

# ***"Safe Spaces Are Built": How African American Women Discuss Professional Connectedness in Online Doctoral Programs***

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*African American women represent steadily increasing enrollments each year in online doctoral programs. Despite their growing presence in academia, more research is needed to understand the experiences of African American women enrolled in online degree programs, including the barriers to success and the supportive interventions necessary to help African American women see their educational endeavors to fruition. This paper explores the results of a qualitative research study focused on the conversations that arose in a sister circle-style focus group to understand connectedness and the use of safe spaces to foster meaningful relationships linked to African American women's perception of belonging in online degree programs. Using constructivist grounded theory techniques from a Black feminist thought theoretical framework, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews and observations across two focus group sessions with four African American women attending online doctoral programs. The data was analyzed using the constant comparative method (CCM), and results illuminated themes of authenticity and safety, with sub-themes that described features of a safe space, which included intentional, genuine, and supportive.*

**Keywords:** African American doctoral women, sister circles, professional counterspaces

Audre Lorde spoke deliberately of connectedness and suggested that “*without community, there is no liberation.*” The literature is replete with challenges, like systemic gendered racism that African American (AA) women and women of color experience while pursuing doctoral degrees and academic careers (Jaggers, 2020). There is a need for a more in-depth look at the role of belonging in shaping the experiences of AA women in online doctoral programs. Research alludes to the negative experiences, such as experiencing microaggressions, reported by AA women in higher education as deterrents to completion (Lewis et al., 2016; Shavers & Moore, 2019). Hernandez Rivera (2020) describes the phenomenon as continuous warfare concerning higher education arenas. African American women report thriving in spaces where they feel welcomed and have a sense of belonging that encourages their success toward completion (Allen, 2019; Ramos & Yi, 2020). Research has shown that AA women seek out affinity groups or safe spaces to process and receive support from peers regarding oppressive experiences during graduate study (Grant & Ghee, 2015; Harpalani, 2017). Little is known about AA women doctoral students' experiences in online doctoral programs, and further limited knowledge exists on the impact of programming that could help offset these negative experiences. Notably, AA women have reported difficulty finding connections and belonging in academic spaces (Porter et al., 2020). This study aimed to explore how AA women define safe spaces (or professional counterspaces) and foster professional connectedness in culturally curated virtual settings. With this in mind, we focused on the research question: How do culturally specific online spaces foster professional connectedness for AA women doctoral students?

### **Literature Review**

Exploring professional development, self-efficacy, and engagement to understand how culturally specific online spaces foster personal and professional connectedness for AA women doctoral students begins with examining the components of higher education for AA women, the online environment, and the elevated educational level of doctoral education. While online and hybrid colleges and graduate programs have existed for decades, the COVID-19 pandemic led many land-based universities to shift to virtual learning (Centers for Disease Control, 2020). With more people learning in distance-based settings, it became increasingly important to understand how students and faculty connect for professional development. African American women have consistently matriculated in these higher education academic spaces; however, research suggests that AA women report the importance of visibility of diversity as it impacts their overall experience and well-being (Foxx et al., 2018; Lewis et al., 2016).

### **Cultural Representation**

African American women represent a multiply-minoritized positionality and often face unique challenges related to gender and race during their graduate studies (Lewis et al., 2016). These challenges are exacerbated by underrepresentation of faculty and students of color, perceived (or actual) lack of support, and non-traditional learning settings, like online learning (Nichols & Anthony, 2020). In particular, hybrid or online counseling graduate programs pose significant challenges to fostering a supportive atmosphere for professional development. Further,

online learning spaces can create barriers to AA women's access to faculty support for several reasons (e.g., lack of faculty availability for support, limited time, or inability to connect with faculty synchronously with in-person or virtual formats). Foxx et al. (2018) reported that racial and ethnic minority participants valued representation when choosing counselor education programs. As educational institutions increasingly adopt online learning as part of their instructional design, it is crucial to understand AA women's unique circumstances in these settings.

