HASHTAG INTERVENTION: HOW #BLACKGIRLSRUN

IS MAKING "HEALTHY" GO VIRAL

by

FELICIA HARRIS

(Under the Direction of Elli Roushanzamir)

ABSTRACT

In 2009, Toni Carey and Ashley Hicks created *Black Girls RUN!* (BGR), a blog turned national running organization created to help tackle the growing obesity epidemic in the Black community. In recent years, BGR has proven to be an important cultural, social, and health phenomenon inspiring more than 100,000 women to hit the pavement. This dissertation explores the influence and appeal of BGR with various approaches, including a critical textual analysis of 1,062 Instagram posts tagged #blackgirlsrun. That analysis is combined with a broad cultural contextualization supported by ten qualitative interviews, participant observation, and auto-ethnography. Findings show that the daily use of #blackgirlsrun on social media has spurred a national dialogue on Black women's health issues and also generated a virtual health community where women can seek out information and support that spans across traditional barriers of distance and time. The various cultural and social practices occurring within the stream of #blackgirlsrun reinforce the role of evolving communication technology in community formation. The viral nature of the group's message demonstrates the importance of cultural relevance in promoting health and empowering target audience members to adopt new behaviors.

These findings suggest that *Black Girls RUN!* and the social media hashtag, #blackgirlsrun, have significant implications for the fields of mass communication and health promotion.

INDEX WORDS: Social Media, Instagram, *Black Girls RUN!,* Cultural studies, Critical textual analysis, Ethnography, Online community

HASHTAG INTERVENTION: HOW #BLACKGIRLSRUN IS MAKING "HEALTHY" GO VIRAL

by

FELICIA HARRIS

B.A., Columbus State University, 2010

M.A., The University of Georgia, 2012

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2015

© 2015

Felicia Lynne Harris

All Rights Reserved

HASHTAG INTERVENTION: HOW #BLACKGIRLSRUN IS MAKING "HEALTHY" GO VIRAL

by

FELICIA HARRIS

Major Professor:	Elli Roushanzamir
Committee:	Carolina Acosta-Alzuru
	Valerie Boyd
	James Hamilton
	Su-I Hou

Electronic Version Approved:

Julie Coffield
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2015

DEDICATION

To the glory and honor of God.

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, and not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward.

Colossians 3:23-24

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None of this would have been possible without the love and support of my son, Omari Matthew Allen, who has been a source of resiliency and strength. Son, I have endured because of your smiles and laughter; our movie nights; your sharing in my love of reading and writing and learning; always having a confidante in your toddler-esque ear; and your tiny hands wiping my tears while telling me everything was going to be okay. My degree – like everything else I am/have/earn – is as much yours as it is mine. Our lives will never be the same.

To my mother Glenda, my sisters Alison and Arica, and my "big brudder" Basil, I am forever grateful. You all have each been instrumental in my figuring out how to navigate this thing called life and to my pursuit of knowledge and personal growth. To my best friend, Stephanie Feely, words cannot express how you have contributed to my journey – just know that our friendship contract is etched in stone. I would also like to thank my colleagues/ friends/ "sista scholars"/ babysitters that became family during my time at The University of Georgia: Loren Saxton, Marcie McClellan, Michael Dale, Sherrelle Thorpe, Tamara Burke, Philip Badaszewski, Tonya Baker McPherson, Jillian Martin, Joan Collier, Jane Diener, Louis York, Jr., and many more. You have each made a significant impact on my life (and Omari's).

I will always be inspired by the brilliant group of scholars and writers who agreed to serve on my doctoral committee: Carolina Acosta-Alzuru, Valerie Boyd, James Hamilton, and Su-I Hou. Thank you for your guidance, wisdom, and encouragement.

Also, thank you for pulling me out of the rabbit holes of research and helping me stay focused on accomplishing what I feared to be impossible.

Of course, I must acknowledge and thank my chair, Elli Roushanzamir. I could not imagine where I would have ended up had I not ventured into your office on that emotional day during the first semester of my master's program. The knowledge, perspective, and self-esteem I have gained as a result of your mentorship have changed the trajectory of my life. With your guidance, I have become a better writer, thinker, teacher, and scholar. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

To the women of *Black Girls RUN!*: Thank you for sharing your runs, sweat, and tears. I have learned so much from your triumphs and challenges -- OUR triumphs and challenges -- and sought to tell our stories with the utmost care! Every post tagged #blackgirlsrun tells a story and every post matters. The narrative of #blackgirlsrun is touching lives every day, including mine. Thank you, thank you, thank you for sharing your stories with the world.

And last, but certainly not least, I acknowledge the giants on whose shoulders I stand – the revolutionaries, the activists, the pioneers, the martyrs, the outspoken, and the visionaries who were crazy enough to think that one day their actions would create opportunities for a black girl like me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

PROLOGUE

PushPushPush... Damnit, PUSH!

I'm silently screaming to myself as I come around the bend of the track. I'm about halfway through a 200m sprint and I'm in last place. To be honest, it's not a race, but I'm trailing about 15 yards behind the group and I can't help but feel like somewhat of a loser. I'm overweight, out of shape, and at the point of desperation. Last week, I tried (and failed at) a 48-hour juice cleanse. This week, I'm going back to running. It's my first time out for 5:30 a.m. speed drills with my new running club, the Athens Road Runners (ARR), and I desperately want to make the best of it. I keep pushing until I reach the finish line and stumble into a walk. Gulping for air, I raise my arms and envelope my hands behind my head to catch my breath.

