

**STUDENT INTERACTION AND NEGATIVE MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS:  
EVALUATING BLACK STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL CLIMATE AT A  
CANADIAN UNIVERSITY**

by

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## **Abstract**

Black students attending Canadian universities face a number of unique challenges and stressors that shape their experiences and mental health outcomes on campus. Utilizing 12 in-depth interviews with Black students at a large, metropolitan university in Western Canada, my findings show that Black students navigate instances of everyday racism on campus and in the classroom. Consequently, Black students experience negative mental health effects, forms of alienation, and social isolation. In response, these students adopt various coping mechanisms, such as modifying their behaviour to avoid discrimination and minimizing the importance of distressing interactions to negate feelings of anxiety and depression. More broadly, I illuminate the heterogeneity of Black student experience on campus, problematize current models of campus racial climate and outline culturally responsive equity and diversity initiatives that universities can implement in Black student populations.

## **Lay Summary**

My research asks the question, “How do interactions between students and negative mental health experiences affect Black undergraduate students’ perceptions of campus racial climate?”. My findings show that most of the Black students in my sample (n=12) experienced everyday racism from professors and peers on campus and in the classroom. In response, these students experienced negative mental health effects and utilized a number of psychosocial coping mechanisms such as minimizing the importance of harmful interactions, racial distancing and self-regulating to avoid future discrimination. Overall, this research provides data to universities and educators so that effective equity and diversity initiatives can be implemented for Black students.

## **Preface**

This thesis is drawn from original, primary research done by Jada Charles. Dr. Seth Abrutyn provided direction on the development of the project and offered substantive feedback on earlier drafts of this thesis. Jada Charles was independently responsible for recruiting and interviewing participants during the data collection process and led the data analysis with the support of Dr. Amin Ghaziani (Professor, Sociology, UBC) and Dr. Seth Abrutyn (Assistant Professor, Sociology, UBC). This research was granted approval by the Behavioural Research Ethics Board at The University of British Columbia [H22-00236].

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## Introduction

Mental health challenges have become a crisis in post-secondary academic institutions. The 2019 Canadian National College Health Assessment reported that 15.8 percent of students have been diagnosed or treated by a professional for both anxiety and depression in the last twelve months, while 60 percent of students reported that post-secondary schooling has been “traumatic” or “very difficult to handle”.<sup>1</sup> These academic stressors can be exacerbated when we consider the interplay of identity markers, structural constraints, and lived experience (Posselt & Lipson, 2016). For example, racialized students are at a heightened risk of contending with negative mental health effects due to the underutilization of mental health services (Colvin et al., 2016), differential access to resources (Hurtado et al., 2011), and instances of discrimination and prejudice (Canning et al., 2020; Livingston et al., 2021). In addition, students of colour also report feelings of imposter syndrome (Canning et al., 2020), minority status stress (McClain et al., 2016), and are more likely to screen for anxiety and depression, especially in classroom environments that are perceived as highly competitive (Posselt & Lipson, 2016).

The vast majority of research has focused on comparing the mental health experiences of Black and White students in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in U.S. and U.K. contexts. Left unexamined are the distinct racial profiles of Canadian universities and how they affect Black student mental health (Hargis et al., 2021.; Livingston et al., 2021; McClain et al., 2016). While Canadian and American universities share several similarities, there are historical, demographic, and contemporary racial

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<sup>1</sup> American College Health Association. 2019. “Publications and Reports: ACHA-NCHA II.” Retrieved December 5, 2022 ([https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA\\_Data/Publications\\_and\\_Reports/NCHA/Data/Reports\\_ACHA-NCHAIIC.aspx](https://www.acha.org/NCHA/ACHA-NCHA_Data/Publications_and_Reports/NCHA/Data/Reports_ACHA-NCHAIIC.aspx)).

dynamics that differentiate the two. Thus, the racial climate of Canadian universities must be evaluated to understand Black student mental health within this context. To do this, I will utilize select aspects of the campus racial climate model that measure Black student representation, how Black students are interacting amongst themselves and with other racial groups, and students' perceptions of racial conflict and attitudes. Furthermore, existing work generally neglects intersectional frameworks and misses the nuances of Black students' experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Posselt & Lipson, 2016). In this article, I will draw on interviews with Black undergraduate students at a large, metropolitan university in Western Canada. The following questions motivate this exploratory study: how do interactions between students and negative mental health experiences affect Black undergraduate students' perceptions of campus racial climate? How are Black students coping with microaggressions and feelings of alienation?

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

I begin by identifying the absence of recent Canadian studies that center the Black student experience and go on to draw a distinction between how Black individuals experience racism in American and Canadian contexts. Since the racial climate model will be used to understand Black student mental health, I outline its dimensions and problematize its limitations.

### **1.1 American versus Canadian Climate on Campus**

In the past decade, there have been no sociological studies conducted on Black students' mental health experiences or perceptions of racial climate in a Canadian context. While there has been valuable research conducted on the experiences of Indigenous students, racialized faculty, and other racialized students, the experiences of Black students have been disregarded in the literature (Bailey 2016; Baghoori 2022; Clark et al. 2014). Due to this paucity of data, an exploratory study is needed to elucidate the experiences of an understudied population. The majority of research conducted has occurred in an American context, part of which can be attributed to its colonial history and contemporary racial climate (Mwangi et al. 2018). Historically, the U.S. has been divided along racial lines. When we examine the U.S. racial climate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it remains fraught with tension due to the increased visibility of police brutality toward Black people, the 2016 election of Donald Trump, and the growing empirical evidence of anti-Black racial bias that occurs in US society (Mwangi et al. 2018; Bonilla-Silva, 2017). A report from the Anti-Defamation League stated that White supremacist propaganda distribution on college campuses increased by 258 percent since 2018, only lessening in 2020 due to the pandemic (Anti-Defamation League). Thus, American society is more explicitly delineated along racial lines when compared to Canadian society. This is especially evident when