### **Isolation and Belonging**

Social isolation contributes to attrition in doctoral programs because it threatens academic success, which is exacerbated for online learners (Breitenbach, 2019). Additionally, AA students are less likely to access necessary support, which impacts degree completion (Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021). Institutes of higher education are not powerless. Initiatives and efforts that create space for AA women counter isolation and increase social connectedness (Hernandez Rivera, 2020). West (2019) explained that lack of connection and a diminished sense of belonging could harm a student's personal and professional development.

Social connectedness refers to a person's sense of belonging in meaningful relationships (Breitenbach, 2019). In higher education settings, these relationships include peer-to-peer and faculty connections, and these relationships are paramount for AA students at PWIs (2019). White supremacy and institutional oppression position AA women in opposition to mainstream culture, which fosters disconnectedness and othering (Hernandez Rivera, 2020) and further facilitates AA women's hesitancy to openness and transparency. African American women routinely "question their sense of belonging on campus ..." which may lead to a sense of "disconnectedness" (Jaggers, 2020, p. 289).

### **Mentorship**

According to Grant and Ghee (2015), AA women thrive in educational settings that provide representation and support from peers and faculty. The presence of informal mentoring also indicates AA women's desire as students to form connections and relationships for doctoral preparation, social adjustment in PWIs, and other wellness benefits. Further, research supports the use of mentorship and other preventative practices to improve the mental well-being of BW in PWI settings, emphasizing the prevalence of these problems (Grant & Ghee, 2015).

### **Defining Connectedness in Online Spaces**

Harpalani (2017) described safe spaces as "physical spaces on campus" that offer support to minoritized students, often housed in cultural centers or gatherings held by organizations (p. 124). African American women identified a space called sister circles (Harpalani, 2017), which Allen (2019) defined as "a welcoming physical and emotional coping space that allows Black womyn to unpack and manage the oppressive societal situations they encounter" (p. 6). Safe spaces can be "instrumental in unpacking and healing from oppressive and traumatic experiences" (Hernandez Rivera, 2020, p. 343). Creating culturally specific programming, like sister circles, is essential for addressing the unique challenges AA women face in doctoral programs at PWIs (Allen, 2019; Grant & Ghee, 2015). Notably, online collaborative spaces "have been shown to increase student-to-student and student-to-faculty connectedness in online doctoral students" (Breitenbach, 2019,

p. 222). Our working definition of a sister circle was curated to incorporate meaningful connections personally and professionally (Teasdell et al., 2021). Burnette (2019) found that Black women perceived benefits from safe spaces through participation in informal and formal networks of friendships, fictive kinships, and mentorship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Black feminist thought (BFT) is focused on illuminating intersections of identities, like race, gender, and class, and builds from the premise that purports that the liberation of humanity must address what Collins (1986) calls the “*simultaneity of oppression*” (p. 522). Black feminist thought recognizes that if one group of individuals is liberated while others remain suffering, that is not true liberation of humanity. Therefore, we present this reflection as a backdrop to our conceptual framework. We hope to provoke openness and consideration for how supporting Black women's liberation travails towards a larger unified goal of cultural inclusivity, cultural humility, and equity for all. Porter et al. (2020) discussed the context of socialization of Black women's identity development in college. Similarly, they referred to the BFT framework accounts for the unique experiences of Black women, integrating perspectives of race, gender, intersectionality, and deconstruction of oppressive narratives (Collins, 2009).