***

My first encounter with the ARR was exactly what I'd expected it would be. I was at a local running store where the group hosts meet-ups and offers discounts when ARR members started filing in, greeting each other with warm hugs and excited chatter. The two employees at the store also appeared to be part of the group as they circulated around and played catch up with the crowd. After an awkward search for assistance, my friend asked an employee to help her find a shoe and he obliged. Meanwhile I stood perusing, feeling invisible. The small showroom was filled with ARR members but there was a bubble around me. They walked near me, around me, spoke over me, and beside me. This continued for about ten minutes or so, until the group filed back out for their run. The

other employee, now left behind in the empty store, suddenly noticed me. “Oh!,” she exclaimed looking surprised, “Do you need help finding a shoe?”

I joined the group anyway. The 20 percent discount on the shoes I bought that day was worth more than the cost of membership (and my pride), so it was the reasonable thing to do. As much as it pains me to say it, living in a northeast Georgia town like Athens often means feeling invisible if you’re a Black woman. It’s not always a matter of racism, but race and raced experiences tend to stick out like a sore thumb in certain parts of the South, and this was one of them. Furthermore, those experiences are amplified if you’re even remotely interested in matters of health, as Southern culture would lead us to believe that Black folks are more interested in the art of frying chicken than fitness. Most of the health and fitness related spaces you encounter are predominantly, if not completely, White, and it’s easy to find yourself questioning where you fit in. If you’re lucky, you’ll get a member’s discount that somehow mitigates your sense of not belonging.

As for camaraderie and social support from Athens Road Runners, I wasn’t betting on it. But, then again, my standards were high. At that time, I was knee deep in research on *Black Girls RUN!*, a group spawned by a blog dedicated to making fitness and healthy living a priority among Black women. Two of my close friends from graduate school introduced me to the BGR! movement during the final year of my master’s program and I was fascinated and motivated. BGR! was a running group designed specifically for me. In the months following my initial introduction to *BGR!*, and in lieu of a local chapter to join, I would often find myself perusing the blog or browsing Instagram and clicking ‘#blackgirlsrun,’ the hashtag that emerged from the

group's presence on various social media sites. I felt inspired to run, so I did. I bought my first pair of running shoes and hit the pavement. I ran for ten minutes, then twenty, then thirty. I jogged around the neighborhood, started hitting the treadmill, and ran my first road race. I lost 15 pounds and lowered my blood pressure. I'd hit the pavement at 7:30 a.m. feeling a kinship with my imaginary "sole sisters" across the nation.

As those months extended into the second year of my doctoral studies in communication, the steady physical progress I'd made contributed to my budding research interests in health promotion and technology. I believed that my transforming body was evidence that something magical was amidst: after years of battling weight gain and elevated blood pressure, I'd finally committed to healthy lifestyle changes. As a woman of color from a long line of shapely, curvy, and, in some cases, dangerously obese women, the significance of this feat was not lost on me. I set out to explore the myriad of practices fueling the appeal and influence of BGR!, operating on the hunch that the interactions I'd observed online could offer insight for promoting Black women's health and boosting behavior modification in meaningful ways.

What I'd learned was that, in addition to promoting health and fitness, BGR! enthusiasts were motivating and educating one another, collectively forming new identities and significantly transforming the narrative on fitness in the Black community. Social media was providing a space for these women to speak openly about their fitness experiences on their own terms, free from having the mainstream media or others define what their fitness journey was supposed to look like. In addition, social media's vast tagging and archiving functionality allowed women who were often in the minority, like myself, to access and join conversations with passionate others across the globe. And,

perhaps most significantly, the thousands of pictures of Black women on the track, lacing up, crossing a 5K finish line, or posing with BGR! running group members affirmed that the message and the movement was rooted IRL (in real life), and was not merely a viral uproar briefly making waves on the Internet. These were the revelations that I carried with me on the pavement and into the local running store that day.

However, as my research took off the amount of time I had to seek inspiration online dwindled. I had watched the weight creep back on and been alarmingly reminded that at the root of most successful social media movements is what happens offline. After beating myself up for weeks about my loss of motivation, I began to wonder if belonging to an actual running group would be the change that I needed. Many of the women whose efforts I had admired from behind a phone screen belonged to one of BGR!'s local running groups, which meant they had accountability partners and support systems that were tangible, not imagined like mine. As a result, weeks after joining the Athens Road Runners for a store discount, I found myself scanning the weekly digest for times and locations of the group's meet ups. Although I knew the chances of finding a "sole sister" in the ARR would be slim, I crawled out of bed at 5:30 a.m. that Wednesday and put on my running shoes anyway.

So, there I was, finally a part of a group. Minutes before, I had approached the small group of White women gathered under a lamp to introduce myself as an ARR member there to participate in the morning's speed workouts (there was no way I was going to let my presence be shunned after waking up at 5 a.m.). Then, in the heat of our second sprint, the distance between the group and me began to grow, and I found myself trailing in the back and mentally wielding my feet to keep moving. Every time I crossed

the finished line – last – at least one group member would lag behind to tell me I was doing great, or that the first time is always the toughest, or that they, too, had felt like throwing up their first time running sprints. Although I felt genuinely welcomed, I couldn't help but wonder how my experience would be different if I was at a BGR! group run instead. Would we be training as hard? Would I be running faster or slower? Would I be talking more or less? Would I be happier?

