we need to normalize that crying or being angry is okay, that's normal, and all of these are emotions and characteristics.

Kelly is challenging the strong Black woman image and is redefining the narrative in a more self-nurturing way. She is providing nuance to how strength can manifest in the lives of Black women, which in this case is through expressing the vulnerable parts of her emotionality. Jane is another exemplifier of this new wave ideology:

I feel like now we're bringing the younger generation up in a more positive light and making them aware of it. It's okay to express these things and it's okay to be

how you are and that you're not going to necessarily fit into the characteristics that everybody sees you as.

Jane speaks to the generational influence of the SBW schema and how these redefinitions have the power to shape how the younger generations conceptualize what it means to be a strong Black woman and how to endorse the schema in ways that fit best with their identities. Based on these redefinitions, the participants showcase that they have evaluated multiple sources of the SBW schema, rejected specific aspects of the schema, and have molded personal definitions of strength that align best with their identities.

Theme 2: Seeking Community and Mentors to Define and Build Strength to Navigate PWIs

Answering research question 2, participants in this study express seeking out representation within their campus communities to build upon their notions of strength. The spaces that Black college women navigate frequently at PWIs consist of sexist and racist ideologies that continue to detract from their social and educational experiences (Payne & West, 2022). These adversities make the navigation of PWI's increasingly more challenging for many Black college women. In order to remain strong in the face of adversity, the participants seek out community to support them through negative gendered racial experiences. Jane shares that she feels empowered when she is surrounded by other Black women and asserts that there is strength in community:

I think I'm most inspired and empowered when I'm surrounded by other Black women. I think that we're stronger together. And when we come together and we're all black excellence and working towards something and embracing just

who we are and what our culture is, that's the most empowering moment to me knowing you hold strength.

For Jane, being in the presence of those who are like-minded and embrace their authentic selves in a place where their identities are scrutinized is an empowering experience. This empowerment allows her to hold her strength while in the face of adversity. Similarly, Beyonce references the SBW schema and posits that a strong Black woman requires community support to provide and build up her strength in times where she is unable to be strong on her own:

I feel like it's like you're being strong, but who's there to hold you up? Because I feel like any in the positive sense of "strong black woman," I feel like a strong black woman is kind of raised by a village. Someone's there to make sure she's okay when she's not strong.

It appears that Black college women are drawing upon others to build a safety net of support and strength while in adverse campus climates. West et al., (2022), had similar findings and reported that Black women in higher education tend to build their own safety nets through seeking out support from other Black women, family, and friends to navigate academic spaces. In addition to seeking out community, the participants referenced looking to faculty members who resemble them for guidance and mentorship. For example, Grace mentions how she tries to surround herself faculty members that she can relate to and vice versa to help guide her throughout her educational journey:

I try to just surround myself with more staff of color and just try to get their perspective on everything because while yes, there are some white professors that will help and encourage you. I feel I get more guidance because they've been

through what I've been through. So that's how I've tried to see it for the last two semesters.

In this quote, Grace emphasizes the importance of having mentors who have had similar PWI experiences. It is through these mentor relationships that Black college women are learning how to better navigate their campus climates. Similarly, West et al., (2022), also found that black college women tend to seek out Black women mentors in order to catalog the strategies of other successful Black women while pursuing their own aspirations and academic goals. Taken together, the participants expressed that strength and empowerment stem from community representation.

Theme 3: Navigating PWIs with Self-awareness, Vulnerability, and Intent (The Power of the Redefinition of SBW)

Building from theme 2 and answering research question 2, participants in this study further discuss how they approach navigating PWIs. As noted by Anyiwo et al., (2022), the SBW schema may serve as a survival mechanism and coping strategy for Black women in the face of gendered racial marginalization. Informed by their own definitions of strength, the SBW schema acts as a catalyst for the ways in which the participants within this study maneuver their campus environments. The participants in this study mentioned actively employing self-awareness, vulnerability, and intentionality as they navigate their often micro aggressive campus climates. When asked how she deals with discrimination, Grace discusses her own personal growth journey and discusses how she came to learn how to better communicate and express her emotions to others:

And me learning in my growth process, I need to learn to communicate more.