#### **Black Feminist Thought**

Patricia Hill Collins developed BFT, which created a framework for learning, understanding, and interpreting the unique social position of Black or AA women and their view of “*self, family, and society*” (Collins, 1986, p. 514). Collins (2009) provided three central tenets and distinctions of BFT that provide a framework by which others can criticize and evaluate scholarly works that amplify AA women's voices. More specifically, she describes the unique positionality of AA women as an *outsider-within*, representing how AA women stand at the intersection of multiple marginalized or othered identities. From this vantage point, Collins asserts that scholars can glean from AA women's experiences to shape our understanding of cultural identity and their interactions with society. Contemporary scholars continue to use BFT to shape practices in counseling and education as this theory emphasizes the complexity of intersectionality in that AA women navigate multiple marginalized identities (Oliphant et al., 2022; Porter et al., 2020). In this study, we utilized BFT as an analytic framework to examine the experiences of AA women in an online counselor education and supervision doctoral program and to understand the behaviors and interactions that participants faced as they navigated this higher education space.

### **Research Design**

We conducted a qualitative research study using constructivist grounded theory techniques. Charmaz et al. (2017) encourage reflection from the researcher's experiences and literature to challenge perceptions and diverse conceptualizations of phenomena. African American women reflect on self-identity and understand their experiences through conversations with other AA

women (Collins, 2009). Therefore, using focus groups for data collection aligns with BFT literature and compliments grounded theory techniques. We designed our focus group to reflect aspects of what is known as a *sista circle* or sister circle, using guiding questions to let participants direct the conversation (Hernandez Rivera, 2020). We selected this approach to emphasize the exchange between researchers and participants, which is supported by the theoretical tenets of BFT. Our research question was: *How do culturally specific online spaces foster personal and professional connectedness for AA women doctoral students?* We developed semi-structured interview questions to guide the focus group. Further, this approach enabled an in-depth exploration of our research question, and our observations illuminated insights into building professional connections.

**Participants**

Our research study was posted on the University’s Participant Pool website with permission and Institutional Review Board approval for recruitment. The recruitment posting contained the purpose of the study and contact information for the lead investigator. Those interested in participating who inquired about participating in our study were sent an email response from the lead investigator with more details, including a demographic survey and a link to the study's consent form. The demographic survey (shown in **Table 1**) was used for purposive sampling. Researchers assessed participants for this study using the inclusive criteria of identifying as CIS gender AA or Black woman currently enrolled in a CES program at a PWI.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics and Pseudonyms*

Pseudonym	Race and Ethnicity	Age Group Range	Employment	PhD CES Status
Sage	Black / African American; White / Caucasian; American Indian/ Native American	39-54 (Generation X)	Employed full-time in the profession of counseling	Internship
Martha	Black / African American	23-38 (Millennial)	Employed full-time in the profession of counseling	Year 3
Autumn	Black / African American	23-38 (Millennial)	Employed full-time in a profession other than counseling	Year 3
Raven	Black / African American	23-38 (Millennial)	Employed part-time in the profession of counseling	Transferred into program

We modeled the focus groups after an existing culturally specific affinity group curated and led by the authors at a predominantly white online institution. To avoid any appearance of maleficence, we scheduled the focus groups separately from the existing affinity group meetings. Only those who consented to participate were a part of the sister circle-styled focus group, with

verbal consent obtained at the beginning of each group. We followed IRB protocol closely, using the participant pool to recruit participants, scheduling the focus groups at different times, and using a video-conferencing platform different from the regular meeting to increase anonymity and confidentiality. We collected demographic information relevant to our study's focus and later used pseudonyms for participant confidentiality. Eligible participants received details and links to Microsoft Teams meetings for three sessions, with the third session used as an alternate date. We designed the demographic survey to encourage participants' self-identification, aligning with BFT's self-definition (Collins, 2009).

### **Site**

The focus groups lasted between one hour and up to ninety minutes on two different dates using Microsoft Teams. Three participants used video in the first focus group, while one used audio only. All four participants used the video feature at the second focus group meeting. The first author, a student in the participants' CES program at the time of data collection, remained on camera each group to conduct the semi-structured interview. The other two investigators, representing faculty and administrator roles, remained off-camera after introduction, supporting the affinity space atmosphere.