Within minutes after our last sprint, the entire group was gone. I stayed behind to stretch and reflect. The coach had awarded me the gold star of that morning's workout for not quitting and for pushing myself the entire time. I smiled as the sun rose from behind the bleachers. It hadn't turned out so bad. The next Tuesday, I contemplated setting my alarm for 5 a.m. to meet up with the ARR group, only to change my mind. Instead, I agreed to a 7:30 a.m. run with my friend who had been in the running store with me the day I joined ARR. She's a Black girl who runs, too.

***

The current state of rapid evolution in technology and media has several implications for health, wellness, and fitness in the United States. From crowdsourcing health on social media to wearable fitness technology, the extent of research on the intersection of health and technology makes one thing clear: the way we do health is changing radically. Perhaps the most radical implications lie in the potential ability of health and technology to close the gaps of health disparities that have existed for decades – to extend quality care into the homes of the elderly, create manageable treatment and tracking options for those living in poverty, or simply empower members of underserved

groups to make better health decisions through increased access to accurate health information and virtual social support.

As a communication scholar with an interest in health, I am thrilled. As a Black woman, I am ecstatic. For years, national and international health agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the United States Department for Health and Human Services (HHS) have named reducing racial and ethnic disparities in health as a top priority. Still, it's no secret that Black women find themselves confronting a disproportionate share of many life-threatening health risks.

An ecological approach to health and wellness reveals that Black women's vulnerability is the result of multiple factors ranging from the systemic effects of living in a society where race and gender impacts quality of life, to cultural attitudes and perspectives that shape understandings of health and wellness and their importance. My experiences offer an example of just how complicated the task of promoting and sustaining health can be for Black women. Despite my role as a researcher and self-proclaimed health enthusiast, I sometimes neglect my body and, while watching the scale go up and down, willingly turn my back on participating in healthy behaviors that I know could reverse my current hypertension diagnosis. I've received the pamphlets and had the talks with my doctor. I've read the studies and news stories. However, when I found myself trailing behind a group of runners that had once made me feel invisible, a hypertension diagnosis didn't matter so much. My membership in Athens Road Runners didn't work for me; but my virtual membership in *Black Girls RUN!* did.

This dissertation emerges from my personal experiences as a Black woman struggling to conquer the enigma of health and takes root in my systematic approach to knowledge as a trained researcher. Because there are various factors that contribute to how Black women perceive and understand health and fitness, the goal of this project is to explore how technological savvy, health promotion, and cultural contestation have combined to create the momentum behind *Black Girls RUN!*

Run.

It's the middle of the workday and I'm at the doctor's office. I hate everything about coming to the doctor. From never being called back at my actual appointment time to holding my breath on the scale and having a thermometer stuck in my mouth.

I hate having my blood pressure taken. And the disapproving eye that comes along with the reading. "You're way too young to have blood pressure this high," they say. So we try again. "Imagine you're at a beach relaxing with a cool breeze hitting your skin," the nurse says, "try closing your eyes and breathing deep." She tries again, switching the cuff to my left arm.

I feel tears welling up in my eyes. My mother has had high blood pressure my whole life, and quite possibly hers. A few years ago she was diagnosed with diabetes. My aunt recently had her second – or was it third – bypass surgery. My grandfather died of a massive heart attack. I can feel my blood pressure rising so I try to conjure a peaceful moment. For about two minutes, I'm standing on the steps of La Sacre Coeur looking over the Paris skyline. The cuff on my arm loosens and my pressure reads 152/91.

Hypertension. What does the word even mean? Is it some elaborate, medically appropriate way to say high blood pressure? Hyper. Tension. That sounds more like it. I'm a Black, single mother and I'm in a graduate program in a White college town where I have no family and a group of associates that I can count on one hand. I think it's safe to say that my tension is hyper right about now.

My primary physician walks in with a fistful of pamphlets and starts "the talk." I need to watch my sodium. I should stay away from sugary beverages and drink more water. I could substitute meat in my meals once or twice a week. Have I ever tried baking salmon? Have I changed my mind about the prescription? Have I ever thought about running?

My mind flashes to Milledge Ave., the street where you're guaranteed to see a fit white girl running at any time of day. I once saw a girl running at night – in the pouring rain. Nope, I tell my doctor, it hasn't crossed my mind.

A few weeks later I stumble upon a satirical e-card circulating online. It reads: "It's not that diabetes, heart disease and obesity runs in your family. It's that no one runs in your family."

I pull out my computer and start searching for running tips.

CHAPTER ONE

IT'S MORE THAN SOCIAL, IT'S CULTURAL

I have a family history of diabetes. My mom's diabetic, my grandmother, my great grandmother. So, I was like, I'll give this running thing a shot. I always tell people I've been running from diabetes ever since.
Ashley Hicks
Co-founder of *Black Girls RUN!*

Month after month, health magazines and online forums tout benefits of running and provide readers with how-to guides for improving form, quickening pace, and strengthening endurance. Although the benefits of running are the same today as they were decades ago, the appeal of these stories continues to increase, particularly in the United States, where more than a third of adults are obese. According to the Centers for Disease Control, obesity in the U.S. dramatically increased from 1990 – 2010, and is now at epidemic proportions.[1] This makes it possible for health magazines to recycle articles and slideshows with titles akin to "6 Reasons to Start Running."[2] These features, and the images of fit bodies that accompany them, serve to suggest that, in addition to being easy and affordable to start, running is almost unsurpassed in the realm of health benefits. For example, in the article mentioned above, the writers at *Women's Health* revealed that running potentially burns more calories than most gym room equipment, increases weight loss, gives your bones a boost, helps reduce stress, prevents disease, and gives you a better chance at living longer.[3] Looking back at my visit to the doctor, I bet my physician was wondering how, with all the available information about the benefits of running, I

had never considered taking up the sport to combat the prognosis bringing me to tears of frustration in his office.