we consider how educational institutions are categorized in the American context, either being classified as a PWI or HBCU. Most of the research conducted on Black student mental health has occurred in either institution with researchers often comparing student experience. Black students fare better at HBCUs academically, socially, and emotionally than their counterparts who attend PWIs (Asher BlackDeer et al. 2022). This is because HBCUs prioritize Black culture, community life and provide nurturing environments that can insulate and protect students from discrimination (Allen et al. 2007; Asher BlackDeer et al. 2022). Conversely, PWIs have been found to undermine Black students' chances of academic success, degrade their academic performance, and inspire racial stress which undermines their social integration (Harper and Hurtado 2007; Karkouti 2016). Contemporarily, we see this as Black students in American universities are navigating explicit instances of racism, such as threats of lynching, death threats, and racial epithets (Case & Ngo, 2017).

Conversely, Canadian students experience racism in subtler forms (Case & Ngo, 2017) since Canada promotes a multicultural ideology about the “presence and persistence of diverse racial and ethnic minorities who define themselves as different and wish to remain so” (Leman, 1999, p. 1). However, the narrative of multiculturalism fosters a discourse that Canadian society is colour-blind and free of racism (Clark et al. 2014). This is not the case as evidenced by Clark et al. (2014) and Bailey (2016) who both conducted qualitative studies with Indigenous students in Canadian universities. They found that all of the students in their sample experienced everyday racism (e.g., microaggressions), which impacted their educational success and personal satisfaction within the university environment (Clark et al. 2014; Bailey 2016). Microaggressions and everyday racism can be characterized as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural or environmental indignities...hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights” (Sue et al. 2008, p.

277). The students in Bailey's (2016) study, for instance, were subject to comments in class, social isolation and raised concerns about barriers they faced in the university. Since racism is manifest on Canadian campuses in subtle ways, I will adopt a similar framework for understanding the experiences of Black students.

## **1.2 The Racial Climate Model**

Previous research has found that Black students navigating PWIs have negative perceptions of their campus climate due to instances of racism and discrimination, lack of representation, and tokenization (Lewis et al. 2021; Griffin 2016). They experience negative mental health effects such as isolation and a lack of sense of belonging (Johnson et al., 2007). In response, institutions seek to increase diversity and inclusion efforts and initiatives (Mwangi et al. 2018). Thus, the Black student experience on campus is shaped by institutional forces, social relations, and students' psychological well-being (Hurtado et al. 2012). To evaluate Black student experience in its entirety, we must bring these factors into a conversation. I will do this by using a model of campus racial climate. Racial climate can be characterized as the overall feel and structure of a campus that reflects an acceptance or rejection of racial diversity (Hurtado et al. 2012). This model contains five dimensions: the historical legacy of the institution, organizational/structural dimension, compositional diversity, behavioural dimension and psychological dimension. While the historical legacy and structural dimension of an institution is important, I am most interested in exploring how students are grappling with representation on campus, interacting with their peers, and experiencing their mental health in the context of the university. Seeing as only one percent of Metro Vancouver's population is racialized as Black, it

is worth exploring how these tensions are impacting such a highly marginalized group (Creese, 2019). Therefore, I focus on three aspects of the racial climate model which I have outlined here. First, compositional diversity refers to the numerical and proportional representation of different groups of people within the campus environment (University of Arizona, n.d.). This is an important facet of the model seeing as the underrepresentation of Black students on university campuses tends to negatively impact how racial climate is perceived (Griffin et al., 2016). Thus, it is worth exploring to what extent minoritized student populations (or lack thereof) are impacting Black students' perceptions of racial climate. Second, the behavioural dimension focuses on the social interactions between racial groups, as well as the nature and quality of these intergroup relations (University of Arizona, n.d.). These between-group social interactions are important as positive interactions can facilitate a comfortable environment for Black students on campus and in the classroom (Griffin et al., 2012). To aid in my analysis of student interaction, I will be using Erving Goffman's conceptualizations of deference and demeanour and strategic impression management. Goffman (1967, p.56) defines deference as instances where "appreciation is regularly conveyed" from one person to another. We see this manifest in presentational rituals such as "salutations, compliments and apologies which punctuate social intercourse" (p.57). On the other hand, it is also conveyed through avoidance rituals where the individual refrains from engaging in acts that would violate the recipient's ideal sphere (1967, p.75). Demeanour is conveyed through "deportment, dress, and bearing, which serves to express to those in his immediate presence that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities" (p.77). Thus, to receive deference, an individual must convey the appropriate demeanour towards others. Bringing these concepts together, individuals use strategic impression management to cultivate deference by modifying their demeanour in accordance with the

expectations of their audience (Goffman, 1959). More specifically, individuals engage in defensive and protective practices to safeguard the impression that they have fostered within a social interaction (Goffman, 1967, p.7). Preventative practices are employed to protect the individual's definition of the situation, while protective practices are used to save other individuals' definition of the situation (p.7). Therefore, I am interested to see how participants strategically manage their impressions amongst themselves and their peers in institutionalized settings. Lastly, the psychological dimension refers to the ways in which students are perceiving racial conflict and attitudes held toward individuals of a different race, ethnicity, or background.