### **Data Collection**

At the start of each focus group, researchers reviewed the informed consent with all participants. The researchers also examined the study purpose at the beginning of the first session, with time set aside to answer questions about the research study. Researchers invited participants to ask questions and seek clarification from the researchers at any point throughout the focus group. For each focus group, we took descriptive notes of participant responses to guiding questions and observations that exhibited connection (i.e., participants using each other's first names). Using Whiteside's (2015) key categories relative to social connectedness and belonging, we described engagement between our participants and noted social presence between individuals as "affective, cohesive, and interactive" (p. 57).

### **Procedures**

We used an observation protocol form (Amankwaa, 2016; see Appendix A) to document aspects of the participants' behaviors, actions, words, body language, and interactions with one another while participating in the focus group. Notably, we observed how participants engaged with each other, aligning our observations to describe affective, cohesive, and interactive engagement (Whiteside, 2015). Author one remained on camera and asked guiding questions to allow for participant-led discussion so that we could observe interactions between participants and the researchers (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021; Hernandez Rivera, 2020). Though participants were asked guiding questions, they were encouraged to speak freely, expanding on their responses or other participants' responses. **Figure 1** provides an example of the type of iterative process used in the semi-structured guiding questions asked during the focus group. The literature supports this approach, which describes the natural, collaborative flow of exchanging information paramount to curating safe spaces for AA women (Collins, 2009; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Redundancy occurred after completing two focus groups.

**Figure 1***Guiding Question Example*

*Guiding question:* When you think of connectedness, what comes to mind if you had to describe or define it?

*Follow-up question:* [What about] forming connections professionally?

**Data Analysis**

We used a constant comparative method (CCM) to analyze each researcher's *Observation Protocol notes*. The use of CCM involves an inductive analysis process that includes the simultaneous systematic coding and analysis of the data to produce a theory (Creswell, 2017). We began the first step of data analysis, open coding, by exploring how the participants interpreted the questions and provided their responses. Codes were assigned to the responses of each research participant on the Observation Protocol Notes, organized by focus group date, and then arranged into categories of more prominent themes. The next step in the data analysis process included axial coding or expanding upon the initially developed themes. We compared participants' responses by assigning comparable themes and determining any inconsistencies between the themes and categories. We also examined the data to note any connections between themes. Our final step involved selective coding, which identified the fundamental themes derived from the analysis. These themes helped inform our recommendations.

**Positionality**

Rhemma, the first author, identifies as an AA woman living in the Midwest. She attended a land-based PWI university for her undergraduate and first master's degree and later completed another master's and her doctoral program in online PWI programs. Ariel, the second author, identifies as an AA woman from the southern East Coast. She attended PWIs for her undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs and graduated from an online doctoral program. Maranda, the third author, considers herself multiracial and identifies as an AA woman from the south. She attended PWIs for her undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs.

**Trustworthiness, Limitations, and Bounds of Study**

We used multiple strategies to establish trustworthiness. We followed an observation protocol, including descriptive and reflective notes, and we used member checking to ensure pertinent information was collected to accurately represent participant responses (Amankwaa, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2017; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2021). Following each focus group, the authors met to discuss reflexive observations. This study explored the experiences of four AA women at a single PWI in an online counseling doctoral program. We aimed to recruit up to eight participants; however, we found that four participants offered rich perspectives. Moreover, no student experience can be generalized to all students of a specific gender, race, or ethnicity. The results of this study provide important insights into the use of online safe spaces for supporting

AA women. This study could benefit from replication across universities with various instructional designs and expanding to disciplines of study outside of counseling.

## Findings

This research examined how culturally specific online spaces foster personal and professional connectedness for AA women doctoral students. Two prominent themes emerged — *authenticity* and *safety* (see **Figure 2**)—and both support BFT's perspective of insights that often emerge in cultural-specific spaces (Collins, 2002, as cited in West, 2020). We gathered these findings from a study of two sister circle-styled focus groups.