In part, running didn't appeal to me because messages about running are not designed to appeal to me. Therefore, I've never felt compelled to pay attention to them. To demonstrate, in the early stages of this research project I took a few minutes to browse the magazine aisle during a trip to the grocery store. While there, I picked up copies of *Women's Health* and *Women's Running* magazines. Page after page, I searched for – and failed to find many – images of women of color. The results of my loosely structured content analysis were discouraging and reminded me of my initial gut reaction to the word 'run' at my doctor's office. There were only White women running in my neighborhood and there were only White women on the pages of those magazines. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who found it hard to believe that living a healthy lifestyle as a runner was something I could, or should, do.

Outside of my grocery store browsing, several studies have provided evidence that Black women in the United States are not typically presented with relatable or positive health messages in mainstream media. Researchers in the early 2000s found that, when compared to mainstream magazines, magazines targeting Black women have fewer health-promoting messages and more messages that promote unhealthy behaviors, such as smoking or alcohol consumption, in their pages. Moreover, in general, Black faces in magazines are more likely to appear in advertisements of products that promote unhealthy behaviors than White faces.[4] It should come as no surprise, then, that some Black women believe public health campaigns neglect race as an important factor in

making health decisions and that messages in the media do not target them or fail to engage with the cultural nuances of their lives.[5]

The nuances of my upbringing taught me that I was small, and for what little curves I had (compared to the 200-pound-plus women who surrounded me) I was to be admired, not admonished. The history of heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes in my family led me to believe that there was little to be done about my impending diagnosis; it was a matter of when, what doctor, and what water pill I'd be taking for the rest of my life. Sadly, this appears to be a common truth for many families in the United States, and especially in the South, where the obesity rate of 30.2 percent reflects the highest prevalence of obesity in the nation.[6] Black southerners are fairing even worse: 39 percent of non-Hispanic Black adults in the South report being obese, the highest prevalence of self-reported obesity when compared to any other ethnicity group.[7] The result is an overwhelming occurrence of deadly chronic diseases. When it comes to heart disease, the numbers are raging. Blacks in the United States are 29 percent more likely to die from heart disease than non-Hispanic whites. In particular, Black women are 1.6 times as likely as non-Hispanic White women to be obese and have higher risk factors for cardiovascular disease than White women of comparable socioeconomic status.[8] When poor health outcomes become the norm, it's easy to ignore or be ignorant about the damage they cause. That is, until your physician walks into the room with a fistful of pamphlets.

According to Ashley Hicks, this is how many Black women find their way to the website for *Black Girls RUN!* (BGR!), an organization she co-founded in 2009 with her sorority sister, Toni Carey. At the time, Ashley and Toni made a pact to make healthy

lifestyle changes, one of which included running. After running several road races the duo began to notice that they were often two of only a few Black women participating. Concerned about the implications of this trend, they decided to blog about it. In April 2009, Ashley posted: "Black girls run? Of course we do. The goal of our blog is to provide a community and inspiration for black women who run and encourage more black women to run."[9] That October, as the blog begin to grow in popularity, BGR! was featured by *Clutch*, an online magazine for Black women. The brief article highlighted that Ashley and Toni founded *Black Girls RUN!* "with hopes of dispelling rumors that African-American women don't run."[10]

This dissertation is a result of my experiences with and interest in BGR!'s notable impact on the health and wellness of thousands of Black women. The seeds of this project were planted in the summer of 2013, when I chose *Black Girls RUN!* as the object of study for a course in social network analysis. One of my assignments was to use NodeXL (an open-source add-in developed by the Social Media Research Foundation to collect, analyze, and visualize complex social networks) to create a visual display mapping the relational processes of social media users connected in a social network determined by a search phrase or hashtag.[11] Specific actions that NodeXL visually maps are when one user follows another or directs a comment to them. Similarly, likes and comments under the same thread on Facebook create a connection between two users, as does retweeting, favoriting, or replying to a Twitter user's status update. At that time, BGR! had just over 70,000 fans on Facebook and the hashtag #blackgirlsrun was being used several times per day on Twitter. I expected the visual map of the hashtag on Twitter to reveal a thriving network of nodes with ties in multiple directions, place-based hubs, and an overall close

and highly reciprocal community of Black girl runners. Instead, I found a loosely connected network of influencers (mostly publications and high-profile Twitter users mentioning BGR!'s official account) and several disconnected outliers appearing as tiny dots in individual circles scattered across the screen [Appendix A]. The course's instructor and I were baffled; why would a hashtag be so popular when its users did not appear to connect with each other?

