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Ain't I Cool: Investigating the Lived Experience of Cool for Black Male Collegians

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AIN’T I COOL:
INVESTIGATING THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF COOL
FOR BLACK MALE COLLEGIANS

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
The School of Education

by
Kyle N. Boone
B.A., University of Louisville, 2004
M.A., University of the Pacific, 2006
December 2013
DEDICATION

To my Mother…
To my Father…
To my Sister…

Because of you I am…

I LOVE YOU

To Aisha

Look at God
Acknowledgments

Lord Heavenly Father, thank you for simply being you. Thank you for carrying me and getting me out of my own way. Without you this would not be possible. I often wonder why you chose me to run this race, but I thank you for allowing me run and not be weary. Jesus, I love you and I thank you. Amen

While writing this dissertation there have been several ups and an equal number of downs, but I had to remember this is what I prayed for. I am thankful for this opportunity and grateful to be blessed with so many wonderful people that have helped along the way.

To my mother…my first teacher…thank you so much for everything you do and everything you are…I guess that N-a-t-h-a-n-e-l song paid off. You taught me when I was young, do not ever forget who you are and, more importantly, whose you are. Well Momma, I promise I didn’t. Thank you so much for teaching me how to own my gifts and how to share my voice. You are, by far, the most intelligent and beautiful person I know. I pray I have made you proud.

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To Kyrynn, I am so proud of you. I pray you know that your uncle will always be there for you. You never cease to amaze me. Uncle loves you, baby girl.

To my father…Pops! Look at this. It’s done, good sir. Thank you for the calls and the advice. More importantly thank you for showing me how to be so cool. I love you.

To Aisha…Babe!!!…It’s over. Thank you for your patience and your support. You have been there every step of the way and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I thank God for
your faith and I pray we continue to grow now that this stage of our lives is over. You are indeed loved.

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You have gone from mentee to lil’ sister, and it is an honor to see you grow. Oh…and last thing….Yea!!!! We Made it…We Made it…Yea!!!

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During a stats class, I told the wonderful Dr. Arbuthnot that I usually avoid telling the people I grew up with about my degrees due to my desire to avoid the awkward, “We knew you would make it” conversation. Dr. Arbuthnot said to me, “Your action (to not talk about your degrees) is doing a major disservice to the people who could benefit from your story.” I have thought about that conversation since that day, and I have come to the realization that she was right. I am eternally grateful for this lesson and must now take the time to reintroduce myself.

With Humility, I am

Kyle N. Boone Ph.D.

Sometimes I be mad as sh**, Then I say stupid m********* boy you asked for this, Oh Yea…I did didn't I, Did it big didn't I, Made my album sell like it did a bid didn't I, Check the album credit, that’s produced and written by, None other than yours truly,

-J. Cole

*Keep fighting the good fight and never forget to dream.*
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The Experience of Cool is an Expression of Self

The Experience of Cool Provides Access

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of cool for Black male college students. Cool, defined as a means to navigate cross-cultural structures, serves as Black men’s acknowledgement of, and response to, the rules of their self-identified cultural group when confronted by dominant racial, gendered, and/or class hegemonies. Results of this study note that cool is a major part of the fabric in the identity development of Black males and is contextualized through environmental factors.

For this study, four theoretical frameworks were used to understand Black male cool: Phinney’s (1989) Ethnic Development Model, 2) Performance Theory (Butler, 1988), 3) Face-Identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and 4) Cultural Capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). These theoretical frameworks were merged together to create a textured analysis of cool. Texturing for this academic study established a greater “feel” and connection with the topic it is analyzing. Through texturing, I was able view cool through a complex lens in order to assess how cool was learned, performed, and advanced for Black male students.

In order to investigate Black male cool, I adopted a quasi-phenomenological qualitative research design, rooted in a social constructivist worldview. To obtain data for this study I conducted one to two-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews with 11 Black male students and employed a version of photo elicitation called framing. Framing is the process of identifying a visual representation of an idea, behavior, or concept, after speaking about the experience with that idea, behavior or concept. For this study the participants were asked to share their lived experiences with cool and to later frame cool. Through in-depth interviews and framing, data triangulation was accomplished, and four major themes spoke to the experiences of the
participants. For the participants (1) cool is learned and influenced by one’s environment; (2) the experience of cool is an expression of self (self awareness); (3) The experience of cool provides access to multiple spaces, people, and relationships; and (4) The experience of cool creates opportunity to (re)define self.
Chapter I: Dem Boyz So Cool: Introduction

You know a ni*** don’t really wanna take his cool off
-Kanye West, Marvin Gay and Chardonnay

It is 6:00pm and “Where are you?” just flashed across my cellphone screen. I am running late to the campus’s first National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) all Greek coming-out show, and a co-worker wanted to assess my whereabouts. I politely typed in text message jargon “OMW” (on my way) to indicate that I should arrive shortly as I debated what I will wear to this event. Upon arriving, I am taken aback by the amount of people who have decided to show up to see the newest members of this University’s Black Greek community.

The audience on this chilly night began to erupt as five gentlemen lined from shortest to tallest proceeded down the Greek amphitheaters stairs. The gentlemen created a tightly linked line by pressing their backs and chest together while interlocking their arms to seal this position. This line of individuals, dressed in white tuxedo pants, patent leather white shoes, white shirts and matching vest, moved in unison mimicking a military-esque type march. In the spirit of anonymity, the gentlemen were fully masked to conceal the identity of each person; however, I was still able to detect the variety of Black hues of each new member. Nevertheless, the implementation of the masks seemed to amplify the anticipation of the crowd that was currently witnessing this “show”.

Each synchronized movement was emphasized with a hint of a familiar aggression as if the gentlemen were attempting to stomp a hole in the concrete stairs. Each step figuratively dared onlookers to doubt the strength of their unified movements. If each step could speak, it would have echoed, “I wish you would” to the audience. The crowd continuously cheered, some

1 The National Pan-hellenic Council (NPHC) serves as the governing body for nine historically Black Greek letter organizations
getting louder to match the “lines” aggressive movements, and many audience members stood with the hopes of getting a glimpse of the campus’s newest who’s who. On stage, current members of the organization began to scream louder; however, several of these screams were directed to the missing “deuce club” who apparently wasn’t man enough to make it through the pledge process. This missing number (person) was quite evident at the end of the show when the newest members were presented with their line shirts, and the number two failed to be presented to the second person in line. Therefore, the current line-up that was shown at the end of the show was one, three, four, five, and six. Spoiler alert, but I digress

Once on stage, the gentlemen whose organization they were representing adopted the moniker notorious and created a “less aggressive” section of the show by utilizing R&B artist Trey Songz to create the rhythmic framework to guide each intimate motion, which was the direct opposite from the introductory step. Although artist Trey Songz presented a slower, more melodic and sensual parallel to the previous musical selections, the crowd instantly became louder than they were during the introductory step when Trey Songz song began and five Black chairs were escorted onto the stage.

As the song began, the five “notorious” gentlemen started grinding and gyrating with the five assigned chairs in a choreographed sexual nature as R&B artist Trey Songz sang, “Massage you in the bathtub yea; rinse the shampoo up out your hair; baby can I kiss you right there; I won’t leave no hickeys don’t be scared” (Smith, McDowell, & Taylor, 2011). These lyrics became the instructional syllabus needed to direct each thrust, hump, licking motion, slide and grind. Each motion hyper-sexualized; each thrust purposefully placed. Through the use of

---

2 In Black Greek life it is tradition to line the pledges (normally) for shortest to tallest and provide them numbers for identification. If there is a missing number, then it is assumed that someone did not cross, or make it into full membership, for reasons that are normally unknown to the viewing audience.
chairs, the gentleman created the figurative image of the act of sex to the crowd which baited some and stimulated others. The crowd began to erupt even louder as the gentlemen began to pass the chairs that they were grinding between one another or rested their assigned personal chair on the ground and switched positions with his “line brother(s)”. High fives, a colloquial and common hand greeting that is caused when two hands are slapped together in a tagging type motion, were exchanged between members of the organization and between audience members in the crowd to display their approval. In essence, the crowd was cheering the idea of “running a train,” a group sexual act involving multiple partners engaging in sex with one person while taking turns—and/or the idea of disposable sexual partners that can be passed between a group without any degree of happenstance. And at this very moment, when the crowd seemed to peek with excitement, an older member of the organization said with great emphasis to another member of the organization, “Dem boyz so cool”.

**Statement of Problem/ Research Question**

But what was actually cool about this performance or the gentlemen’s on-stage presence? Was it cool to simulate a (hyper) hetero-normative group sexual act with chairs as an example of true manliness? Meaning, men have sex with women but manly, cool men have promiscuous sex with multiple partners. Maybe it was cool that these gentlemen were the ones with the gumption and bravado to “make it”? Meaning, joining an organization is okay, but manly cool men do whatever it takes to “cross-over.” Or, was it cool that these gentlemen have somehow gained the general approval of the community in which they are a part of? Whatever it was, older members of this organization praised them for possessing it, and audience members were in agreement that they indeed had it.
Similar statements and sentiments about “cool” that were identified in this narrative have surfaced and been referenced in scholarship about Black male cool behavior (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992), even though scholars have not contextualized this concept specifically (with) in the university. Nevertheless, cool has been labeled in the Black male narrative as “a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behavior, scripts, physical posturing, impression management and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). Therefore, it could be argued that this show was not solely an introduction for the campus community to meet the newest members of this historically Black Greek letter organization (BGLO); this show was an intentional reinforcement that this organization is an accurate depiction of Black masculinity at its finest.

However, how is cool presented when there is no “stage” present? How is it performed, gained, explained, and/or taught? And, is it even important to do so? To truly understand the narrative about Black male coolness within the academy, the Black male narrative must be examined at its root. I offer that even stereotypical assumptions for Black male students must be analyzed holistically, especially within pop cultural accounts that are often bookended with hypermasculinity, homophobia, anti-intellectualism and hypersexualization, in order to assess the subliminal references that have engrained social interaction and personal development. These assumptions of cool will be critically analyzed in order to reconstruct and “re”conceptualize the idea of Black male coolness that is fervently repositioned, remarked and repackaged through pop culture and a variety of ill-seeded transportable/mobile definitions of masculinity (a) in the academy and (b) for current and future university ambassadors. According to Trifonas (2009) this interrogation/reconceptualization of what it means for humans to know, and I would add what it means to perform what I know, is a necessary obligation and a central aim of this
dissertation. Therefore the research question (central aim) that guided this study was, “what is the lived experience of cool for undergraduate Black male students?”

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to uncover the meaning cool based on the lived experiences of Black male college students. To do this I interviewed Black male students ranging from Black male members of historical Black Greek letter organizations (BGLO), student leaders, student athletes, Black male students not involved in campus leadership activities and Black male students from urban and suburban backgrounds.

But what is Black male cool and why is cool important? According to the literature, Black male cool falls into two major trains of thought. Billson and Major (1992) suggest cool is a behavior, a survival and coping mechanism which signifies masculinity, strength and control. Conner (2003) notes that cool is a code that defines manhood and is authenticated by the dictates of one’s environment. Through both definitions, cool serves as a response to a need and a means to navigate (cross)cultural rules. Be it psychological, physiological or emotional, cool serves as Black men’s acknowledgement of, and response to, the rules of their self-identified cultural group and society’s dominant cultural groups values and ideologies. For the purpose of this document, the term (cross)cultural, which is intentionally bracketed, symbolizes the relationship between the dominant and minority group(s). This relationship represents an insider-outsider identity negotiation process affectionately labeled by Du Bois (1903) as double consciousness. Simply put, (cross)cultural serves as a stage or multiple stages, and double consciousness becomes the process leading up to understanding how to act on that stage. Cool, on the other end, serves as the home team’s rules.
Reflecting back on the introductory story and the assumptions that were presented could help with understanding these two definitions of cool and support the legitimacy of cool’s performance. Although sections of the introductory story were laced with homophobic and hypermasculine undertones, proper performance of these behaviors suggest a covert understanding of the cultural rules (this is what Black men do), and acceptance of this behavior denotes strength. As a result, communal and individual self-respect was/is obtained (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992).

As I reflect on my personal undergraduate experience as a Black male student, I can recall cool being an ever-present phenomenon that remained nameless, yet permeated a multiplicity of spaces. Although a decade removed from school, the introductory story creates a snapshot of my undergraduate experience from 1998-2004, which, upon further reflection, complicates my ever-changing understanding of masculinity and manhood. These often muddied concepts (Black masculinity and Black manhood), which in the case of this study apex at coolness, are a result of the Black male’s unwritten passage into manhood which “become shaped not by the realities of puberty or by the rules of the larger society, but by images and symbols that depict manhood in their environment” (Connor, 2003, p. 25). Manhood and masculinity, and more importantly Black male coolness, are codes that govern and connect individuals within that direct culture and serve as a lifestyle, worldview, rite of passage and perhaps “the most important force in the life of a Black man in America” (Connor, 2003, p. 1). These rules are created out of a need (Connor, 2003), are necessary for survival (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992) and “[are] the closest thing to religion” (Connor, 2003, p. 1) for Black men. Connor (2003) stated,

Cool has many meanings and purposes. For those who need it, cool is a mechanism for survival, a symbol of strength and prowess, and from that strength it becomes a vehicle
for self esteem. When a person is truly cool there exist for him an unspoken respect throughout the community, and from this respect comes a sense of self worth. (p. 40)

Historically, these images of Black men were based on the systematic adherence “to the rules of the White man” (Connor, 2003, p. 9), while the current media representation of Black manhood is rooted in who has the power to create, purport and project those images to the viewing/listening public (Asante Jr, 2008; Hopkinson & Moore, 2006). In the introductory story, the images of aggression, hyper-sexuality and promiscuity (which are not a far cry from current media representation of Black manhood) were the accepted precursors of masculinity that were projected in that collegiate setting as “cool”. Nevertheless, this socially constructed concept, Black male coolness, is a cultural tour guide that ultimately ushers Black men towards manhood and needs additional attention and examination because of the power that cool yields. According to Connor (2003), this power is evident because “cool essentially, defines manhood. Once an adult male is considered cool, his peers consider him a man” (Connor, 2003, p. 11).

During this portion of this introduction, I have created a broad stroking overview of Black male cool. During the next chapter I will go deeper into the phenomenon of Black male cool by carefully analyzing the purpose of cool, its history, symbols and evolution. It is important to note that manhood and masculinity are indeed important factors of this study but should not be confused with the overall purpose of this dissertation. The two, manhood and masculinity, will and must be separated in order to fully understand this concept of Black male coolness. For the purpose of this study, manhood will be defined as a gender role or more specifically a socially constructed concept (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004), and masculinity is the contextualized performance that ultimately reinforces the foundational understanding of manhood (Butler, 1988).
In the next section, I will present research dedicated to analyzing the environment of this study, higher education, as well as how race intersects with this environment in order to paint a fuller picture of this subject and this phenomenon. I will provide literature dedicated to Black male student success, engagement, and/or the lack thereof. This section will take some time to extend the conversation on Black cool by merging “cool” mannerisms noted in the literature review dedicated to higher education and student engagement.

Finally, I will provide a quick overview of the theoretical framework adopted for my research. This framework, which I call textured analysis of cool, is the process of layering multiple theoretical frameworks to gain a better understanding of a topic. For this study, more specifically, this framework provides insight on how cool is learned, formed, performed and, finally, the worth of cool. Below, I will provide a brief description of the individual frameworks that give life to my textured analysis and a more thorough account in Chapter II.

**Theoretical Framework Introduction**

The first framework, Phinney’s (1989) Ethnic Development Model, will create a holistic understanding of Black (male) student development by investigating the influence of interconnectedness, self-reflection and shared culture (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Phinney’s model is grounded in the experience, more specifically, the exploration and understanding of the influence that one’s self-identified culture has on individual development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Phinney, 1989; Phinney, Ong, & American Psychological Association, 2007). Next, I have adopted performance theory (Butler, 1988), face-identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005) as a means to create a solid package to understand cool and answer the research question above: What is the lived experience of cool for Black men in college?
Supplemental Conceptual Framework Introduction

In addition to the textured analysis that has been established, I have also decided to intentionally employ the use of popular culture, hip-hop more specifically, in order to provide the reader with a rich account of this subject (Black male coolness). This framework will not reside solely in methodological sections; it will serve as a hovering conceptual framework intentionally implemented to supplement and introduce the literature, frameworks and worldviews needed to understand this topic. This strategy to utilize hip-hop was not generated because of a superficial linkage between hip-hop and coolness. Ultimately, this strategy allows experiences, be it from the lyrics of artist or the stories of the participants, to permeate throughout the entire text.

In this study popular culture, hip-hop more specifically, will serve as a form of shadow data (Morse, 2000). According to Morse (2000) shadow data “provides the investigator with some idea of the range of experiences and the domain of the phenomena beyond the single participant’s personal experience” (p. 4). This is important for me as a writer because I do not want this phenomenon and the voice of a culture to rest solely in the methodological section of this text. It is far too important to constantly feel these words (to borrow from Sue Weinstein’s (2009) text dedicated to investigating the implementation of nontraditional literacy practices as a form of pedagogy), and hip-hop (Black popular culture) will create a lane needed for this to occur.

Although “popular culture is typically not validated by official institutions” (Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 126), and some scholars critique hip-hop as deficient and unworthy of inquiry (Dyson, 2007) “unofficial institutions—the general public—are arguably consumed by Black popular culture and continue to validate and utilize popular culture to make sense of self and others through the mediated narratives of symbols and signs” (Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 126). Therefore,
this decision to utilize Black popular culture creates a rich response to formal academic texts by complicating and/or complementing the current discourse in these media (re)presented realities, be it just and/or problematic. Like McKee (2001), I will not insist that popular culture is right or wrong; however, I do believe that since “there is no simple, single, correct interpretation of reality, it becomes very important to understand how media texts might be used in order to make sense of the world we live in” (p. 8). In the following section, I will introduce popular culture and how it will be used to make sense of this study of Black male cool.

Dolby (2003) defined popular culture as a powerful medium that can serve as a social adhesive and divider that society has adopted a love/hate relationship with. The power of this avenue was noted to “ha[ve] the capacity to intervene in the most critical issues and to shape public opinion” (Dolby, 2003, p. 256). Therefore, popular culture can serve as a medium whose influence is without walls and which possesses the ability to consciously or unconsciously influence the viewer. According to Dolby (2003), popular culture is a combination between, or integration of, text and lived experience; however, this binary relationship is not solely dichotomous. These concepts are bridged together through reception studies, which show how popular culture is received and interpreted. This combination of lived experiences and texts reinforce the voices of members of hip-hop culture who abide by the current codes that regulate that community. Ultimately, hip-hop is simply following the rules of popular culture (and, I would argue, the unwritten mancode: rules that regulate actions of Black men) by applauding those who remain aligned with authentic behavior, or anything that italicizes contextual and situational realness, and condemning those that do not remain in lockstep with these ideologies. Hip-hop’s sphere of influence has served as an active worldview (Dimitriadis, 2009; Hill, 2009), shaped the formation of gender roles (hooks, 1994), “presents us daily with a constantly up-dated
version of social relations and cultural perceptions” (Fiske & Hartley, 2003 p. 5) and “has become an increasingly accurate mirror for American values” (Hopkinson & Moore, 2006, p. 86). Ultimately, hip-hop is far too important and influential for anyone to turn a blind eye to (Guillory, 2010).

According to Giroux (2004), culture is ever-changing and is a much broader topic that should not be confined to educational walls. According to Giroux, “culture is...both a site of contestation and a site of utopian possibility” (Giroux, 2004, p. 60). Giroux (2004) often challenges the reader to see how culture shapes and mediates history while trying to understand how political becomes pedagogical. This point provides an extremely rich understanding of the influence of Black/hip-hop culture since it creates the framework that this culture (hip-hop) is a site for the birth, performance and transference of ideologies. Hip-hop “influences how many students express who they are” (Guillory, 2010, p. 209). Therefore, since culture is contextual (Giroux, 2004) and ideologies are transparent “systems of representation” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 12), hip-hop text will be a useful aid to this study by narrating, culturally authenticating, and contextualizing the academic rhetoric that underscores Black male coolness. In the text

Performing Identity/Performing Culture, Dimitriadis (2009) confirms this charge by stating,

More than ever, then, we must be flexible in our methodological and theoretical presuppositions and assumptions. We must be open to whatever will help us understand and act upon a global reality that is rapidly sorting out the lives of youth in brutally unfair and unforgiving ways. Popular culture is one important front in this struggle—but it cannot be the only one. (p. 172)

This passage shows the importance of forging a relationship with popular culture and academic texts, a relationship that I have intentionally employed throughout this dissertation.

The strategy to utilize Black popular culture was not adopted to intentionally smite the work of prominent scholars who have studied and pontificated on Black males; however, this
strategy does attempt to muddy the lines of inquiry and examination by questioning who has the authority to talk about Black males and to ensure the depth of the topic is thoroughly examined.

Through the implementation of hip-hop I am able to emphasize multiple lived experiences in order to illustrate a variety of worldviews with the hopes of making sense of this phenomenon. “In many respects popular culture provides the key narratives or stories—around love, respect, friendship, adventures, ect.—that people make use of in coming to inhabit validated identities” (Dimitriadis, 2009, p. 126). Finally, critically examined and properly presented hip-hop texts provides a voice for the normally marginalized voiceless (Dyson, 2007; Hill, 2009) and is a creative methodological stance used to strengthen this study. Like Michael Eric Dyson (2007), I will strategically engage traditional, historical, and academic texts in conjunction with hip-hop text as a form of critical cultural consultation in order to “bridge the gap between then and now, and to offer the insights of past icons to the younger generation while engaging young folks criticism of their elders” (p. xxiii). Therefore, throughout this literature review I will slightly deviate from the pathological approaches of addressing Black male students by introducing sections and engage ideologies with the help of popular culture and/or hip-hop text—in addition to traditional academic texts—in order to complement, challenge, and authenticate the voices of the scholars and/or prophetic speakers who have often been avoided, or simply silenced. In this study hip-hop texts will include, but are not be limited to, song lyrics, movie characters and thematic video/movie scenes and story lines that reflect hip-hop rhetoric as Black cultural capital. Carter (2003) argues that Black cultural capital establishes worth, authenticity, intragroup solidarity and racial interconnectedness. Therefore, cultural capital will symbolize a contemporary account of “realness” according to Black culture, which could
compliment and/or contradict current academic references. Cultural capital will be explained in greater detail later in the theoretical framework section of this document.

To demonstrate this relationship between historical scholars and hip-hop artists, I will stage a conversation about Black men between two authors that are separated by time. Carter G. Woodson (1933) noted in *The Mis-Education of the Negro* that education (or economic growth)—which was a major indicator of the acquisition of manhood—is meaningless for the Black man if he refuses to use this growth to influence his community or, more importantly, is unable to return home or simply chooses to not return to this community. Rapper Meek Mills (2011), who would normally not be coupled with the words of Carter G. Woodson, expounded (possibly unintentionally) on this idea through elaborating on his lived experiences and current understanding of the acquisition of manhood, positionality and authenticity when he stated in a song titled *Ambition*, “I was raised by the stop sign.” This line situates the artist on the corner of the streets where the stop signs are located, thus suggesting he was raised on the corners and is a product of his immediate environment. Further, in Meek Mills’ (2011) song *Imma Boss*—a song that is fixated on power and the ability to govern, which are arguably categorical representations of western masculinity, Meek Mills stated that he “be riding in my old hood, but I’m in my new whip; same old attitude, but I’m on my new shit” (Orlando et al., 2011). Through these lyrics, rapper Meek Mills (consciously or unconsciously) reinforces the charge established by Carter G. Woodson by (a) intentionally situating himself in the streets that raised him (e.g. the stop sign) and (b) through operationalizing (confirming) his ability to return home despite any newness that he may bring with him. In short, Meek Mills is saying material possessions and status do not change and/or affect the relevance of his character. At its core, each text underscores the importance of survival, which Conner (2003) says is cool’s initial purpose, which ultimately
“evolves into something much more complex, subtle, tangible and important…living as a Black man with dignity, cultural and personal pride and satisfaction” (p. 8).

**Methodology Introduction**

After the literature dedicated to Black male cool is established, and the theoretical and conceptual frameworks noted, the next chapter will focus on the methods used to examine the phenomenon of Black male coolness within the academy (university). For this study, I have adopted a qualitative research design which utilized semi-structural interviews with a quasi-phenomenological approach. Although this complex approach borrows several tenants of phenomenology, it should not be confused with a phenomenological study. However, I have chosen to utilize tenets from phenomenological research to assist in discovering similarities and describing how participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Moustakes, 1994). The purpose of borrowing ideas from phenomenological study is to uncover the meaning of what is cool, what is the impact/importance of Black male coolness and ultimately, how the concept of cool is experienced, and (l)earned.

For this study I adopted a social constructivism paradigm in order to inform my research. At its root, constructivism “is defined in its simplest terms as an interpretive stance which attends to the meaning-making activities of active agents and cognizing human beings” (Paul, 2005, p. 60). This is extremely important in this study since the participants provided personal/lived experiences, which define cool. For constructivists, this meaning-making process comes at the intersection of actual happenings and the value laden foundational understandings generated by past experiences (Lincoln, 2005). How one reacts to—or comes to an understanding of—a current situation is not a matter of chance; however, it is a result of a calculated response utilized to make sense of a situation.
Dissertation Structure and Summary

The introductory story provides an excellent snapshot of the complex nature of cool by introducing the performers and several of the validators of this phenomenon to you, the reader. Although a narrative dedicated to Greek life served as the introduction to this study, it should be noted that this dissertation is far from a study about Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO). Indeed, cool is a fluid phenomenon that can and does attach “itself” to Black Greek life, and the data that could be gathered from a study dedicated solely to Black Greek cool could be rich enough to power its own dissertation. However, bracketing this phenomenon solely in the guise of student engagement, or, more specifically, solely focusing on BGLOs experience with cool would do a disservice to a population that is often overlooked and understudied. For example, literature dedicated to student engagement is in abundance; however, what happens to the students who are unengaged? What happens to the students that are high or even low achievers who chose to avoid Black Greek life due to whatever undiscovered reason? Are their voices about their understanding of the phenomenon of cool, uncool, unwarranted, unimportant, or even without merit? It is my hope to include participants in Black Greek letter organization but to not limit this dissertation to Black Greek letter organization members in order to establish a pseudo-longitudinal chain of thought.

In order to not get distracted in the formal understanding of research studies, a few terms must be defined here. The term pseudo-longitudinal was used to focus on the life span of the Black male college student. This means, instead of actually following one student through his collegiate timeline (college entry to graduations and all spots in between), I engaged the thoughts and experiences of a variety of Black males at different stages of time and different levels of their collegiate experience in order to capture multiple views of the Black male student
experience and thought. Also, cool should not be confused with popularity. Although some cool behavior can fall in the category of the popular cool kids, allowing popularity to underscore cool minimizes this phenomenon to public opinion and strips away the depth of the overall phenomenon.

In summary, this dissertation investigated the lived experience of Black male cool through attempting to understand how cool(ness) (the behavior and the idea) impacts Black males in the academy. Chapter II provided the necessary literature relevant to this study in order to create a foundational understanding of Black male cool. Chapter III explored the adopted theoretical frameworks used to make sense of Black cool. Next, Chapter IV clearly establishes the methodology adopted for this study in order to gain rich data needed to understand cool. In Chapter V, I introduced the participants utilized for this study. Next, I presented a synthesized and analyzed account of the data acquired. One of the striking and noteworthy things about Chapter V is my method of data presentation. In order to follow the popular culture/hip-hop theme, as well as the textured approach used to view cool, I have intentionally reported the interview responses in a method that resembles album sampling. For example, in album sampling several beats and melodies are layered together (like my theoretical textured approach) to create a unified sound. The same method/idea were used in the data reported in Chapter V. In addition to the layered responses, later in Chapter V, I supplemented the data reported with visual representations of cool, provided by the participants; through a process I called framing. Finally, Chapter VI summarizes this study and distinguishes my research by positioning my findings with(in) the literature review provided in Chapter II.