Although I will be using sections of this model to present my findings, there are three limitations that need to be addressed. First, the model assumes that Black student populations are homogenous, conflating ethnic and racial identity. Second, the behavioural and psychological dimensions of the model do not adequately consider the racial conflicts and social interactions occurring *within* minoritized student groups and thus, how racial climate may be affected by these circumstances. Third, it assumes that all Black students desire ethnic or racial salience and does not consider that students may have different social needs when adjusting to a new environment.

Both the behavioural and psychological sections of the racial climate model primarily focus on between-group differences, specifically between majority and minority populations (University of Arizona, n.d.). This has caused Black student populations to be regarded as homogenous and monolithic as much of the literature conflates racial and ethnic identity. However, there is an immense amount of heterogeneity within contemporary Black student populations (Mwangi 2014). For Black domestic and international students, racial identity has come to mean something very different depending on how and where they were raised. As



defined by Steck et al. (2003), “Black racial identity is molded by historical and sustained discrimination and prejudice.” Consequently, race tends to be more relevant to marginalized individuals, especially when they feel that they have been racially defined by others (Steck et al. 2003). The literature finds that strong racial identity can play a positive role for students’ mental health and that having strong ethnic ties in university help with social and academic integration (Hardeman et al. 2016; Baker 2013). However, racial and ethnic salience are not always guaranteed in a time where large numbers of Black immigrants are beginning to attend institutions of higher education in North America. This is reflected in my sample which primarily consists of international students from around the world. Thus, it is important to consider that some students do not desire ethnic or racial salience and instead hope to acculturate into dominant society. For example, Jackson’s (2010) study on Black immigrants revealed that Black individuals who recently immigrated to the US engaged in rhetorical strategies such as social distancing and race talk that was democratic and respectful, but still maintained their individuality from African Americans who they felt they had little in common with. The concept of social distance in sociology is “used to describe the relationship between individuals and groups in society” (2010). I am interested to see how international students frame their relationships with Black Canadian students and how they evaluate on-campus student groups.

It is worth noting, given the unique demographic and historical characteristics of the Black Canadian population as a whole and university students more specifically, the racial climate model may not be fully applicable. While I presume that it will capture some aspects of Black student experiences in a Canadian context, I have also demonstrated that there are significant differences between American and Canadian campus racial climate that it may fail to account for, as illustrated in the first section of this chapter. In pursuit of these aims, I conducted

twelve semi-structured interviews which were instrumental in elucidating how students are navigating each of the aforementioned dimensions and their evaluations of the campus racial climate.

## Chapter 2: Methods

The following study of Black student mental health was conducted at a large, metropolitan university in Western Canada and is constructed on interviews with Black-identifying students during the summer of 2022. Although there have been numerous studies conducted in the U.S. and the U.K. about how Black students fare at competitive institutions that are not racially representative, Canadian universities have been neglected in the literature on mental health (Mohamed and Beagan 2019). This institution is highly ranked and has a modest number of international undergraduate students with a small percentage of those individuals identifying as Black. Thus, it provides a unique opportunity to examine academic competitiveness and how negative mental health effects might be mitigated or exacerbated based on Black student representation. I used non-probability sampling strategies to recruit twelve Black-identifying undergraduate students from May to December 2022. I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with each of these participants. I posted recruitment materials on social media and asked administrative staff at the university to circulate it on their listservs. Thus, all respondents identified as Black, were enrolled at the institution at the time of the interview in either a Humanities or STEM program and ranged from first to fourth year of study. Table 1 illustrates the demographic distribution of my respondents. All participants have been assigned a pseudonym for confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Sample Demographic

	N
<b>Age</b>	
18-20	5
21-30	7
40 and older	0
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	7
Male	4
Nonbinary	1
<b>Year of Study</b>	
First Year	1
Second Year	4
Third Year	3
Fourth Year	4

Interviews ranged from 25 to 60 minutes. All were one-on-one and conducted over the teleconferencing platform Zoom to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission. Using Zoom as an alternative to conventional face-to-face interviews was standard for my participants, seeing as all Canadian university students switched to remote learning throughout 2020 and 2021.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the real-time nature of the video interviews closely resembled the tone and structure of in-person interviews, as I was able to access verbal and nonverbal cues and Zoom’s dynamic environment prevented participants from overthinking answers or considering the most socially desirable responses (Howlett, 2022). Inspired by Lester et al.’s (2020) suggestion that we should structure the qualitative process in phases to create transparency for both the researcher and the reader, the phases I engaged in were as follows:

*Phase One: Transcribing.* I transcribed each interview which produced 93 pages of single-spaced textual data.

<sup>2</sup> Alhmidi, Maan. 2022. ““University students struggling with impact of online classes as pandemic wears on”” CBC News.” CBC News. Retrieved November 15, 2022 (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/covid-ont-universities-1.6326620>).