In an attempt to answer this question I sought to learn about the functions of Internet tagging. I wanted to learn more about the history of tagging on the Internet and the various motivations Internet users had for doing so. The hashtags #blackgirlsrun and #bgr were being used daily to facilitate an ongoing conversation about Black women's health on social media sites. However, looking at the visual map of unconnected nodes I had a hunch that, for this particular group of women, using #blackgirlsrun was about more than merely joining an online conversation. My hunch was based on the gut reaction I had when I first encountered the hashtag in one of my social media feeds. What caught my attention about this movement, aside from the fact that my friends were going for a run without me, was the story being told by the tag, the one that reassured me Black girls do indeed run. Immediately, I wanted to use that hashtag because, as a Black woman, I felt it was created specifically for me. I also wanted to use it because it linked me directly to thousands of other Black women whom I aspired to emulate. And, lastly, because it makes other people sit up and take notice.

Between the mystery of the unconnected dots in the #blackgirlsrun visualization and my intuitive hunch, I knew further investigation into the viral nature and impact of *Black Girls RUN!* would require more than a social network analysis of a hashtag. The

goal of this research is to explore the various components that contribute to the momentum of this movement and to highlight how those components are successful in promoting healthy behaviors to Black women.

Indeed, there are social practices specific to social media and online communities that have contributed to this movement's success. Online photo- and video-sharing; the use of captions; the construction of tags; and virtual relationships enacted through friending, following, commenting, or liking are just a few ways that BGR! members use social media to share and promote their health experiences. However, those practices are underpinned by the Internet's ability to bypass barriers of time and space, and allow Black women to connect and empower each other through the depth and authenticity of sharing their lived experiences. The rapid spread of #blackgirlsrun is predicated on Black women infusing new, media-driven and social practices with long-standing cultural practices, making this phenomenon a notable case to explore.

The answer to my initial question about the widespread use of #blackgirlsrun amongst seemingly unconnected users is a multifaceted one. It calls for critical inquiry into the social and cultural aspects of social media utility, community formation, and health promotion – in this study, three inseparable pieces of one complex whole. Thus, this research is guided by theory from multiple fields including health behavior change theory, British cultural studies, and Black feminist thought. In the following sections, I introduce theory to connect *Black Girls RUN!* and #blackgirlsrun with the themes of this project: health promotion and cultural contestation?

Promoting Health in Black Women

Undeterred by the peculiar nature of *Black Girls RUN!*'s seemingly unconnected social network, the reach and impact of the group's grassroots health campaign can not be ignored. BGR! member stories and before-and-after photos are continuously highlighted by the mainstream media as part of a successful health movement for Black women, deemed an at-risk group because of their disproportionate experiences with preventable disease, death, and disability when compared to other groups.[12] Due to their at-risk status, Black women are often the target of many public health campaigns and interventions. However, few have achieved the level of reach and sensationalism of *Black Girls RUN!* Research has revealed that despite being more likely to be obese and overweight than their counterparts, African Americans were less likely to participate in physical activity.[13] Thus, BGR!'s achievements and unique approach to promoting health in Black women merit further exploration.

Traditionally, public health campaigns are defined as "an effort to persuade a defined public to engage in behaviors that will improve health or refrain from behaviors that are unhealthy."[14] When it comes to BGR!, the defined public and healthy behavior is clear: get Black girls running. Typically, these campaigns follow a top-down model that includes defining the problem, setting objectives, identifying target audiences, developing message strategies and tactics, selecting communication channels, implementing the campaign, and evaluation.[15] What's unique about BGR!'s health campaign is the co-founders' bottom-up approach to public engagement: the duo became keenly aware of a prominent health issue within their community and set out to address that issue by talking about health with other Black women via social media.

Although BGR! offers a noteworthy campaign, health communicators have not been out of the loop when it comes to using communication technology to promote health. Health communication helps people change behaviors by enabling them with the knowledge, skills and self-beliefs to take charge of their health.[16] Advances in communication technology have expanded the scope and reach of health promotion programs, especially for population-based approaches. To bolster health promotion efforts, researchers use media to share information about and model personal changes, and to link participants to social networks and community settings where they receive guidance, support, and incentives for changes.[17] When it comes to adapting health behaviors, such as smoking cessation or beginning a new exercise program, research has revealed that social support and guidance can increase long-term success. However, while there is much hope for the future of interactive Internet-based programs and interventions in health promotion, these systems are only useful for those who make use of what these systems have to offer.[18] Unfortunately, many Black women agree that health messages targeted toward them miss the mark.[19] In addition, many minorities report not trusting that participating in health programs will benefit people of color, but will benefit whites instead.[20] Thus, communicating with each other is an essential method by which Black women learn about health and develop health behaviors.

Learning from a community of peers is a concept that is well developed in health promotion research. Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) posits that the likelihood of an individual changing their health behavior is influenced by a combination of personal and environmental factors.[21] On a personal level, an individual must have the knowledge, skills and confidence to complete the behavior. However, an individual's environment is

a key factor in influencing their decision to start or repeat a behavior. As an example, an individual's self-efficacy can be strengthened or weakened based on their surroundings. A person who chooses to take up running may leave their first road race feeling empowered or reluctant to continue running dependent upon how they felt they performed at the race, or even how others around them performed in relation to them.

The previous example is simple, but Social Cognitive Theory is a dynamic process that includes many constructs including observational learning, whereby individuals learn through observing the behaviors or experiences of credible others; and reinforcements, rewards that individuals receive from others or give themselves for completing a behavior.[22] When applied to health research, SCT exposes health as a social issue, and not just a personal one. According to Albert Bandura, SCT extends the notion of human agency to collective agency, thus becoming a community matter.[23] As a result, the approaches that work best to create social change in regards to health are community-focused and community-driven.[24] The impact of BGR!'s community can be observed in physical and online spaces, situating the case of *Black Girls RUN!* at the crux of media studies and health promotion research.