Like the notorious gentlemen introduced in the earlier pages, cool’s anonymity (so far) remains masked and onstage, while onlookers (like myself) are excited with anticipation of
cool’s show. However, if the Kanye West quote that introduced this chapter is accurate, it is my hope that once cool is unmasked, we will not only see why those boyz are so cool, but more importantly, what is the lived experience of cool for undergraduate Black men and why Black men are unwilling to take this cool off.
Chapter II: I’m a grown ass man: Investigating cool, masculinity and manhood: Literature Review

Temptation in this entertainment all for the love of being famous
The cool one’s end up being the lamest
-Stalley Live at the Blossom

Chapter II serves as the literature review for Black cool and is broken into independent sections that work together to paint a fuller picture of black cool. In the first section, research specifically dedicated to Black male cool was discussed. The chapter begins by explaining Black cool and then chronicles the history/depth of Black cool. Next, research on Black males’ images in popular culture was discussed in order to provide a deeper analysis of the American Black male experience. Following this section, cool as a form of communication will be discussed. This section addressed the symbols of cool that are extremely important when discussing, the next section, Black masculinity. Lastly, the Black male experience in college was discussed in order to address cool’s impact in the academy. At the conclusion of Chapter II, the reader will have a greater understanding of Black cool.

Black Male Cool

According to Majors and Billson (1992) coolness—which they define as cool pose—is a survival mechanism utilized to psychologically shield/protect Black men. This pose and its evolution were not studied directly in the university; however, its effects have penetrated the university walls. In addition to being a survival mechanism, cool (pose) was defined as a coping mechanism used to alleviate the stresses of racism and has become a normalized behavior used to handle the woes of the world (Majors & Billson, 1992). Cool (pose) is riddled with anti-intellectual and hyper-masculine behavior; therefore, cool has become the antithesis to vulnerability and intelligence (hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992). Cool, as a behavior, is a natural ritual. More specifically, cool (pose) “is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails
behavior, scripts, physical posturing, impression management and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single critical message: pride, strength, and control” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4). However, this ritualized form of masculinity was based off rules created and validated by the Black man’s environment (Connor, 2003). Lastly, it has been noted that “cool is critical to the Black male’s emerging identity as he develops a distinctive style” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 4), and cool defines when a Black boy becomes a man (Connor, 2003). Therefore, cool is the result of the successful acquisition of manhood while following the cultural rules and regulations of a particular environment, which dictate how masculinity will be performed. If performed correctly, the cool Black man will possess all of the privileges and entitlements that distinguished members of this sacred clan need to differentiate themselves from their “uncool” counterpart. Connor (2003) elaborates on this point when she notes that, “cool is about becoming a man. Becoming a man is about succeeding by the dictates of your environment” (p. 201). In other words, cool’s key influences are a result of peer validation and cultural confirmation. Conner (2003) sums up the story of cool well by saying,

Black boys and young men have developed their own system of manhood and pride and of earning respect through being cool. It is a powerful psychological triumph over America’s tunnel vision about self. And that is why it is praiseworthy. Unfortunately, the system of achieving it is so perilous and so emotionally restricting that it is also insidious. (p. 141)

The above passage shows the catch-22 relationship of cool and manhood. Although cool is a powerful medium towards respect and positive self-worth, the cost of cool could actually restrict the emotional growth of Black men.

What cool means or looks like is not universally defined across cultures, geographical regions and even in language codes, despite the influence of popular culture. For example, in White culture, cool is seen as a negligent member of the general public or someone who simply
goes against the rules (Connor, 2003). This means, the proper amount of hoodlum plus a side of recklessness and visual danger, could become a recipe for American cool. Even in literature, many early American authors subscribed to “celebrating the individual and the nonconformist, advocating civil disobedience, savoring the homoerotic, and above all claiming sensual powers of the new” (Leland, 2004). The fictional character the Fonz, played by American actor Henry Winkler from the 70’s television sitcom Happy Days (Marshall, 1974), provides an example of this equation. In an episode which specifically references cool, the Fonz received a phone call from (as he referred to her as) the “airline lady,” the Fonz stated “why don’t you throw down your pencil and hustle over to my place and be cool for the first time in your life” (Figueiredo, J., 2007)? Although the viewer is not able to hear what the airline lady said, the Fonz continued the conversation by saying, “what...now whatcha say...what makes me think I am so cool” (Figueiredo, J., 2007), and the Fonz hung up the phone and the studio audience erupted in applause. The applause continued and the phone rang again and the Fonz picked up the phone and stated, “that makes me think I’m so cool” (Figueiredo, J., 2007). In this scene, The Fonz demonstrated how going against the rules and demonstrating blatant disrespect illustrated his cool and the audience reaction supported the comical guised of cool. Interestingly, the championing of the Fonz, this sitcom protagonist who possess antagonist characteristics, speaks to a general cultural differences of cool.

The history of cool can be traced back to African civilization; however, the definition of cool slightly differs from current standards. In Ghana, cool “combines notions of composure, silences, vitality, healing and social purification” (Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 35), while the South African definition of cool “symbolizes what is good, normal and desirable in society”
(Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 38). According to the research of historian Robert Farris Thompson, he suggests that,

Cool philosophy is a strong intellectual attitude, affecting incredible diverse provinces of artistic happening, yet leavened with humor and a sense of play. It is an all-important mediating process, accounting for the similarities in art and vision in many tropical African societies. It is a matrix from which stem ideas about being generous. (as cited in Pountain & Robins, 2000, p. 36)

According to African Culture, cool is considered sacred (Pountain & Robins, 2000) and, “bears a spiritual meaning: sense of control, symmetry, correct presentation of self and sophistication” (Majors & Billson, 1992, p. 57). This sacred understanding of cool is deeper than the stylized ideas that currently inhibit thoughts about cool. Moreover, if you cycle through the history of cool, you will recognize its extremely deep roots and “you will be able to see a group of people mature as a race” (Connor, 2003, p. 46). According to Connor (2003) there are five stages or conversation about Black cool that should be established in order to understand cools complexity: Street, Revolutionary, Middle Class, Electronic, and woman and cool.

**Street Cool: Up from Slavery**

What a shame from the pain because we used to be slaves, made a change from the whips, shackles and the chain
But nowadays man seem a little strange Trade his soul for the whips and the chains what a shame
-ASAP Rocky, Toast to the Gods

To understand street cool, it is necessary to first evaluate America’s dark history of slavery (Connor, 2003). During this time, culture, pride and power were stripped from Blacks forcing them to learn manhood from the symbols of a culture that were foreign. As a result some of the original symptoms of white manhood (e.g. hyper-masculinity, capitalism, patriarchy) were made clear, while the process of suppressing emotions because of the harsh reality of slavery became critical to survival (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992). According to Connor
(2003), “it is this internalization process that is the beginning of cool” (p. 7). It was learned then to—as rapper 50cent (2005) said in Get Rich or Die Trying—“show no love ‘cause love will get you killed.” This historical assessment of cool is important because it shows the direct location of its American conception—a need. According to Connor (2003),

> It is essential that we remember th[is] experience in order to understand the desperate need [emphasis in original] people had to create a system that teaches emotional control from the minute a child begins to walk. Need [emphasis in original] is at the root of what makes cool—in its purest form—a uniquely Black experience. At the root of cool is the need for it. (p. 7)

Nevertheless, American cool was established out of a need; therefore, as the needs change, cool will follow suit (Connor, 2003). This need began as a form of power and interconnectedness based on cultural values. Historically, cool was grace under fire, a mask to veil the harsh realities of the world. However, on the outside, cool’s veil can be questioned, like Ralph Ellison’s (1952) main character in the Invisible Man, because it is often unclear if this veil is being removed to open one’s eye (positive) or being put on to make it darker (negative). I will refrain from attempting to define this binary (positive versus negative) due to the power of remaining adjacent to the conversation, while hoping the participants of this study will define it for me. Throughout the reminder of this section I traveled through various needs in American culture in order to display a broader understanding of cool.

**Street Dreams**

> The streets raised me up not giving a f***
> I thought Jordan’s and a gold chain was living it up
> -Nas, Street Dreams

In urban America cool continues to be a response to the need for survival; however, the symbols of cool have changed, and the stakes are higher. In street life it is paramount that Black men are able to defend and provide for themselves, by any means necessary (Majors & Billson,
1992). However, it is just as important to have what it takes—attitude, confidence, means and peer validation—to maintain this “cool” image (Connor, 2003; hooks, 2004). The reality of the power and pervasiveness of cool can be seen recently in the collegiate setting due to an altercation that occurred at the end of a college basketball game. During a college basketball game featuring Xavier versus Cincinnati in 2011 tensions ran high over a comment that was made on Twitter, a social networking site. At the end of the game a fight occurred between both teams and during the post-game interview; two members of the winning team explained why this decision to fight was unavoidable. During this interview, Mark Lyons said,

> Cause at the end of the day, if somebody put their hands in your face or try to do something to you, where we from you going to do something back. You know. We not going to sit there and get-get our face beat in by somebody like Yancy Gates or somebody. We don’t let that happen… I wouldn’t be able to do media if I didn’t protect myself. You know what I’m saying. (Mark Lyons, post-game interview, Public Apology Central, 2011, December 10)

In this passage, not only did the player indicate his reason for fighting, he also demonstrated how his actions were and/or would be validated by his peers where he is from. This passage demonstrates more than a need to survive. The passage also identifies the power of peer validation and total buy-in to the need to represent in and outside one’s geographical area.

> Defending oneself though violence is much deeper than simply the physical act. Violence is character, a mentality, and an attitude (hooks, 2004). During the same interview another player spoke about the character of the team by saying;

> We’re a tougher team, we’re grown men over here. We got a whole bunch of gangstas in the locker room. Not thugs but tough guys on the court, and we went out there and zipped them up at the end of the game. That’s our motto, zip-em’ up and that’s what we just did to them. (Tu Holloway, post-game interview, Public Apology Central, 2011, December 10)

In this passage the physical act of fighting was not enough; however, the belief that was carried throughout the entire team shows a response to a need. The team’s actions and mentality
demonstrated how violence, an arguable symbol of strength and self-confidence, is as important as the people who validate it.

America’s association of cool and violence is often short lived and admired at a distance. According to Leland (2004) in his research on the American hipster, “Americans may love the swagger of the gunslinger riding into the town, but they don’t want to clean up afterwards” (Leland, 2004, p. 227). Therefore, there is a stern importance of looking the part and possessing the justified swagger of being violent cool. Interestingly, being violent (or being the gunslinger as noted above), despite the justification for the doers and the reaction of the viewers, differs culturally and should not be dismissed solely as the physically action. For many Black males, violence serves a resource to measure and claim status while remaining visible when the world turns a blind eye (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992). Indeed, violence has earned a negative reputation but, culturally, there is depth beyond the malevolent and simplistic definition of the physical act. As stated in the above sections, cool is a response to a need and violent cool could serve as the response to make the invisible, visible.

**Revolutionary Cool**

During the 1960’s television served as a medium to display Black images and, in turn, black cool. According to Connor (2003) during this time learning and self-awareness were the new markers of cool. Examples of this new cool were in abundance due to mass media and could be seen in members of the Black panther party, Malcolm X, sports icons such as Muhammad Ali, and Olympic medalist Tommie Davis and John Carlos (Connor, 2003).

Congruent with the above images of cool, as Connor (2003) defined it as revolutionary cool, which underscored self-awareness and learning, mass media began displaying Black males within (higher) education. This is pivotal to note because the Black male experience was no
longer isolated to and solely defined by one’s neighborhood. Now, because of the influence of television, the Black male experience has been broadcasted, syndicated, generalized and interrupted through a variety of vantage points. In turn, cool was required to survive in alternative spaces, such as the university (Connor, 2003). Movies such as Higher Learning and television shows such as A Different World and The Cosby Show served as a living, yet fictional, example, of the Black (male) experience that transcended the current trajectory of Black life. According to Connor (2003) media’s reach extended far beyond one’s personal privy and neighborhood and ushered in a reconceptualization of cool. Whether positive or negative, mass media images of cool “developed as a way for a boy to become a man in an environment where he could not become a man in the traditional way” (Connor, 2003, p. 59). Popular culture provided a template for young men to follow if they wanted to be seen as cool on a broader scale. Subsequently, now that cool has evolved, and symbols changed, definitions and relationships were reestablished to reflect these new images, and additional lines were drawn to further a divide in identity developmental definitions (Connor, 2003). These definitions and images will be discussed in the section below.

The Popular Culture Black Male Narrative

Came from the basement and the attics,
Jump shot or serve rocks be the average mindset of the young Black male,
The track so small but we trap so well,
Spend it all at once and make it back so well,
- Stalley Live at Blossom

A critical assessment of the popular culture image/narrative of Black males provides a deeper analysis of the American Black male experience. According to Brown & Kraehe (2011) Black males’ images in popular culture expose the normalized subjugation and dehumanization of Black males and America’s jaded understanding of Black life. Indeed, not all popular cultures
images intentionally generate a negative connotation for Black life; however, this does not negate the face that Black males in popular culture are often “typecast as entertainers, clowns and super athletes” (Gause 2005, p. 19). Therefore, it is crucial these images be critically assessed because not understanding media’s impact on Black males renders the perception of Black males as deficient (Brown & Kraehe, 2011).

According to Reddick (1944) media is extremely hard to escape and as a result, media can be credited for weaving negative stereotypical images of Black males (Black masculinity and Black male cool) in the fabric of America. These stereotypical images have (un)consciously attacked the character of Black men by contextualizing Black men as ignorant animals, buffoons, criminals and lethargic aloof objects. I have intentionally deviated from utilizing the term human or being in the previous sentence due to the dehumanization of Black males that was discussed the literature of Gause (2005) and Brown & Kraehe (2011) that presented in the above section.

Reddick (1944) identified 19 stereotypical images that have been purported in earlier media representations of Black males and have remained salient in current representation of Black males. According to Reddick (1944) these images, “supplement each other, though they are sometimes mutually contradictory” (p.369). In table 2.1, I present the stereotyped characters that Reddick (1944) identified and below the chart I will spend significant time describing contemporary examples of a few of the stereotyped characters identified in the table 2.1.

### Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotyped Characters (Reddick, 1994, p. 369)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Savage African</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Happy Slave</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Devoted Servant</td>
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<td>(Table 2.1 Continued)</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Corrupt Politician</td>
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<td>The Irresponsible Citizen</td>
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<td>Petty Thief</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Social Delinquent</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Vicious Criminal</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Sexual Superman</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Superior Athlete</td>
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<td>The Happy NonWhite</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Natural Born Cook</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Natural Born Musician</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Perfect Entertainer</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Superstitious Church Goer</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Chicken and Watermelon Eater</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Razor and Knife Toter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Uninhibited Expressionist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentally Inferior</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In order to create a contemporary understanding of some of the images reported by Reddick, I turn to current popular cultural texts to illustrate a few examples of these globally exacerbated images. In the movie *Juice* (Dickerson & Brown, 1992), the late Tupac Shakur (who played the character Bishop) demonstrated the *vicious criminal* perfectly during a scene after a botched robbery attempt resulted in the death of his “friend.” Tensions were running high, and Bishop startled co-star Omar Epps (who played the character Q) outside of his (Omar Epps characters’) high school locker. The two exchanged words, and Q aggressively asserted to Bishop that he (Q) was done playing Bishops little game and to “try [him] if [he] thought he was
bullshitting” (Dickerson & Brown, 1992). As the scene continued, Bishop said in a calm yet patronizing tone, “Look at this…the brother finally decides to stand up like a man and throw down. Too bad Raheem had to die first, huh?” (Dickerson & Brown, 1992). In this scene, the socially constructed understanding of a Black man was one who is willing to “stand up” and fight. This is a media represented replication of the Cincinnati and Xavier fight that was stated earlier in this chapter. Both of these performances—the fictional account that was displayed in the movie Juice and the actual fight that occur of a college basketball court—illustrates a media authenticated and culturally accepted understanding of masculinity that exist inside the walls of high schools and colleges.

The Sexual Superman can be identified in recent hip-hop text. Rapper (the late) Notorious B.I.G illustrates this point in his song titled “Big Poppa”—a song that underscores manhood by highlighting the moniker poppa. According to B.I.G., Black manhood, or urban Black manhood, is surmised through the Black man’s understanding of the rules to survival, his acquisitions of female companionship and his economic status. When asked during the third verse of the song how “he was living,” the dapper rapper B.I.G., who deviated from traditional standards of beauty, was performing this scene of his video in a nightclub setting draped in a designer sweater and expensive jewelry informed the listener that “money, hoes3 and clothes, [is] all a nigga knows” (Wallace, 1994). The artist later says in the same verse that he was “living better now, coogi sweater now, drop top BMs I’m the man girlfriend”. In this text, being a man, and illustrating masculinity was about survival; making it out of a bad situation into a better life that included symbols of monetary success (coogi sweaters and drop top BM’s: BMWs) and remaining focused on doing whatever it takes to keep this status. This story and how it was

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3 a “hoe” is a derogatory word to describe women
communicated—like the NPHC coming out show—was defined as cool, and undergirded by the respect of the public, despite any misogynistic and/or capitalistic undertones that may lace this verse.

It is not my intent to provide an example of every image that Reddick reported in 1944; however, I did feel it was necessary to welcome a few. These romanticized concepts of cool in popular culture can be categorized as a product that yields a profit, while negating the true internal value of cool for Black men in America. These images often serve as America’s cultural identification card for Black bodies. Interestingly, many of these images of cool serve as a positive (yet controversial) counter-narrative that influences the “two worlds that he [the Black male] alternately desires and repels, supports yet neglects (Brown & Kraehe, 2011, p. 86). This means, these labels discussed by Reddick create a complicated understanding of Black males due to the counter-tropes, or as Brown and Kraehe (2011) would say, the counter-narratives, that challenge dominant culture and serve as a “symbol of freedom from oppressive and repressive social conditions” (p. 79). This relationship between narrative and counter narrative (one situated in duality and contradictions), like cool, is truly powerful for the Black male journey into masculinity because many Blacks seek authenticity in and outside of myths and public opinion (Asante, 1988). This means, peer validations influence the representation and communication of cool. During the next section, I will extend the conversation of the Black male image by discussing representation as well as the communication of this representation prior to discussing theories that situated masculinity and its performance. Beyond peer validation—which has remained thoroughly peppered in this document—authenticity will be seen as the crux of the next few sections.
Black Male (Re)presentation

According to Gates (1988), the concept of seeking Black authenticity is reflected in racial representation, which is divided into two camps: how people understand relationships with others (Cultural Politics) and how culture informs the organization (Political Culture). Gates (1988), understanding the power that the Black male image wields, wanted to analyze the image of what is considered Black and masculine since the current image does not accurately expose what it means to be a Black male. Gates wanted the racist undertones that have shaped Black Americans to be challenged and the current images of Black men to be reestablished. Brown and Kraehe (2011) added to this claim by situating the global impact of the Black male image and presentation of this image by saying,

How visual culture represents the Black male speaks to the way dominant, socially mainstream discourses construct and imagine him. When these constructions travel globally they frame how one makes sense of what it means to be a Black male. These frames discursively and materially fasten a narrative of Black masculinity that informs social responses to him. (p. 75)

Simply put, this response dictates the performance of cool, and this performance is a means of communication. In the next sections I will identify the importance of exploring the communication of cool in order to show the interplay of authenticity and representation.

The Communication of Cool

The first to go to college
They say knowledge is the tool
But these hoes on campus will make a young ni*** drool
So we party, skip class, get ass and talk cool
-J. Cole, I’m a Fool

Despite the multiple variations of cool that are provided in this document, the good (Connor, 2003) or the bad (Majors & Billson, 1992), it is my hope to not become trapped in this binary because remaining situated in the good and bad about cool negates the widespread impact
of “coolness as a cultural phenomenon” (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009, p. 280). Further, its disrupts cool’s messy desire to connect while standing out (Connor, 2003; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Majors & Billson, 1992). According to Kirkland and Jackson (2009) cool serves as a form of literacy that is communicated through fashion and symbols, style and posturing. Literacy was defined as a cultural practice and a mode of representation (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). By representation, I feel it fitting to adopt Hill’s (2009) stance which refers to representation—which he scribes as representin’(g)—as a “practice of sustaining allegiance to community and meeting locally constructed standards of authenticity” (p. 131). Therefore, representin’ refers to a specific set of realness, or authentic behavior, that is defined and communicated by the community at large. The importance of viewing cool as a literacy practice—cool talk, more specifically—demonstrates cool as a means to function (survival) regardless of location, be it at school, home, or in the community (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009). Rapper J. Cole skillfully demonstrated the fluidity of cool talk in his lyrics that were utilized to introduce this section. J. Cole, a college graduate, identified the complex relationship between cool in the academy by establishing the understanding of the power of knowledge as well as subsequent realities that often trump academic rhetoric. As a result, cool, in addition to being defined as a means of survival, a method to demonstrate masculinity and coping, also becomes a method of representation created to communicate one’s relevance, position and identity. This creates a degree of authenticity in a variety of situations and areas with the use of proper cool talk. In the following section, the conversation will be shifted to Black masculinity theories in order to compliment the concept of authenticity (authentic behavior within the Black male experience) while theorizing cool. This approach, in essence, will summarize this conversation of cool by evaluating the “stages” of masculinity.
Black Masculinity Theories

Men do what they want, boys do what they can,
And it ain't no secret I'm a grown ass man.
-Young Jeezy- Lets Get it

Theories have attempted to illustrate the Black male experience/journey into masculinity; however, many of the theories have remained vested in the stereotypical assumptions (many noted above) of the Black man that prevent Black men from escaping the guise of violence and hyper-sexuality (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004). Some of these theories negate the importance of the culturally validated and ritualized ideologies of masculinity (Connor, 2003; hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992), and assume that all acquisitions of manhood are created equally (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004). When evaluating Black male masculinity one must understand that gender is a behavior arrested in context that should not be evaluated in a vacuum, and masculinity is an “extension of the self that is externally presented and licensed” (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004, p. 125). This means, others experience this performance of masculinity and adjudicate on this show’s relevance. Consequently, if a Black man cannot complete the culturally constructed obstacle course of manhood, then that Black man could be stripped of his manhood membership card and cast out of the conversation about “who’s the man.” According to O'Neil (1981), this failure to establish the proper masculine gender expression results in anxiety (strain) and the unfortunate performance of negative and dysfunctional trends such as violence, hyper-sexuality, underachievement and aggressive behavior. As I attempt to situate myself in the literature, as a 5 foot 1 Black man, I am normally questioned about my masculinity since I am small in stature and my size normally draws into question my ability to protect others, including but not limited to my family, and significant others. Therefore, if I am unable to fulfill the requirements listed in the stereotypical and culturally validated presumptions (violent,
competent, or sexually aggressive) I too can be removed from—questioned and/or heckled in—the conversation about my masculinity. This conflict is key to understanding Black masculine identity.

According to Jackson and Dangerfield (2004) masculinity is situated in positionality, while Black masculine identities are created through inter-social conflict. These conflicts manifest through five distinct concepts that must be negotiated successfully. The five stages of this paradigm are (1) struggle, (2) recognition, (3) achievement, (4) independence and (5) community. Struggle sits in the middle of this model and is a constant that should be understood as what one needs to fulfill a Black man’s desire. In the struggle period (stage) one is trying to understand who they are and who they desire to be in order to be successful. The Recognition stage involves the social validation and social approval of one’s behavior with others. This means, those who co-exist in the contextual space that one occupies must approve masculine behaviors. Achievement defines the moment when one obtains any of the (superficial) standards of manhood that were predefined and justified. This is important to note because in a capitalistic society that lives off of the myth of meritocracy (the belief that success is based on one’s effort without taking into account access), “true” success may be difficult to obtain thus, positioning Black men—who may not have the resources to gain the American dream—as deficient, according to American standards. Subsequently, once these deficient ideologies are internalized, the worth of the individual and his purpose can be controlled (Woodson, 1933). Independence can be understood as separation from others to better understand the self; however, the community provides cultural validation of one’s behavior in regards to masculine behavior. In this case the community becomes the “co-author of normative behavior” (Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004, p. 129).
It is critical that community and the role of others is emphasized due to its heavy relevance to this study and how community involvements sit congruent with Phinney’s (1989) ethnic development model (which will be discussed in the theoretical framework section). In addition, since cool is an extension of masculinity and a validation stamp of manhood, it is necessary to see how both concepts intersect during Black male development. More importantly, it urges the reader to see the complex reality of cool and its fluid contextual and expressive relationship that interacts based off the communities communicated rules and realities.

According to Harris, Palmer, and Struve (2011), Black masculinity in Black college students is expressed through achievements (success and proving people wrong), enforced through homophobic tendencies and is seen in patriarchal and often misogynistic relationships with women. This behavior—albeit problematic—connects cool to a response to gender norms established through societal demands. More importantly, this behavior reinforces the prerequisites of “toughness, aggressiveness, material success, restrictive emotionality and responsibility” (Harris et al., 2011, p. 54). Each concept, achievement, heterosexuality and promiscuity—all concepts that were illustrated in the introduction scene in chapter one—serve as a means to prevent emasculation and ridicule.

According to Gilbert & Gilbert (1998) a strong understanding of one’s masculine identity could result in multiple positive outcomes, yet Black masculinity research remains understudied and undeveloped (Harper, 2004). Harper (2004) notes,

[L]ittle attention has been given to exploring identity development and conceptualizations of masculinity among male students on college and university campuses. Research regarding within group variations…is virtually nonexistent, and the intersection between race and gender among this population remains particularly understudied. (p. 89)

Exposing the limited research conducted on Black masculinity creates space to evaluate factors that influence identity development as well as the adverse affects, or as Jones (2004) would
describe as “a crisis of identity” (p. 96), that could result from a lack of understanding of self. “The crisis of identity, or the Self, speaks to problems concerning how the Black man is physically and psychologically situated within public and private space” (Jones, 2004, p. 96). Further, a lack of understanding of the multiple variables that influence masculinity, such as one’s sociocultural stance, could render the perception of the Black male as deficient and powerless (Brown & Kraehe, 2011). Therefore, how a Black man sees himself (internal) juxtaposed with how society sees and internalizes the Black man’s disposition (external), affects Black male identity development and the performance of that identity (Du Bois, 1903).

This data, which underscores the lack of attention that is being intentionally dedicated to the positive maturation and matriculation of Black male students, could suggest that the American Council on Education’s (1937) Student Personnel Point of Views, which declared the university’s responsibility to educate the whole student (Evans et al., 1998), could have mistakenly used the word “whole” instead of its homophone “hole” which is (or could be) a more accurate representation of some universities’ hollow commitment to Black student development. Or, this data could brace the reality that higher education was not founded with Black students in mind (Thelin, 2004) and the printed results of the attention that is paid to Black students is an accurate (re)presentation of the shaky ground higher education was founded on.

It is important that this critique of Black masculine identity development and the physical and psychological posturing of Black males is not solely presented in a cannon outside of the university, because this “crisis” has indeed infiltrated the university walls. However, solely focusing on this crisis without acknowledging a pivotal variable, the intersection of race, negates the universities complex schizophrenic relationship with education “wherein schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower” (Yosso,
This inside-outside critique (inside the university and outside the university) of the study of masculinity/cool demonstrates the definite need to pay critical attention to Black male identity development, and—more importantly—the meaningful need to engage the literature and multiple factors (variables) that influence Black male development. It is my desire to specifically situate this study inside the university due to the positive perception and perceived access—be it literal or figurative—of a received college degree, the negative persistence rate of our Black males within the academy (Harper & Nichols, 2008; Harper, 2006b; Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009), and the developmental potential of our current colleges and universities (Du Bois, 1973; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Keeling, 2004; Woodson, 1933). However, in order to do this I must finally draw attention to the history of higher education and higher education’s relationship with race.

**The Color line**

Historically, the founding of our oldest institution of higher education predates the founding of America, which illustrates this country’s longstanding relationship with education. However, American colleges and universities were never intended to include all genders, sexualities, classes and races (Thelin, 2004). Therefore, the lack of attention dedicated to race is reflects the history of American higher education. W.E.B. Du Bois predicted this deep-seated issue in the forethoughts of his book *The Souls of Black Folks,*

> Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being Black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader: for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line. (Du Bois 1903, p. 41)

According to Du Bois, race would have a major impact on society, which underscores a significant issue in higher education today. Nevertheless, failing to acknowledge these facts isolates Black men and is detrimental to the university community.
In the next section, I will address the intersection of race in the academy while providing research and literature dedicated to perceptions of academic success, cool in the academy and Black male student engagement.