### **Authenticity**

This core theme suggests ways AA women graduate students might experience connectedness through authenticity. It represents the feedback expressed by AA women in a counselor education doctoral program and was echoed across multiple interview questions. The core theme has five subthemes: genuineness, encouragement, modeling, transparency, and support.

#### ***Genuineness***

This sub-theme refers to an expectation that AA women reported is necessary for relationships, intergroup connectedness, and safety. Autumn offered, "Safety is.... genuineness: I need to see how you interact with me and others." She went on to say that being genuine is something she brings to spaces that aid connections and forming relationships.

#### ***Encouragement***

At one point in the focus group, we observed the group offer uplifting comments about their interactions with Autumn. For example, Sage appeared compelled to share her previous experience with Autumn, who she believes "brings warmth and authenticity" to spaces. Raven also shared that she "feels connected" to Autumn. Autumn expressed gratitude and disclosed her hesitance to "toot her own horn," which the group explored. While laughing, Sage encouraged Autumn to 'toot her own horn.' Thus, in tandem with genuineness, this interaction suggested another influencing factor of connectedness: encouragement. Raven expressed the need for encouragement and shared her experiences with Black women who exhibited competitive behavior that was discouraging for her. Further, these experiences caused her to be leery of interacting with Black women in specific settings.

*"I would hope that this space would allow for networking with other Black women ... and [be] encouraging."* – Raven, participant.

### ***Modeling***

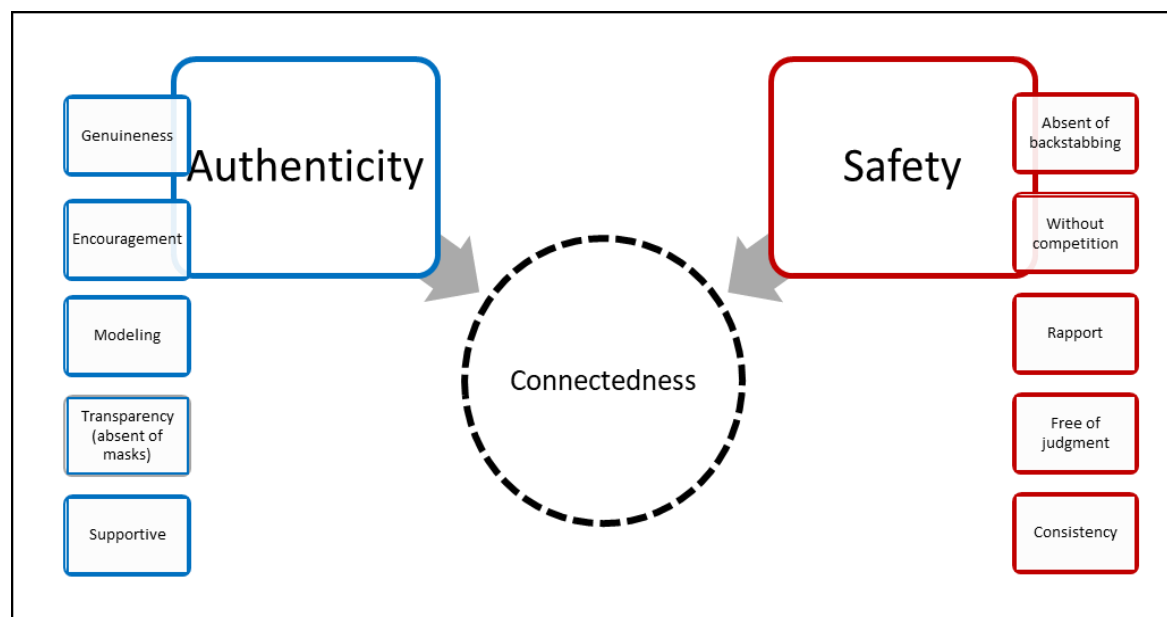
Modeling within culturally specific online spaces is inherent to experiencing authenticity. One participant shared her experience of the Sister Circle while responding to an interview question focused on intergroup connectedness. Autumn shared, "It feels authentic and .... is doing

a good job of modeling how beautiful it is to be in relationship with Black women; that is very encouraging to me." Discussion illuminated the role of peer-to-peer modeling in increasing connections and forming relationships. Participants expanded on how displays of vulnerability from one another encourage them to do the same. Sage described bringing others together as "glue" and "bring whatever is missing." Autumn offered the following characteristics: "genuine, merit, professionalism, ethical, moral" as necessary.