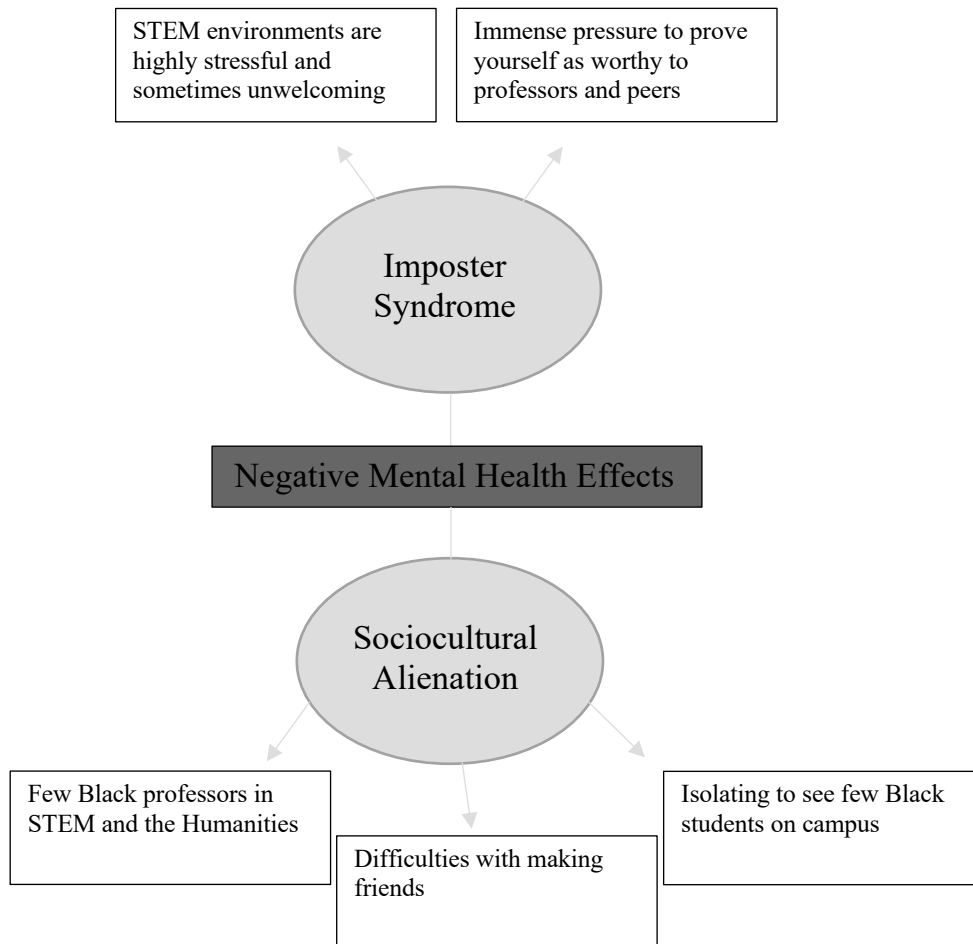
*Phase Two: Familiarizing.* Once I organized and transcribed my data, I made a note of the broad themes covered in each interview. These included (1) being Black on campus (e.g. “Thinking about the last time you felt Black in a class, can you tell me about that experience? How did it feel?”); (2) being Black in a chosen academic field (e.g. “What has your experience being Black in STEM/Humanities been like?”); and (3) mental health (e.g. “What would you say affects your mental health the most?”). In order to become familiar with the data, I re-read interview transcripts to look for emergent themes.

*Phase Three: Memoing.* I took notes throughout the interviews. Once these interviews were complete, I wrote a more comprehensive memo about emerging themes and impressions of participants’ body language and tone; important nuances that I knew I would have a hard time remembering during the transcription process. These memos directed my analytic procedures in the next step.

*Phase Four: Coding.* I deductively and inductively coded the data to ensure valid inferences (see Table 2) (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

*Phase Five: Moving from codes to categories and categories to themes.* Lester et al. (2020) described this phase as an inductive engagement, with researchers moving from isolated cases to broader interpretations. I chose to do this visually, utilizing Attride-Stirling’s (2001) thematic network (see Figure 1), a web-like illustration that summarizes the main themes constituting a piece of text. These themes were split into basic themes (lowest order), organizing themes (middle order), and global themes (super-ordinate). I began with assembling a collection of basic themes (e.g., unwelcoming STEM environments), which I later classified into organizing themes that specified underlying narratives (e.g., imposter syndrome). Finally, I reinterpreted organizing themes in light of their basic themes and brought them together to illustrate the conclusion or

global theme. By visually mapping this process, readers can observe how I moved from codes to categories to themes (Attride-Stirling 2001).



**Figure 1**

*Phase Six: Reliability.* Researchers have long struggled with issues of inter-subjective reliability in qualitative data analysis. Miles and Huberman (1994), describe “quality control” as ensuring whether the process of the study is consistent, reasonably stable over time and across research and methods (278). I conducted intercoder reliability tests to assess the stability of my analytic

procedures (see Table 2). First, I selected at random ten percent of my transcribed pages, and then I trained an independent coder on my procedures and major themes (see Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019 for a similar approach). This process resulted in a minimum of 80 percent agreement across my themes (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Intercoder Agreement Results**

Code	Description	Stability
Academic Alienation	This code captures students' perceptions of academic difficulty in a hostile classroom environment. Characterized by anxiety and internalized pressure.	82.92
Expanding Networks	This code captures participants' attempts at expanding their social networks. There are some interesting implications here, as some participants state that they would hope to make friends specifically outside of their race- I am unsure of how to code for that specific motivation.	92.33
Imposter syndrome	This code is meant to capture instances where participants report feeling imposter syndrome (feeling like they need to work harder than their peers, scared of failure etc).	88.61
Lack of Representation	This code occurs most frequently and describes participants' feelings about there being a lack of Black representation at the faculty and student level. This code often overlaps with isolation, seeing as students often talk about how lack of representation can lead to isolation. There are also some parallels with alienation, lack of understanding and race representation.	96.53
Minimization	Captures instances when students minimize the importance or impact of micro-aggressions or more explicit forms of racism	96.53
Internalized racism	Captures instances where participants express disdain towards their own racial group; moments where you notice that they have internalized the racist stereotypes, values, images and ideologies perpetuated by White dominant society about minoritized populations	84.90

I operationalize mental health by looking closely at three interpretive expressions. First, I examine to what extent compositional diversity on campus affects the sociocultural climate. In other words, do Black students feel socially integrated (Rolison and Loo, Chalsa M. 1986). Second, I elucidate the behavioural dimension by examining the impact of racial microaggressions in competitive academic environments (Bailey 2016). Last, I explore the

psychological dimension by examining how students are perceiving and managing racial conflict and tension.