**Black Cool in the academy**

My cousin finished school, can’t believe he graduated;
Threw him $20,000 dollars, told his ass congratulations;
‘Cause me! I wasn’t made for this sh**
-Big Sean-Burn

Perceptions of coolness within the media have had a longstanding relationship with education. hooks (2004) provided an example using the television portrayed Black scholar Steve Urkel from the comedic sitcom *Family Matters*. hooks noted that this sitcom provided the image that the “studious Black male is a freak, [and] a monster” (hooks, 2004, p. 40). This visual representation of what it means to be educated could result in a resistance to academics and the degradation of intellectual development of the individual student.

According to hooks (2004), Black male students are often found downplaying their intellectual ability in order to maintain an image of coolness. This action could reinforce the lack of importance and value of achievement within education, or it could show a connection to a buy in to certain cultural standards that place a higher value on cool behavior rather than standardized education. For whatever reason, this is not a new concept. In Booker T. Washington’s (1901/2000) autobiography *Up From Slavery*, he stated his reluctance to take a vacation to Europe because he did not want to be seen as “stuck up” (p. 273). It could be argued that Washington was haphazardly downplaying his intellectual ability/accomplishments in order to maintain an image of coolness according to Major and Billson (1992) definition. In this example cool is seen as safe and unthreatening to one culture and, maybe to some degree, loyalty to a certain standard in another. To extend this conversation, Du Bois stated in 1930,
Our college man today is, on average, a man untouched by real culture. He deliberately surrenders to selfish and even silly ideas, swarming into semiprofessional athletics and Greek letter societies and affecting to despise scholarship and the hard grind of study and research. (Du Bois, 1973, p. 67)

In this passage DuBois (1973) is unclear what is, indeed, real culture but it is clear that DuBois is emphasizing academic rigor over the co-curricular educational experiences. Therefore, Dubois was making the call for more scholarship, however this call has not been received with open arms. In research conducted by Christie (2010) and Peterson-Lewis & Bratton (2004), being and acting smart has been defined as acting White, which has been deemed a derogatory term utilized to weaken one’s character and to insult one’s character. As a result, intellectualism has become compartmentalized as a culturally specific thing, and to step outside the box is to step outside the rules. Therefore, it is not a surprise that many students have adopted this cool pose in order to authenticate the self and defeat weak characteristics and societal pressures (Majors & Billson, 1992).

The pressure to achieve for Black male students is noted to be extremely high. Black male students are often perceived as having low expectations for themselves and feel extreme pressure to prove they belong at the university (Schmidt, 2008). During a presentation at Southern University, educator Lisa Delpit noted that many Black male students “act out” in order to live up to the stereotype of being less than (L. Delpit, personal communication, 11/19/2009). This idea is one method to take the power away from the person that might call this student stupid (Hoberman, 2000). According to hooks (2004) the Black male student’s embrace of a given stereotype rather than challenging it, causes Black men to look at themselves through a stereotypical lens. Ultimately, Black men marginalize themselves as a defense mechanism by adopting the current/conventional cool mannerisms.
According to hooks (2004) “well-educated Black men have learned to act as if they know nothing in a world where a smart Black man risks punishment” (p. 33). Sadly, research on Black male achievement in colleges and universities provide the numbers to reinforce this charge. Harper (2009) notes in his 2002 study, that 4.3% of all students in our current colleges and universities are Black men. Although this number is low, he later indicated this is the same percentage since 1976. Harper (2008) stated in 2004, Black male students only occupied 36.4% of the Black population and were outnumbered 2:1 by Black females. In regards to graduation, “fewer than one-third (32.4%) of Black men who start college graduate in six years (National Center for Education Statistic [NCES] 2005), which is the worst college completion rate among both sexes and all racial/ ethnic groups” (Harper, 2006a, p. 19). Porter (2006) declares that African American men represent only 2.8% of undergraduate enrollment in the 50 flagship institutions. This number of graduates has only increased .2% in the last 26 years.

To further complicate the relationship between education and coolness, researchers have proclaimed that in order to be successful in the university one must be involved in and outside of the classroom (Evans et al., 1998; Tinto, 2000; Williamson, 1999). However, according to Harper (2009), many collegiate Black men view sports as cooler than campus leadership roles, and have a devalued perception of leadership prior to college. This does not mean that all Black men carry this devalued perception of leadership in college and universities (see introduction story for an example); however, it does show a void in the data. Nevertheless, despite the research that indicates that Black men are unengaged, there has been research that identifies specific themes as a result of Black male student engagement.
According to Harper (2009) there are seven themes that are a result of an engaged Black male student. These themes provide a deeper understanding of the impact of Black male student engagement and will be discussed in the section below. The first idea is Black men can resolve a masculine identity conflict. As hooks (2004) professed, our current culture values violence and patriarchal sexist masculinity over education and emotions; therefore, if Harper’s above claim is accurate, then research would suggest that student engagement could distort that negative definition of manhood in African American men. Simply put, this means that being engaged in leadership activities could influence the way a Black male student internalizes this social norm. Harper (2009) also suggests that an engaged student acquires social capital and negotiates support for achievement. This social capital could be the manifestation of a positive relationship with fellow students and faculty alike, but the idea is a modest pathway to support. Next, an actively engaged African American male student gains survival skills and is able to craft productive responses to racist stereotypes. Lastly, an actively engaged Black male student is able to overcome educational deficiencies and develop a positive Black identity (Harper, 2009). This means that there are sufficient benefits noted for being engaged, but since research suggest that many Black males are not engaged, it becomes necessary to understand why.

Understanding and intentionally assessing a marginalized community’s available opportunities for engagement is a pivotal step towards uncovering the power in participation. This assessment could improve the totality of the student leadership experience beyond homogenous assumptions by providing an additional lens of understanding (Harper & Quaye, 2007). According to Harper (2007) “one of the most effective ways to improve student engagement is to invite those who are the least engaged to share their knowledge and experiences” (p. 9). Although this strategy presented above identifies an effective means to
improve student engagement, the variable of race still has a major influence on the practical application of this strategy (Sue & Constantine, 2007). According to Sue and Constantine (2007),

Many student affairs faculty confess that they do not know how to deal with these situations, and that they experience considerable discomfort and anxiety over broaching racial topics. They may halt discussions in the classroom when intense feelings may lead them to believe the debate may get out of control, or when they themselves become uncomfortable with the dialogues. (p. 136)

In research dedicated to understanding the perceptions of leadership for Black student leaders, it was suggested that many Black student leaders view student leadership as a burden (Arminio et al., 2000). According to the students in this phenomenological study,

They felt it [leadership] separated them from other students in their racial group. For some African American and Black students, being a leader meant being part of the enemy, no longer separated from the oppressor or an oppressive system. Being a leader suggested to them that they bought into the system that oppressed their racial group, thus alienating them from their peers. (Arminio et al., 2000, pp. 500-501)

Simply put, Black students in this study felt that leadership opportunities isolate those students more than connecting them to the campus community.

Indeed, leadership and student engagement aid in persistence and retention (Tinto, 2000), but that is only one-side of the coin. The harsh reality is that leadership for Black students is the equivalent to the gingerbread house Hansel and Gretel visited. On the outside, administrators often portray leadership opportunities as a beautiful entity, appealing to the eyes and appetizing to the senses. What is normally lacking, however, are the indoor interworking(s) of leadership that could display tales of isolation, oppression, and self-deprecation. This is not an argument to cease leadership activities and opportunities for Black students. However, it is a call for an extreme home makeover before universities conduct their next open house.
Lastly, the cost of leadership for Black students is exposed as a heavy price to pay (Arminio et al., 2000). Many Black students feel that they give up more to be a student leader than what the leadership experience is actually worth, which makes the expectations to participate in leadership activities “lofty and contradictory” (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002, p. 501). Consequently, these negative images of Black leadership negate the worth of leadership, thus causing a lack of participation—and ultimately a lack of presence of Black leaders—within the campus community.

As a result of the previous section dedicated to student engagement, an assumption of or about differences is needed in this document. Although difference is pervasive across cultures, it does not mean that difference does not experience fluidity within cultures. This means that all members of a cultural group do not share the same beliefs, feelings, or ideologies. In other words, all Black men are not the same and do not think the same. Harper and Quaye (2009) support this idea of heterogeneity when they stated the following,

Dependency on sameness is no longer appropriate, as contemporary cohorts of student at colleges and universities are different; the ways they experience and respond to our campuses are varied. Thus, educators and administrators must be strategic and intentional about fostering conditions that compel students to make the most of college both inside and outside the classroom. (p. 1)

Therefore, practitioners need to practice precaution when applying generalizable theoretical frameworks to an individual. Being engaged may indeed be an indicator of success; however, if students are uninterested in leadership activities or see this participation as uncool or not worthwhile, practitioners have officially placed the cart before the horse.

This section’s introductory quote was intentionally provided to establish the feelings many Black males have in regards to higher education. Although current practitioners believe whole-heartedly that they want to make a difference, many Black males simply feel, as the artist
pointed out, that they “weren’t made for this shit” (Williams & Anderson, 2012). This is a very important text because it causes me as a researcher to call into question, “What are you made for” or “What were you made to do?” Or, more importantly, what identity characteristics result in being “built” or “made” to succeed in the university? Lastly, where does cool sit in this continuum?
Chapter III: Textured Analysis of Cool: Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

In Chapter III, the guiding theoretical framework used to make sense of Black cool is established. These theoretical frameworks were selected to work in collaboration with each other with the intent to supplement any holes that one theory may present in understanding Black male cool. In my framework—which I call a textured analysis of cool—these theories have been layered together in order to create a fuller and richer understanding of cool. Texturing for this academic study establishes a greater “feel” and connection with the topic it is analyzing. Through texturing, I am able to assess the worth of cool as well as weave how cool (the behavior and mentality) was learned, performed, and advanced for Black males.

In the next section, I describe Phinney’s (1989) theory on ethnic identity development in order to answer three questions dedicated to the overall power brokers of society and the academy—self, peer group and dominant culture (i.e. White people). I will attempt to answer what role does (a) one’s peer group; (b) dominant culture; and (c) self-identification play in racial identity development? Outside influences such as socio-economic status and historical traditions will be discussed in the section below.

Phinney’s Ethnic Identity Development

Phinney’s (1989) Ethnic Development was selected with the intent of making sure race and identity development remained linked. However, literature that intersects race with identity development has “remain[ed] more descriptive than analytical” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 217). Scholars such as Cross (1978), Sue and Constantine (2007), Phinney (1989) and Helms (2007) have problematized the intersection of race and identity development to make sense of racial and ethnic identity development. For the purpose of this study, Phinney (1989) will serve as the primary anchor due to (a) the focus on adolescence (which I will argue is the category of
traditional college age students); (b) it is extremely contextual, and; (c) it holds an implicit socially constructed and socially influenced stance, which grounds my study. Social constructionism will be discussed later in Chapter IV of this text. Further, “an ethnic identity refers to a sense of self, but it differs in that it involves a shared sense of identity with others who belong to the same ethnic group” (Phinney et al., 2007, p. 275). This means that identity is influenced by outside entities, internally situated and constantly evolving (Evans et al., 1998).

According to Phinney (1989), identity development is not entirely an individual process; “the culture into which a person is born plays an important role in the development of one's identity” (Phinney, 1989, p. 3). Therefore, ethnic identity development is a coupled understanding of self, others and one’s environment. More importantly, ethnic identity development attempts to situate how one’s ethnicity impacts day-to-day interaction (Phinney, 1989). Phinney’s Ethnic development model drew heavily from Marcia’s (1980) adolescence identity model that focused on the way in which adolescent identity development occurs. Both models are extremely similar; however, Phinney’s (1989) attention to ethnical development makes this theory better suited for this study. Below I will analyze the three stages of Phinney’s model of ethnic development: Diffusion-Foreclosure, Moratorium, and Identity Achievement (Evans et al., 1998).

Diffusion-Foreclosure

During the diffusion-foreclosure stage of Phinney’s (1992) Model of Ethnic identity, individuals self-identify with an ethnic group; however, those individuals have given little or no thought about their ethnicity (Phinney, 1992). What has been acquired—which foreshadows the personal examination of their ethnicity—are the personal ideas and ideologies that have been passed down from others who are deemed significant in their lives (Evans et al., 1998; Phinney,
Those that have given little or no thought about their ethnicity results in diffusion; however, the acceptance and, more importantly, the internalization of others attitudes is noted as foreclosure (Evans et al., 1998; Phinney, 1989). Simply put, during the first stage of this model, the individual will experience diffusion which equals no connection and/or foreclosure, which equals the positioning of others (the majorities) negative ideas into one’s understanding of their personal ethnicity (Phinney, 1989). As stated by Evans and her colleagues (1998) in Student Development in College, “individuals in the first stage of ethnicity development have not explored feelings and attitudes regarding their own ethnicity” (p. 80).

Moratorium

As individuals begin to experience situations as a result of their ethnicity (e.g. racism), the individual will begin to explore and “seek more information about their ethnic or racial group while attempting to understand the personal significance of ethnic identity” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 80). During this time, cultural behaviors, languages (slang), codes, and styles will be explored, identified and adopted (Phinney et al., 2007). This stage is a form of healing that Hill (2009) would say is beneficial to personal development, due to the discussed and assumed in-group commonalities that extend within ethnic lines.

Identity Achievement

Finally, after the rituals, codes and languages are understood, and the conflicts between dominant culture and the minority culture are resolved, identity achievement can begin (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). During this time “individuals accept membership in the minority culture [and] gain a secure sense of ethnic or racial identification while being open to other cultures” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 81). This stage of ethnic development is extremely reminiscent
of Du Bois’ (1903) double consciousness due to the identified benefits of remaining a minority in a majority because of what that identification can teach to the world.

Phinney’s (1989) theoretical framework is congruent with cool due to the in-group self identification, and culturally-validated membership; however, to properly understand the performance of cool within the academy, I have elected to utilize additional theoretical frameworks to supplement some of the voids pertaining to this particular research study. During the next portion of this chapter, I will identify and define performance theory (Butler, 1988), face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and finally cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

**Performance Theory**

In the above section, ethnic development was established as the growing-up model that grounds my study, while performance theory serves as the means by which individuals (participants) establish their identity. However, the method in which this identity is performed, which in turn validates the prescribed identity, needs further evaluation. For the case of this study, this means, although there is a predetermined understanding of cool, how cool is performed is less understood. According to Butler (1988), gender is constructed over time and established through trial and error. Like Phinney’s (1989) theory, performance theory utilizes a shared predetermined culture, language and codes to define what is culturally acceptable but it also underscores that one performs these acts (e.g. cool) and each case is performed differently (Butler, 1988).

According to Butler (1988), gender is culturally interpreted, and to be a gender (in her example she noted woman) is to become said gender. In an interview Butler (2011) explained
this process of producing and reproducing as gender as performativity. Butler (2011) elaborated on the complexity of gender performativity by stating,

To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...We act as if that being of a man or that being of a women is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it’s a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start.

This point speaks well to this study due to the series of effects that influence cool.

Lastly, gender politics or the performance of cool highlights cools history, its present and ultimately its legacy; however; the impact of this performance (reasons how and methods of performance) needs further examination, additional literature and support. In the next section, I will provide an additional theoretical framework to support Butler’s performance theory.

**Face-Identity Negotiation Theory**

According to Jackson (2002) there is a definitive need to organize identities appropriately to avoid any conflict that could arise. These identities are constantly exchanged, and identity negotiation is the process of selecting the role that one would like to show others (Jackson, 2002). Ultimately, this is a communicable choice that is based on relationships and is about mutual respect, validation, protection and alleviating conflicts (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). This is important because through this negotiation process, identity is created, disseminated, and validated (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). However, according to Jackson (2002) this initial negotiation process must begin with self. For example, what it means to be a cool Black male is significant to what one presents and how it is presented, or better yet performed, to others. “As a result, identity negotiation is about coordinating one’s identity to match, compliment, or not resist the presence of other cultural identities” (Jackson, 2002, p. 362). Once this coordination
process occurs and a relationship is established, a cultural contract is “signed,” thus bridging certain intercultural differences (Jackson, 2002). According to Butler (1988), this process is constantly being renegotiated.

The exchange and negotiation of identity is defined by Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) as facework, which is “a set of communicative behaviors that people use to regulate their social dignity and to support or challenge the others social dignity” (p. 188). To demystify this concept, facework is a managing process that situates how one would want to be seen and face refers to the variety of mask (identities) we wear. In the case of this study, cool will serve as a cultural “face” that is learned (Phinney, 1989) performed (Butler, 1988) and carefully negotiated (Butler, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) inside and outside a specific cultural group(s) and/or settings. Lastly, facework functions in a three- pronged process that is founded on cultural knowledge, reflexivity, and the ability to connect and/or interact in a variety of situations (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

**Cultural Capital**

A possible result of proper (or accepted) identity negotiation is the acquisition of cultural capital. According to Carter (2003), cultural capital is how people access in-groups and out-groups or, more specifically, dominant (White culture) and/or non-dominant culture. However, the power of cultural capital is much deeper than access since it (cultural capital), ultimately, maintains class and sustains social inequality (Carter, 2003). Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu (1986) consists of three interrelated forms: embodiment (personal competencies and skills of the dominant culture); objectified (symbolic goods and cultural access); and finally institutionalized (societies system of credential validation [e.g. college degree]). However, what is under theorized in this early understanding of cultural capital, is the inverse relationship and
value of other cultures, or more specifically, the value of both dominant and non-dominant culture (Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005).

According to Carter (2003) there is a benefit in understanding the multidimensionality in both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital. On the surface, dominant cultural capital refers to behaviors or performances of those from high(er) status groups, while “non-dominant cultural capital describes the resources used by lower status individuals to gain authentic cultural status positions within their respective communities” (Carter, 2003, p. 138). These cultural high-status and low-status resources are important to note because an unsuccessful performance or a misused non-dominant cue in a dominant cultures (or vis-a-ver), can result in a unauthentic label that is extremely difficult to shake (Carter, 2003).

Through both definitions there is a unique undertone of performing and knowing authentic group behavior in order to obtain community membership. Although authentic group behavior is subjective at best, the two definitions should not be demarcated by class. In the scope of this study, Black cool, for example, may be considered a non-dominant cultural norm; however, the value to demonstrating a cool behavior authenticates capital and creates worth in a community in which one may seek value. Carter (2003) describes this performance as receiving “variable cultural currency” (p. 138). The value of understanding (and being able to perform) culturally-specific cues that reflect dominant and non-dominant is, according to Carter (2003), a “balancing act of maintaining both dominant and non-dominant cultural capital are likely to acquire valued status positions within their lower status community and the wider society” (p. 139). The above example bears striking resemblance of Du Bois (1903) double consciousness due to the intentional exchange of multiple faces, more specifically dominant and non-dominant behaviors in order to survive.
In conclusion, this Chapter introduced the theoretical framework used for this study. This framework, known as a textured analysis of cool, makes sense of cool by addressing how cool is learned, performed, and advanced. For this dissertation four independent theories worked in collaboration in order to explain Black cool. First, Phinney’s (1992) ethnic identity developmental theory was contextualized as a method to understand self through group validation. Phinney’s (1992) theory is important to the study of cool because it grounds how cool is learned and earned. Next, performance theory was explained in order to identify how this (l)earned behavior of cool is done. Face-identity negotiation theory was introduced as the “when” or, better said, the reason behind the performance of cool, as well as a marker to distinguish the impact of identity presentation. More specifically, the calculated decision of the faces (mask) one wears. Lastly, cultural capital was defined as a result, or better yet, what is credited or debted, for the sake of cool. Each theory informs the literature that was selected for this chapter and will assist in understanding the over-arching research question that guides this study; what is the lived experience of cool for Black male college students.

In the next chapter, (Chapter IV) I explain the methodology used to investigate Black cool. Next, I take time to identify the research design adopted for this study of Black cool as well as justification of my decision to adopt this strategy. As the chapter continues, I share my sampling strategy as well as how my data will be collected, coded and analyzed. As I conclude Chapter IV, I position myself in my study in order to provide a deeper understanding of the data collect. As a Black male college student, studying Black male college students, I feel it is important to establish who I am due to the limitations or privileges to information my race, gender or status might provide.
Chapter IV: Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to understand the lived experience of cool for Black male students. The methods utilized consisted of multiple means of inquiry that were established to gain information rich responses (Patton, 1987), as well as aid in the trustworthiness and rigor of my study (Padgett, 1998; Creswell 1998). As the chapter begins, the purpose of this study will be reintroduced, followed by a detailed account of the worldview, or strategy of data interpretation (Lincoln, 2005) and qualitative frameworks (methods) that grounded this study. Next, I positioned myself in the study and my role as primary researcher in this study. Then, I identify my sampling strategy and how the data was acquired and analyzed, and finally, at the conclusion of this section, I spend significant time on the trustworthiness and rigor of my study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to uncover the meaning of the phenomenon cool based on the lived experiences of Black men in college. In other words, I am interested in describing what cool looks like, how it is performed, and how it is valued inside the university. Although cool (the behavior and concept) may have been introduced to my participants prior to their entry into the academy, I was still interested in cool’s definition (personal descriptions) due to the extent to which the university environment (may) influence cool.

Research design

In order to investigate Black male cool, I adopted a qualitative research design which involved semi-structural interviews with a quasi-phenomenological approach. According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Qualitative research, at its root, is dedicated in investigating personal (or a groups) stories in order to understand a
particular situation. In qualitative research, data is collected through interviews, observations and written records and “begins as raw descriptive information” (Patton, 1987, p. 7). However, how this descriptive information is analyzed depends largely on the strategies of inquiry (research method) selected in the study (Creswell, 2009).

**Strategy for Inquiry**

For this study I develop a complex research design to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and add rigor and trustworthiness to my study. Rigor, which should not be confused with an inflexible means of inquiry, “increase(s) [the] confidence that the voice of the participants is heard” (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006, p. 441). In addition, rigor eliminates bias in research findings (Creswell, 1998, Padgett, 1998). Although rigor and trustworthiness are both discussed in great detail later in this chapter, it is the point of this section to unpack the research methods elected to inquire about Black cool and highlight the intentionality behind the research design that was used for this study. Below I will travel through the total design of my study by starting with phenomenology, and then my method of inquiry (semi-structured in-depth interviews and framing).

**Quasi-Phenomenology**

For this qualitative study dedicated to understanding Black male cool, I have chosen to borrow primarily from phenomenology. It is important for me, as the primary researcher, to make sure this study is not confused solely as a phenomenological study. Doing so discredits research of past/current phenomenologist and, in addition, the depth of this study. Therefore, it is key to understand the intent behind defining this study a quasi-phenomenological.
Quasi for this study speaks to my un-phenomenological approach to data reporting. Borrowing directly from social work research dedicated to qualitative research, it was my aim to “prioritize the voice of the participant over that of our own” (Lietz et al, 2006, p. 444). This does not mean that phenomenologist prioritize their voices over that of the participants. However, it does speak to my desire to allow the data to speak together and in a different way. In traditional phenomenological work, analysis moves from “individual textural-structural descriptions [in order to] develop composite descriptions of meaning and essences of the experience” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 121). However, for my study it was my desire to triangulate the individual structural descriptions through framing to establish an actual visual composite that could speak to the lived experience of cool. My strategy was extremely ambitious, but it also speaks to my desire to maintain qualitative rigor.

Phenomenological research is dedicated to “understanding the lived experience” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13) of the participant, while discovering similarities and describing how participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Moustakes, 1994). According to Moustakes (1994), “The understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge” (p. 14). For this study, Black cool will serve as the phenomenon, and the research question that guided this study was, What is the lived experience of cool for Black male college students?

**Worldview**

In addition to using a quasi-phenomenological approach, worldview posits a means in which a researcher interprets data (Lincoln, 2005). For this study I have adopted a social constructivism paradigm as the worldview to inform my research. At its root, constructivism “is
defined in its simplest terms as an interpretive stance which attends to the meaning-making activities of active agents and cognizing human beings” (Paul, 2005, p. 60). This is extremely important in this study since the participants will provide personal/lived experiences which define cool. For constructivists, this meaning-making process comes at the intersection of actual happenings and the value-laden foundational understandings generated by past experiences (Lincoln, 2005). Therefore, how one reacts to—or comes to an understanding of—a current situation is not a matter of happenstance. However, it is arguably a result of a calculated response utilized to make sense of a situation.

It is important to note that value-laden foundational understandings do not reside solely with the participant(s). Constructivists pay close attention to this detail and make their position clear that the research—or the researcher—is never value free (Creswell 2009; Lincoln, 2005). According to Creswell (2009), “Researchers recognize that their own backgrounds shape their interpretation, and they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretations flows from their personal, cultural and historical experience” (p. 8). Therefore, throughout this study I have intentionally situated myself within the data by employing a process known as reflexivity. This process began in Chapter I during the introductory probate show. Reflexivity requires consistent reflection “upon research practices, activities, relationships, decisions, choices and his or her own values in those arenas” (Lincoln, 2005, p. 63). Simply put, reflexivity is a process of reflection utilized to better understand one’s positionality within the research. This figurative recalibration process informs me—the instrument—about self and how my position ultimately impacts (influences) my study. To validate this claim, Lincoln (2005) noted,
If values are inescapable…then we should make extraordinary efforts to uncover the value positions which shape, guide, and create individuals’ and groups’ constructions. It is only when we understand the underlying values of respondents and research participants that we can begin to understand where conflict exist and where negotiations around larger issues might be engaged. (p. 63)

Therefore, as a Black male studying Black males, I must recognize the access or availability to data that may not be disclosed to a different researcher outside of the cultural group.

**The Researcher**

As the primary investigator in this study I must take the time to acknowledge my role as the instrument (Crewsell, 1998; Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. 1985). To do this I must acknowledge my bias and my relationship with the topic. According to Moustake (1994) the researcher must engage in a “disciplined and systematic efforts to set aside prejudegment regarding the phenomenon being investigated in order to launch the study as far as possible free of preconceptions, beliefs and knowledge of the phenomenon” (p. 22). Epoche (the reduction of bias and prejudice) allows the researcher (instrument) to become “completely open, receptive and naive” (Moustake. 1994, p. 22). Below, I explain my experience with epoche by illustrating a personal lived experience with cool and my strategies I adopted to acknowledge prejudice and bias.

As I reflect on my understanding of Black cool, my personal lived experiences serve as a (a) sounding board to my recent curiosity and interactions with cool and (b) a means of phenomenological reduction. For example, as a Black male navigating a doctoral process, I am constantly reminded about my proximity to cool. I can recall informing a doctoral professor about this reality by disclosing that I am reluctant to inform those I grew up with about my advance degree(s) or my educational status as a doctoral candidate. In all actuality, this conversation (about my education to my peers) was normally avoided by any means necessary.
To me, any indication that I am doing something that my crew (peers I grew up with) did not do often warrants multiple passive aggressive charges that I have “made it” or that I am better than them. Here lies the problem: Being seen, or referred to, as “better than” is a form of direct disrespect, and as a result, my silence speaks to my compliance of my neighborhood cool rules, even though it negates my ability to role model the possibility of obtaining a college education to those who might not think they could obtain one.

My apprehension was rooted in what I would call negotiation fatigue. For example, it was not too long ago when jokes and ridicule infiltrated my adolescence if I raised my hand or participated in leadership activities. As a matter of fact, many of my friends discontinued their educational experience the moment that high school ended and sometimes before. The message was clear. For my neighborhood, school was uncool. Therefore, any action that contradicted the neighborhood norm was unacceptable. However, after talking to those same individuals about my current college activities, my current position is now seen and contextualized as cool. What is cool about my decision? Or better yet, why am I cool now and not then?