Learning from successful community programs is one way that researchers can overcome dissemination hurdles for health promotion. Identifying successful components of community-developed programs and determining the contexts in which they work can contribute to theory development.[25] This includes understanding the social and cultural contexts of successful programs. Although BGR!'s development has followed some steps of a traditional health campaign, not operating within the parameters of agency- or institution-driven (top-down) campaigns has made it difficult to gauge the successful

components of the movement or its potential for replication. This dissertation is an attempt to rectify this dilemma. In the following sections, I introduce the theoretical framework for this dissertation and connect the framework with the themes of this research.

The Complexities of BGR! Nation

Since 2009, *Black Girls RUN!* followers have set about fashioning themselves after the group's namesake and the women they encounter and learn from online: they are on the quest to become Black girls who run. As of January 2014, BGR! had more than 69 running groups with 50,000-plus members meeting in 30 states.[26] Like me, many of the women who make up the running groups found themselves at the brink of health and death, and their physicians' warnings sent them to the Internet searching for a way to take action sooner rather than later.[27]

Today, blackgirlsrun.com continues to be a resource for women at any level of running. The site provides visitors with race training guides, strength training circuits, tips on fashionable running gear, and advice about managing Black hair which, the co-founders will share, is an important topic for the BGR! community. Since the blog's launch in 2009, the organization has made great strides online and on the pavement. In 2011, BGR! launched a series of running groups across the nation that were free to join and completely volunteer driven. In 2012, the group hosted the inaugural Sweat With Your Sole conference and race, bringing hundreds of Black women to Atlanta, Ga., for a weekend of health education and physical activity. The group also initiated the Preserve the Sexy Tour, an annual series of one-day pit stops across the United States with a

thematic focus on health, fitness, and running education. However, the foundation of the organization's movement is firmly rooted in its members' use of social media.

With the growing success of BGR! running groups, it is evident that the group's online community contributes to offline numbers. The organization's Facebook page has more than 144,000 fans and its Twitter account has more than 22,000 followers.[28] On YouTube, the BGR! channel has 48 videos and 545 subscribers; however, a YouTube search of the phrase "black girls run" yields just over 3,200 fitness vlogs, interviews and other videos related to their mission.[29] On Instagram, the mobile photo and video-sharing social network that launched in October 2010, BGR! has more than 11,000 followers, and a search for the hashtag #blackgirlsrun yields more than 57,000 pictures where users have tagged their photos to be included in its stream, not including the several variations of the hashtag, such as #blackgirlsrunatlanta, #blackgirlsrundallas, #blackgirlsrundc, or #blackgirlsrunchicago.[30]

The sheer magnitude of BGR!'s online presence offers plenty of data for the social network or health promotion researcher. However, as mentioned earlier, the type of data collected through a social network analysis would not provide the appropriate evidence to address my initial thoughts about the appeal and influence of this movement. I have chose to situate my research in British cultural studies, a critical intellectual movement developed by scholars at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) whose work is positioned around the complex nature of 'culture' as converging interests of historical, social, and political processes.[31] As James Carey reflects, "to study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used."[32]

Culture, like community, is a word of many interpretations. In this project, I'm using a social definition offered by Raymond Williams, in which culture is "a description of a particular way of life" that expresses certain meaning through a variety of practices.[33] The term 'cultural practices' refers to the process by which everyday events are infused with shared cultural values that shape our ideas and social relationships.[34] For culturalists, relationships between elements and social practices, such as communication, cannot be parceled out for examination, but should be investigated as parts of a whole way of life. In thinking about cultural studies, Stuart Hall explains:

> It prefers the wider formulation – the dialectic between social being and social consciousness: neither separable into its distinct poles [...] It defines 'culture' as both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they 'handle' and respond to the conditions of existence; *and* as the lived traditions and practices through which those 'understandings' are expressed and in which they are embodied.[35]

Williams argues "the analysis of culture is the attempt to discover the nature of the organization which is the complex of these relationships."[36] According to Williams, culture expresses meanings and values not only in art and learning, but also through institutions and ordinary behaviors.[37] Stuart Hall explores many activities, such as one's choice of dress or leisure pursuits, as ways that individuals within 'a culture' respond to "the problems posed for them by their material and social class position and experience."[38] In addition to participation in *Black Girls RUN!* place-based groups, this research considers the practices that occur within BGR!'s online communities (uploading images, writing captions, friending or following others, and liking or commenting on pictures and videos) as part of the culture of BGR! and a means by which the group's members are responding to and reflecting on experiences surrounding their health.

Viewing media as practice allows us to discuss phenomena like "digital revolutions" in the context of how individuals use media to fuel change. For example, Twitter has emerged as a social networking platform with several distinct practices, among which include a means of unauthorized commentary by high-profile individuals, maintaining online presence for celebrities, and sharing commentary or information pertaining to a certain topic (using hashtags) for other site users. Identifying the multiple uses of Twitter pushes the focus from what the newer medium is for to how the medium is being used.[39] A practice approach to media studies also allows researchers to examine practices that are related, but not specific, to any form of media. Likewise, media as practice brings into view the role of practice in systems of power, such as allowing those without representation to tell stories about themselves.[40] Often, groups who find themselves on the opposite ends of power find ways to express their subordination and experience in their culture.[41] Black women have a long-standing history of using communication practices to sustain acts of resistance and a sense of self-identification that predates, but has been transformed by, today's newer media forms. This is the act that the founders of *Black Girls RUN!* were performing when they first started blogging in 2009, and that Black women continue by sharing details of their own health experiences online.