**Transparency**

Several factors influence AA women’s hesitancy to openness and transparency. This subtheme refers to ensuring authenticity through transparency. The discussion shifted towards defining safety to encourage transparency. When discussing safety, Sage shared, "... if I don't have to wear my mask, I'm safe." Discussion highlighted how mask-wearing interferes with transparency, as Martha commented, "Right now, you have just gone see a representative because I don't know you." Sage added, "I can wear the mask and still be authentic ...until I can see your authentic self." Reciprocity in transparency appeared essential to the group.

**Figure 2**  
*Professional Connectedness – Core Themes and Subthemes*



**Supportive**

Another sub-theme explored was the need for culturally specific online spaces to be supportive. Our participants answered a question searching for reasons an AA woman would want to join a group. Sage shared that when the group is "reciprocal." Martha shared that she "avoids connecting through negativity." Further, Martha offered that the safe spaces need "commonalities...positive energy." Autumn shared similar sentiments of safety and authenticity. Raven said the group should provide "guidance to support each other." The group expounded on

meaning, with Sage sharing that "linking...not being alone" and Raven expressing "support" as important parts of safety.

### **Safety**

Participants expressed the need for a sense of safety in personal and professional settings to feel connectedness. Safety is fostered through the ability to speak freely. Autumn shared that safety means a person can "speak freely without wounding." This core theme suggests ways AA women graduate students might feel connected through safety, which would reduce the gap in degree attainment rates compared to other races and ethnicities. Safety was likened to the building process, requiring intentional effort and resources for a sustainable structure. Sage offered, "Not everything that harms us is intentional." Safety was a desired attribute noted among participants, along with using discernment to identify safe spaces. Additionally, safety appeared to present complex layers that would take time to build. Thus, we found that the theme of *safety* includes five subthemes: absent of backstabbing, without competition, rapport, free of judgment, and consistency.

*"A safe space is built ... it's a process"* – Sage, participant.

Regarding professional connections, observation of others was essential for safety. Raven playfully shared "watching how people engage with others." Sage affirmed Raven's input and added that she "relies on discernment and observes words and actions [e.g.], do they match." She noted that the relationships she has kept in touch with were initially formed face-to-face. Autumn shared that she needs "to be heard, collaboration, alignment, purpose." She referred to Sage by name and agreed with the necessity of using discernment.

### **Absent of Backstabbing**

Martha shared that she has experienced "...the other side of not being supported and torn down" as a factor influencing her decision to join a group. Several participants echoed this and shared that knowing the group topics before entering the sister circle space was a deciding factor for whether they would participate. Autumn shared that she is "slowly gravitating to the circle." Martha continued to disclose that experiences of "backstabbing" impact her connections in professional spaces.

### **Without Competition**

Competition was a factor that could dissuade participation in a culturally specific online space for AA women. Martha disclosed "competition" as an experience that impacts her ability to form connections. Raven echoed these sentiments, stating, "I would hope that this space would allow for networking with other Black women without competition..." Discussion and responses seem to be informed by past experiences of the participants. Autumn shared a need to have the person she is seeking a professional connection with to "make space for me." A discussion of negative experiences while trying to form professional connections highlighted the impact of negative encounters with AA women in professional settings. These responses resulted in a discussion of the need to advocate for safe spaces.

***Rapport and Consistency***

*"Safety is kinda like what we do as counselors, we build rapport"*—Martha, participant.