Reflecting on this situation allows me to understand my participants’ colorful stories about their experience with cool, not because I have been through exactly what they have been through, but because I have my own accounts of cool to reference. As rapper 50 cent said in a recent interview, “From an artist’s perspective, when you’re painting a picture you have to use the colors...so if you want to feel the way things feel in the environment you have to use the slang and the terminologies that apply” (The Breakfast Club, 2012). This means, my experiences can be (a) a translation of the multiple variations of cool, and (b) serve as a valuable part of a phenomenological research agenda and were identified and engaged throughout one’s study.
**Phenomenological reduction: Epoche**

Although this study is quasi-phenomenological, several of the tenants of phenomenology remained the same. For example, for phenomenological studies to run efficiently, Epoche needs to be established (Moustakes, 1994). Epoche is the process of “setting aside prejudgment and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 180). This does not mean that my story or thoughts about cool, which were introduced as inescapable in the above section, are irrelevant. It does mean, however, that in order for this study to remain phenomenological, I must resist allowing my story to overshadow the stories and experience of my participants (Moustakes, 1994). According to Finlay (2009),

> Phenomenological research is phenomenological when it involves both rich description of the life-world or lived experiences and where the researchers have adopted a special, open phenomenological attitude which, at least initially, refrains from importing external frameworks and set aside judgments about the realness of the phenomenon (p. 8).

Therefore, it is key that I acknowledge my biases and reflect on my personal interest in cool in order for my lived experiences to dialogue with the lived experience of my participants (Shultz as cited in Moustakes, 1994). This concept—known as intersubjectivity—speaks to the primary challenge of Epoche, which is “to be transparent to ourselves, to allow whatever is before us in consciousness to disclose itself so that we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 86).

In an effort to be transparent, I spent significant time prior to collecting data, and during, acknowledging my biases. I reflected on my personal experience with cool as a Black man in college, and I engaged in critical dialogues with my (Black male) mentors about their stories. I processed my understanding of BGLO, and I revisited my reaction to the notorious gentleman that introduced this study. These stories brought me closer to the topic and served as a
living/functional check and balance system. This system became more defined throughout the data collections period.

My mirror in the hallway of my apartment served as my canvas to acknowledge my bias. More specifically, I would write biases or prejudice on my mirror. One of the first words (bias) documented on my mirror, was “the Wanderer” to remind me of a passage titled *The Garment* from Kahlil Gibran’s (1968) book *The Wanderer*. In this passage the main character spoke about the adventure of Beauty and Ugliness. In this particular story, both Beauty and Ugliness went swimming naked in the sea, and when Ugliness finished swimming, Ugliness exited the sea and put on Beauty’s clothing. Because of this switch Beauty was forced to wear Ugliness’s clothing, resulting in people mistaking the two (Beauty and Ugliness) for years. For me, this story served as a reminder that I am not the gatekeeper of cool, and what is cool in my world may not be the same to my participants. My strategy to begin this documentation process on a mirror was more symbolic than extensive. I felt that in order to be true to the bias that I maintained I must be able to see me in the bias, thus the use of the mirror.

**Sample**

In order to study cool, purposeful sampling was adopted to establish a participant team and to intentionally gain additional power and “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1987, p. 52). These cases maximize the opportunity to gain knowledge about a particular concept because the participants selected were aligned with the overall research objectives (Patton, 1987). The concept of purposeful sampling “means that the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposely inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). This intentional selection of participants
strategically creates a greater opportunity to obtain a depth of data (saturation) central to the purpose of this study (Patton, 1987).

Determining the sample size needed to achieve saturation depends largely on the studies size, topic, quality of data presented, design and the use of shadow voices (voices of others) (Morse, 2000; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). For a phenomenological study, Starks and Trinidad (2007) suggest that sample size needed for data saturation will be between 1-10 participants and according to Morse (2000), this number is between 6-10 participants. For this study, the purposeful sample size selected consisted of 11 Black male college students. These individuals were specifically selected based on a predetermined criterion in order to provide a variation to the data. Criteria sampling ensures that all cases have reached some prerequisite deemed necessary for the study (Patton, 1987). These prerequisites will be identified in greater detail in the following participant section of this document.

Participants

Research about Black male students has been entrenched with monolithic homogenous assumptions. These assumptions posit Black males in a over-generalized lens, while avoiding the plentiful diversity of Black male students. As a result, professors, student affairs practitioners and researchers have lumped Black males in one grandiose category while teaching, instructing or in research. According to Nelson (2004) this monolithic packaging is quite evident in classroom pedagogy which has become laced with an one size fits all undertone, which is inaccurate and digressive (Nelson, 2004). There is more depth to Black male students in this study will support the claim that, in order to understand the Black male college students, one must realize that he is actually a subpopulation within a subpopulation (Harper & Nichols, 2008).
In a study of racial heterogeneity, six subgroups were established for Black male students. These groups are: (1) student-athletes, (2) Black Greek-Letter organization members, (2) socially disengaged Black male students, (4) campus leaders, (5) urban males and (6) men from suburban white neighborhoods (Harper & Nichols, 2008). Indeed, although these descriptors are limited at best, they do provide a multidimensional lens, based on research, to study Black men. It is important to note, that all students are beyond monolithic assumptions, and no theoretical perspective can accurately define an individual. However, in the case of Black male students, it is necessary that assumptions are not placed on the individual because of a heavy stereotypical backing that can distort one’s reality. Nevertheless, according to Harper and Nichols (2008), knowing these assumptions exist is “both noteworthy and problematic. On one hand, within-group diversity presents unique opportunities for learning….But on the other, complicates the existence of so much fragmentation within the group” (p. 12). The former relationship was utilized for the purpose of this document, and I sampled from these six subpopulations in order to understand how Black male students could experience coolness. The results of my sampling efforts have yielded students from both predominantly white colleges and university and historically Black colleges and universities. More specifically, my sample consisted of student athletes, Black Greek letter organization members, campus leaders, urban, and suburban students.

Data Collection

Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews

In order to gain the information, rich descriptive data needed to understand Black cool, data was collected through face-to-face, one to two-hour semi-structured in-depth interviews. These semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data collection. For this study I
utilized a phenomenological interviewing strategy that involves an “informal, interactive process and utilizes open-ended comments and questions” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 114). This process attempted to gain insight into the participants’ perspective (Patton, 1987). Further, my questions did not serve as a ridged means of data collection, but as talking points that can be “varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experiences of the bracketed questions” (Moustakes, 1994, p. 114). Therefore, the conversation dictated the pace and organization of my interviews. These interviews consisted of eight primary questions and several probing questions in order to obtain a descriptive account of the lived experience of cool.

Photo Elicitation: Introduction to Framing

In addition to semi-structured interviews, I have also elected to apply a unique version of photo-elicitation (Harper, 1984). “Photo elicitation is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview” (Harper, 2002, p. 13). In traditional photo elicitation, a photograph is presented to engage “different parts of [the] human consciousness than do word-alone interviews (Harper, 2002, p. 17). Photo-elicitation is an extremely personal, valuable and, unfortunately, underutilized tool for researchers (Harper, 1984).

Photo-elicitation for this study mimicked a reverse version of reflexive photography used by Harrington and Lindy (1998), Ziller’s (1990) and Douglas’ (1998). In reflexive photography (Douglas; 1998; Harrington, C. & Lindy, I., 1998; Ziller,1990) the participants provide a picture to the interviewer, and the participants later describe the image that was provided. Although photographs are used as a primary means of inquiry in both, there are indeed deviations between the two. In this study I established a version of photo-elicitation called framing. Framing is the process of identifying the visual representation of an idea, behavior, or concept, after speaking
about what make it special. For example, during my interviews about cool I solicited information about popular cultural references that embody the “cool” my participants spoke about and requested a picture to be emailed to me at the conclusion of the interview.

All participants provided a popular culture example of cool during the interview; however, not every participant sent an actual picture as requested. Once the photographs (which consisted mainly of athletes, entertainers and musicians) were received, the photographs were identified as raw data and were coded against the data collected during the face-to-face interviews and interpreted into meanings (Creswell, 2009). The photographs I received are located in the framing section of Chapter V. Ultimately, the purpose of the pictures was twofold. One, the pictures were used to frame, visually contextualize, cool. And secondly, the pictures aided to the rigor in my study by establishing triangulation by method (Padgett, 2008).

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

Prior to starting the interview process, I sought consultations from several of my dissertation committee members to gain advice on completing the proper paperwork, my consent form and the interview protocol. On November 13th, 2012, I submitted my materials to the Louisiana State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). For this study I applied for exemption from institutional oversight. Approval was provided via email on December 5th, 2012. The approval number for this study is E8064.

**Interview Protocol**

An interview protocol served as the guide for this study. In it, there was as set of questions, probes and a storyboard sheet created by committee member Cassandra Chaney. The storyboard was a tool given to the participants to guide them along the interview. Each interview began with an intentional attempt to get the participants comfortable and willing to describe their
experiences with cool. Prior to asking any questions, I engaged in conversations outside of the research that proceeded. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), it was extremely important for the researcher to set the tone, or establish credibility with the participant in order for the interview process to resemble a conversation more than an interview.

Prior to starting the interview, I provided beverages (e.g. coffee, soda, water) and proceeded to engage in small talk. My speech was extremely informal during this stage of the interview process. Phrases such as what’s up (what is up), what’s goin’ on brother (what is going on), what’s da’ deal (what is the deal), served as examples of my introductory greetings that were exchanged between my participants and myself. These introductions seemed extremely comfortable and were received well. Although I was in the position to study my participants, my greeting felt like my first and only chance to establish my authenticity. This was my opportunity to gain entry into the world of my participants, and it was my goal that this process/experience would feel as natural as possible.

For my interviews I followed Moustakes (1994) suggestion, and I used “broad questions” (p. 116) in order to increase the likelihood of getting “rich, vital, substantive descriptions of the co-researchers’ experience” (p. 116). These questions intentionally traveled through a large time frame of cool, but ultimately ended where we started. For example, questions one and question eight asked about a personal connection with cool. The interview consisted of—but were not limited to—the following open-ended/behavioral questions⁴:

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⁴ For a full list of the questions and probes used please see Appendix A
Interview Questions

1. What does the word “cool” mean to you?
2. When you think of men that are “cool,” what, in particular, makes these men “cool?”
3. Do you think that your definition of cool has changed?
4. Do you think that your definition of cool has changed from high school to college?
5. Do you think that how you now define cool has changed the relationships that you had with your high school friends?
6. Describe how Black men demonstrate cool(ness) in college. Describe the value of being considered cool in college.
7. Now, I’d like you to tell me a story about cool in your life.
8. Do you think that you are cool?

Data Reduction and Interpretation

During the interview process I collected data via three recording sources. The primary recorder was a digital recorded, followed by a cell phone and the voice recorded under the Microsoft Word application on my computer. This strategy was to ensure I was able to gain quality audio throughout the interview and respond to any unforeseen technical difficulties that may present themselves. Once the data was collected, I converted the audio files to an mp3 so I would be able to listen to the recordings in multiple locations and spaces (e.g. car, gym).

Prior to re-listening to the interviews to transcribe, I returned to my field notes that were documented during each interview. I took time to redefine the notes that were abbreviations or written in short hand to ensure I did not forget any high points of the interview. I attempted to place several of the notes on the notes section of the audio tab on the interviewees’ files on
Microsoft Word; however, this process was later altered due to my plan to use this tab for transcription purposes.

I conducted a full listening of the interview prior to attempting to transcribe the data. This listen was simply to take me back to the interview to see if any new thoughts or emotions were detected. I also repeated another listen after the interviews were fully transcribed. Each interview ranged from one hour and a half to two hours, and the transcripts were between 25-35 pages in length. In addition, interviews took on average 2-3 days to fully transcribe. However, there were interviews that exceeded my 3 day average. When I completed my first transcript, I then converted the word document to an audio file in order to hear the words on that were written. I did not repeat this process with remaining interviews; however, I did revisit this text-to-talk technique later in the reporting process in order to hear the words that were chosen to represent various themes.

**Data Analysis**

According the Patton (1987), the process of understanding and analyzing are two separate entities that requires the researcher to collect data and place this data into patterns and then attach meanings to these patterns. Above, meaning was not attached to my data; however, during this time my interview procedures for data analysis were created (with an amazing degree of flexibility) for this study. These procedures served as an audit trail which “manage[s’] the threats to trustworthiness” (Lietz et al., 2006, p. 450). According to Lietz, et al.,(2006),

> An audit trail allows a researcher the freedom to make unique research decisions not previously prescribed while still requiring that each decision and justification for that decision be recorded along the way. An audit trail allows the researcher to follow his or her own research procedures consistently. (p. 451)

Additional strategies, like audit trials, are discussed in the trustworthiness and rigor section below.
To analyze my data I first spent time recognizing the depth of the in-depth interviews that occurred in my study. According to Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, and Pedersen (2013), “In-depth interviews often involve many units of analysis, which are not always easily identified” (p.3). Therefore, it was key to identify the means of analysis. Although this study utilized four of the modification of Van Kaam method of analysis (Moustakes, 1994), I decided as primary research the need to block interview into units to assist with coding. According to Smagarinsky (2008), coding should make theoretical sense, and due to my social constructive worldview, the textured analysis established for this study and quasi-phenomenological research design I purposefully identify segments (or blocks) of data that informed the participants’ experiences with cool. These blocks served as individual representations of my participants’ experiences with cool. Each block created a fuller and more complete understanding of my participants’ experiences with cool.

In the first round of analysis known as (1) horizontalization (identifying significant accounts to describe individual experiences), I searched for words that spoke directly to the experience of cool. Direct references to cool or personalized action statements, such as I am, I think, I have or I feel, served as the initial means of coding. For example, when Derrick⁵ (one of the participants that the study) stated, “I’m going to be that dude,” this statement was highlighted and the unit that supported it was bracketed as a point of interested. Due to my social constructivist worldview and textured analysis, Derrick’s statements served as a point of interested because it warranted further inquiry into how the participants knew he was cool; how he would show he was that dude (performance); what does “that dude” actually look like in the academy; and what is the worth of being “that dude?” Although this passage did not directly

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⁵ Derrick is fully introduced in Chapter V. Real life examples were provided to demonstrate actual coding strategies.
identify a described individual experience per se, it did underscore significance through Derrick’s declaration.

Next, I established (2) reduction of the originally identified horizons by eliminating accounts that do not describe a phenomenon. Examples of eliminated horizons consisted of hypothetical accounts of cool that may have reflected an actual experience but in an indirect way. To do this, I adopted a process of collaborative peer debriefing to assist in the reduction process. For example, Henry⁶ (another participant of the study) stated in his interview, “in college also liquor and drugs can make you cool as well.” This statement was indeed telling; however, the statement spoke to cool cues and reduced cool to a purchasable means. While conducting a peer debrief one of the team members stated, this statement spoke to a generalizable perception and not to the participant’s lived experience. I do believe Henry’s statement could be used in a future study, but did not have a place in this dissertation.

Next I spent time (3) clustering (creating themes) cool, based on the data provided. To do, this I coupled horizons together using index cards that spoke to the same theme. For example, Kai⁷ (another participant of the study) made the claim that “I was cool in my own way because I always stayed true to myself.” This statement was coupled with the definition of cool provided by Everette⁸ (another participant of the study) who said cool is “being able to be confident in yourself, enough to believe that you can accomplish anything.” Both statements were clustered together as confidence, being comfortable with self and later converted to self-

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⁶ Henry is fully introduced in Chapter V. Real life examples were provided to demonstrate actual coding strategies.

⁷ Kai is fully introduced in Chapter V. Real life examples were provided to demonstrate actual coding strategies.

⁸ Everette is fully introduced in Chapter V. Real life examples were provided to demonstrate actual coding strategies.
awareness. Conversation of meaning (4) (Creswell, 2007; Moustakes, 1994) served as the fourth stage used for this quasi-phenomenological study. These meanings began as descriptive accounts to cool that were later reduced after I conducted additional collaborative peer reviews and member checks to establish an agreement on coded themes. Collaborative peer reviews conducted for this study spoke to Smagorinsky’s (2008) charge for peer collaboration instead of “independent corroborations” (p. 401). Both member checks and peer reviews will be detailed in the following trustworthiness section.

**Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Research rigor and trustworthiness reduce the likelihood of study bias (Creswell, 1998; Padgett, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness is established when the participant’s experiences are represented accurately. To establish rigor in this study, I utilized 5 (reflexivity, triangulation by method, member checking, peer debriefing, negative case analysis) research strategies to increase study trustworthiness. In this section, I will specifically identify and detail these strategies.

**Reflexivity**

Reflexivity has travelled throughout the life of this study. In the section titled the researcher, I chronicled my conflict and my relationship with cool. As the instrument, I recognize the value of my story but attempted to view the data from the fresh perspective. An example of my experience with reflexivity came as a result from member checking. After the conclusion of an interview with one of the first participants, it was suggested that I speak to a friend about his experience with cool. Initially, I was reluctant to call the gentleman; however, I decided to invite the suggested friend to interview in my study. When I met the gentleman I was surprised that the gentlemen did not “look” cool. However, his experience with cool was vivid
and thorough. Reflecting on his interview, I immediately turned to the “epoche” mirror in my apartment and read the words “the wanderer” again.

**Triangulation by Method**

The research design of my study also established rigor through triangulation. Triangulation is defined as using two or more sources to achieve clarity of a research question (Padgett, 2008). For this study I coupled in-depth interviews with framing in order to paint a clearer picture of the lived experience of cool, thus triangulated my data. It was the intent of my used of triangulation to establish “a means of corroboration, which allows the researcher to be more confident of the study conclusions” (Bowman, 2005, p. 215).

**Member checking**

According to Padgett (1998) and Creswell (1998), member checking is the process where authority is shifted back to the participants to gain clarification. Interestingly, member checking for my study existed if I initiated the check or if the participants were checking in. For example, after the interview with one of the participants who was a student athlete, I was approached by him and asked how the study was going. During that time I had the opportunity to ask him about the picture (frame) he provided in the study in order to get additional clarification. Through member checking, trustworthiness is expressed as well as respondent validation. Because of this interaction, I put it in my research plan to contact my participants after the study even if I did not need clarification of their data.

**Peer debriefing**

Peer debriefing involves the utilization, or consultation, from individuals outside of the research study (Creswell, 1998; Leiz et al., 2006; Lietz, & Zayas, 2010; Padget 1998). Using peer debriefing is another means of gaining clarity of themes and “can help promote reflexivity
allowing researchers to become more sensitive to the effects of their socio-cultural position” (Lietz, & Zayas, 2010, p. 196). For this study, I established a team consisting (outside of my dissertation chair) of degreed (2 doctorate, 1 masters) higher education administration professionals. It is important to note, that each member of the peer group established have engaged in a rigorous research project such as a dissertation, thesis or masters reports. With this team I shared passages (via email or face to face) of undisclosed data and asked for their insight on the passage. In additions, during the final write-up of my study, these individuals were provided a copy of the document to see if I reported the codes properly.

**Negative Case Analysis.**

Negative case analysis is the process of “seek[ing] contrasting evidence” (Leiz et al., 2006, p. 197) and is a method to verify the data collected (Padgett, 1998). To engage in a negative case analysis the search for contrast is intentional (Leiz, et al.,2006; Padget, 2008). Therefore, for this study I elected to use a pseudo version of negative case analysis. During an interview with one of the student leaders from a BGLO I was surprised when his experience was a direct contrast from all of the data that I collected previously. Even after member checking I was still confused on how to code his experiences with cool. However, through peer debriefing, I was able to deduce how to report his cool, but it was necessary that I looked at it with fresh eyes.

In conclusion, the above strategies assisted in created a rigorous (not to be confused with inflexible) study. Throughout this study, significant time was established to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor due to my charge to “place the participants voice at the highest priority” (Leiz, et al., 2006, p. 456). In this next chapter (Chapter IV), the voices of the participants are shared to tell the story about the lived experience of cool.
Chapter V: Experiencing “Cool”: Data Analysis

It’s just different…I know it feels different
-Jay-Z

In this chapter I will present data acquired from the semi-structured, in-depth interviews dedicated to investigating the lived experience of cool for Black male students. In this chapter I (a) introduce my participants, (b) travel through the established clustered horizons (themes) and phases of cool, (c) uncover the methodological essence of cool, and (d) frame cool through the use of photo elicitation. As you proceed through Chapter IV and begin to fully emerge yourself in data presented, it is my hope that you find yourself juxtaposing your personal understanding of Black cool (or the lack there of) with the data provided by my active research participants and with the “notorious” gentleman’s controversial and arguably misogynistic show that introduced my interest in cool. Notwithstanding, this chapter is dedicated to presenting the results of the study; however, it is your right and responsibility as a reader to challenge and/or be in an active conversation with the data presented in combination with your personal assumptions and understanding. At the conclusion of this chapter it will be clear that the experience of Black cool is far greater than the aesthetically pleasing, popular, aloof, man’s man that is depicted in popular culture and presented in casual conversation. Indeed, these aforementioned characteristics are presented, but do not fully illustrate a representation of the whole. Like the introductory quote for this chapter, cool—for my participants—“is just different, it feels different.”
Participants

The initial participants for this study were purposely selected in order to strategically guarantee information-rich data (Patton, 1987). However, as the study continued, additional gentlemen were identified by some of my participants as “cool.” This participatory snowballing expanded my initial pool beyond my immediate periphery and created a much more demographically and academically diverse sample. According to Creswell (2009), snowball sampling can result in the acquisition of exclusive and unique data from populations that are normally difficult to reach. Each participant selected for this study was eager to participate and was interested in the results of this study. All participants were undergraduate students that attended an institution in the southeast region of the United States. Two participants attended a private/public Historically Black College and University (HBCU), while the remaining participants attended a mid-size predominately white institution (PWI). For the purpose of this study, all interviews ranged between one and two hours.

At the introduction of each interview, each participant was presented a “storyline” sheet created by Dr. Cassandra Chaney, to serve as an interview guide for the study. The storyline, which contained a general overview of the direction of each questions, but not the actual questions, proved to be a valuable asset that (a) guided the interview process and (b) helped in organizing the data into stages and themes. What was recognized at the conclusion of each interview was a distinct “journey” of cool that started with the belief and thoughts of cool and transitioned into descriptive accounts of cool.

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9 Storyline sheet is located in Appendix C
Introduction to Participants

Eleven Black males were selected and interviewed for this study. The experiences and stories provided by the participants in this dissertation represented a rich variety of data from multiple subpopulations (groups and organization) and backgrounds. Introducing the Participants...

1. Aaron, at the time of the interview, was a senior finance major who was extremely active on campus. Aaron is a member of a historically Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) and represents an original member of my initial interest pool. According to Aaron, cool, which he indicated was hard to define, represented balance and confidence. According to Aaron, you “come into yourself when you are in college because you learn how to negotiate.” Aaron is attending a predominantly White institution (PWI).

2. Brodrick is a senior, interdisciplinary studies major at a PWI. I met Brodrick years prior to our interview while in my campus cafeteria. Every time I saw him, he was working the room: greeting university employees, dapping up (shaking hands with) male students, and hugging female students. People seemed to gravitate towards Brodrick. Brodrick stood at around 6’5” 330lb, which made my 5’1” stature seem extremely shorter, wore his hair in locks and wore basketball shorts, Jordan’s [sneakers] and a university t-shirt during our interview. Brodrick

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10 The names provided for the participants are pseudonyms in order to conceal their identity.

11 Dapping is urban slang for shaking hands that often results in a close embrace or hug. There are various forms of dapping.

12 Locks are a hairstyle that consist of hair being naturally matted.
is a student athlete at a PWI but has a desire to be known beyond the normal athlete garb. Brodrick stated when speaking about cool that “I had to show people that I was different.”

3. Derrick was the youngest participant. Derrick was an 18-year-old freshman business major who tries to maintain maximum visibility on the “yard” [slang for university or campus]. It is never a surprise to see Derrick in the gym or just on the yard, tailgating and socializing. Derrick was recently in a male pageant hosted by a Black Greek letter sorority. Derrick was a tall, athletically built student who was in the process to lock his hair at the time of the interview. When asked about cool, Derrick noted that it is something about “being that dude” that is special. Derrick attended a PWI.

4. “So how real can I be?”…These were the first words Gregory said when he stepped in my office for his interview. After that comment, I knew he had something to get off of his chest about cool. During the interview, I could not help but notice his laid-back demeanor. Gregory is a military child who has moved all of his life. While in high school, he was a star athlete who suffered a major injury that ended his sports career before it could get started. This was the self-proclaimed catalyst of Gregory’s “I just don’t give a F***” attitude. According to Gregory, “Cool, first of all it doesn’t change…like no matter where you go.” Gregory is an engineering major and member of a Historically Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) at a predominately White institution (PWI).

5. Frank is a 22-year-old mechanical engineering senior and also member of a historically Black Greek letter organization (BGLO). During his high school
days, Frank attended a predominately white high school, which provided a significantly different experience with cool, as opposed to the other participants of the study. In high school Frank was considered one of “coolest,” and as Frank indicated during this interview, he was doing all that he could to make sure he maintained this cool status.

6. I officially met Everette at a leadership conference dedicated to discussing Black male achievement. Everette was on a student panel speaking about transitioning from high school to college and how he maintains success in this new space (college). Everette was an active member of a Black engineering society and other leadership initiatives. Throughout Everette’s interview he grounded several of his answers about cool on the teachings of his father and in his spiritual connection with God. For Everette, a cool Black male is someone who “stands strong for what they believe in, who stands for a purpose and doesn’t get deterred, by any means.” Everette attended a PWI.

7. I met Ian at a National Pan-Hellenic round table discussion, but I would always see Ian walking around campus prior to our initial introduction. Ian was normally dressed in business casual type of attire, even though most of his peers were simply casual. It was common to see Ian dressed in ties and bow-ties during the school week. At the time of his interview, Ian was a graduating senior engineering major. According to Ian, if someone is cool they have that “It” factor, which is a reflection of that person’s “personal brand.”

8. I met Christopher while giving a presentation and a colleague suggested I speak to him about my research. Once I introduced myself to Christopher, who was
surrounded by 3-4 bright-eyed and smiling females, I explained my study to him, and he was immediately on board. Christopher is a 20-year-old junior, graphic design major and another active member in campus leadership activities. Christopher, who is not Greek, spoke highly about Greek life and his mentors—who are all Greek—and explained to me that the experience cool of is about handling your business despite stereotypes. Interestingly, the coolest Black men that Christopher spoke about were degreed college professors or doctoral students who have persevered and succeeded in multiple settings.

9. I actually met Kai in person on the day of our interview. An earlier participant indicated that Kai was one of the coolest people he knew and had an awesome story to tell about cool. Trusting his judgment, I contacting Kai and explained my study to him. I didn’t know what to expect when meeting Kai, I just remembered that he came highly recommended. When Kai arrived to the interview he was dressed in a pair of jeans, a tucked-in Nautica polo and a pair of Air Jordan sneakers, a completely opposite appearance compared to my other participant’s athletic/urban/business/hipster garb. Kai’s story on cool begins in poverty and has transitioned into college success. Kai is a 21-year-old Family Studies major as well as an author and public speaker. Kai began school at an HBCU and later transferred to a predominately white institution (PWI). To Kai, cool is “cutting against the grain” and develops in to a “personal model of greatness.”

10. A fellow doctoral student approached me one day and informed me that their brother, Justin, just crossed over into a Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) at a historically Black university. As I was expressing my congratulations, I began
to wonder if this gentleman would be interested in talking to me about his experience with cool that I assumed he had at an HBCU. I slid my agenda into the conversation, and the doctoral student informed me that he would be a perfect fit. I received Justin’s contact information and called to explain my study to him and see if he was interested. We also set up a time to meet during that call. Justin, a 22-year-old Biology major, came to the interview in a polo jacket, Air Jordan sneakers, a striped button down, and a New York Yankee fitted hat. Justin defined cool as an experience that is about “trailblazing” and made it clear that his definition was due to the influence of his environment.

11. I approached Henry one day in the cafeteria to ask him if he would be interested in participating in my study. Henry is a member of a Black Greek letter organization (BGLO) and a engineering major. Henry seemed extremely comfortable in the interview and informed me that cool “starts with confidence” and is someone who is “sincere and honest with themselves.” What is interesting about Henry’s understanding of cool is his deliberate attention to the self and one’s internal relationship based on external factors.