Because I wasn't a great communicator and just being able to communicate now, it kind of takes a weight off my shoulders and expressing how I felt in the situation.

Grace's realization illuminates her level of self-awareness and the steps that she is taking to become more vulnerable with her emotions in the face of adversity. Her vulnerability stems from her own definition of strength which entails holding herself accountable. When leading with self-awareness and vulnerability, she is equipped to handle discriminatory encounters that she might have within her campus environment in ways that are true to her most authentic self. Through the employment of self-awareness and vulnerability, participants within this study are more attentive to their self-presentations within academic spaces as well as self-advocating. For example, Sunni states the following:

I feel like just coming to the PWI, you already have that stigma against you. I don't know. I guess it's just influenced me to stand up for what I believe in and educate others.

A level of vulnerability comes with self-advocacy, and with many of the participants ascribing vulnerability to strength, it appears Sunni is drawing upon her own strength in order to stand up for herself and educate others on race related topics. Regarding attentiveness towards self-presentation, Lucy mentions:

I have to make sure that I look nice, I'm dressed nice, so they don't assume that I look a certain type of way. I have to prove my intelligence to them, I have to make sure that I'm just doing everything right, basically, so I don't get a bad taste in these people's mouths.

In this quote, Lucy who uses they/them pronouns, expresses the amount of effort that they put into their self-presentation in order to prove to others that they are worthy of and belong in these academic spaces. They emphasize wanting to do everything right to ensure that others can see their intellectual abilities even if that means presenting themselves in a specific way. Lastly, participants in this study also reflected on moving with intentionality when navigating PWIs. The participants discussed being selective of the spaces that they put themselves in as well as being intentional with what they say. For example, Jane discusses being intentional with how she navigates her campus climate:

So, just kind of being conscious of how people are going to respond to me and how I have to respond. And then just being intentional in what I do, what I say, what environments I've put myself in. So, I think that it's molded my college experience a lot.

In this quote, Jane recognizes that she must be intentional with the environments that she puts herself in as they can heavily mold her college experience. She further reflects upon the importance of being intentional with the following:

I had to figure out what I wanted my college experience to be and how could I be intentional about being surrounded by other Black people or being surrounded by other people who also embrace my culture.

This quote speaks not only to the importance of intentionality but further reiterates the need to seek out community while at PWIs as discussed previously in theme two. Jane also displayed a level of self-awareness by being cognizant of what she would like to get out of her college experience and navigating her campus environments with those intentions in mind.

Theme 4: Developing Adaptive Coping Mechanisms to Fight Against the SBW Schema

Answering research question 3, the participants within this study recognize the detrimental psychological effects that can be associated with SBW schema. Abrams et al., (2019) explored the negative psychological outcomes of the schema and referenced the theory of self-silencing which suggests that Black women are silencing their needs, presenting inauthentic exteriors, putting others needs before their own, and evaluating themselves based upon cultural standards. When asked to reflect on how the SBW schema can impact mental health Liz states:

I think the biggest thing is people won't know how to deal with mental health if they've never confronted it. So, I think if you keep putting everything in a box and not addressing it, eventually you're going to hit the point where it overwhelms you and you won't know what to do about it because you have been doing nothing about it.

This quote speaks to the self-silencing behaviors that Black women often engage in to be perceived as strong in the eyes of society. However, Liz recognizes that the consequences of such behaviors and how they can negatively impact the mental health and emotionality of Black women. If left unattended, these emotions can become overwhelming and burdensome. This notion further coincides with the research of Vance et al., (2022), which asserts that Black women are often pushed towards unhealthy coping behaviors (i.e. self-silencing). Chelsea had similar thoughts regarding the SBW schema and its effect on Black women's emotionality:

I think it affects your mental health because a part of it is figuring out how to regulate your emotions and things like that. And I think a part of that is realizing how to accept your emotions and your progression from anger to maybe sadness, whatever the case may be. It affects your mental health because if society and all

these people aren't allowing you to process those emotions, you're not able to fully develop how to handle it.