This study relies on a modest sample size of students who principally identify as female. While this can raise some concerns about generalizability—thus signalling the need for more research—the current study is exploratory, particularly given the dearth of research on Black student experiences in Canadian universities. My sample provides a nuanced understanding of the experiences of domestic Black students on Canadian campuses, the mental health challenges they face, and the coping mechanisms and protective strategies they employ. I now turn to my results which I organize into three sections: compositional diversity, behavioural dimensions, and psychological dimensions.



## Chapter 3: Results

Several themes emerged which reflected Black students' evaluations of campus racial climate. These themes are captured by the following categories: compositional diversity, behavioural dimension and psychological dimension. In compositional diversity I discuss lack of representation and sociocultural alienation. In behavioural dimension I discuss stereotype threat and academic alienation. Finally, in psychological dimension I discuss the coping mechanisms students adopted in response to their experiences with sociocultural alienation, academic alienation, instances of racism, and negative mental health effects.

### 3.1 Compositional Diversity

When examining compositional diversity, I asked questions about representation on campus, peer groups and how the participant interacted with Black peers if they frequented a class or extracurricular with them. While each of my participants had vastly different experiences, they each observed the lack of Black students and professors on campus. This created a sense of isolation and scarcity. Tanya, a fourth year Humanities student described the campus as “very isolating.” Fiona, a third-year biology student shared a similar sentiment, “When I look around and see no one who looks like me and a person we can share and connect our experiences, definitely you will feel that there is something that is missing.” This indicates that representation is felt at a visual level; students are acutely aware of their physical positionality on campus and how it contrasts the majority.

These findings also show that Black students are more prone to feeling isolated in spaces that lack representation. This outcome, which I call *sociocultural alienation*, occurs when a particular racial or ethnic group makes up a small proportion of the overall student body and experience isolation as a result. Fiona stated,

...to be Black on our campus... you have like 65k students and a very small percentage we are Blacks. So sometimes it's challenging because you cannot find a safe place to connect with other Black students because you are very few. And the fact that we are few- sometimes you feel isolated and alone because you don't have your own there. So that is a challenge.

Having racial or ethnic specific student groups such as the Black Student Union (BSU) and religious student groups mitigates this isolation. For example, Chris, a third-year student majoring in public health described his connection to the Christian student union,

There's such a huge family, we usually meet especially on the religious activities. I'm a Christian. So sometimes we meet, you know, in our unions, the Christian unions. We have so much connection that I can say that they have been part of what has kept me going. They've been such a good part of my education life here.

Similarly, Jordan, a first-year biology student recounted a positive experience with the BSU:

A lot of events that they held were like really great with like connecting with like not just Canadian Black Culture but also like because everyone there is also from like specific countries in Africa so they definitely share their cultures too. There are a lot of Nigerians there so that was also great cause I'm Nigerian myself. It was just really great because we had this like one event where- cause I was really missing food from home like, you know, jollof rice and all that stuff because I can't cook. And I had no way to get it.

Thus, when we consider this institution's lack of compositional diversity, specifically as it relates to Black representation on campus and in the faculty, it is evident that some students are

more prone to experiencing sociocultural alienation. This claim is well supported by the literature which shows that Black students who feel underrepresented on university campuses report higher dissatisfaction and feel more vulnerable to tokenization (Griffin et al., 2016). However, finding community in culturally familiar spaces such as racial, ethnic, and religious student groups mediated these negative mental health effects (Hardeman et al., 2016).

Three participants defied this trend. Imani, who emigrated from Uganda, attended a BSU event and felt out of place because she described the space as “mixed race”. As a result, Imani did not feel welcome since she did not think she had much in common with other attending members. This event was so off-putting to Imani and her friends that they decided not to “go to groups where there are so many Black people” because “it’s very hard to get close to them.” From this point forward, Imani strove to befriend individuals “outside of [her] race” but was ultimately unsuccessful as she did not feel that those interactions went beyond the surface level. Furthermore, while Imani consistently experienced micro-aggressions from her White counterparts, she expressed a longing for a friendship with them that felt unattainable and thus distanced herself from her own racial group throughout this process. We see this again with a third-year environmental science student, Faisal, who described the alienation he initially felt in a classroom as follows: “...everyone was looking at me weirdly. I don’t know if they have never seen a Black person...I couldn’t understand it. People were trying not to sit near me.” However, he follows this with stating that now he, “[has] a lot of White friends” and feels “a bit more comfortable in class.” When I asked him about the BSU, he replied, “I don’t like engaging in such stuff because sometimes I don’t want other people to feel that we’re segregating.” This pattern is inadequately theorized in the literature and points to a relationship between emigrating from an African country, experiencing alienation or prejudice, and engaging in racial distancing

as a protective strategy. When we compare these students' experiences, it is notable that one student was successful in his mission to befriend White students and experienced less discrimination as a result, while the other was unsuccessful and felt extremely alienated and socially isolated. This indicates that while many students are experiencing sociocultural alienation, not all students are finding comfort in culturally familiar spaces. In fact, these students went against the grain by distancing themselves from other Black students who they were unable to forge bonds with or were unwilling to join racial or ethnic specific groups which they assumed would be perceived as discrediting in the eyes of their White counterparts. This speaks to the heterogeneity of Black populations, seeing as for these students who have recently immigrated to Canada, attempting to assimilate into the majority by making White friends was their way of feeling less like outsiders. In the next section, I will describe how Black students are navigating behavioural dimensions at the university, specifically STEM environments.