**Introduction to Clustered Themes and Structural Vignettes of Cool**

During the course of the interview analysis, which consisted of several hours of revisiting interview field notes, reading transcripts and listening to original interviews in their entirety, several themes emerged from the individual descriptive accounts of the participants. These descriptive accounts consisted of examples, reflections, and powerful abstracts that created a visual story about the experience of cool. Statements such as “I
feel,” “I am,” and/or “I think” served as valuable declarations due to their ability to encapsulate the totality of a lived experience, the action and the thought.

In addition to identifying the emergent themes of cool, this chapter also travels through environmental vignettes of cool. These vignettes served as “common ground” to the experience of cool (e.g. high school, college, personal neighborhood) and provided additional layers to this study. These vignettes, however, should not be confused with the emergent themes of this study, which make sense of the experience of cool, but as integrated structural commonalities that exist in each interview. Themes do exist in each vignette, but the emergent clustered themes represent a deeper analysis of the total experience of cool. Nevertheless, as you travel through the data presented in Chapter IV, these themes and vignettes will serve as a guide to “seeing” cool and will help create a structural description of cool.

Developmental Cool, Cool in Education, and the Community of Cool have been identified as the environmental vignettes of cool. **Developmental Cool** serves as the reader’s introduction to the cognitive development of my participant initial understanding of cool. Developmental cool normally occurred prior to entering a formal education setting. **Cool in Education** transitions from what cool means, into what this experience of cool actually looks like in an educational setting. High school and college serve as the primary educational settings for cool in education. Lastly, the **Community of Cool** vignette provides a slight overlap between cool in education, but the primary function of this phase discusses the (communal) relationships and access established (or lost) as a results of cool.
Traveling through each identified vignette will provide a definition to “cool;” however, this was not the overall intent of this study. Defining cool is indeed important; however, the purpose of this research is to investigate the lived experience of cool. Simply defining cool could isolate the phenomenon as a separate entity outside of the self, rather than fully intersect Black cool with the experience of Black male college students. During each vignette of the following clustered themes emerged:

1. Cool is learned and influenced by one’s environment.
2. The experience of cool is an expression of self (self awareness).
3. The experience of cool provides access to multiple spaces, people, relationships, rewards and conflict.
4. The experience of cool creates opportunity to (re)define self.

Developmental Cool

“I always felt I was cool”
-Aaron

During each interview with the participants, it was clear cool was a phenomenon that resonated as a personal relationship with the norm while remaining true to self and one’s ability. Words such as unique, remaining true, natural, and self-confidence, spoke to the characteristics of cool. These invariant constituents speak to strength, power and confidence (Conner, 2003), and according to the participants, there is an authenticity with cool that is true and important. This ‘truth’ was illustrated in several ways. Kai described cool as:

[Cool is] a deep word…Cool is uniqueness…Cool to me is being able to be confident in yourself, enough to believe that you can accomplish anything; work hard with your circumstances regardless of where you come from; regardless of who your parents are…so that’s cool. I’m always gonna be cool, you know,
being able to cut against the grain and say I’m gonna do this because I think it’s important.

Gregory extended this point by stating, “Being cool is being yourself, and everyone else is accepting it.” This dual acceptance of cool (via personal and communal) italicizes the bold strength and perseverance of cool, as well as the value of personal development. Interestingly, while recognizing that remaining true, and the communal acceptance of this truth, is indeed significant, what really stands out is Kai’s acknowledgement of the value of cool as well as his personal ownership of cool. This ownership extends cool far beyond the walls of confidence and uniqueness.

According to Henry, cool is a natural and sometimes effortless state of being. Henry furthered this point by saying,

I don’t try to be cool. It’s not something I aim to be. I feel like I try to be very true to myself, I’m very confident in things I do, if I want to do something I want to do exactly that and I’m going to speak my mind and how I feel about things. I feel like I am very comfortable with myself. In my eyes I feel like it’s very cool to be like that way.

Each point, if viewed under the lens of the guiding research question “what is the lived experience of cool,” provides a fascinating synthesis of the introduction to developmental cool. Simply put, according to the statements above, the experience of cool is unique, personal, and natural.

Learned oneness or the inseparability of cool was an additional reality of the participants. According to Henry, “I personally don’t view cool as something that I put on like every morning, like all right it’s time for me to be cool now.” What is extremely interesting about this statement is the internalized belief that asserts being cool is to be “one” with cool. This belief indicates an extremely emotional connection with cool. Ultimately, this oneness with cool is in total alignment with the Kanye West quote that
introduced Chapter I. Oneness with cool means cool is a part of one’s personal character, which is unable to be removed. When reflecting on his personal understanding of cool, Gregory was able to clearly identify this connection to cool even within his inability to “define” cool. Gregory pondered on his first experience with cool and noted, “You know, I didn’t understand what cool was, I didn’t understand none of this shit but I knew that it was important and I knew it made me feel a certain way…coolness is like a universal language, you know what I mean.”

Christopher also addressed his understanding of cool and his unwillingness to remove his cool. According to Christopher,

To me, cool is so important that I wouldn't take it off because, I'm not going to say it defines me, but it does give me a foundation of how I would act or how I would handle the situation. Like man, that's cool right now. So it will determine how I act. And other times, cool could be a mask... So if you take it off you kinda revealing something different. And then when you take that mask off you are not cool. That means you did not meet the standards if you are not cool and if you did not meet the standard you fail. You don't want to take it [cool] off.

When viewed through the social constructivist paradigm, there is a significant implication to the words spoken by the participants. Cool is hard to define yet desired. There is a compelling part of cool my participants are intrinsically drawn to. Themes such as standard, foundation, feel(ing) and failure, speaks to Conners’ (2003) identified need for cool.

When the participants were asked how they individually learned about cool, the responses presented a intersecting multi-leveled understand of the complex nature of cool. Subsequently, the influence of family, peers, community and self served as a unique foundational point to the understanding of cool. According to Brodrick and Everette, watching their elders became their means of capturing cool. Brodrick noted,
“[I] Never hung out with kids [my] age…I watch[ed] [my] elders.” Everette, after explaining a story about the role of his elders and cool stated in a matter-of-fact tone, “Where do you think I got it [cool] from?” Everette further elaborated on the result of the intentional decision to watch his elders when he stated:

I think I was a little more mature for my age ‘cause I spent a lot of time like with older people. My father, my step-father, my uncles, aunts, like those were people I spent a lot of time with growing up, and they always like dropped knowledge on me like wisdom…a lot of kids don’t have people who tell them certain things like that in their life. Or just give them advice. A lot of it comes from their peers, [or] their friends. But for me it was from, you know, my elders.

Everette indicated the (sub)conscious “life lessons” of cool that that, when viewed throughout the textured analysis that guides this study, will identify this connection to cool and his foundation with cool. For Everett, cool is capital.

I mean for me growing up, like my dad kind of beat that into me. Not literally but, you know, always told me, “Hey, you need to present yourself well. You need to dress nice.”…my dad owns a limousine company so he’s always in suits. He has custom made suits and nice shirts and, you know, he dresses up a lot…. [however] my dad doesn’t have a great education. He grew up in a lower income community in Houston. He got his high school degree, never went to college but he owns his own company and he’s successful at it…the way he presents himself in front of them [those with education], they would never know, where he came from in life. Like he presents himself like he should be in their presence. You dress a certain way, you speak a certain way, you carry yourself a certain way then, it’s kind of like they gravitate toward you.

Other members of the participants discussed their packed definition of their cognitive understanding of cool as an example of trial and error. Further, they began to identify multiple individuals, in addition to their elders, that helped them cognitively understand and facilitate cool. In the following example, Ian described the process of defining cool as a means of trial and error. Ian inserted, “I came up with that definition [of cool] from how I interact with people and the stuff that I have picked up on and the stuff that I see; the advice that I have gotten from older people and the stuff like that.” In
an effort to identify how this trial and error worked, Ian provided a story detailing the
“growth” of his experience with cool. According to Ian,

I felt like I was heading in the right direction as being a young man, when you get
the opportunities to go to the barbershop by yourself [and] you sit back and listen
to the older guys and how they react to each other and just pick up on stuff; stuff
that may not be valuable today but may be valuable tomorrow… I can remember
like it was yesterday…I was one of the last people getting my hair cut [and] one
of the drug dealer guys comes in the barbershop. He has on nice clothes, has a
nice car outside and stuff like that. I am thinking he is making this look so
easy… he is getting it. The guy leaves and I am very close to my barber so I
mention to him that the guy that just left out is really doing it with the drug game.
In my eyes I’m thinking that is cool. The barber cut off his clippers and basically
slapped me in the back of the head and he was like man heck no.

Ian saw the nice clothes and attached values to these images; however, these values were
challenged. There is a contextual complexity to this situation. For Ian, cool was
represented through the successful use of symbols (Kirkland & Jackson, 2009) and
posturing (Major & Billson, 1992). However, due to the value placed on Ian’s elder’s
opinion, Ian’s perception of cool was disrupted. For Ian, his environment influenced his
experience with cool.

Justin also provided an example which illustrates the relationships between
environments and one’s cognitive understanding and personal definition of cool. Justin
stated,

I feel like as far as being cool, like I feel like it’s based on basically… your
environment. Like I feel like to me cool means success, but to somebody else the
success might be in a different light. To me, I feel success is like a businessman,
or success [is] a doctor, an entrepreneur or raising a successful family. That’s my
definition of success whereas somebody might feel like [cool is], “a n***** who
pushed thirty keys [drugs],” that’s their definition of cool. I look at success as
being cool…[or] being the first of your kind; like being someone who is a
trailblazer, that’s what I feel is cool.
Derrick reflected on his cognitive evolution of cool and discussed the growth of his security and assurance in his cool. Changes in someone’s cool must be met and later received with comfort. According to Derrick,

When it got to the point where I was comfortable being myself, or starting my own stuff, doing my own trends, that’s when I got to that cool level…It wasn’t, I’m trying to be like them its like y’all trying to get like me, you trying to be like me. Which is something I am still trying to do.

Interestingly, these passages speak candidly to how one’s environment, and those who can influence this environment, impacts the lived experience of cool. For my participants, cool developed as a “feeling” that evolved into a “foundation” of my participants’ overall character. It was “who I am” [who they are] and this “uniqueness” must remain congruent (true) to his character. According to the participants, cool was taught through the knowledge of elders and observation. These cool life lessons were still subject to interpretation and internalized. Further, the degree of comfort in cools inherent definition must be met. Through this analysis there is a distinct relationship, and a need for a relationship, between cool and self. In the next section, I continue discussing the development of cool by advancing my participants’ experiences with personal emotion and cool.

Emotional Cool

In research dedicated to cool, Connor (2003) noted that cool is emotionally restricting; however, according to the “11” there is value in recognizing and controlling (which is different from restricting) one’s emotion. In a story about understanding of emotions, Everette reflected on the transcendental nature of emotions by stating, “To be vulnerable was probably seen being weak or being less of a man, or being soft. But the way I see it, to be vulnerable is to conquer fear or to be able to take control of [it].”
Everette continued by providing an example of the power of vulnerability that he has seen in popular culture by stating,

I really respect Nas because he’s…not afraid to be vulnerable. I mean he [Nas] went through a nasty public divorce. And just expressing like all of his emotions and feeling and everything that he went through, through his craft. It allowed him to…to transcend ordinary.

This story about vulnerability, unpacks 50 Cent’s “show no love, love will get you killed” quote. According to Everette, cool and emotions can peacefully coexist.

The concept of “transcending ordinary” speaks volumes in this study of Black cool. On one end, Major & Billson (1992) suggest an oil and water relationship (a relationship that does not mix) between cool and emotions, while Everette has demystified the power in emotions. For Everette, vulnerability denotes strength, and strength is a response of his cool. It is important to have laid out this claim because through vulnerability Everette has (a) found a space conducive to emotional growth and (b) has internalized and redefined vulnerability as cool. This disrupted definition of cool (based off Everette’s reports) shows an adaptability of cool that was developed in his immediate environment. In this next section, I will share additional experiences of my participants’ adaptation of cool.

Adaptation of Cool

Adaptation of cool was an area of developmental cool that was discussed as a process of transferability, or the method of cognitively adapting one’s cool. Adaptation extends the experience of cool into multiple settings and situations. Many participants identified various reasons for the adaptation of (their) cool and spoke about its role in the experience of cool. Brodrick explained his rationale for adaptation of his cool by stating,
I can go into any situation, whether it’s with the hood people, with upscale people, or just the regular middle people, you know I can go in, [and] I can adapt to all situations. You have to be able to adapt to your surroundings...because if you cannot adapt to your surroundings nobody wants to hear what you have to say or be around you.

In Brodrick’s passage, “hood” is slang for neighborhood and is directly contrasted against upscale or a more affluent community. This contrast shows a decline of status. Due to the juxtaposition of hood and upscale, the assumption can be made that hood represents a population that is less affluent or of different means. Therefore, Brodrick’s adaptability of cool speaks to his ability and desire to negotiate his cool in affluent spaces.

Negotiation of one’s cool possesses a strong undergirding of double consciousness established by W.E.B Du Bois (1903). Double consciousness serves as an insider-outsider identity negotiation process that is determined by the dictates of one’s environment (Du Bois, 1903). Several of the “11” spent time explaining their sophisticated understanding of their personal negotiating of cool. Kai described the process of negotiating his cool as a response to his environment. Kai reflected on an experience dealing with the negotiation of his cool which demonstrate the ability to adapt, and his need to adapt. This form of adaptation involves understanding environmental cues and one’s audience. According to Kai,

I’m a complex person from the get go, you just gotta know when and where to use the right language. When you are in the hood hanging with your boys, they don’t want to hear that shit, most of the time it’s “man, what’s up” and you’re talking this way, but when you are in school, you might have to speak in front of the class, you know, “how are you doing,” you are speaking a little bolder. When you are rapping [to] some girl, depending on the girl, the way you talk changes. A lot of people are not mindful of that but you have to be mindful of that.
What is extremely interesting about this passage is Kai’s unconscious ability to channel a subconscious response in order to successfully exhibit a conscious self. Kai exhibits how his cool is able to vacillate through contrasting and demarcated spaces.

According to Everette his negotiation of cool was one learned from watching his father and is arguably a testimony to Everette’s understanding of manhood. Everette reflected, “My dad’s a real man. You’re going to get him one way and one way only. He’s not going to change for anybody. Now, there’s a difference between maybe the way he would talk amongst his friends and family as opposed to in a meeting setting.” In Everette’s passage he spoke about a realness or a degree of authenticity that is unmovable in a contextual environmental shift. This authenticity speaks to the character of his father that he respected.

Brodrick also spoke directly on how he negotiates his cool while with a familiar audience but in a different space. In a story about an experience with his friends Brodrick reflected:

Cool with my homeboys, I’m more of a laid-back guy when chillin’ with the fellas, but it depends on the situation. [If we are] just sitting around the house shooting the crap man I may have some sweats, shorts, tennis shoes…but if we ‘bout to go to a VENUE, [I’m in a] kinda classic shirt and tie; suit. I'm trying to be the freshest one in there. I'm coming correct.

For Brodrick, there was a duality of personalities that was expressed in this passage that existed outside of the obvious physical changes. Indeed, Brodrick is trying to be the “freshest,” which speaks to a cognitive need for his cool to be noticeably unique (Conner, 2003). However, what is more interesting is his desire of come correct. Coming correct (which has an undertone of realness) addresses a quest for authenticity in cool.
Brodrick’s physical characteristics speak beyond the purchasable symbols of cool and expose the deeper understanding of Brodrick’s total ownership of cool.

Lastly, Henry repositioned the conversation of cool by exposing the political nature of negotiation. This means, according to Henry, that there are societal and cultural (unwritten) rules, which specify acceptable behavior and influence of cool. Henry’s example shows how cool occupies multiple settings. According to Henry,

I know people who go out behind closed doors but then you see them on campus and that n**** is on. I feel like that has to do with more of being politically correct… I feel like there is always a time for everything…I know some of the conversations I have with my partners [friends] I would never say to some of my classmates. It’s definitely like that but it goes back to knowing your crowd and knowing who you are around.

There is tremendous depth in this passage due to Henry’s use of the term “on.” Henry is referring to his acknowledgment of Du Bois (1903) double consciousness, as well as the acceptance of cool’s ability to maneuver through the (cross)cultural rules that govern one’s environment. For Henry’s example, I would imagine being “on” is the equivalent to coloring inside the lines with erasable coloring pencils. Henry’s desired image can fit expected standards as well as change, depending on who he is coloring it for.

Everette and Justin provided corroborating thoughts about the process of knowing your crowd, and ultimately, knowing your “cool,” which requires a higher degree of self-awareness. According to Everette and Justin respectively, “There are certain things that are acceptable in a certain group” (Everette), and “You have to make moves based on what’s best for you and not what’s best for fitting in” (Justin). Both statements identify a truly complex internal verses external battle that can occur in the experience of Black cool. According to Brodrick’s experience with this conflict, he notes, “It’s two different sides. I just learned both of them. I just learned, you know, both of them are going to pay
off anyway.” There is a distinction that must occur here. Brodrick acknowledges two worlds and the benefits of being authentic in both. Everette further elaborated on Brodrick’s point by stating,

Being able to step out of your comfort zone and to grow as a person in a situation where you’re not comfortable, that is living cool…Like recently I have been talking to this girl and I’m a Christian, I’m a virgin, and I plan to stay abstinent until I am married. So when you find a girl that you like, it’s always hard to, well, not hard but its always interesting telling them that [he is a virgin] because they react differently. But being able to stand up amongst all the temptation and trust me there’s a lot; especially being on a college campus everyday. You know, that’s living cool.

In the example provided by Everette, it is clear that he had to embody what was acceptable at his core definition of cool and be comfortable in his decision. Everette’s negotiated decision was opposed to the norm of cool for Black men, but for him was an example of him “living cool.” Everette remained grounded in his personal beliefs and values. Everette’s stance, while being postulated against common decisions and choices, was to remain true to self, thus going against the societal grain. To Everette, his decision was a living example of cool.

In this section I traveled through the participants’ development of cool. Several passages highlighted the learning process of cool, but more importantly, the testing of the participants’ cool. For Justin, it was his unmovable core values and for Henry, this resonated as being “on.” Each participant in this section spoke about the sophisticated process of recognizing the space that they are in, and how they navigate these spaces based on their understanding of cool. This adaptation speaks to the participants’ learned self-awareness and the role their environment plays in their experience of cool.
Cool In Education

During this vignette, Cool in Education, the participants addressed the unique qualities of the experience of cool in an educational setting. This section is organized by high school and collegiate cool and in various social demographics. As we travel through the next sections, you will notice several examples of education-specific experiences dealing with the negotiation, adaptation and situational recognition of cool. Although these points are identified in the earlier pages of this chapter under the developmental cool phase, the following examples will speak to the experience of this phenomenon directly in an educational setting.

When interviewing the participants about their experience with cool in high school, several of the responses were directed towards identifiable attributes and organizational membership that allowed one to stand out from the crowd. This means cool in high school is about being unique, different or, for lack of better terms, special. While pondering about his own high school cool, Derrick noted, “In high school like if you [were] on them girls…or you can fight…you got respect. If you were a hooper, or you played football…that was another cool thing…I was the funny guy in (high) school though, man.”

Through the above story Derrick introduced a variety of cool cues (e.g. athleticism, having intimate relationships with women, violence), however one’s ability to be funny seemed to become a provisional acceptance into the cool kids, due to a societal loop hole or, to put more plainly, an exception to the rules. Henry provided an example of the role humor plays in cool. According to Henry,

I had some partners I knew who were cool, [according to] everybody in school. Just super cool dudes and they didn’t look like somebody on T.V., you know what
I’m saying? They didn’t have the best clothes or whatever else, but they could make everybody laugh, they made everybody feel comfortable around them and that made them cool.

Based on the above story, humor made members of this space comfortable and in turn made Henry cool.

Interestingly, possession of cool qualities (e.g. being athletic) does not necessarily serve as your sole “cool card,” but it does provide access to cool circles. Gregory spoke to this idea directly when he said:

Everything that anyone wanted to do was dictated by whoever everyone said was cool… It was a pretty big factor. Pretty big I think… there was this one guy that wasn’t cool but he had all the qualities to be cool, but he still was lame, but because he still had all the [cool] qualities people still treated him like he was cool when he really wasn’t.

Through this passage, walking the walk or owning the symbols of cool did not automatically grant admission into what was considered being cool. However, it does display one’s desire to have verisimilitude in cool.

Everette, being one of the members of the participants that felt like he was not cool in high school, still recognized the value of his affiliation with cool. Everette stated, “Man [in] high school I couldn’t really say that I was like a cool kid. I mean, I might have had cool qualities, like I was on the basketball team.” In this story provided by Everette, athletics, more specifically basketball, was an expressed high school cool quality. Despite Everette’s declaration that he was not cool, Everette maintained some proximity to cool.

Additional cool qualities, such as appearance, proved to be extremely similar across my interview team. Several members of the “11” attended a variety of high schools in the southeast region of the United States, but there was not much deviation
from the accepted “cool” clothing brands. Derrick noted, “[in] High school [if] you got on J’s [Michael Jordan Sneakers] Girauds [Urban Jeans Brand], big t-shirts, you [are] straight like that. You [are] swagged out.” Across the interviewees Jordan’s (Michael Jordan Sneakers or J’s as noted above) were mentioned as cool, but having Jordan’s does not mean you were cool or automatically “swagged out.” However, there is a general agreement on the value of Jordan’s for my participants and the communities they represent.

Frank, who attended a majority White high school, acknowledged the value of clothing brands mentioned by Derrick, but had a different experience due to Frank’s environment. According to Frank,

I graduated with three Blacks…so my definition of cool, [be]cause I was in that community was different…they were never sagging, not even a little bit of sag [be]cause then you branch out of that [environment’s] coolness. Like all right, he’s a thug, you know, like lock my doors type thing.

Frank’s experience speaks directly to the adaptation and negotiation of cool which was discussed in the section above. For Frank there were specific (unwritten) environmental rules that impacted his experience and performance of his high school cool. For Frank, his cool reflected an understanding of the rules of a predominantly White space, where ostracism is the result of performing the cultural typecast of the group Frank looked like.

Ian acknowledged an appreciation of the “cool” brands that other Black males desired. These clothing brands represented the desired environmental cool for that specific space. While reflecting on these representations of cool Ian noted,

On a scale of 1 to 10 wanting to be cool was a 10. You always wanted to look cool. You always wanted to be up on what’s hot in the streets, what’s new, what kind of clothing I can wear, what kind of shoes do I need. You always put yourself in a position where you always wanted to make sure you were current. Yeah that was always something big.
Despite Ian’s assessment (people always wanting to be in the position where they are current) Ian later shared that he occupied this position of appreciating what’s current from a distance. According to Ian, “I have never bought a pair of Jordan’s in my life and I still feel like the way that I dress and speak and carry myself in some eyes I may have that ‘it’ factor.”

The concept of the “it-factor”—which in the scenario above is synonymous with cool—displays the malleable nature of Black cool and recognizes symbols of cool and actual cool, are two different things. This point is supported by Henry who noted, “I feel like dressing cool and talking cool is like superficial things almost. Something that can symbolize [the] possibility of coolness but it doesn’t mean that you are cool though.”

With my participants’ experience of cool, there is an understood authenticity that is not addressed head on here. Cool is something you are, and that something is beyond purchase.

In this section, there was an introduction to cool cues based on the experience of the participants. These cues provided an overview assessment of several surfaced representations of cool, while also challenging the authenticity of the symbols of cool. This challenge pushed the functional understanding of cool outside the canon of cool. This does not mean that appearance, athleticism, and humor were not important to the experience of cool. However, it is important to note that the experience of cool should not be reduced to the variables appearance, athleticism and humor. Notwithstanding this critical assessment of the above identified cool cues, there is value in spending some time addressing a variable of cool. Below we will travel through the participants experience with cool in athletics.
High School Athletics

According to the “11”, one’s status in high school’s hierarchy of cool was accentuated by one’s athletic ability. Ian examined his experience with this hierarchy of cool when he noted,

I mean you got your jock, you got the star of the football team, the guy who is in the band; they were cool. It was not the guy you see at lunch doing homework…You see I was a book-worm but I was still an athlete as well. So I was able to see things from both sides of the spectrum, you know.

Ian’s experience with high school cool was one that occupied two roles: the book worm and the athlete. However, based on his quote, it is obvious that there was more value placed on “jocks” (athlete), “star football player” (athlete) and the “band” (a supporter of athletics) rather than the “book worm.” This is fascinating due to the subconscious divide that illustrates student-athletes as the separate entities of student and athlete.

Henry spoke about his situational relationship between Black cool, athletics and academics that existed in his high school. Upon reflection, Henry described a need-based/cause-driven understanding of his role as student and athlete.

When I was in [high] school I hung out with basically a lot of athletes; basically it was almost like [I] don’t care [about academics]. Like I’m going to pass to play football, basically other things were more important than school. Playing basketball, playing football, females, whatever else was all more important or “cooler” than going to class and making good grades. So if you’re making good grades but you weren’t doing all this other stuff, then you weren’t really doing [cool] things in most peoples’ eyes in high school.

In the above passage the relationship between scholarship and athletics were muddied due to the perceived hierarchy of cool. According to Henry there is an extreme value of co-curricular activity and academics serves as a means to an end.

According to Gregory, being involved in athletics does have benefits, but Gregory also acknowledges varying degrees of cool within cool groups. While speaking directly
to his experience Gregory noted that “even within cool there’s sects of cool. So it was just really interesting…We were all on the football team…[and] There are the lame athletes and the cool athletes. But to other people in the school we might all be looked on as cool.” This passage speaks to the fullness of Black cool, while highlighting and acknowledge the diversity of cool. The diversity of cool, according to Gregory’s story, posits an insider-outsider inquiry into Black cool that begs to ask what is cool and who is cool.

Henry provided a divergent analysis to this dilemma by juxtaposing status vs. cool to illustrate his point. According to Henry,

I feel like, it’s hard to tell the difference between cool and status you know?…Status is like…athletes…you know just regular men…but I feel like within those statuses you can be cool or you can not be cool. So I think just because you have that status doesn’t mean you’re necessarily cool.

Henry’s point illustrates an insider’s view of the multiple layers of cool. According to Henry, cool qualities [athleticism, clothing] can convolute actual cool. Henry’s explanation of cool is a representation of self based on authenticity (remaining true to one’s values). What should be gathered from this section is the subtle relationship between academics, athletics and cool. This relationship speaks to the symbols of cool and its value in high school. Viewing this relationship through a textured lens (theoretical framework) that guides this study shows the environmental influence of cool (Phinney, 1992). In the section below, I will now speak in greater detail on my participants’ relationship between cool with academics.
In a Relationship but it’s Complicated: High School Cool Academics

The question, *what was the relationship between cool and academics* initiated my attempt to assess how cool maneuvers (the idea and the behaviors) in an academic space. According to research by hooks (2004) and Majors and Billson (1992), this relationship was nonexistent at best. When the “I’ll” were asked about this relationship, it immediately took them back to a familiar space full of denial and mixed reviews. To borrow a quote from Facebook (a large social networking site), and according to the responses of the participants, cool and academics were *in a relationship but it’s complicated.*

During my interviews, several responses provided by the participants indicated their ability to be successful academically but also make a conscious decision to “dumbdown” or “bottle” up (not discuss) their academic prowess. According to Derrick, even family pressure could not supersede and intercept the influence of cool on academics:

My people [were] getting on me about my books [studying]…but I wasn’t about to be a nerd and lame and not cool. I was in the National Honor Society …getting 3.8, 3.9, A’s, B’s on my report cart but I’m still considered cool and that [was] what I was juggling with in high school…Like in class if I am trying to listen to the teacher, because if you don’t hear them or if you don’t get the notes right, you ain’t gonna do good there. So I’m trying to listen to him but my dudes [are] talking to me like what do I do; do I get up and move, go sit by these white kids or do I stay here and try to juggle and act like I’m clowning with them but I’m listening…juggling was a big thing”… Maybe if I would have been comfortable [and said] “man, get in your books, that [is] what I am doing” I could have went to a whole other level of cool.

In this passage there are several things that must be unpacked before we continue.