The participants recognize the negative impacts the SBW schema can have on one's mental health and have developed adaptive coping mechanisms to combat negative psychological effects. A proponent of these more adaptive coping mechanisms is the ability to fight against stereotypes. Keke discusses how she must consistently remind herself that she does not need to limit herself within the constructs of how society believes Black women should be:

I can be multiple things at one time. And I think I find myself, not struggling with it on a daily basis, but I feel like I have to constantly remind myself I can act in one way and I can also act in another way. There's not a box that I have to keep myself in.

Although she did not explicitly refer to the SBW schema, "strength" is a characteristic that is often associated with the SBW schema. Another proponent of the participants' adaptive coping mechanisms to combat the negatives of the SBW schema is their utilization of self-evaluative coping mechanisms. Beyonce expresses how it is important to be evaluative of our own personal growth journeys and to take the time to appreciate the small wins as Black women:

For me being a black woman is all about knowing yourself and the growth that you make, and taking those small wins and running with them. Because I feel like as a black woman, we are always trying to have to conquer the world and never are appreciative about the small wins that we have.

Lastly, the participants appear to engage in identity confirmation coping styles in order to combat the negative effects of the schema. Grace says the following:

I would say just being true to who you are, no matter what, like what I said before, no matter what life throws at you, if you are able to still be yourself during that experience. If you're still able to just hold yourself accountable and to really think what lesson this is teaching you. That's really how I look at it. A strong black woman is someone who holds herself accountable, no matter like what the situation.

In this quote, Grace showcases her ability to utilize identity confirming coping styles to affirm her identity as well as remain true to herself in lieu of any obstacle. Utilizing identity confirmation coping styles can help combat the more negative psychological effects of the SBW schema because it allows the participants to prioritize themselves and in Grace's case it allows her to hold herself accountable.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore Black college women's and non-binary students gendered racial identity development, navigation of PWIs, and mental health through the lens of the SBW schema. Building from past research on the SBW schema, the results from this study illuminate how perceptions of the SBW schema play an integral role in the gendered racial identity development of Black women and non-binary students. The students within this study demonstrated how they redefined the SBW schema to better fit their identities. Additionally, results from this study highlight how Black women and non-binary students navigate PWIs through community and mentor seeking, alongside maintaining levels of self-awareness, vulnerability, and intentionality. Lastly, the results showcase the adaptive coping mechanisms that Black college women and non-binary students have developed to fight against the negative side effects of SBW schema.

Strong Black Woman Perceptions and Gendered Racial Identity Development

While supporting previous gendered racial identity development research, the findings of this study specifically highlight Black women and nonbinary college students' reconsideration and redefinition process of the SBW schema. Coinciding with Porter's (2017), Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women (MIDBUW), the findings illuminate how for Black college women and non-binary students their socialization towards being strong is informed by familial and cultural influences. The Hip Hop Feminism Model of Multiple Identities (HHFMMI) also supports these findings, as this model explores how the multiple identities of Black women are consistently being revised, repackaged, and performed based on

environmental influences (Payne & West, 2022). During the participants' reflection upon various sources of the SBW schema that they have been exposed to, the familial and cultural influences on their perceptions of strength became apparent. This reflection upon SBW influences within this redefinition process is reminiscent of the reflection stage described in Williams and Lewis's (2021), gendered racial identity development process. However, the reflection within this redefinition process differs in the sense that it requires reflection specifically upon the strong Black woman schema through the lens of familial and cultural influences.

The rejection aspect of this redefinition process also aligns with Williams and Lewis (2021), who found that Black women are rejecting parts of the Black women stereotype that do not fit into their own views of Black womanhood. Within the premise of this study, the rejection aspect pertains to rejecting parts of the strong Black woman schema that do not fit into Black college women's view of Black womanhood. In order to redefine the SBW schema in ways that align best with their gendered racial identities, the participants within this study demonstrated how they had to reject more traditional definitions of strength. The results indicate that the redefinition of what it means to be a strong Black woman stems from constantly having to fight against this stereotype, gendered racial identity conflict, and wanting to dismantle this façade of strength that Black women are expected to uphold. Understanding this redefinition process may assist other Black college women and non-binary students who are navigating through their own identity development processes. Furthermore, knowledge of this process adds to our understanding why Black college women navigate predominantly white spaces in the way that they do.