### **3.2 Behavioural Dimension**

Hallie, a second-year student majoring in biochemistry, described her experience being Black in STEM, "Well, I try as much as possible to be among the best if I can say that. Being Black in such a major sometimes...is overwhelming and you really have that pressure that you just feel you need to work extra hard...." When I asked her to expand on where she thinks this pressure is coming from, she attributed it to her environment, classmates, and herself:

Well for me, the pressure is coming from my environment or the people I'm studying with- my classmates. And, again just from myself, from within- I just feel like I need to prove to these people that even Blacks can still be perfect in stuff and also in class.

Hallie draws a distinction between “these people”, (i.e., White counterparts), and Black individuals like herself to describe the distance she feels between the groups. Furthermore, her desire to prove her competence “even” as a Black person reveals that Hallie feels threatened by a preconceived notion of Blackness that disparages her role as a student. Similarly, Anya, a first-year student majoring in philosophy and computer science stated that she felt like she was “working under scrutiny” because of “what people [kept] saying about Black students.” Notice the parallels between what these participants report as their experiences in STEM environments. Both articulate feeling a distinct pressure to perform at their best in response to a predetermined stereotype of Black student that casts a shadow over their academic experiences. When I asked Anya to describe this stereotype to me in her own words, she stated that it was a mix between individuals claiming that Black students possess a “lower IQ” (a claim that originated from a professor), and that they are “lazy.”

I initially theorized this as imposter syndrome, or a feeling that an individual is engaging in a charade that will soon be discovered by their peers as inauthentic (Canning et al. 2020). However, in this case, what distinguishes the experience as something other than imposter syndrome is that these students do not have the opportunity to engage in such a “charade”; rather, they feel that they must disprove a stereotype to prove themselves as worthy to their professors and peers. For example, Anya stated, “Because I do remember, at some point I had a very challenging lab and I was one of the last people to get out like, to sign off, and I broke down like in front of my TA’s. And I guess it's because I was actually in the place where I was telling myself, I'm confirming that stereotype that we have a lower IQ.” Hallie reported feeling a similar pressure, “... many of the times I just have to spend extra hours studying and perfecting my knowledge and skills and theory and everything just to make sure I'm on par with the rest of the

people. I just want to make sure that I perfect everything so I work extra hard to prove myself that I can do this, no matter how things are and no matter where I am.” Both students feel immense pressure to perform at their best due to the perceived scrutiny of their classmates, which acts as a major stressor. These feelings are exacerbated by microaggressions from other students in the classroom. For example, Anya described feeling that her classmates were reluctant to sit with and interact with her in the classroom:

...I remember when I came to my first lab I was a bit late and I sat in the specific corner, and I did notice that people were bit spread out. But then as the year went by, I did notice that I ended up sitting in that corner alone like for the rest of the year. So it's things like that, that sometimes I sit down and I'm like, okay, maybe you're being paranoid, but I think it says a lot about how people are reluctant to interact with Black women. And for me like emotionally it can be a bit hard in a sense where I don't feel welcome.

Hallie reported multiple instances where her classmates would make racist jokes:

Well, I don't really like talking about them but.... even in class people just make some racist jokes. Or even outside in any social gatherings or something. So I'm never comfortable. I really don't know what people would do to me so [I'm] worried a lot [of the time].

Fiona stated that her classmates would often express disbelief when discovering how well she performed on her exams:

Being Black in biology... some of the students, especially in that one unit, they see you as if you're not supposed to be there. They see you as if you're in the wrong place, you

know? But the fact that I do my exams well, I pass my exams, they say ‘are you sure you're the one who does that or what?’ you know?

When we consider the fact that these students are forced to confront such an abundance of stressors, it is not surprising that negative mental health effects emerge. I call this *academic alienation*. Although characterized in the literature as a phenomenon that comes about when students feel powerless in the face of academic difficulty; my findings suggest that students’ perceptions of academic difficulty can be heightened due to their academic environment. Thus, the negative mental health effects that students experience in response to their treatment in the classroom should also be categorized as a form of academic alienation. These disparaging social interactions with peers and lecturers exacerbate students’ feelings of anxiety and hopelessness within a classroom setting which discourages them from participating in classroom activities and interacting with professors. For example, Chris, a third-year student majoring in public health expressed feeling a “different attitude” that lecturers adopted when communicating with Black students:

We were not many I think we were about 4. 1 dropped, so now we are about three of us. So it would feel that our lecturer back then, most of them were having a different attitude and, you know, attitude is something that you don’t need to be told that a person has a bad attitude towards you, negative attitude. So I could feel it and that’s made me to lose the connection with my lecturers which you know, limited the knowledge that I could tap from them because I was kind of intimidated, I had the fear to approach them to maybe guide me on one or two issues... I feel even after [the] class the attitude was kind of very, you know, demoralizing.

Here, we can see that the behavioural dimension is manifesting in three distinct ways. First, Black students are modifying behaviour in response to racial stereotypes that have been perpetuated by a faculty member. Second, Black students are having adverse social interactions with White students and faculty that is giving rise to negative mental health effects and feelings of academic alienation. Third, Black students are not being granted sufficient deference from instructors and are engaging in avoidance rituals to insulate themselves from experiencing further transgressions. This illustrates how Black students are forced to engage in strategic impression management that extends beyond that of their White counterparts due to hostile treatment in the classroom. These claims are well supported by the literature which shows that Black students' negative evaluations of campus climate is often due to instances of racism and discrimination (Lewis et al. 2021). This begs the questions: how are Black students responding to the negative mental health effects described? What are the specific coping mechanisms that they are employing whilst being forced to confront lack of representation, sociocultural alienation, and academic alienation? I will address these questions in the next section.