Derrick spoke about his deep conflict with juggling cool and academics while recognizing the value of being able to occupy both sides of the continuum (academic and
social). Through Derrick’s example he identified the environmental factors that added pressure to his high school experience with cool. This test, although difficult, illustrates an internal conflict with a high achieving student who maintained high marks in spite of his internal struggle. What should be pointed out was the idea of juggling for Derrick. For Derrick it was an obligation to do both (be academic and cool). This juggle speaks to a need to be recognized, acknowledged, and accepted in multiple circles. Du Bois (1903) double consciousness is evident in this passage.

Brodrick also spoke to his dedication to maintaining his cool by bottling up his own academic ability and teasing others who did not do the same. According to Brodrick,

You know like we teased guys all the time for being smart men. I probably was one of the smarter guys in my [high school] and I was teasing them but nobody ever knew. They were always like what did you get in this class? [he would say] Man, I got a D or a F. Trying to sound as if I were cool. I really got an A or B in the class. So you know, being a smart guy, it wasn’t cool. But like now as I look back on it the smart guy was cool, because they were unique in their own way. And who knows I may have to call on one of those smart guys one day to get a job…because they taking care of their business.

Brodrick’s illustration provided an interesting and intersecting view into the experience of cool in academics due to the influence (and advantage) of hindsight. Brodrick’s statement in the above passage, spoke to the silent coolness of the smart kids due to their uniqueness and their ability to take care of business. Self-awareness (being authentic to self) within multiple environments continues to resonate as a major underpinning of cool.

Although Brodrick spoke to his reality as a cool kid trying to maintain his cool, Ian provided an illustration of the perceptions of others—a teacher more specifically—and their (the teacher’s) internalization of the stereotypical nature of cool (e.g. cool rules) and their efforts to reinforce one’s perception of cool. According to Ian,
When I was a senior we had an awards breakfast. That’s when people were on the honor roll and stuff. Like I said of course I was a bookworm, but I was an athlete as well. In one of my classes it must have been an elective class or something like that, they got on the intercom and they announce all of the people that are invited to the awards breakfast [in order] for the teachers to let them [the high achieving students] out of class. So I get up and I had my letterman jacket on and then my teacher is like, “Where are you going”…I was like I am on the honor roll can I go? At that point, she is making a joke out of [it] but I know she is serious because she thinks that I am playing…I kind of told her just come and look at the paper [because] my name is on the paper and from there you can just let me go. She did it and just her reaction was like wow [he] was really serious, I didn’t know that you were going. I started laughing. I couldn’t really feel bad because like I said far too often times the Black guys are not really looked at from a scholastic point.

This passage provides an extremely troubling point that should not be missed. Scholastic achievement was already a struggle to express for the student due to environmental factors within peer groups, but now an authority figure adds additional depth to the complicated relationship between academics and Black cool. The statement “I couldn’t really feel bad” postulates the toxicity of the academic space from the vantage point of a “high achieving student.” Although Ian was able to recognize the opinion of the teacher (Black guys are not looked at from a scholastic point), I wonder the implication this action had on the other Black male members of the class and their relationship with cool and academics.

Christopher shared an extremely similar experience about this relationship with education that highlights Ian’s point that “Black guys are not really looked at from a scholastic point.” During Christopher’s example, the phrase wasted potential stood out. Christopher reflected,

When I was in the classroom…I didn’t really pay attention. I was just talking to girls or just not paying attention to the teacher. One day she [the teacher] called on me to read. And I read…I read really well, and she was shocked by me just because I came from another school and came here and the way I acted in class she assumed I couldn’t read…the look on her face was just ridiculous…She
stopped me like the next day and she was like “Christopher I am really shocked by what you did in class…I’m proud of the way you led the group and you should do that more often.” And she was like “it hurts me to see a Black boy waste his potential” and when she said that I was like WHAT? Wasted my potential? I was like my GPA is high. I’m here…what do you mean I wasted my potential. But her saying that, even though I got offended, it made me go back and reflect on what I was doing. I was like, man, I was just in class not doing what I was supposed to do. It’s not enough to be smart.

Although there were instances of good pedagogy and practice in this passage, this does not negate the troubling attempt to ridicule Christopher. My point is not to vindicate, vilify or justify either behavior, but it is to shine a light on the teacher’s pedagogical influence. To refer back to the textured analysis and running themes used to guide this study, it could show another environmental variable that challenges cool and that cool challenges. Although these points are reversed (cool challenge/challenge cool), it displays an insider-outsider relationship with cool. On the inside of cool there was a charge to maintain cool, while on the outside there was an attempt to debunk cool. As a result, there was an adaptation of cool based on a conflict and a reflection on this conflict.

Justin also had a similar experience with education and Black cool; however, Justin’s example occurred prior to high school. Although in the introduction to this chapter I spoke about my attempt to speak about high school and college cool, this passage provided a good backdrop for probable high school behavior. According to Justin,

I graduated high school with a three point 3.8 GPA. I was always like at the top of a class or whatever you want to call it. One situation [when] I was in middle school and there was an awards banquet. The way they did their awards banquets was athletes and academics were the same banquet. As I was growing up, I was a star athlete playing football [and] baseball. In sixth grade I got injured, a horrible injury, to where it was like my athletic future was in jeopardy…So we are at the awards banquet and they are calling out all of the awards for the athletes…I’ll never forget they called my name for 4.0 whatever, top scholar, and I didn’t stand up. I always think about that situation because I wanted to stand up but at the
same time in my mind I was feeling like man these guys are getting awards for playing basketball that’s where the fame [popularity] comes in.

This conflict between the intersection of Black male cool and academics is all too real. According to Justin’s story, he battled with receiving academic praise in front of his peers and felt academics was not worthy of acknowledgment. Justin’s decision to not accept his award demonstrated a distinct loyalty to cool and the difficulty that comes when this idea is challenged.

Derrick also provided a story of his conflicted relationship with academics. According to Derrick, the stress to balance high schools cool rules dedicated to academics was an internal struggle. Derrick suggested,

High school you getting in your books (studying) wasn’t cool…I was always smart, [I] got in my books, [I] wasn’t cool, I mean. I was cool because I still wanted to be cool so I wouldn’t make it seem like I was stressing over my books. When I was actually stressing over my books…How do I still clown with them [homeboys] and get my books just as good as these other kids getting their books when they have a hundred percent they can give to it but I don’t know how to do it.

Derrick’s example of his experience with cool provided a calculated inquiry referring to an obligation to be cool. Derrick wanted both the grades and the cool, but spent a significant amount of time attempting to negotiate how to do both. What was extremely poignant about Derrick’s story were the words “a hundred percent to give.” These words position Black cool as a must that White students (to Derrick’s point) do not have to worry about. Derrick in this story, and during this battle, was attempting to identify self within external variables and during internal calamity.

Frank (who attended a predominantly white high school) had an entirely different experience with the intersection of Black cool and academics. According to Frank, in his environment, the predominately White high school, cool and academics went hand in
hand. However, when the environment changed (from the White high school to his original Black neighborhood), the standards of cool changed causing Frank to be on the outside of cool, looking in. According to Frank:

I was considered you know, one of the coolest at my [high]school just because of my laid back attitude. Like, people didn’t see me upset. People didn’t see me sad really…It didn’t deal with how I dressed or things I do, or how much I studied. I studied my ass off up there…that didn’t affect my cool(ness) because it’s a different culture…its funny, ‘cause like, I went back home and I wasn’t cool no more. I wasn’t cool at all. I was now the smart guy.

Interestingly, Frank’s point showed compliance to the rules of the environment; it also showed the response when Frank deviated from his traditional neighborhood standard of cool.

Although the parallel between the experience of Black cool and education has been detailed as a closeted relationship that is sometimes met with resistance, Derrick did provide another exception to the rules of cool. In a conversation about nerds, a derogatory name for extremely smart yet (often) socially inept people, Derrick muddied the lines by stating, “Nerds can be cool. The only way a nerd can be effective at being cool is the fact that he accepts that he’s a nerd…when they get to [the] point where they are not cool is when they are not comfortable being a nerd.” Despite the bifurcated reality of the experience of cool in education, Derrick’s above statement, which reflects another major degree of self awareness, presented a situation for the two—cool and high school education—to coexist. However, for this relationship to occur, there is a degree of comfort in oneself that must be met.

The *Inbetweeners*: Cools Transition to College

As the “11” transitioned from high school to college, cool did as well. For some this transference was premeditated, while others questioned the validity of those who
“plan” to be cool in college. Derrick, who was excited about this next stage in his life, was determined to be, in his own words, “that dude” in college. During a reflection Derrick noted,

Junior or senior year, I was like in college it’s going down. I’m going to be that dude…believe it or not I’m not that social as people think. I’m really a quiet person, like I’m cool with just being by myself [but] I like the fact that I can go somewhere and know somebody or they feel like they are in my presence.

Despite Derrick’s self-proclaimed quiet demeanor, it was clear that he wanted the status and attention that cool commanded. It was obvious that Derrick desired to create a space that made others “feel like they are in [his] presence.”

According to Gregory and Everette, Derrick’s behavior is a common occurrence in their experience with Black cool, however it is a falsified representation of Black cool. According to Gregory:

A lot of people who weren’t cool [in high school]…made it to the college level, [and said] ‘like now it’s my turn to be cool’…sometimes it’s indistinguishable—who was cool before and who really wasn’t. But if you been cool your whole life, you know who was and who wasn’t because it’s that indistinguishable quality. Like that ‘it’ factor.

While expanding on his earlier point Gregory proclaimed:

I think it [is] very rare that you find someone who’s genuinely cool and who’s also very intelligent…the levels of cool people who make it to college are so low, what happened is that the kids that was from high school who were never cool before, who were close enough to see the cool kids, see what they do, they make it to college and there like, I can be cool here.

To Gregory’s point, there was an influx of inauthentic cool when in college. College, ultimately, becomes a place of new opportunities. Therefore, when the environment changes, cool changes.
Everette, provided a similar assessment of cool and also noted,

People who didn’t have ‘it’…in high school…they try to have ‘it’ in college. And then they kind of try to take on a new persona or dilute their personality, you know what I mean? So they become this new person and then that’s where they try to find themselves and they go through some battles and what not.

The above passages illustrate several points about the experience of cool in education. According to the participants, several Black men attempt to redefine themselves in college by taking on the assumed persona of cool that they witnessed (from a distance). This decision to be “that dude” in college could result in an internal conflict. What is more interesting is the perception that college is a welcoming space for this (re)authentication process to occur. In the next section I will explore the lived experience of cool in college in order to assess the difference in cool when the environment changes.

It’s a Different World: The Experience of Cool in College

An emerging theme of cool in college was as the environment changes, cool changes. For the participants, the original declaration that academics and cool do not/cannot function in the same space was altering before their eyes. However, although college provided a safe space for cool and academic to functions successfully, this relationship was closeted and rarely discussed. According to Ian, there was an unwritten/unspoken, don’t ask don’t tell policy regarding cool and education.

There is a disconnect between high school cool and college cool, and that is simply because in high school you just thinking about today. You don’t really have your mind set out as far as thinking of everything you could have accomplished if you really just apply yourself. In college your cool is you thinking about how I am going to set myself up for years down the line when I have to be the man of my household; when I have to be a father for my kids and stuff. It’s kind of like you are thinking about you actions not only for yourself but you are thinking about your actions and how they relate to you as a person.
There is an immediacy of cool when in high school verses the collegiate projected path of life that is in turn cool. In an effort to go into greater detail about this relationship between education and Black cool, Ian further explained,

In high school I was kind of like a bookworm and so in most people’s eyes I was “the guy who does work.” There’s really not much more to [me] except he does work. When I got to college I saw that people kind of like people who do work. I really started to think, well I wasn’t really doing anything wrong in high school it was just that the mind state of people has changed and matured, as we get older.

This transition was indeed an epiphany moment for Ian. Ian was starting to experience the fame [popularity] Justin spoke about earlier.

According to Derrick, who was destined to be that dude in college, he agreed that there was something different about the experience of cool in college in regards to education. During a conversation positioned around his original conflict with studying, Derrick noted that the mindset of those who engage in the college environment is simply different. Derrick reflected,

The mindset is different as compared to high school…If somebody tries to check me I’m like ‘dude, if I don’t get my books then I’m not going to be able to go to this party anyway’…as opposed to high school its different. I’ll tell you I’m studying for this test bro, y’all go do that. I would have never done that in high school…people talk about books like they’re getting their books here, not high school.

This audacious stance displays the impact an environmental change has on one’s personal relationship with cool. To be clear, there is still a duality that it presents (to be social and academic), yet this relationship is more vocal. However, that is not consistent across all participants.

This ‘acceptance’ of cool and education, which is a direct deviation from the one identified in high school, was not always met with open arms. According to Henry, educational achievement is indeed acceptable in college, as opposed to high school;
however, it is a personal relationship that remains quiet. Henry reflected on his relationship with education and college cool and noted, “It’s really hard to explain, because it’s cool to do good in school and do well in school but at the same time it’s like it’s not cool to learn outside of school, it’s not cool to [talk] in a casual conversation [and] discuss different philosophies and different things in life.”

Frank provided a similar—yet perplexing—sentiment when he explained his personal relationship with college academics and cool. Frank, who attended and predominantly white high school where being smart was the norm and where he was the “coolest,” noted,

It’s sad to say but even in [College] academics [does] not look that cool. Like nothing about academics is cool and it’s sad….You’d have to bottle it. You’d have to hide it. You’d have to do what you do to get your good grades, but you wouldn’t be able to talk about it… it’s funny; it’s a weird situation. If you have good grades and you don’t talk about it then it won’t affect your coolness even though people may know. It won’t directly affect your coolness… I do downplay engineering a lot… if someone ask me my major, I say mechanical engineering. It’s like at first I’m not cool…but it’s like if I tell them like yeah it’s tough, like I am struggling…it’s not a problem.

Interestingly, Frank presented a negotiated version of himself that mimicked every other member of the “11’s” high school experience with cool. Frank’s inverted relationship with cool speaks to his applied value of cool. Notwithstanding, Frank has provided an interesting analysis. According to Frank (and Henry), there is value remaining aligned with the community standard and to succeed without drawing excess attention to self. This is interesting for me as a researcher due to the social groups (e.g. college athletics, BGLO) who require an admittance GPA and that provide cool points due explicitly to their ability to stand out. In the section below we will start with Black Greek letter organizations to explain their relationship with cool.
School Daze: Black Greek Life and Cool

Historic Black Greek letter organizations, like the one that introduced cool in Chapter I, present another interesting relationship described to have a significant impact on the Black cool experience. However, this impact is often met with the challenge to prove your worth under a microscope due to the ‘pedestals’ that fraternity members are put on. According to Henry, a member of a BGLO, “It’s cool to be in a frat, but if you’re cool or not it’s going to show at that point, when you have that attention. When you have that attention people are going to see if you are really lame and they are going to see if you’re really cool.”

Frank spent time describing life on the “pedestal” of Greek life and the pressures that accompany it. According to Frank,

What affected me is that [my] organization puts me...on a pedestal...as far as like the social aspect. So by me being on that pedestal when I’m looking out, my organization is here but then society is here and so it’s like, I want to fit in society, and grades in my organization are the small part.

It is evident that Frank’s lived experience of cool and life on the pedestal of Greek Life is peculiar and quite different compared to the other members of the participants. If you can recall, Frank entered the university under the impression that he was cool, only to be informed that he was not. Membership into his organization provided a platform for Frank to obtain a spot with the “cool kids.” Now on this platform, Frank is reestablishing his cool.

Gregory provided an example as a nonmember of a BGLO with aspirations to join a particular cool Greek organization. Gregory (who described himself as a ‘cool kid’) explained how his cool provided additional access and privileges to a cool organization
that a non-cool Black man may not experience. Gregory recalled a situation when a member of the organization approached him and noted,

[the member of the BGLO said] ‘Man you know you’re about to get in our chapter? You know what I’m saying, like we’ve only admitted like five freshmen in our chapter in our whole history, every freshmen had like a 3.6 to 3.8 GPA, got to have 50 hours community service. You’ve got to be on point if you’re trying to get on as a freshman. Man you better, you better be the tightness n***** ever.’ …And the semester came and they were like …‘how many hours of community service you got?’ And I was like 0. They were like ‘what’s your GPA?...It better be at least a 2.5’. And I was like 2.47. They were like, ‘Damn, you suck...Damn bro. Well, like check this out we really want you on so you have to take this intersession course, make an A and we will fucking put you on’. And that’s what happened. I fucking took the intersession course, made an A, and they put me on...They told me to be a freshmen on here you’ve got to have this, this, this, this and I didn’t do none of that shit and they’re like, ‘Still ...you’re cool, we want you on.’

According to Gregory’s story, his experience with cool is one of access and privilege. Due to Gregory’s personally packaged cool, he was privy to organizational access and admittance. What is more interesting than the organizations willingness to provide access to a cool non-member, was the organizations desire to replenish their cool with more cool members. This modern day self-perseveration speaks to one’s ability to survive in an environment, and ones desire to stack the cards to ensure they not only survive, but they control the flow of the environment. For the organization to maintain their cool, they admitted based on cool.

Aaron reflected on this concept of access and privilege, one that he termed as cool points, and said,

Yeah, being Greek on campus definitely gives you a few “cool points”, [actually] being Greek definitely gives you a lot of cool points in a sense, whether it be through administration; [or] with girls because [they] are looking at you now; [or] guys are going to take you more seriously because they want the same thing that you want. So I think it definitely helps [because] people actually take you seriously and listen to the stuff that you have to say. Being Greek gives you a
stage, it doesn’t unlock the door for you, but it gives you a stage and lets everybody see who you are.

Aaron spoke heavily about the stage which upon first glance looks like a prop to put you above others, but what is more telling is the stage’s ability to provide credibility to members. It is important to note that although these examples are social in nature, one cannot forget the academic requirements of these organizations (at least at recruitment). This means, there must be an academic relationship with cool, although this relationship is not highlighted.

Frank provided a similar assessment of the power of Greek life when he provided an example of a non-cool member becoming cool. According to Frank,

One of my frat members, when they came [joined the organization], they [weren’t] cool at all. It’s not a bad thing, you know. They weren’t. So by us giving him tips, by us helping him changing some of his mannerisms and things he do[es], he’s been seen as more cool. You know, or cooler. And now he’s able to get more girls to talk to him and simply because he joined the frat.

According to Frank, the environment and access the organization provided packs the ability to change members’ degree of cool. If we refer back to the textured analysis established for this study, this organizations ability to change members cool or to influence of one’s environment speaks to the group’s cultural capital. Cool in this case contributes to the expression of self by being contextualized with in-group affiliation.

In addition to the above examples, Henry provided an experience that indicates that this process presented by Frank (Join an organization and be perceived as cool) is indeed possible. Henry reflected,

I feel like you can be lame before and cross [enter full membership into Greek organization] and then get the attention and be that dude. I feel like there’s a change that happened. I feel like crossing may have added that confidence they needed, could have added something that they needed in their personality to bring that cool factor out…. he could have been lame before but, he’s probably, I
guarantee the lame dude that was [lame] before he crossed and he’s like that n**** afterwards.

This passage reflects a Clark Kent/Superman relationship. For example, a person can be uncool, but when they pledge (or as when Clark Kent found a phone booth) they can transform into cool. However, I think this passage is more elaborate than the idea “membership creates cool.” This passage returns to the pedestal example from earlier. New lame members have access to the rights and privileges of the organization, thus possessing the ability to learn in a new environment in a setting occupied with new relationships thus resulting in a new you.

Although the relationship of cool and Greek life has been discussed thoroughly in this section, Gregory was still able to provide a summary, which illustrated his initial “raw” appreciation of Greek life and the value of their cool. During the above story, you can tell Gregory’s overall admiration for Greek life due to his impression of their cool, moved him. Gregory reflected, “When I first got here and I was like, I am going to be a member. Like these n**** are awesome…You know, a lot of people have really very, very good reasons. I really didn’t have the best reasons. I just had seen them and I was like, that’s what I’m going to do.”

As I reflect on the introductory story in Chapter I, I can imagine people in the crowd expressing the same admiration displayed by Gregory because of the “stage” Greek students were put on, and their performance—be it positive or negative—on this stage. In this next section I will discuss university athletics and cool. When you travel through this section, it is key to remember the pedestal analogy obtained through membership.
Oh... You’re a Baller: College Athletics and Cool

If there was a hierarchy of cool, several of the participants indicated that athletes would be top tier in the college they attend. Frank explained in a matter-of-fact tone that Black athletes cool do not even register on the typical understanding of cool that he is familiar with. When Frank was asked the question about Black athletes and cool, Frank quickly asserted, “Athletes! Athletes are on another level. It’s funny cause like they are in another world. It’s like I see athletes as almost like that is ‘it’! It’s over! You’re an athlete, you’re automatically cool.” Franks point provided a celebrity type relationship between athletes and cool. According to Frank, college athletics (Frank spoke specifically to college football) makes you ‘it’.

Henry noted in a similar fashion:

Athletes are way above frats [cool], especially on this campus because of the simple fact that they’re on T.V. These females know that some of them are going to go to the NFL so they have that different level of coolness. So it’s almost something that you can’t even touch. It’s like kind of superficial or some shit.

What is extremely telling in this section is the athlete’s cool (from the outside) was judged on their earning potential. Although this point is interesting, I began to assess the value of the environment (space) that the athletes occupy due to television. Television makes the athletes “larger than life” which elevates their cool, not based on self-awareness, but on the access that they possess. So far the athlete’s lived experience of cool has only been referenced from an outsiders perspective, which cannot be assumed is the actual reality of Black athletes. However, these outsiders’ perspectives shed light on the malleability (or difference) of cool depending on in-group status.

Frank explained the difference in cool comes with a difference in standards and rules. Frank explained this by declaring,
They’re [College Football players] put on a pedestal higher than even Greeks. On [this] campus that’s probably the highest pedestal. So they can do things against the norms and still be cool because they’re still athletes. For instance I saw these two big n***** riding on one scooter…Normally that wouldn’t be acceptable. That’s gay, that’s gay.

Despite the socially insensitive use of the word gay, there was extreme depth in this passage. Ultimately, the established hierarchy of cool demonstrated a clouded set of rules that are altered depending on the participant. BGLO and athletes both were categorized as cool, but what that cool experience looks like was indeed different.

In this section we traveled through the relationship between athletics—primarily football—and cool. What was discovered is the experience with cool and athlete was one of elevated status and influence. In the next section, I will travel through the final phase of cool (as indicated in this study) community and cool. In this section, the participants begin to explain how their college experience with cool is perceived by those who grew up with the participants. In addition to addressing the perceptions of past friends, it was valuable to examine the impact the participants’ previous neighborhood or community (that originally taught the participant about cool) had on the participants’ lived experience of cool.

Community and Cool

All of the responses provided by the participants indicated that their personal lived experience of cool changed from high school to college, thus causing changes in their immediate community. What was significant about these changes were the acknowledged (acquired) responsibility necessary to maintaining and managing one’s cool status. For some, these changes were identified as the acquisition of new
relationships, and for others the loss of older ones. In this section I will discuss the experience of cool in previously established relationships.

Hood Adjacent

Frank indicated that due to his new “cool,” he was no longer cool to his friends of his past. Frank described this experience when he stated:

Yeah...to them I’m not cool anymore. You know, cause it’s like, it’s almost like I become stuck up. In their eyes because like I’m trying to reach the coolness level of a group that I feel cooler than them. So now I’ve become stuck up...And it’s funny because that’s pretty much how it works. It’s like once you change environment or once you change, you know, cultural environments, it’s like if you were cool in another environment, in this environment you may be something totally different...[so] Every time I did go visit my wardrobe changed, my clothes got a little bigger. You know my shoes got a little whiter...my speech got a little sloppier.

Due to Frank’s understanding of cool (codes and rules), Frank adapted his behavior based on the dictates of his environment. Interestingly, this adaptation due to environment has resonated throughout the entire text and is proving be a value when understanding cool.

Gregory described a similar change in older friendships, but his response was different than Frank’s. Gregory recognized that he was doing “better” than his friends from home and attempted to silence his development in order to salvage past relationships. To do this, Gregory made the conscious chose to refrain from speaking about his present and rather allow his friends to highlight theirs. According to Gregory,

Before when I was more arrogant I would be like, ‘Yeah this is the thing I’m doing.’ Now it’s like if I feel like the things I say might bring offense to you or might bring a negative emotion to you I’m just not going to say them. I’d rather hear about what you’re doing and shine some light and positivity onto the situation that you got going on.

Gregory’s and Frank’s examples reflect their desire to remain “hood adjacent.”

This concept—created by Shaina Riser—is defined as the conscious moment of self-
marginalization due to one’s internalized obligation to their specific community.

According to Riser (personal communication, 5/09/11), by asserting ties with one’s upbringing due to societal and communal pressures is a form of hood adjacentness (personal communication, 5/09/11). This deep and insightful concept identifies the direct occupation of two spaces—in this case, one’s past community and the university—and their desire to stay connected to both, even if this space is unwelcoming. I would argue that being hood adjacent does indeed share the undergirding of one’s obligation to one’s self identified community, but this obligation *does not* always result in self marginalization but *does* operate under societal and communal pressures—or arguably responsibilities.

Kai provided a story about his obligation to remain connected to his community and attributed this directly to his authenticity, which he linked to his cool. According to Kai,

> The reason I can go back to poverty and I can talk to the hardest gangsters, the people who talk about murders all the time, the people who sell drugs, is because they thought I was *cool*, in my own way. Because I always stayed true to myself. So it’s cool to stay true to yourself. People praise the originals so whatever you really are by your heart, people are gonna always respect that and that’s cool to them. They’re like, he’s not trying to be a gangster man he’s just being him.

This statement of authenticity, because [he] stayed true to self, was praised and noted as extremely valuable to his community. Ultimately Kai’s cool provided relevance to his character.

In another example, Justin reflected on a recent trip home and illustrated how it was the expectation for him to be successful for his community. According to Justin,

> Since I’ve been out for the holidays, I’ve been spending a lot of time with my homeboys from high school because they are back home, you know. In fact, I feel like maybe my friends are different because they’ve always known that I’ve
been academically savvy. So now that they see I’m doing my thing, it’s like [you got to] put on for the team. You keep doing your thing that is what you were made for.

This conversation is extremely powerful due to the recognition of environmental influence and one’s connection and support within spaces. Ultimately, Justin’s cool was legitimized by his ability to be successful in both spaces. In other words, as stated in Chapter I, Justin was able to fulfill the request of Charles Woodson (1933): become educated and come home.

In another conversation about past relationships Everette provided a glimpse into what this expectation meant for him. Everette recalled a story about a relationship with a very good friend in high school that he lost touch with when he went to college. In this conversation it was clear that Everette’s cool, which was defined in the passage as being true to himself, was the original reason and inspiration for their friendship. Everette explained,

He was telling me about, you know, anger struggles that he was having and how high school, even to this day he feels like he hasn’t been true to himself. Like he feels lost, like he doesn’t know who he is. And he was telling me one of the main reasons, that he wanted to be friends with me or why we were so cool is because like he saw that [cool] in me. Like how I didn’t care about how anybody talked about me I was just going to be me. I was going to be real.

This story provides a poignant example of how one’s cool impacts his immediate community and demonstrates how cool functions in a variety of spaces. Throughout this section, cool has been explored in multiple settings. Key words such as space (environment) and authenticity (keeping it real) were shared in several interviews as variables of influence with cool. What was discovered in these stories was a communal obligation to be an active representation of the community or a personal obligation to
remain loyal to the standards of cool of that space. This obligation presents a sophisticated contextualization of cool.

Contextualization of cool, simply put, is acknowledging the lived experience of cool in multiple spaces. These experiences can have several shapes and forms. According to Derrick, “Keeping the room [and] letting them know that y’all chilling with me, I’m not chilling with y’all”, is cool. Therefore, it is Derrick’s intent to be a visible factor in the space that he occupies. Interestingly, this vision of cool has an interconnected relationship with respect, and, I would argue, power. This conscious presence in space is confidence resulting in a response dictated by one’s proximity to cool. Proximity to cool simply put, is one’s desire to be around you because of your cool (e.g. relationships). Proximity to cool is not always isolated to one’s desire to be around your cool. It could function as one’s personal desire to be around cool.