The ability to establish rapport was discussed as foundational to forming a group and was shared as particularly important for AA women in cultivating safety in online spaces. Further, the concept of rapport aligned with a type of professionalism inherent to our participants' field of study (e.g., counselor education). Martha expressed, "For me, safety is kinda like what we do as counselors; we build rapport, and the more I know about you, the more comfortable I feel about sharing." Developing rapport was also described as a process of feeling connected to other group members and as a gauge by which they would observe common interests among others in a group to determine the safety of the group. Martha affirmed this and offered her thoughts on what creates connectedness, "commonalities, shared similarities, positive energy."

*"Safety is consistency... genuineness..."* – Autumn, participant.

The discussion also emphasized the need for consistency to foster safety. Raven shared that she was "looking forward" to the group and "glad to be on video." Similarly, at the start of the session, Autumn expressed that she was "...looking forward to the conversation..." A consensus focused on discussing how rapport is built through consistent positive interactions with individuals, which creates a sense of safety. We, as researchers, noted the increased comfort that our participants seemed to exhibit from one focus group to the next. Throughout the second session, the group continued to explore safe spaces. Autumn offered, "Safety is consistency, genuineness; I need to see how you interact with me and others amongst me that gives me the green light, or the red light...how do you show up in the world?"

***Free of Judgment***

In discussion around safety, Sage shared, "A safe space is ...judgment-free..." This sentiment seemed to echo throughout the group. Sage identified ways she searches for the absence of judgment and shared, "I don't want to say the group norms should say you can't speak freely because it's to be a safe space, and if you align with the mission to build up and not tear down, your input should do that." Sage's thoughts on the influence of judgment-free spaces seemed to be shared by the group, as was apparent by visual agreement (i.e., head nods). Sage continued by sharing her strategies that rely on discernment and observing consistency in others' words and actions, which she clarified with a question she asked herself, "Do they match?" Raven playfully added that she, too, watches how people engage with one another. Our participants spoke of optimistic caution when discussing safety and intergroup connectedness. Sage explained, "I don't want to be the outcast person...I guess I don't seek out a lot of outside connections ... I don't have too many. I did gain some great professional relationships throughout this doctoral program. I've had so few safe spaces that I am conditioned to not want or not seek out."

## Discussion

Black feminist thought is a framework for learning, understanding, and interpreting the social position of AA women (Collins, 2009; Porter et al., 2020). Within this theoretical framework, three central tenets guide critical thought and evaluation of experiences, which include self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and the importance of AA women's culture (Collins, 2009). Researchers have explored the concepts of isolation, belonging, mentorship, and safe spaces regarding the experiences of AA women in higher education settings (Breitenbach, 2019; Jagers, 2020). Yet, minimal research exists that explicitly addresses self-definition, self-valuation, oppression, or acculturation stress that AA women experience in online CES doctoral programs. While including a small and brief focus group of participants, the responses of the AA women in the study support the findings of past literature. Across subthemes, each demonstrated characteristics of affinity spaces that foster safety and authenticity. This study explored how past experiences and personal inclination influence AA women's sense of belonging, safety, and connectedness in academic spaces.

Further, this study found that AA women often seek support and social interaction with others who look like them, where the interactions are purposefully and intentionally structured to reduce harm and increase connectedness and belonging. The need to connect was central to our participants' identities as AA women and online doctoral students. Additionally, past experiences, caution, awareness, and perceived safety played a significant role in Black women seeking support for academic success when completing their doctoral degrees.

### **Belonging and Connectedness**

Our participants collectively identified the need for safe spaces while illuminating the issues in their experiences that would deter their participation in such spaces. Research has explained that relationships with peers and faculty, within the concepts of social connectedness and belonging within educational settings, have been instrumental in the academic success of AA women, especially in PWIs (Breitenbach, 2019). Lewis et al. (2016) explain that while individuals may desire connections in a group, these individuals may also be reluctant to connect with people with differing views or opinions from other group members. Our participants expressed feelings of isolation stemming from past educational and professional experiences and a lack of intentional opportunities for belonging and safety in their academic program. Many participants resolved not having a safe space to feel included as their lack of connectedness in other education settings conditioned them to believe these spaces simply did not exist.