### **3.3 Psychological Dimension:**

Psychological dimension refers to the ways in which students are perceiving racial conflict and attitudes held toward individuals of a different race, ethnicity, or background. Furthermore, it accounts for the ways in which students are perceiving and managing racial conflict that they are experiencing themselves. Thus, in this section I will show that there are two ways that Black students are coping with the aforementioned circumstances: preventative and protective mechanisms. While the mechanisms here are akin to Goffman's protective and defensive practices in the sense that individuals engage in them to protect the social interaction,



the core difference is that the following mechanisms are psychosocial and are also intended to protect the mental health of the individual. Furthermore, although participants are enacting these mechanisms by modifying their behaviour in social interactions, these are both psychological processes. This is because participants are strategically choosing to manage their impressions after having negative experiences with their audience.

### *Self-Regulation as a Preventative Mechanism*

Preventative mechanisms are procedures that individuals use in order to keep themselves from engaging in harmful or negative behaviour. I distinguish self-regulation as a preventative mechanism as it is a conscious process that Black students engage in when interacting with their White counterparts and anticipating tensions or conflicts. Rather than stating their honest opinion and risk entering into a debate, these students censor themselves in an attempt to *prevent* instances that could lead to racism or discrimination. For example, Jordan described how she deliberates these matters when she is the only minoritized individual in a particular space: “Sometimes it's not the best idea to instigate conflict, which I have unfortunately, learned, especially during first year... So, I have to be careful about where and when I want to speak up because I have to understand like not, everyone is going to see what I'm talking about from my point of view.” Later in the conversation, Jordan adds that she was often dismissed in previous encounters with her university peers as being “the angry Black woman” during debates or arguments. Such experiences motivated her to modify her behaviours in the future when faced with a similar peer groups and situations. Similarly, Chris articulated what he described as “self-control” when discussing his interactions with “the Whites.” He described taking care not to overstep his relationship with them by giving them “respect” and trying “to avoid any argument even if [he] had different opinions on various matters.” Essentially, we can see how Black

students engage in behaviour that is self-regulatory in an attempt to prevent future encounters with discrimination.

### *Social Support and Minimization of Negative Experiences as a Protective Mechanism*

Protective mechanisms are behaviours or thought processes that students engage in to protect themselves from negative mental health effects. Most commonly, having strong social networks and other forms of social support such as family are highly protective against negative mental health effects. On campus, the BSU, as well as religious organizations, are groups where some students found belonging and community. Renata, a science student going into her second year, attributed her sense of community to the BSU and their events. She stated that it helped her feel “more in tune with the Black community.” However, this was not the case with every student that I spoke to, pointing to a need for more culturally responsive student groups and organizations on campus. For example, Imani, who is originally from Uganda, described feeling like she did not fit in to the BSU: “[I]t's a Black student union, but as Black students, we don't feel connected to the group, and I honestly don't think there are so many resources at [university] for Black students.” However, those who were unable to find community heavily depended on returning home to spend time with family and old friends. For the participants who lived out of country, this was especially transformative as they described coming back feeling “refreshed.” Therefore, the negative mental health effects they may have been experiencing before were temporarily relieved.

A significant psychosocial coping mechanism utilized by several participants was minimizing negative experiences in an attempt to protect themselves from negative mental health effects. For example, after discussing distressing instances of discrimination, Anya stated that she is “really trying to not feel sorry for [her]self.” Similarly, Chris warns that “if you're not

careful [experiencing discrimination] you can get depressed”, but that with time you are able to “get used to some of these challenges here and there.” This points to a larger pattern of emotional repression and a dismissal of significant events that impact mental health. Both participants simultaneously acknowledge and dismiss their experiences, indicating that it is something they cannot dwell on and must reconcile on their own. In repressing something, an individual consciously disregards or denies emotionally confronting an experience because they find the information too distressing or threatening to cope with at the current moment. Part of this stems from the fact that discrimination is regarded as an inherent part of the Black experience which we see when Chris describes discrimination as “common”, and Anya describes not wanting to be perceived as “weak” when asked if she tends to discuss these encounters with her peers. This points to a larger expectation that is placed on Black students to be strong and resilient in the face of discrimination, especially since it has become normalized in racialized communities (Brownlow 2022). As a result, being able to minimize these experiences and engaging in stringent emotional control is seen as inherently positive. However, the danger here is that although these participants express feeling that they have moved past an event or are trying to assume a different mindset, there have been few attempts to work through the aftermath of those events. Rather, the emphasis is placed on moving forward or allowing time to heal what they have experienced.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

Despite the abundance of research comparing the mental health experiences of Black and White students in the U.S. and U.K, there have been no sociological studies in the past decade conducted on Black students' mental health or perceptions of racial climate in a Canadian context. Motivated by the question, "How do interactions between students and negative mental health experiences affect Black undergraduate students' perceptions of campus racial climate?", I conducted in-depth interviews with Black students at a large, metropolitan university in Western Canada. Using elements of the racial climate model, I evaluated students' perceptions of racial climate on campus via the following dimensions: compositional, behavioural, and psychological. Overall, I found that while some students were able to acclimate and find community on campus, most of the students that I interviewed not only had a negative evaluation of the campus' racial climate but also reported experiencing negative mental health effects due to their experiences with White peers and faculty.