Frank’s position on cool, compared to the data supplied by every member of the participants, is a perfect story about someone’s desire to be around cool (or a deviant case for cool). Throughout Frank’s interview, it was made clear that Frank’s desired attraction to cool was a result of the access that cool has provided. Frank, who made a conscious decision to dumb down in college, provided a story speaking about his regrets with cool.

Of course I have regrets with cool…um then again, it’s not really a regret. Like the whole grades thing. Like conforming by letting loose with my grades…but on the other hand, it’s like I’ve had so many opportunities and I’ve done so many things like socially that [it] helped me also…If I was heavy on the academics, I wouldn’t have been able to do some of the things I’ve done in that aspect. And that truly makes me happy. That’s what I would love to do. And so it’s a give and a take.
For Frank, cool provided a peek into his purpose. Although Frank was the only person to occupy this section, I felt Frank’s story needed to be shared. Frank sat as an outlier (deviant case) to the data, but after carefully revisiting Frank’s notes and through member-checking, it was clear that Frank did take a different path, but ended in a familiar place. Frank’s lived experience exposed him to an opportunity to learn more about himself and others.

The Rebirth of Cool

Finally what was discovered during this study was how cool has been transformed for the participants. During the last questions of the interview, the participants were asked, *Do you think you are cool?* As the interviews proceeded, each member provided an up-to-date version of cool that they think they are now. In the section below, I will travel though what cool has been reborn into, and I will spend time on what that means collectively to the participants.

Brodrick took time to explain that his new definition of cool as a means of survival. Brodrick’s definitions of cool fits well with Billson & Majors’s (1992) suggestion that cool is a survival mechanism for Black males. When Brodrick responded to my inquiry, he explained what this survival meant for him. According to Brodrick, “[Cool] has evolved because things in the world have evolved. You know!…Now it’s like to the point education has become cool. Because it’s so key and so vital.” Brodrick continued to say,

I want [people] to know me as an educated Black man…That achieved a lot in academics and on the field as an athlete, you know, because it’s hard to find a student athlete in college that can come to college and get a degree and still be successful…Most guys they either gonna count on football or whatever sport they play that’s going to take them to the top and forget about the degree. Or you going to get the degree and [it] never pans out for you. So, I’ve got an
opportunity to have both. Get a degree and still get a chance to play on the big stage. So it’s like you just have to be true to who you are.

The statement “staying true” —which has permeated throughout my entire analysis—has shown how Brodrick’s experience of cool has resulted in a deeper understanding of self. Brodrick is trying to create the space he occupies and not simply living in it. This is evident based on his desire to succeed on the big stage while obtaining a degree.

According to Ian, cool is a means to navigate society and defines Ian. For Ian, cool is a lifestyle that is dictated by outside circumstances. For Ian,

Cool to me is kind, you know, a lifestyle, almost like a brand, you know what I mean. With a brand, you know, you have different brands; it’s all about how someone can take whatever is going on outside of them, problems or not, and still maintain a level of responsibility.

Ian continued by saying,

I am cool simply because at the end of the day, I have never felt like I changed my image. I have stuck with my same image and just life itself and just how society has changed it just kind of made me cool. I feel like I am cool because I am that same person. In some ways, of course, I have grown and changed in natural ways, but I have stuck to my core values.

What is telling about Ian’s passage is the idea of sticking to one’s core values. Ian was demonstrating an indirect acknowledgement of the changing time while directly committing to maintaining cool, or—more specifically—being true to self.

According to Gregory, cool is intelligence and the power to create one’s own reality. While reflecting on this question, Gregory deliberated:

Personally, I feel like some of the coolest people I know also happen to be some of the most intelligent. Intelligent, in a way that they supersede all other levels of intelligence. For instance, you couldn’t tell me that Jay-Z isn’t as intelligent as any other of these college degreed, or Ph.D [people]…he was able to create a whole reality and a whole world and a whole life for himself.
This ability to create one’s space is extremely important to Gregory, and he was able to illustrate it through a popular culture reference. What is interesting is Gregory did not codify intelligence as school/book smart; he actually did the opposite. Gregory’s positioning of cool speaks to the importance of school and worldly intelligence.

Everette took time to redefine cool and also discussed his location in his own definition of cool. In Everette’s definition—like Ian’s—there is a strong spiritual undertone to his lived experience of cool. Word such as inward and purpose stood out as keys to Everette's understanding of his cool. According to Everette,

> When people are true to their core, like when they shine from inwardly, outwardly that the thing that, that’s really cool man. Like when people aren’t afraid to share, you know, where they come from or share different ideas that they truly believe that’s cool; I mean to be personally [honest], being cool is like just being someone who, you know, stands strong for what they believe in, who stands for a purpose and doesn’t get deterred by any like by any means...I’m not at my ultimate goal of cool yet basically. But I know what it takes and it takes a lot...I know the type of man I want to become. But you know, I’m young so I’m getting there.

For Everette, cool speaks to his purpose and mission. For Everette, there is a high degree of an emotional and spiritual level of cool, which speaks directly to his environment (elders) and the relationships he has experience with cool.

Through the individual descriptions provided earlier in this chapter, it is clear that the assumed misogynistic, arrogant and anti-intellectual cool is slowly growing and maturing based on the experiences with cool. What is unique about the lived experience of cool is at its root, cool is a dictate of the environment, and ultimately cool provides multiple opportunities for personal development to occur due to the numerous variables and societal pressures.
In the section above we have traveled through three major vignettes (or structural stages) of cool (developmental cool, cool in education, community and cool) in order to witness the clustered themes of cool intersect through each phase. During each vignette (structural stages) the following clustered themes were identified by the participants:

1. Cool is learned and influenced by one’s environment.
2. The experience of cool is an expression of self (self awareness).
3. The experience of cool provides access to multiple spaces, people, relationships, rewards and conflict.
4. The experience of cool creates opportunity to (re)define self.

It was my intent to let the participants tell their own stories to resemble an interwoven conversation. Every vignette (structural stage) was home to a representing theme to show the continuous evolution of cool.

In the section below, we will discuss the visual representation of cool established through framing. As a reminder, framing (a form of photo elicitation) was utilized in order to capture a visual response to the experience of cool that may be missed through words alone. During each interview, the participants were asked to provide visual representation to cool through popular cultural references. These strategies are another form of inquiry as well as an opportunity for triangulation by data. The following section is dedicating significant time to frame (provided and in-depth visual analysis) of cool for the participants.
Now That’s what Cool Looks Like: Photo Elicitation

During the course of this study, the experience of cool has been examined and explained through the use of real life examples and experiences. Each story provided a view of cool through the participant’s vantage point that challenged and/or reinforced the previous literature about cool (Conner, 2003; hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992). At the conclusion of the interviews, there was an established commonality amongst the participants that identified cool does not look (the behavior and the idea) like it did when the participants were first introduced to cool. This fascinated me and made me wonder if there was a popular cultural representation of cool that reflected the participants’ explanation of cool.

During this final section of this chapter, I will introduce the photo elicitation of cool in order to establish a visual illustration of cool for the participants. The intentional use of photo elicitation adds additional academic rigor to this study by subsequently adding a popular cultural analysis that will be juxtaposed to a personal representation of cool. This juxtaposition of photographic raw data against in-depth interviews ushered in another data source needed for triangulation.

Photo elicitation is a process that inserts a photograph into a research interview (Harper, 2002, p.13) in order to assess how a participant reacts to an image. According to Harper (2002) photo elicitation “enlarges the possibilities of conventional research…[but] its potential usefulness is…largely unrecognized.” Ultimately, photographs have the ability to “connect core definitions of self, to society, culture and history” (p.13). For the purpose of this study, “traditional” photo elicitation was not used (providing a photograph for a participant to assess during an interview); however, an
amended version photo elicitation, which I called framing, was utilized in order to capture a response to the experience of cool that may be missed through words alone.

At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were asked to identify someone in popular culture who captures their current definition of cool, and it was the participants’ homework to provide this image to me. Every participant identified a pop culture figure; however, not every figure was pictorially “framed”. Nevertheless, in this last section of Chapter V, I will travel through the responses provided and frames of cool presented by my participants in order to create a visual representation of cool. These visual representations of cool establish an external connection with others’ cool, based on an internal understanding of one’s personal cool. When you see the frames provided, please remember these are the participants’ examples of cool at the coolest.

“Transcended Ordinary”: Framing Nas

According to Everette, there has been a shift between the relationship of emotions and cool. When describing this cool he identified rapper Nas and how he “transcended ordinary” by displaying his vulnerability in his album art. Everette explained the power in this decision and noted over coming vulnerability is, indeed cool. Below, in Figure 5.1, Everette explained this point:

Vulnerability it sparks something great. Some many great things like to be a leader you’ve got to be vulnerable. A lot of people associate vulnerability with being weak...but the way I see it, it’s like to be vulnerable is to conquer fear really… a lot of good artists are not afraid to be vulnerable; they understand that when you’re vulnerable that’s when your best work comes…just to represent that [vulnerability] on the cover of the album, you know, he’s got her wedding dress. That was all she left him back at the house when she moved out. And just expressing all of his emotions and feelings and everything that he went through, through his craft. It allowed him kind of to transcend ordinary.
Figure 5.1: Nas submitted by Everette

For Everette, the photo submitted illustrated the ability for Nas to take an emotional situation and live through it. When I received the picture one of the first things I noticed was the albums art indicating that “life is good.” For me the vulnerability was illustrated explicitly yet there was a contextualized good inspiration of the losses.

“Triumph over the Impossible”: Framing Muhammad Ali

Everette extended his definition of transcending ordinary for cool by noting cool is also the ability to defeat obstacles, regardless of environmental factors. In Everette’s next attempt he identified Muhammad Ali in Figure 5.2 as this framing of cool:

You’ve seen the picture with Ali? [the one when] he just knocked out Sonny Liston right? That is the most iconic sports image ever. But man it defines like, it’s a symbol, it defines cool. It defines who Ali is as a person. It’s a symbol of basically triumph over the impossible.
When I received the Muhammad Ali picture I began to reflect on one of the key words that Everette provided: “iconic.” Ali’s picture spoke well to Everette’s claim of triumphing over the impossible and took me back to the clustered themes and phases and lent itself (the vivid illustration) to my participants’ progressive understanding of the experience of cool. Ali stood steadfast and in control which was cool for my participants. I would even synthesize that Ali’s posturing could be a representation of standing over adversity while standing on top of what was said to have stopped you.

“Dream like you haven’t seen obstacles”: Framing J. Cole

Derrick also took a similar approach to Everette and noted that cool is the ability to persevere through obstacles while maintaining a relationship with self and others. Derrick, identified rapper J. Cole in Figure 5.3 as a relatable figure who could best frame his new definition of cool:

My favorite J. Cole quote is “You got to dream like you haven’t seen obstacles”…He was in college and he got his degree, I watch his interviews; I watch things that he does how he handles his interviews and talks about his life and different things – [he’s cool] yeah, definitely.
Figure 5.3: J. Cole submitted by Derrick

In the picture provided of J. Cole, I realized his look was extremely similar to the participants’ Jordan sneakers and a calm and controlled demeanor. Therefore, it was not a surprise to see how relatable J. Cole was with my participants. But what was more interesting for me was the double picture. This presented photograph framed the multiplicity of cool. The cool “image” and the cool depth. Throughout this chapter, participants spoke about the duality of cool and this image offers a depiction, intentional or not, that resembles the experiences of the participants.

“We going to make this...happen”: Framing Diddy

According to Ian, cool is about determination and remaining true to your character. To frame this idea of cool, Ian provided an image Figure 5.4 of Sean “P. Diddy” Combs:

Just from a determination aspect. You see those making the band episodes. I can replay them in my mind where he is having his meetings with the band and he is telling them “we [are] going to make this music happen. I don’t care how we [are] going to do it; even if we have to be in the studio we are going to make this
happen,” and I kind of look at myself and go I don’t know how I’m going to graduate. I don’t know how long it is going to take me, but I’m going to graduate. To look back at that and see that I am a week from graduation now, it is real.

Figure 5.4: Sean “P. Diddy” Combs submitted by Ian

The image provide of Diddy was actually a Gif (a movable computer image). When I received the picture of Diddy was adjusting his jacket in front of the camera. This simple gesture captured Diddy “in motion” which provided a fascinating illustration of cool’s progress. As flashy as this picture is, there is depth in the persistence it displays. Coding this motioning image after conducting a member check (to discuss the reasoning behind sending a Gif instead of a traditional picture) yielded a subtle look at environmental authenticity. According to Ian, he must be able to adjust in multiple situations and, like P. Diddy, “make it [goal and dreams] happen.”

“Supremely confident”: Framing Barack Obama

For Aaron, cool is all about confidence and humility and identified President Barack Obama as his representation of Black male cool. In Figure 5.5 Aaron speaks
about President Barack Obama and notes, “He is confident. He is like extremely confident, supremely confident… and it’s not like he throws it in your face or anything like that.”

Figure 5.5: Barack Obama submitted by Aaron

In the picture of President Obama, I was taken aback by Aaron’s representation of President Obama’s cool. The picture captured Aaron’s view of confidence and humility. What is key to point out is Aaron, who spoke in detail about negotiating cool, identified visually, what balance (or negotiation of cool) looks like. In the case of Obama, it was balancing humility and confidence.

“He didn’t conform. He stayed true”: Framing Kanye West

Gregory identified the experience of cool is about remaining true to self and in believing in your personal cool. According to Gregory, rapper Kanye West, presented in Figure 5.6, is a walking representation of cool due to his resilience.

Kanye is the coolest because when he first came out everyone criticized his style, how he dressed, how he rapped, how he made music, everything. He didn’t conform. He stayed true to himself and as eccentric as his style is, he continued with it with every aspect of it and he believed in himself and he became a trendsetter.
The picture of Kanye provided a serious and focused image of Mr. West, which only speaks to the surface level of cool. However, when investigating this frame, one is able to immediately identify the several (clothing) layers of Kanye. As the primary researcher, I saw Kanye’s cool in a particular space. This is extremely telling and speaks directly to the quote that Gregory used earlier in this chapter. According to Gregory, “Being cool is being yourself and everyone else is accepting it.” For Gregory, Kanye is a walking example of not conforming to others’ standards of cool, and, more importantly, being comfortable in this decision.
“The best of both worlds”: Framing Jay-Z

Justin indicated that cool is about being able to navigate through multiple circles and still remain true to self. Jay-Z was identified in Figure 5.7 as the person that framed Justin’s definition of cool. According to Justin:

The image I have in my mind is him [Jay-Z] …shaking hands with the President at his event. I knew that J[ay-Z] was the best of both worlds because…he can come down and chill with Lebron at the All-Star Game and then he can go to the Democratic National convention and be front row, you know, supporting Barack Obama.

![Figure 5.7: Jay-Z submitted by Justin](image)

Justin’s image of Jay-Z was extremely telling of his understanding of cool. Although for Justin the highlight was Jay-Z speaking to the President, for me it was the crowd in the backdrop. This crowd, which displayed vivid cheers of approval, captured the environmental response to cool presented throughout this chapter. For me, I can picture my participants traveling through their personal experience of cool and seeing
figurative visual cues (signs) of approval, like the blue signs in the backdrop. I could imagine the participants yearning for that experience and that moment.

“Everybody wants to hear what you say”: Framing Kendrick Lamar

Lastly, Christopher illustrated that confidence is one of the main characteristics of cool. When framing this illustration, Christopher noted that rapper Kendrick Lamar, presented in Figure 5.8, is a walking illustration of cool. According to Christopher:

It’s a dude with confidence. Like [when Kendrick] talks about in his song, he wasn’t gangbang or nothing, but he’s in an environment where he is now. This wasn't supposed to be possible at least not without doing something illegal. Now he is like this popular rapper [that] everybody wants to hear what he says. He's really deep and he's rapping about some crazy stuff.

Figure 5.8: Kendrick Lamar submitted by Christopher

The crown in the image of Kendrick Lamar immediately took my attention. It framed the triumph of Ali and the persistence of Kanye. But, more importantly, the crown did not fit. For me, that image of Kendrick is what stuck with me; however, it is
not solely because of the loose and tilted fit of the crown, but due to the growing process of Kendrick and the participants. This is a visual framing of growing into cool and is, indeed, a powerful frame.

Henry, Kai, Brodrick and Frank did not provide a picture for this portion of the study; however, they all identified individuals that framed their cool. In the section below, these picture-less are identified. It is important to note that it was my choice as the primary researcher to not insert a self selected picture of the identified participants due to the ramification of this decision. I am acknowledging the power of personal subjectivity and recognizing my picture of cool—regardless of how this individual is described—could convolute the nature and purpose of photo elicitation. I will only provide the written description of the framed participant and what makes them cool according to the data provided.

Henry noted his popular cultural representations of cool is framed by individuals who have a distinct personality, such as the rap group OutKast. According to Henry, “I feel like they’re very in touch with themselves; they’re very distinct…you can tell [they are] not trying to be like anybody else.” According to Kai, popular culture figures who transcend their personal circumstance while being emotionally grounded are cool. Kai frames this characteristics through Jay-Z who, “[was] born in poverty and h[e] mustering the courage to be a rapper and transcending and being a great business man.” Next, Brodrick took a similar stance as Kai and expressed that his popular culture representation of cool is about defeating the odds. Brodrick framed this through identifying cool characteristic in athletes Shaquille O’Neal and Michael Strayhorn. According to Brodrick:
Shaq has three degrees, masters undergrad and doctor[ate]. Man, that’s cool because you don’t find many athletes that excel on education while they are playing a sport. And you know I look at Michael Strayhorn, he came from Texas Southern right there in the heart of third ward, ghetto playing at TSU (and) got picked up by the Giants…the swagger that he walks with the confidence in knowing I’m Michael Strayhorn.

Lastly, Frank illustrated Rapper Snoop Lion (formally known as Snoop Dogg) as his visual representation of cool due to his laid back persona. When speaking about Snoop, Frank noted, “It’s because of like t[his] attitude is so laid back to me, you know.”

Although the verbal descriptions of popular cultural reference to cool expands on the participants’ experiences and definition of their cool, it would have been interesting to see the if the visual depictions would have generated a deeper analysis about the representative image.

**Conclusion**

Findings from this study indicate a sophisticated and rich development of cool while in college. Based on the responses of the participants there is, indeed, a rite of passage with cool (Conner, 2003) and an innate responsibility to maintaining cool in different spaces (double consciousness) while expressing cool (Du Bois, 1903). However, in this study, it is clear that there is a loyalty to environmental standards in regards to cool. In addition, my study also identified a personal relationship with cool that is powered by internal and external variables. It is my belief that cool is about survival (Connor, 2003; Majors & Billson, 1992), but in order for cool to survive (according to the participants), it must continue to evolve.

According to the data presented, for the experience of cool to begin, there is an initial cognitive development of cool, which evokes a feeling about cool. Many of the participants did not know what cool was, but they knew they wanted to be cool. Next,
there is a personal relationship with the behaviors and mentality of cool that is constantly tested and reinforced (with) in the confines of one’s direct and indirect community (e.g. education). Lastly, in the experience of cool reported by the participants, there is an oneness with cool that speaks to my participants’ purpose and understanding of self. This oneness is battle tested based on the influence and intersection of multiple environmental factors, people, societal pressures and reflections. Therefore, the experience of cool exposed my participants to multiple facets of life that constantly called for a reflexivity of self in order to understand how one can successfully function within multiple contexts.

Through each section, cool was explained and supported with experiences. Upon my analysis of the data, several themes spoke to the lived experience of cool. Variants such as environment, resilience, vulnerability, and truth were referenced as cool, but ultimately, not directly referenced as an answer to what is the lived experience of cool for Black male college students. In this qualitative study, all of the stories differed; however, environmental influence and the desire to be seen as authentic (real) speaks to the methodological essence of cool. For the participants, the lived experience of cool was about maintaining and achieving contextual authenticity. Simply put, my participants’ experiences with cool were grounded in answering how they (the participants) can be real (to self and others) in multiple spaces? Contextual authenticity, positive or negative, is the lived experience of cool and, for the participants, this quest occurs through careful negotiation and is extremely valuable. Prior to starting this study, I visited my barber and asked him, in casual conversation, how important was it to be cool growing up. He turned me in his chair and looked me in my face and said, “Man, it was everything.” Initially, the depth of this statement was lost in the laughter of his matter-of-fact tone, but
after this research project, I can truly understand. Cool for my participants is everything and is a battle tested evolution of a caricature into character.
Chapter VI: Summary, Limitations, Implications

This album is about this duality….how do you navigate your way through this whole thing, through success, through failure, through all this and remain yourself

Jay-Z: Magna Carta the Holy Grail

Study Summary

In Chapter I, five “notorious” gentlemen were presented on an actual and academic stage in order to introduce cool. During this introduction, I spent time narrating my personal experience while witnessing this show and identified the scholarly potential of inquiry into cool. I began to question the meaning of the notorious gentlemen’s performance and the crowd’s reaction. This served as my initial attempt to unpack the complex nature of cool.

Next, I provided a broad stroking overview of Black cool (the behavior and idea) and environmental factors (e.g. college) that could influence cool. Further, I examined my personal relationship with cool. For me, cool was a cultural commonality that Black men strive and inspire to be, and I began to wonder what cool meant for current undergraduate Black male college students. Finally, I concluded Chapter I by establishing an overarching research question that would guide this study: What is the lived experience of cool for undergraduate Black male college students?

In Chapter II, I researched and reviewed articles, journals and books dedicated to Black cool specifically (Conner, 2003; hooks, 2004; Major & Billson, 1992). Next, I carefully analyzed the purpose of cool, its history, symbols and evolution (Conner, 2003; hooks, 2004; Major & Billson, 1992). I also included literature dedicated to the popular culture narrative of Black cool to emphasize the multiple lived experiences of this phenomenon (Asanti, 1988; Brown & Kraehe, 2011; Gates, 1988; Gause, 2005; hooks,
Next, I discussed how cool is communicated (Hill, 2009; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009) and spent a significant amount of time on Black masculinity theories (Brown & Kraehe, 2011; Gilbert & Gilbert, 1998; Harper, 2004; Harris et al., 2011; Jackson & Dangerfield, 2004; Jones, 2004; O’Neil, 1981). Lastly, I shared literature dedicated to analyzing the environment of this study (higher education), as well as how race intersects with this environment, in order to paint a fuller picture of this subject and this phenomenon (Christie, 2010; Du Bois, 1903; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004; Schmidt, 2008; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Woodson, 1933). While investigating higher education, I included literature dedicated to Black male student success, and engagement (Arminio et al., 2000; Harper, 2007; Harper, 2009; Harper & Quaye, 2009; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). This section extended the conversation on Black cool by intersecting cool mannerisms with higher education and student engagement. What was discovered in the literature reviewed was a void in research dedicated specifically to cool for Black male college students.

In Chapter III, I researched several theoretical perspectives adopted to make sense of the lived experiences of cool. Unable to locate one dominating framework, I identified and layered four theories together to create a “textured analysis” of cool. Texturing, a concept that I developed for the purpose of this study, is the process of weaving multiple theories together to gain a fuller understanding of a topic. The textured analysis of cool was created to understand the development (Phinney, 1989), performance (Butler, 1988; Du Bois, 1903), environmental transferability (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and worth of cool (Bourdieu, 1986; Carter, 2003; Yosso, 2005). The theories used in this study were Phinney’s, (1989) ethnic development, Butler’s (1988) theory of preformativity,
Ting-Toomey & Kurogi’s (1998) face-negotiation and Bourdieu (1986), Carter (2003) and Yosso’s (2005) cultural capital. My textured analysis of cool served a sophisticated means of analysis that builds on the social constructivist paradigm established for this study (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln, 2005; Paul, 2005). Social constructivism draws meaning from the intersection of actual happenings (personal experiences) and personal understanding (Lincoln, 2005), while texturing created an abstract, yet powerful, analytic means to understand the total experience of cool for Black male students.

In Chapter IV, I introduced the qualitative research methods used to understand the lived experience of cool for Black male college students. For this study I established a quasi-phenomenological design that borrowed several tenets of phenomenology; however, this design should not be confused as solely phenomenological. It was the intent of this design to use tenets from phenomenological research to assist in discovering similarities and describing how participants experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Moustakes, 1994). Next, I identified in-depth interviews as one of my two means of data collection. Through the use of in-depth interviews, the participants provided ample information, insights, and detailed accounts about cool based on the participants lived experience. The use of in-depth interviews provided the flexibility necessary (through open-ended behavior based questions) to gain the significant insight from the responses of my participants (Creswell, 2007).

In addition to in-depth interviews, a version of photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002) that I called framing was used to gain additional data about the lived experience of cool. Framing, for this study, was the process of identifying a visual representation of cool that speaks to the participants’ experience of cool. After the each interview, I requested the
participants to send a visual representation of cool in order to frame their cool. Once the pictures were collected, they were identified as raw data and coded against the interview transcripts. Through framing I was able to triangulate through by method (Padgett, 2008). Triangulation was used as “a means of corroboration, which allows the researcher to be more confident of the study conclusions” (Bowman, 2005, p. 215).

Prior to the officially analyzing the data I spent time bracketing off (a process known as epoche) my personal understanding of cool (Moustakes, 1994). To do this, I established an epoche mirror in my apartment. This mirror severed as an active reflection of my personal reflectivity. The mirror served as my canvas to acknowledge my bias or prejudice. One of the first words (biases) documented on my mirror, was The Wanderer. This word served as a reminder of Kahlil Gibran’s (1968) book that spoke about the adventure of Beauty and Ugliness in the chapter titled “The Garment.” In this particular story, both Beauty and Ugliness went swimming naked in the sea, and when Ugliness finished swimming, Ugliness exited the sea and put on Beauty’s clothing. Because of this switch Beauty was forced to wear Ugliness’s clothing, resulting in people mistaking the two (Beauty and Ugliness) for years. The story served as my initial reminder that I am not the gatekeeper of cool, and what is cool in my world may not be the same to my participants. Biases continued to be addressed and written on this mirror throughout the study.

Next, I converted the audio recordings into mp3 files and spent time listening to the full interview recordings prior to transcribing. Re-listening to the interviews brought me back to the original interview experience. In addition, it provided additional clarification for the field notes taken during each interview. Each interview ranged from
one hour and a half to two hours, and once transcribed the transcripts were between 25-35 pages in length. In addition, interviews took on average 2-3 days to fully transcribe; however, there were interviews that exceeded my 3 day average.

According to Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen (2013), “In-depth interviews often involve many units of analysis, which are not always easily identified” (p.3); therefore, next I identified the best method of separating data prior to coding. According to Smagarinsky (2008), coding should make theoretical sense, and due to my social constructive worldview, the textured analysis and quasi-phenomenological research design I purposefully identify segments (or blocks) of data that informed the participants’ experiences with cool. These blocks served as individual representations of my participants’ experiences with cool. Each block created a fuller and more complete understanding of my participants’ experiences with cool.

For this quasi-phenomenological study, only the first four stages of the modified methods of Van Kaam means of analysis (Moustakes, 1994) were adopted. In the first round of analysis known as (1) horizontalization (identifying significant accounts to describe individual experiences), I searched for words that spoke directly to the experience of cool. Direct references to cool or personalized action statements, such as I am, I think, I have or I feel, served as the initial means of coding. For example, when Derrick stated, “I’m going to be that dude,” this statement was highlighted and the unit that supported it was bracketed as a point of interested. Due to my social constructivist worldview and textured analysis, Derrick’s statements served as a point of interested because it warranted further inquiry into how the participants knew he was cool; how he would show he was that dude (performance); what does “that dude” actually look like in
the academy; and what is the worth of being “that dude.” Although this passage did not directly identify a described individual experience per se, it did underscore significance through Derrick’s declaration.

Next, I established (2) reduction of the originally identified horizons by eliminating accounts that do not describe the phenomenon. Examples of eliminated horizons consisted of hypothetical accounts of cool that may have reflected an actual experience but in an indirect way. To do this, I adopted a process of collaborative peer debriefing to assist in the reduction process. For example, Henry stated in his interview, “In college also liquor and drugs can make you cool as well.” This statement was indeed telling; however, the statement spoke to cool cues and reduced cool to a purchasable means. While conducting a peer debrief one of the team members stated, this statement spoke to a generalizable perception and not to the participant’s lived experience. I do believe Henry’s statement could be used in a future study, but did not have a place in this dissertation.