A Radical Contextualization of *Black Girls RUN!*

Like the creators of blogs and online publications similar to *Clutch*, Ashley and Toni used the Internet as a space for taking the narrative of Black women's experiences into their own hands; in this case, on the subject of Black women's health experiences.

The launch of blackgirlsrun.com fell in line with a centuries-old tradition of Black women using communication practices to resist the intersecting oppressions resulting from marginalized positions of race, gender, and class. As early as the nineteenth century, Black female orators spoke out against slavery from behind podiums and audience members would take the message back to their kitchen tables and churches to share with family and friends. As more Black women became competent readers and writers, they started to pen novels and songs that their counterparts would share with each other and their daughters, giving voice to unnegotiated truths of black womanhood. In her essay, "The Power of Self-Definition," Patricia Hill Collins details how these practices occur in "safe spaces," socially constructed spaces – institutional sites such as churches, community settings, or within the context of written words – where Black women are able to speak freely to one another and question the legitimacy of widely circulated ideology about their lives.[42]

Jacqueline Bobo argues that Black women's writing tradition can be viewed as a product of the mishandling of Black women's experiences by mainstream media. She cites Hortense Spillers' notion of Black women writers as a "community of 'cultural workers'" seeking to create works more in line with their experiences and history. For these women, the goal of their writing is to build a community of Black women conscious of themselves, and to create new symbolic values and a sense of empowerment for its members. This has also been demonstrated by the efforts of Ashley and Toni, whose blog has grown to encompass an online community of Black women that span across the Internet on social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest.

For many of BGR!'s members and followers, stumbling upon the duo's blog or a BGR! blurb on social media may have been their first encounter with health messages in a context that resonated. According to a few of *Clutch's* readers, Ashley and Toni's blog filled a void that addressed rumors permeating society. In the comments below *Clutch's* story on BGR!, one reader commented: "Thank you!!! I have been looking for a great website, for women of color who exercise, or wanna stay fit!! Especially in the age of "body magic" and quick fixes."[43] Another reader posted: "The whole thing about Black women not exercising because of our hair can finally be laid to rest!"[44]

The growth of *Black Girls RUN!* and the widespread use of #blackgirlsrun online demonstrates how social media have emerged as the podiums and kitchen tables of contemporary conversations, where powerful messages delivered via compelling images, videos, and captions are rapidly shared and discussed on the web. For example, hashtags on Twitter, a micro-blogging social network that allows users to post blurbs of 140 characters or less, are used to join conversations with a larger audience than one's own followers.[45] A trek further into the history of Internet tagging reveals that tags perform a multitude of functions. In 2007, a team of researchers conducted an in-depth qualitative study to identify users' motivations for tagging photos on online photo-sharing sites. They developed a two-dimensional scale across which users tag photos. The two dimensions were *sociality* (to share or convey information about the photo to themselves or others) and *function* (to organize and retrieve photos pertaining to a topic at a later time).[46]

Critical scholars have added to the literature on Internet tagging, noting how the construction of tags allows Internet users to engage in cultural practices online, such as

performing racial identity, participating in cultural exchange, and community formation.[47] Ashley, Toni, and BGR! enthusiasts have had no issue with asserting that the social, and cultural, function of #blackgirlsrun is to counter the misguided belief that Black women need not concern themselves with issues of health and wellness or physical activity less than women of other ethnic groups. In addition, the functional aspects of the tag include archiving an ongoing, and otherwise missing, cultural exchange about Black women's health and connecting members of BGR!'s online community. As part of the overarching goal of this project, this research explores how Black women are engaging with new media conventions, such as collaborative web pages, online groups, and hashtags to continue the tradition of entering spaces where they can "observe the feminine images of 'larger' culture, realize that these models are at best unsuitable and at worst destructive to them, and go about the business of fashioning themselves after the prevalent, historical black female role models in their own community."[48]

Exactly what constitutes a community has been a developing conversation in recent years, specifically with the rise in popularity of interactive communication technology resulting in what some have come to call a shrinking world. Geographical distances "shrink" as global connectivity increases and those distances are no longer socially significant.[49] Unlike the Black women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women today have several avenues through which communities form and are supported. In reflecting on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson introduced the concept of an "imagined community," a symbolic formation through which individuals imagine their relation to others.[50] In this construct, communities are imagined because the members don't have to know or even meet each other to form a strong communal bond. In fact,

Anderson states that often times even members of the smallest groups "will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives their communion."[51]

Anderson posits that communication is a central tenet in the formation of communities, as it is by way of communication that members come to imagine one another and envision themselves as part of a group. Historically, writings such as the novel and newspaper were catalysts for imagining that contributed to the rise of the nation-state.[52] The emergence of print not only circulated common ideas and beliefs, but allowed individuals to think of themselves in relation to thousands or millions of others: readers were aware that the ceremonial act of reading was being simultaneously replicated by others, even if they did not know who they were.