### **Creating Safe Spaces**

When discussing the creation of safe spaces, many participants described safety as requiring a level of comfort, being a process, taking time to reveal authenticity, and beginning with a guarded stance when interacting with new people. These responses revealed emotions of fear and uncertainty, as well as hyper-independence. The lack of safe spaces impacted motivation and experiences as doctoral students for participants. Despite experiencing isolation in their academic experiences, whether influenced by environmental or personal responses, participants desired the

presence of safe spaces to provide genuineness and encouragement within their academic journey. Sage, Martha, and Autumn felt the need to protect themselves and desired assurance of authenticity and safety before feeling comfortable representing their authentic selves in these spaces. Additionally, our participants want a space to network with others who look like them. Overall, all participants expressed a need to feel safe, validated, and supported academically and professionally.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Research suggests that studies devoted to understanding and responding to the issues that contribute to the adverse effects for AA women who are online doctoral students are critical and necessary (Harpalani, 2017; Ramos & Yi, 2020). There is a need to understand the need for connection among online doctoral students. Therefore, we recommend that universities that serve AA women in online doctoral programs support the development and stability of creating informal professional spaces to facilitate connectedness. More specifically, based on results from a previous pilot study, the authors designed this study using their experience with starting and curating a sister circle for AA women in an online CES doctoral program.

Further, we recommend using a survey to actively pursue prospective participant interest in fostering connectedness. Once we secured administrative approval from the program dean, we disseminated the survey to student email addresses. Our meetings lasted 90 minutes and included member-led discussions featuring guest speakers focused on topics suggested by members, while the latter part of meetings focused on cultivating member connections and was facilitated by peer members. We prioritized consciousness of personal and professional experiences in line with Teasdell et al.'s (2021) insights on mentoring AA women doctoral students. Our approach to selecting guest speakers involved leveraging connections to ensure that the speakers were responsive advocates and allies. A sister circle newsletter encouraged ongoing interaction, sharing upcoming events, success stories, and guest speaker details to enhance connectedness and visibility beyond monthly gatherings.

While our recommendations highlight the compelling experiences shared among our focus group participants, we also acknowledge the gap in knowledge of the burden that may be placed on AA women in academia who may answer the call to mentor women in these curated safe spaces. Therefore, we recommend consideration for further research that focuses on the perspectives, experiences, and needs of AA women who have been asked to mentor AA women, informally or formally, who can provide a necessary vantage point that may provide a depth of understanding related to the sustainability of creating safe spaces in online settings.

### **Conclusion**

Our study aimed to further the discussion on belonging, isolation, and mentorship for AA women, using AA women's experiences to guide the fusion of literature and implications for practical application. We discussed the findings from our participants' experiences with "safe

spaces” in predominantly white online doctoral programs. Our recommendations suggest that AA women find connectedness in affinity settings curated with cultural awareness and responsiveness in mind. Institutions of higher education can help AA women through targeted mentorship programs that provide a safe space for connection, dialogue, advocacy, and networking. Thus, understanding what is required to curate safe spaces is equally important to the recognition of the need for safe spaces. These insights further emphasize our proposed recommendations, suggesting the need for further study to understand how to design a safe space.

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Appendix A: Observation Protocol

*Observation Protocol*

Date:		Time:	
Length of observation:			
Participants:			
Descriptive Notes		Reflective Notes	
Setting – visual		Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations.	
Description of participants			
Description of activities			
Description of individuals engaged in activity			
Description of interactions			
Participant comments (expressed in quotes)			
Description of actions			
Description of words (expressed in quotes)			
Description of non-verbal / Body Language			
The researcher’s observation of what seems to be occurring with a level of engagement and professional development efficacy			