Next I spent time (3) clustering (creating themes) cool, based on the data provided. To do, this I coupled horizons together using index cards that spoke to the same theme. For example, Kai’s account that “I was cool in my own way because I always stayed true to myself,” was coupled with Everette’s definition of cool as “being able to be confident in yourself, enough to believe that you can accomplish anything.” Both statements were clustered together as confidence, being comfortable with self and later converted to self-awareness. Conversation of meaning (4) (Creswell, 2007; Moustakes, 1994) served as the fourth stage used for this quasi-phenomenological study. These meanings began as descriptive accounts to cool that were later reduced after I
conducted additional collaborative peer reviews to establish an agreement on coded themes. Collaborative peer reviews conducted for this study spoke to Smagorinsky’s (2008) charge for peer collaboration instead of “independent corroborations” (p. 401).

Lastly, I introduced framing (a version of photo elicitation) to this study as a means of data inquiry and analysis. To do this, I asked the participants to provide a photograph of their image of cool at the conclusion of this interview. It was my vision that they would capture a popular culture figure that represented the participants at his “coolest” in order to frame my participants’ understandings of cool. This method of inquiry provided additional raw data for cool. Additionally, this data provided the opportunity for triangulation by method. For example, Justin provided a picture of Jay-Z and noted, “J[ay-Z] was the best of both worlds because…he can come down and chill with Lebron at the All-Star Game, and then he can go to the Democratic National convention and be front row, you know, supporting Barack Obama.” In an earlier investigation of cool Brodrick noted, “It’s two different sides. I just learned both of them. I just learned you know both of them are going to pay off anyway.” Both accounts speak to a negotiation of cool and communal approve that upon further analysis, provided a visual representation to support the lived experience of cool. This method of data analysis served as a powerful means of inquiry for this study.

In Chapter V, I introduced the participants of this study. Next, I presented the examined the data collected by the participants. I carefully reexamined the data that was clustered and themed in the analysis stage of this study. Next I borrowed from Smagorinsky’s (2008) charge to identify how I “cooked” my raw data. Therefore, I revisited the textured analysis that guided this study and decided that the data should be
presented in the same format that grounded texturing. Therefore, data was presented starting with how cool was learned. Next, how cool was performed and how that performance looked in a variety of spaces was presented. Finally, the value of cool and how cool looks for the participants was identified. What was discovered in the structuring of the data was three structural vignettes (settings/structures) of cool and four major themes. The data was presented in Chapter V by synthesizing the clustered themes while intersecting individual descriptive accounts together in the major phases of cool.

Chapter VI is the final chapter of this dissertation. In it, I summarized my study and distinguished my findings by positioning my research (with) in the literature provided in Chapter II. Next, I will critically evaluate my research and identify limitations and future opportunities. These opportunities will speak directly to the study of Black cool. Next, I will then discuss the implications this study has on the field of higher education and in scholarship dedicated to Black male development. Finally, I will offer a conclusion to Chapter V through a personal reflection of my experience as primary (sole) researcher in this dissertation.

**Distinguishing Finding: Explanation of Themes**

In Chapter II, I traveled through a litany of research that identified, theorized and describe cool. Due to a lack of data directly targeting cool in college, I reviewed several research topics to expand the supplemental data provided about cool. For example, I reviewed articles about masculinity, manhood, environment, and the sociology of education in order to graph cool. Through this strategy, I obtained a thorough account for the totality of cool. Through my review I discovered the primary tenets of cool were derived through studies conducted by Connor (2003); Harris et al. (2011); hooks (2004);
Kirkland and Jackson (2009); Majors and Billson (1992). According to their research, cool was a posing mechanism to psychologically protect Black men (Majors & Billson, 1992); a ritualized form of masculinity (Connor, 2003); critical to the Black males emerging identity (Majors & Billson, 1992); an attitude (hooks, 2004); and a means of gender expression (Harris et al., 2011). Notwithstanding their studies, my research emerged as descriptive accounts to understand cool from the vantage point of a black male college student and further the conversation. Below, I will unpack my research.

When writing this dissertation I witnessed the participants of this study travel through the research/stages of cool noted above, while several clustered themes emerged as an interconnected and interwoven fabric of the experience of “cool.” The themes that emerged in this current study painted a vivid picture of the fluidity of cool, by illustrating the “connection” of the experiences shared by the participants. In addition, I was able to unload their ritualized, necessary, critical, shielded performance (Conner, 2003; Major & Billson, 1992) of cool. Below I will discuss how my research fits and advances the study of cool.

According to my study, three structural vignettes of cool emerged as environmental variables that influence the lived experience of cool (developmental cool, cool in education and the community of cool). These lived experiences were overtaken by an abundance of themes; however, four major themes were able to capture the lived experience of cool for my participants. Unlike previous research, I established a pseudo-longitudinal experience that captures cool at various phases for my participants’ (e.g. high school, college). This strategy created an organic presentation of cool that embraces my textured analysis that guided this study. Below I will travel through the themes that
advanced this study in order to illustrate the methodological essence of cool. The below are the four major themes of this study.

1. Cool is learned and influenced by one's environment

2. The experience of cool is an expression of self (self awareness)

3. The experience of cool provides access to multiple spaces, people, relationships, rewards and conflicts

4. The experience of cool creates opportunity to (re)define self

Cool is learned and influenced by one’s environment

According to the participants, cool is learned and that “learned” identity of cool is determined by one’s personal environment. This theme aligns with the data provided in the literature review about cool (Conner, 2003; hooks, 2004; Major & Billson, 1992). However, what was expressed in my interviews was my participants’ ability to disrupt cool. According to my participants, cool was not fixed as behavior “a” and quality “b.” Through the experiences detailed by my participants, cool was able to move fluidly through their environment and was often challenged and tested by multiple environmental variables. This means, cool—even in its infancy—can become an established and reestablished identity/behavior that is reinforced and negotiated based on the power dynamic of one’s environment.

The Experience of Cool is an Expression of Self

Cool as a means of self-awareness, and self-representation, also links with the literature provided in Chapter II. It was clear that cool is a definitive part of one’s identity and not solely an extension of it. Everette coined this as “living cool.” For each of the participants, cool was expressed in a variety of ways. For Justin (whose definition of
cool speaks beyond the demarcated boundaries of cool), “cool means success,” or “someone who is a trailblazer.” For Derrick, cool is the perfect balance of academic and social awareness. Through both examples there is an internalization of what personally considered cool and this cool demands a commitment to living cool and solidarity with cool rules (environmental and personal).

The Experience of Cool Provides Access

The third theme unpacked the access provided by cool. Access for my study is multifarious in nature and includes relationships and membership. Conversely, additional access to (or through) cool can result in an internal conflict. For example, Frank was adamant about personally “dumbing-down” in college in order to maintain his cool image. Nevertheless, access for my participants became an additional sounding board to test one’s cool. This testing ground expanded one’s immediate environment, by situating external variables (e.g. Greek life, peers, romantic relationships and mentors) as testing agents of cool. This means, because of access, behaviors and ideas are filtered through variables and were affirmed and refuted. When compared to the literature review, this theme would serve as the “what’s next” to the ritualized, necessary, critical, and shielding performance of cool (Major & Billson, 1992).

The Experience of Cool Creates Opportunities to (Re)define self

The fourth and final theme speaks to Major and Billson’s (1992) definition of cool as a ritualized form of masculinity, which is critical to Black male identity development. Cool, for the participants, had become a result of the reflexive understanding of self, based on the environment and pedestal/stage cool provides. Cool is the understanding of one’s core values and, more importantly, how these values are
internally connected with the external presentation of self. For my participants this new cool was actually a result of the experience of cool. For example, according to Everette, “When people are true to their core, like when they shine inward outwardly…that’s really cool.” Interestingly, this speaks to the common theme or the methodological essence of my study.

Contextual Authenticity: The Methodological Essence of Cool

Essence in phenomenological research speaks to the meaning of the experience (Moustakes, 1994). According to Dahlberg (2006), “The essence or structure illuminates these essential characteristics of the phenomenon without which it would not be that phenomena” (p. 11). According to Dahlberg (2006), “An essence is, simply, a phenomenon’s style, its way of being” (p.18). This means, there should be an identifiable factor that makes cool - cool. Therefore, the methodological essence of cool must have remained visible in each account provided by the participants. For this study, the participants spoke heavily about a personal truth and authenticity. For each participant, this authenticity was a must, or better a focal point, in whatever environment they occupied. Therefore, the participants desired to maintain and achieve a degree of contextual authenticity, or situational realness. For the participants, their experience with cool allowed them to travel into various demographic and societal situations and circles. This integrated interaction provided the opportunity for cool to take shape and the opportunity for my participants to establish a personal relationship with cool. This personal relationship is in lockstep with the methodological essence of cool. Below in Figure 6.1, I provided a visual representation of the themes and essence of cool as determined by this study.
In the image above, there are four independent sections that are all influenced by the environment. The top and bottom sections, learning cool, serves as a visual representation of Phinney’s (1989) ethnic development model. In this section, the participants expressed ways in which they learned cool. For example, Brodrick noted, “[I] never hung out with kids [my] age…I watched my elders.” Therefore, Brodrick witnessed cool through what was seen and understood from others. This is seen as Brodrick learning cool.

How cool is interpreted and displayed is located in the self-expression section of the illustration. In self-awareness, what was learned and internalized as cool behavior was expressed. During this expression period, environmental variables, such as friends,
family, and school, tested (reinforced or challenged) the performance of cool that was being expressed. The participants could maintain their previously learned image or alter their performance of cool due to the environment or the environmental variables they are experiencing. For example, Ian noted, “I came up with that definition of cool from how I interact with people and the stuff that I have picked up on and the stuff I see; the advice I have got from older people and the stuff like that.” For Ian, he was testing his cool with environmental factors and making a cognitive decision to alter his performance based on reflecting on what is valuable. Justin confirmed this in the earlier chapters by noting, “I feel like as far as being cool, like I feel like it’s based on basically…your environment.”

Cool (as represented in the image above) is far from static. Cool can be relearned and/or altered based on environmental factors and personal reflection. Ian’s barbershop example provides a great example of a learned understanding of cool being tested in his environment and later changed. According to Ian,

I can remember it like it was yesterday…I was one of the last people getting my haircut [and] one of the drug dealers guys comes in the barbershop. He has on nice clothes, has a nice car outside and stuff like that. I am thinking he is making this look so easy…he is getting it…In my eyes I’m thinking that is cool. The barber cut off his clippers and basically slapped me in the back of the head and was like man heck no.

This image encapsulated the lived experience of cool and the methodological essence of cool. The methodological essence of cool (which undergirded the participants stories about cool) are about maintaining and achieving contextual authenticity. The participants’ experiences with cool were grounded in answering how they (the participants) can be real (to self and others) in multiple spaces. Contextual authenticity, positive or negative, is the lived experience of cool and, for the participants, this quest occurs through careful negotiation and is extremely valuable.
Above, I positioned my research in the literature used to introduce cool as well as differentiated my study to expose new strands of conversation about cool. Several of the themes established in my study replicated findings from previous studies; however, one differentiating factor in the findings of this study was from the vantage point of Black male college students. This strategic research design prompted the abundance of descriptive accounts of college cool that have been influenced through environmental factors. In the next section, I will discuss the limitations, future opportunities and implications for this study.

**Limitations**

This dissertation investigated the experience of Black cool, which serves as a means to navigate cross-cultural structures. During this study, I provided descriptive accounts (stories) about the lived experience of cool based on the stories and reflections of the participants. The data received was extremely fruitful and takes into account the influence of cool and its meaning and worth for Black male college students. Further, this study advanced the thinking of the Black male experience.

As I reflect on the totality of the research project, I am extremely pleased with the results, experience and knowledge created. However, while reflecting on this process, I recognized several limitations (and constructive critiques) to my study that should be noted. Below, I will take time and critique my study and offer a few suggestions to further future research on Black cool.

Although this is technically not a limitation but a powerful research medium, I first must acknowledge that I am a Black male researching Black males students. It is my belief that due to my race, I am privy to cultural codes of cool that could influence my
connection with the data. Although I feel I maintained the integrity of the data provided and remained true to the participants’ stories, I cannot help but wonder what would be the results from a researcher who is not a Black male? If a woman conducted this study what would the data say? What information would they receive that I could not? This limitation does not discredit this study, but it is an inquiry worth noting.

Next, my data was presented from a 100% heteronormative lens. None of my participants spoke about the experience of cool for (or as a) gay Black male college student. The variable of sexuality has the potential to alter this study completely and would lend itself to a fantastic study.

Next, my study was bound geographically, and demographically. After my study proposal defense, it was suggested that I expand my study to include HBCU students in various locations in the country. This undertaking was provided as a suggestion and after consultation with my dissertation chair, I decided to include two HBCU students in this first phase of an on going research topic. Now that this study is completed, I would be interested in seeing the results from a 50% HBCU and 50% PWI sample or an all HBCU but from varying campuses sample. The potential of the demographic and geographic alterations for this study are plentiful.

Lastly for this dissertation, I conducted individual in-depth interviews and constructed conversations between the participants by carefully weaving descriptive accounts together within clustered horizons. What would be interesting is if these gentlemen participated in a focus group in addition to in depth interviews. This change in the research design creates a new space for future research on Black cool.
A constructive critique of my study would be at the fault of my research question. It is my belief that my research was extremely ambitious and broad for a dissertation topic. When I started this project, it was my hope to capture the lived experience of cool from multiple undergraduate Black male students occupying multiple university subpopulations. In order to understand the full story of the participants’ experience with cool, I began by investigating participants’ first experience of cool and traveling through various phases (structures) of cool ending with their current experience with cool. As a result, I received a large pool of data that created an overarching conversation about cool that highlighted several factors, but none greater than the other. This is not a complaint about the data collected, but it does open the door to futures studies. Examples of areas of Black cool to study include, but are not limited to: Women and Black male Cool, Athletics, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Community College, and women.

For example, two of the participants attended a Historical Black College and University (HBCU)—Kai attended for one year and transferred—and they spoke specifically to their lived experience of cool at an HBCU. However, this study was not dedicated to exploring HBCU specifically, and I have to acknowledge that future studies focusing on HBCU’s are indeed possible and necessary. My two participants spoke candidly about cool, but due to this study lack of university specificity, HBCU’s were not referenced directly. Several of the two HBCU participants’ stories did represent the lived experience of cool reported above but in a new environment, yet how this new environment influences cool was not addressed. Therefore, this data was beyond the scope of this study.
Another critique and opportunity for a future study is woman and cool. Several of the participants spoke about woman and cool. However, what was more interesting were the reported roles women “assumed” when inquiring about the experience of Black cool. However after further analysis these stories served as the answer to the lived experience of Black males’ relationships with woman and not the lived experience of cool. Although the data was rich, it was decided by my peers’ debrief team and dissertation chair that that data is beyond the scope of this study.

Lastly, as a future study, I would be interested in investigating the lived experience of Black male students that self identify as a “nerd.” The long-term purpose of this new study would be to juxtapose the data with the experience of Black cool. I would be extremely interested in seeing any similarities and differences in the life of the experience. I would currently hypothesize that there would be a slight difference in data, but the similarities would be extremely compelling. The textured analysis that guided this study would be applied to this “future study.” During this dissertation, Derrick suggested “Nerds can be cool,” and it would be interested to further assess the experiences of Black men who have adopted the moniker of a nerd.

**Implications**

As an emerging scholar-practitioner, I am extremely invested in the data that was uncovered during this study. This dissertation provides a stage for student affairs practitioners, high school educators/administrators, community leaders, pastors and academic scholars to have a conversation about Black male development. Cool extends beyond academic walls, but better knowledge of environmental factors that could influence cool could assist in the identity development of Black males.
Based on the data provided, educators should begin conversations about cool with Black male students starting at a young age. Knowing about the experience of cool and that cool is important could prevent faculty and administrators from belittling or typecasting Black men as a myopic, one-sided students and could establish the space to embrace their multiplicity. Reading this dissertation should prompt teachers and parents to create a collaborative effort to establish environments that promote conversation about cool and cool’s impact at home, in the classroom and all spots in between. Doing this at a young age and continually reinforcing the relationship between scholarship, while showing a degree of appreciation of cool, would ultimately be beneficial to everyone.

Reading this study as a scholar should prompt conversations about the Black male experience. This study is not a representation of every Black male student’s story, but the data provided identifies scholarship beneficial to Black male development. This dissertation is a study about progression, self-awareness, purpose, negotiation, adaptation and growth. Questions such as, how can Black men’s experience with cool influence my classroom and inform my pedagogy, should be engaged.

This study was not meant to essentialize cool but to explain the experience. The intent of this dissertation was to start a conversation about cool while deviating from traditional means of discussing Black male issues. In this study it was disclosed that the experience of cool was natural and everything for my participants. Knowing this, the reader, should feel compelled to fully emerge yourself into this topic and begin to question your own understanding and perceptions about cool. So, what do you know about Black cool?
Conclusion

As I bring this dissertation to a close, it is important that I acknowledge the impossibility of this statement. How can you conclude something that really is just getting started? From the introduction to now we have traveled through cool as reported through the experience of Black male undergraduate students. This dissertation was a project that began based off an idea that gained widespread support from scholars who spoke about the potential of this study and commended my ambition. Through this study I had the opportunity to question my own understanding of cool and fully emerge myself in an extremely interesting research topic, and it has been a wonderful ride.

The data provided in this study do not offer answers to solve any assumed plight of the Black student or respond to student affairs practitioners’ desire to have an intentional benchmark in order to better serve their student population. This study is an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon cool so that genuine conversations about the whole student can begin. Cool is not a stylized, aloof, anti-intellectual show; it is a part of the participants’ development. It is a part of who they are.

While watching the 2013 NBA finals, rapper Jay-Z (who Justin framed as being the best of both worlds. This means that Jay-Z can maintain authenticity in multiple spaces) was on a commercial describing a partnership with Samsung (an electronic company) while promoting a new album called The Holy Grail. As a Jay-Z fan, I was drawn into the commercial and began hanging in anticipation for an announcement of the next Jay-Z product. As the commercial continued, the camera scanned the studio showing a relaxed, fully bearded hip-hop legend Rick Rubin, and super producers Swizz Beats, Timberland and Pharrell. The television has my full attention now. Currently, the
talk has been to a minimum besides beat snippets and instrumentals, but I have gone from a seated position to standing in front of my television as if I was in the studio with them. Then Jay-Z spoke and said, “This album is about this duality...how do you navigate your way through this whole thing, through success, through failure, through all this and remain yourself” (Samsung mobile USA, 2013). Just like that, my dissertation was explained. Amazingly, Jay-Z just explained my two and a half year project in a three minute commercial. What a bittersweet feeling.

Now as I close this chapter, it is my hope that I painted a full picture that allowed you to emerge yourself in this topic. I hope while reading this dissertation, you felt compelled to advance conversation and scholarship on cool. This dissertation, which started as a “mixtape,” has officially turned into an “album” that is about my participants’ experience “navigating their way through this whole thing.” To my participants, this one is for you. Thank you for having the trust in me to write your stories. You all are indeed the “coolest.” Keep fighting the good fight.
References


Cole, J. (2012). *I'm a Fool On I'm a Fool (Single)*. Dreamville Records.


Appendix A: Black Cool Study Informed Consent Form

Please read this informed consent document carefully before you decide whether or not to participate in this study.

Project Title: Ain’t I Cool: A phenomenological study of cool for Black men in the academy

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research will be to examine the meaning to the phenomenon “cool” based on the lived experiences of Black men in colleges and university.

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to meet one time with the investigators to participate in an in-depth interview.

Time Required: Approximately 1 hour and thirty minutes

Anticipated Risks of Participation: There are no anticipated risks to participants.

Benefits/ Compensation: There is no compensation or other direct benefit to you for participation. Information gained from this research may benefit future academic advisors and education leaders.

Confidentiality: I will keep data on a personal password protected computer and I will delete this data after 3 years. Each participant will be distanced from the data presented in this study by the use of pseudonyms. In addition, the participant’s actual names will not be relayed to anyone other than myself.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating and you may withdraw at any time during the study if you choose to participate.

Whom to contact if you have questions: Please contact Kyle Boone, kboone3@tigers.lsu.edu, 225-341-2651

Whom to contact about your rights in the study: Research at Louisiana State University involving human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). For information about participants’ rights please contact: Institutional Review Board, Dr. Robert Mathews (Chair), 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall, Baton Rouge, LA 70803, (225) 578-8692.

______ I have read the informed consent.

______ I was provided an explanation of the purpose of the project and the intended uses of by Kyle Boone Doctoral Degree Candidate at Louisiana State University. I am aware that the individual interviews will be recorded using audio technology and transferred into written transcription. I understand that my interview transcript may be used for publications including and not limited to articles, books, online magazines, or newsletters.

______ I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________
Participant                                     Date
Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Interview introduction script:
“Today I’m going to ask you questions about the importance of cool in your life. What I’d like you to talk about is how you define cool, to describe men that you think are cool, how you personally demonstrate cool, and what being cool means to you as a Black male in college. There is no right way or wrong way to tell this story, because it is, your story. Just tell it as it naturally occurs to you. I’m talking with you because I want you to tell me, your story – in your own words. Again, there is no right or wrong way to tell your story. Just tell the story in a way that is comfortable for you. Now to help keep us to track, feel free to refer to the guide that I have given (Appendix B). The purpose of the storyline sheet is to help you to keep track of the type of questions that will be asked during the interview and as you can see, we will start with what the word “cool” means to you and end with a particular example where you noticed that cool was very important to you. By participating in this interview you are agreeing to be apart of this study, however, your participation is voluntary and you are able to withdraw from this study any time you would like.”

Interview Questions:
What does the word “cool” mean to you?
Probe:
If someone told you to define the word “cool,” what would you say?
What words would you use to describe the word “cool?”

When you think of men that are “cool,” what, in particular, makes these men “cool?”
Probe:
Is it the way they look (physical appearance) (e.g., dress, hairstyle)?
Is it their speech (e.g., the way they talk)?
Is it the way they think?
Is it their mannerisms (e.g., how they act)?
Is it how women relate to them?
Is it how people in general relate to them?

Do you think that your definition of cool has changed?
Probe:
If so, why do you think that your definition of cool has changed?
OR
If not, why don’t you think that your definition of cool has change?

Do you think that your definition of cool has changed from high school to college?
Probe:
If so, why do you think that your definition of cool has changed?
If so, what factors or people have influenced this change?
Tell me a story related to this.
OR
If not, why don’t you think that your definition of cool has changed? If not, what factors or people have influenced this lack of change? Tell me a story related to this.

**Do you think that how you now define cool has changed the relationships that you had with your high school friends?**

**Probe:**

If so, do you think your friends that you grew up with view you as more, less, or the same in terms of cool(ness) now that you are in college? Tell me a story related to this.

OR

If not, why don’t you think these relationships have changed? Tell me a story related to this.

**Describe how Black men demonstrate cool(ness) in college. Describe the value of being considered cool in college.**

**Probe:**

On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being lowest and 10 being highest, how important do you think being cool is to Black men in college? How do Black men in college show others they are cool? Tell me a story related to this.

**Now, I’d like you to tell me a story about cool in your life.**

**Probe:**

Who was there? What happened? When did this occur? Where did this occur? Why do you think that you acted this way? Why do you think that the people in this story acted this way?

**Do you think that you are cool?**

**Probe:**

On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being lowest and 10 being highest, how cool do you think you are? What makes you cool? When do you feel most cool? Do you think that people perceive you as cool? If so, why? How long have you felt you were cool? Tell me a story related to your experience with cool.
Appendix C: Storyboard

COOL STORYBOARD

This form will serve as your guide during the interview just to keep you in the loop of where the conversation will go. As you can see we will start at the bottom and work our way up to a personal story about cool. Please let me know if you have any question.
The methodological essence of cool is described as contextual authenticity. This visual describes how environment is the underpinning of the experience. Relationships, people, groups, rewards and conflicts exist in this space (environment). One’s understanding of self (self awareness) is tested as a result of traveling through the environment or when the environment influences the space you are in. Thus illustrating the clustered theme of this study:

Cool is learned and influenced by one’s environment
The experience of cool is an expression of self (self awareness)
The experience of cool provides access to multiple spaces, people, relationships, rewards and conflicts
**The experience of cool creates opportunity to (re)define self**
Appendix E: IRB Application (Copy)

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research projects using human subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This form helps you determine if a project may be exempted and is used to request an exemption.

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A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:

(A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of parts B thru F.
(B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1 & 2)
(C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
(D) If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment materials.
(E) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information)
(F) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with IRB. Training link: [http://phsp.nih-training.org/users/login.php](http://phsp.nih-training.org/users/login.php)

IIRB Security of Data Agreement: [http://research lsu.edu/files/item26774.pdf](http://research lsu.edu/files/item26774.pdf)

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1) Principal Investigator: Kyle N. Boone  
Rank: Graduate Student  
Dept.: College of Edu. Theory  
Ph: 225-341-2851  
E-mail: kboone 5@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator(s): Please include department, rank, phone, and e-mail for each. If student, please identify and name supervising professor in this space.

3) Project Title: Dissertation: Phenomenological Study of Cool for Black Male College Students

4) Proposal? (yes or no) No  
If Yes, LSU Proposal Number  
Also, if YES, either This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant or More IRB Applications will be filed later

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5) Subject Pool: (e.g. Psychology students) Black Male Students over 18 years old in any college program  
"Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: children <18; the mentally handicapped, pregnant women, the ages, older). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature:  
Date:  
[Screening Committee Action: Exempted ☑ Not Exempted ❌]

Signed Consent Waived: Yes ☑ No ❌  
Reviewer: Mathews  
Signature:  
Date: 2/4/12

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Study Exempted By:  
Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairmen  
Institutional Review Board  
Louisiana State University  
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall  
225-578-8692 1 www lsu edu/irb

Exemption Expires: 2/3/2015

LSU Proposal #  
Complete Application ☑  
Human Subjects Training ☑

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IRB Consent form

Black Cool Study Informed Consent Form

Please read this informed consent document carefully before you decide whether or not to participate in this study.

**Project Title:** Ain't I Cool: A phenomenological study of cool for black men in the academy

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research will be to examine the meaning to the phenomenon “cool” based on the lived experiences of black men in colleges and university.

**What you will be asked to do in the study:** You will be asked to meet one time with the investigators to participate in an in-depth interview.

**Time Required:** Approximately 1 hour and thirty minutes

**Anticipated Risks of Participation:** There are no anticipated risks to participants.

**Benefits/Compensation:** There is no compensation or other direct benefit to you for participation. Information gained from this research may benefit future academic advisors and education leaders.

**Confidentiality:** I will keep data on a personal password protected computer and I will delete this data after 3 years. Each participant will be distanced from the data presented in this study by the use of pseudonyms. In addition, the participates actual names will not be relayed to anyone other than myself.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating and you may withdraw at any time during the study if you choose to participate.

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I have read the informed consent.

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I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Participant

Date
The Vita

In 2004, Kyle N. Boone graduated with a Bachelors of Arts in Communication from the University of Louisville in Louisville, KY. That same year, Kyle enrolled in the University of the Pacific at Stockton, CA and began working on his Masters of Arts in Educational Administration and Leadership with a specialization in Student Affairs. While at the University of Pacific, Kyle served as a Graduate Resident Director and Multicultural Greek Council advisor. Kyle graduated from University of the Pacific in 2006 and then held leadership positions in residential life and housing at the University of Houston and California State University, Channel Islands.

In the fall of 2009 Kyle joined the scholarly community of Louisiana State University to work on his Doctorate in Philosophy in Higher Education Administration. At Louisiana State University, Kyle discovered a new love for research, scholarship and teaching and began to define himself as both an emerging scholar and practitioner.

Kyle’s research agenda seeks to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of historically marginalized populations in the context of higher education. More specifically, Kyle is interested in exploring the social and cultural experiences of marginalized populations in a historically marginalizing space. Ultimately, Kyle is fascinated by the often-contentious relationship between race, space and culture and is committed to making scholarship personal and relevant, fostering innovative thought and practice and engaging students as both scholars and teachers.