First, the institution's low compositional diversity, specifically Black representation on campus, resulted in some students experiencing sociocultural alienation and isolation. While this was mitigated for some students through racial and ethnic student groups or religious organizations, this was not the case for all participants. A surprising discovery was that a sub-section of students did not desire ethnic or racial salience and engaged in racial distancing which they thought would help them acculturate more readily into larger campus society. The concept of racial distancing is inadequately theorized in the literature and in need of further research, especially in the context of higher education (Jackson, 2010).

Second, the behavioural dimension that Black students are navigating on campus is fraught with racial tension, seeing as students feel the need to modify their behaviour in the face

of racial stereotypes. Furthermore, students are experiencing racism from both their peers and instructors which is detrimental to their mental health and academic performance. Since the behavioural and psychological dimensions are closely related to and reinforce one another, perceptions of the environment as hostile significantly shaped how students psychologically coped with these experiences (Griffin et al. 2012). Lastly, although Black students employed several protective, preventative, and coping mechanisms, this does not negate the fact that they are grappling with negative mental health outcomes that are perpetually impacting their quality of life.

The racial climate model was invaluable in helping me to categorize and subsequently evaluate students' nuanced experiences. However, this study highlights the ways in which the model must be expanded to account for the unique challenges and stressors that shape Black students' experiences and mental health outcomes. The behavioural dimension focuses on the social interactions between racial groups, as well as the nature and quality of those intergroup relations (University of Arizona, n.d.). While relations between majority and minority populations is an important aspect of how campus racial climate is evaluated, the behavioural dimension should also account for *within* group interactions. As seen in my findings, we should not assume that all Black students desire or find racial or ethnic salience on campus. In addition, we need to consider that within group tension can also create feelings of sociocultural alienation or isolation. Similarly, this applies to the psychological dimension, which solely accounts for how students are perceiving racial conflict and attitudes held towards individuals of a different race, ethnicity, or background (University of Arizona, n.d.). Based on my findings, I argue that we need to take this a step further by expanding the psychological dimension to include how students are perceiving and managing racial conflict that they are experiencing themselves.

Although this study is exploratory, it fills an important niche by centering the experiences of Black domestic and international students on Canadian campuses. However, my sample consisted primarily of international students who were more prone to experiencing significant negative mental health effects and racial microaggressions and thus were more prone to perceiving racial climate negatively. On the other hand, domestic students were more readily able to adapt to campus life, navigate institutional spaces and access strong support networks. Future research is needed on Black Canadian domestic students' evaluations of racial climate and mental health.

Overall, my study demonstrates that Black students' perceptions of racial climate is dependent on several factors, particularly as it relates to their positionalities and lived experiences. Black students are navigating spaces where they are largely underrepresented and encountering instances of everyday racism on campus and in the classroom. As a result, they are also experiencing negative mental health effects, forms of alienation and social isolation. This is significant and has important implications for educators, student affairs educators and other campus stakeholders. There is a need to (a) increase the number of Black students and Black faculty members so that students can see themselves represented in the student body and amongst their instructors, (b) rather than treating Black students as monolithic, institutions need to consider how to be culturally responsive when funding student groups and providing resources, and (c) prioritizing policies and education surrounding anti-Black racism on campus.

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## Appendix

### INTERVIEW GUIDE:

#### *Introductory script:*

Welcome, and thank you so much for setting aside the time to chat with me!

My name is Jada, and I am a first year MA student at UBC. I am conducting this research for my Master's thesis, and it is particularly important to me as I am deeply passionate about understanding what your unique experiences have been in higher education.

Did you have the chance to read through the consent documents I sent to you?

Do you have any questions about any of the details or processes described in the consent documents?

Your name and participation in this project will be kept completely confidential, and if I use any quotes or information from your interview it will be anonymized.

I don't anticipate that our conversation today will be harmful to your mental health but given how difficult the pandemic has been for many of us it's possible that you may feel anxious or stressed during the interview. I have a list of mental health resources that I'm emailing to you now, and I also want to emphasize that you have the right to decline to answer certain questions, to pause or take a break, and to end the interview at any time.

Our interview will take about an hour today, and I'll be recording and occasionally taking notes while you speak. **Is it alright if I turn on the recorder now?**

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

*Ok, I'd like to ask some questions about your university experience?*

2. Can you tell me about how you came to choose to come to UBC/York?
  - a. Thinking about this decision, do you feel like it was the right one?
  - b. Do you enjoy living in Vancouver/Toronto?
  - c. What are you majoring in? What is that like?
  - d. Have you changed majors since you've been here? Why?
3. Could you tell me a bit about what it's been like to be black on campus?
  - a. Do you feel connected to a black community on campus? In the city? Why or why not?
  - b. Thinking about the last time you felt black in a class, can you tell me about that experience? How did it feel? How does it feel telling me? Did you tell anyone else?

- c. Can you tell me about an experience on campus that made you aware of your racial identity?
  - d. Thinking about that experience within the context of your experience at university, is that common? Do you think other black students have similar experiences? Can you give me some examples?
4. Returning to the question about your major, what has your experience being black in STEM/Humanities been like? Are there other black students, and do you hang out with them?
- a. Why or why not?
    - i. Are there other ways that you find community?
    - ii. As a black student, do you feel represented in the faculty?

*For the next set of questions, I would like you to think about school and mental health.*

5. What would you say affects your mental health the most?
- a. Who do you feel you can go to for help?
    - i. Why or why not?
  - b. Who do you feel like you can't go to for help?
    - i. Why?
  - c. Have you been able to access mental health resources?
6. Is there anything else you'd like me to know about who you are or anything we've talked about today?