Navigation of PWIs Informed by Personal Definitions of Strength

In addition to the SBW redefinition process, results of this study demonstrate how these new and individualized definitions of strength inform how they navigate PWIs. This notion of utilizing the SBW schema to maneuver through gendered racial discrimination experienced at PWIs is consistent with past research on the SBW schema endorsement. While Aniywo et al., (2022) only assessed the endorsement of the SBW schema among Black adolescent girls, their findings that Black girls who experience racial discrimination are more likely to endorse the SBW schema it appears that the schema is being carried over into early adulthood as Black college women begin to navigate the gendered racial barriers that accompany PWIs. The participants in this study sought out community and mentorship to build upon their own personal definitions of strength. Many of the participants express that there is strength in community and representation. This need for community and mentor support builds upon the findings of West et al., (2022), that Black college women are building safety nets of support to better help them navigate their adverse campus climates.

Adding to research, the results of this study indicate self-awareness, vulnerability, and intentionality as common characteristics that Black college women and non-binary students incorporate into their definitions of strength. Furthermore, the results demonstrate how participants use these characteristics to navigate their campus climates. Many of the participants discussed their personal growth journeys and how they had to become more aware of their self-presentations when in their campus environments. The participants expressed being mindful of how they present to others to disconfirm some of the biases that surround Black women. In addition to becoming self-aware, the participants also expressed becoming more vulnerable about their wants and needs as Black women in academia through self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy is an integral part of navigating PWIs as it enables Black college women and non-binary students to speak up about the inequities they are faced with. Utilizing vulnerability as a navigational strategy can aid Black women and non-binary students in reshaping their gendered racial experiences at PWIs. Lastly, navigating PWIs with intentionality acts as a catalyst for Black college women and non-binary students to carve out and cultivate spaces within their campus environments where they can express themselves. In understanding how Black college women and non-binary students use their redefinitions of strength to navigate PWIs, we can better interpret the role that the strong Black woman schema has on their journeys through higher education.

Developing Adaptive Coping Mechanisms to Fight Against the SBW Schema

In addition to redefining the SBW schema to better fit their identities, results of this study showcase adaptative coping mechanisms that participants developed in order to combat negative psychological effects of the SBW schema. Previous research has identified self-silencing behaviors, distress, anxiety, and depression as byproducts of the strong Black woman endorsement (Abrams et al., 2019). Coinciding with past research, the participants articulated similar negative side effects of endorsing the schema expressing that there is a pressure to maintain a perfect image of strength which can inhibit their emotionality and self-expression. Vance et al., (2022) describes this as the pursuit of strength at the cost of emotional expression.

To combat these negative psychological outcomes, results of this study indicate that Black college women are continuously fighting against the SBW stereotype and have constructed self-evaluative and identity confirming coping mechanisms. Developing self-evaluative coping mechanisms is an effective way to disconfirm the notion that strength is measured by the

magnitude of one's success but rather is about evaluating and recognizing the small accomplishments. Identity confirmation coping in the context of this study is about reaffirming identities and definitions of strength. This research study shows that it is important for Black college women and non-binary students to remember that strength is not linear and is rather about how they handle and carry themselves throughout situations. Future research should further explore the development of adaptive strong Black woman coping mechanisms.

Implications

As Black women continue to pursue higher education at PWIs, examining the impacts of the SBW schema on Black college women and non-binary students is becoming increasingly more important. The SBW schema's impact on the gendered racial identity development and mental health of Black women has been a topic of exploration in past literature. However, results of this study provide a conceptual guide as to how Black college women and non-binary students are redefining the SBW schema during their gendered racial identity development. This redefinition process reflects Williams and Lewis's (2021) gendered racial identity development process and provides insight into how the SBW schema is being reshaped to better fit their identities. Moreover, the results of this study highlight ways in which Black college women and non-binary students are utilizing their redefinitions of the schema as a navigational tool and coping mechanism while attending PWIs.

By understanding the impacts of the SBW schema on Black college women and non-binary students, educators and staff within predominantly white institutions can deepen their knowledge on the experiences of the Black college women and non-binary students attending their institutions. Furthermore, this understanding can lead to better accommodation for their

students through striving for more progressive change within their campus environments. As for Black college women and non-binary students, this study aids in the contextualization of their experiences with being at the intersection of multiple social identities and how the strong Black woman schema impacts navigation of PWIs and mental health. This contextualization can help to prepare Black women and non-binary individuals for the identity development changes that may occur while attending a PWI. In addition to identity development preparation, this contextualization can provide Black women and non-binary individuals with useful insight into PWI navigational tools (i.e. navigating with intentionality, vulnerability, and self-awareness) and adaptive coping mechanisms (i.e. identity confirming and self-evaluative coping mechanisms).

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APPENDICES

Appendix A:

IRB Approval

The screenshot displays the Cayuse Human Ethics interface. At the top, the navigation bar includes 'Dashboard', 'Studies', 'Submissions', and 'Tasks'. The user is logged in as 'Whitney Akalugwu'. The current page is 'Submission Details' for a study titled 'Initial' (IRB-FY2023-303 - The Strong Black Woman Schema: How It Informs Black College Women's Identity Development And Navigation of PWIs).

The submission progress is shown in four stages, all marked with a green checkmark:

- In-Draft:** Submission is with researchers.
- Awaiting Authorization:** Submission is awaiting certification or approval.
- Pre-Review:** Submission is being prepared for review.
- Under-Review:** Submission is with reviewers.

A green banner indicates 'Review Complete'. Below this, the submission details are listed:

- PI:** Ashley Payne
- Current Analyst:** Johnna Pedersen
- Decision:** Approved
- Policy:** Post-2018 Rule
- Review Type:** Expedited
- Review Board:** MSU

Navigation tabs include 'Approvals', 'Task History', 'Letters', and 'Attachments'. The 'Approvals' tab is active, showing a 'Research Team' table:

Name	Role	Result	Date
Ashley Payne	Principal Investigator	Certified	01-11-2023 1:09 PM

A blue notification bubble with a question mark is visible in the bottom right corner.

Appendix B:

Themes and Categories

Themes	Definition of Theme	Categories
Theme 1: Redefinition of the SBW: (Re)Considering Personal, Familial, and Cultural Constructions of Strength Subtheme 1: Evaluating Multiple Sources for SBW: Reconstructing the SBW schema to fit identity Subtheme 2: Rejecting Traditional SBW Definitions	This theme reflects the redefinition process of the SBW schema that Black college women experience during their gendered racial identity development. This theme highlights the following as the three components of Black college women's redefinition process of the SBW schema: (1) evaluation of multiple sources of the SBW schema (2) rejection of traditional SBW definitions (3) reconstructing the SBW schema to fit identity.	Category 6: Identity Guided by Personal Redefinitions of Strength Category 5: Familial and Cultural Definitions of Strength Category 7: Rejecting the facade of Strength Category 15: Fighting Against Stereotypes Category 11: Gendered Racial Identity Conflict
Theme 2: Seeking Community and Mentors to Define and Build Strength to Navigate PWIs	This theme reflects the importance of seeking out representation while attending PWIs to receive support and further develop notions of strength.	Category 1: Seeking Mentors to Build Upon Strength Category 12: Seeking Community to Build Strength
Theme 3: Navigating PWIS with Self-Awareness, Vulnerability, and Intent (The Power of the redefinition of the SBW)	This theme reflects how SBW redefinitions inform how Black college women navigate PWIS. Guided by these redefinitions, Black college women appear to navigate their campus environment with the following: (1) self-awareness (2) vulnerability (3) Intent.	Category 2: Navigating PWI with Vulnerability Category 9: Moving with Intent and Awareness Category 10: Self Advocacy Category 14: Attentive to Self-Presentation
Theme 4: Developing Adaptive Coping Mechanisms To Fight Against The SBW Schema	This theme reflects how Black college women and non-binary individuals are utilizing adaptive coping mechanisms to combat the negative effects of the SBW schema	Category 15: Fighting against stereotypes Category 8: Negative Perceptions of SBW and Impact on Mental Health Category 3: Identity Confirming Coping Category 13: Self Evaluative