Anderson's concept of community formation has often been applied to the influence of the early Black press. The arrival of Black newspapers in the first half of the 19th century gave readers the ability to imagine themselves as part of a collective for the first time: a nation within a nation.[53, 54] In a manner that echoes the ways print media contributed to the early spread of Black nationalism, social media platforms have been credited with sparking critical cultural conversations for Black users and creating conscious global Black communities. These virtual communities transcend place-based limitations and nurture social relationships based on shared characteristics such as occupation, hobbies, or shared interests.

However, while social media conventions allow users to communicate with and imagine each other, some culturalists argue that Anderson's stance of imagination as a key component of community may be oversimplified, especially as it applies to users of

the Internet.[55] According to Susan Clerc, participants in online communities do more than merely imagine each other; they exchange social information, create group-specific meanings, negotiate group-specific identities, and build relationships.[56] These sorts of communal activities can be found in online forums, web pages, blogs, and social networking sites.[57] Still, Anderson's concept of imagination remains relevant to online communities, as active participation is not a requirement of visiting and engaging with content in online spaces, or of identifying with an online community.[58]

In sum, computer-mediated communication and Internet use occurs within contexts of larger social, political, economic, and cultural processes that influence social interactions. Thus, studying online communities requires "a radical contextualism," a contextualism that moves beyond examining cultural practices performed on the Internet as simply texts, but considers the shifting consequences of media and communication on history, culture, and power.[59] The goal of this research is to radically contextualize *Black Girls RUN!* and the practices in online and offline spaces that contribute to the movement's notable reach and impact. This includes a thorough cultural analysis of the texts and practices inherent in the group's online community and critical inquiry into the shared cultural values that influence members' understandings of those texts and practices.

Chapter Summary

This chapter establishes the significance of *Black Girls RUN!* and use of #blackgirlsrun as an important social, cultural, and health movement. It began with a detailed description of the nation's current obesity epidemic and the particularly harsh

toll it's had on the health outcomes of Black women. Then, it relays Black women's lack of trust in health information and messages that target them, and explains why a community of peers, such as BGR!, is important for promoting health behaviors and health education to Black women.

This chapter illustrates why social network analysis was not appropriate to understand the momentum of BGR!'s movement and grassroots health campaign, and why the evaluation tactics of traditional health promoting models would not suffice either. I identified Social Cognitive Theory as a framework through which BGR!'s success in promoting health behaviors in online communities could be explained. The theory posits that individuals set expectations and goals that influence their behavior choices based on a community of their peers. In this case, the community rests on an essential online presence that is shaped by habitual practices.

Next, I introduced British Cultural Studies as a useful guide for interpreting the social practices of BGR! as an expression of culture. A practice approach allows media researchers to examine practices that are related, but not specific, to any form of media. A practice approach also allows researchers to determine what media are being used *for*, providing a much deeper understanding than merely asking *how* media are being used. The connections between community and practice led to the inclusion of Black Feminist Thought, a school of thought that explores acts of resistance performed by Black women through ordinary behavior, such as singing, reading, and writing. Black Feminist Thought contributes to the historical context of this study by detailing the purposes of Black women's communication practices predating the arrival of social media and groups like

Black Girls RUN! Turning a critical eye toward BGR!'s use of social media for health promotion, I intend to tell one story of *Black Girls RUN!*

In the next chapter, "A Community of Practice(s)," I outline the blend of approaches and methods I took to studying the BGR! community and the interpretation and writing process I used to present my findings. In my third chapter, "Let's Take a Selfie!" I perform a textual analysis of the #blackgirlsrun community on the popular social media platform Instagram. Next, in "A Changed Consciousness," I place the group's use of social media in the context of prominent shared cultural values of BGR! community members. I conclude this project with a discussion of the implications of this research for media studies, health professionals, and members of marginalized groups.

Notes

[1] "Adult Obesity Facts," Center for Disease Control, accessed February 1, 2014, www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html.

[2] Amy Van Deusen, "6 Reasons to Start Running," *Women's Health*, March 22, 2013, accessed February 1, 2014, www.womenshealthmag.com/fitness/health-benefits-of-running.

[3] Van Deuson, "6 Reasons to Start Running"

[4] Susan Duerksen et al, "Health disparities and advertising content of women's magazines: a cross-sectional study," *BMC Public Health* (2005).

[5] Jennifer Vardeman-Winter, "Confronting Whiteness in Public Relations Campaigns and Research with Women," *Journal Of Public Relations Research* 23, no. 4 (October 2011): 412-441.

[6] "Adult Obesity Facts."

[7] "Adult Obesity Facts;" "Obesity among Non-Hispanic Blacks," Center for Disease Control, retrieved January 13, 2015, http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/table-non-hispanic-black.html

[8] "Health Status of African American Women," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, accessed February 1, 2014, minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?ID=3723.

[9] Ashley Hicks, "About," Black Girls RUN!, April 19, 2009, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/about/.

[10] Jaida McKie, "Black Girls RUN!," *Clutch Magazine,* October 19, 2009, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2009/10/black-girls-run/

[11] "About us," Social Media Reasearch Foundation, accessed January 13, 2015, from http://www.smrfoundation.org/about-us/.

[12] Lu Ann Aday, *At risk in America: the health and health care needs of vulnerable populations in the United States,* (San Francisco : Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001) 3-7.

[13] "Obesity and African Americans," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, last modified October 15, 2013, accessed November 21, 2014, http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=25.

[14] Jeffrey Springston, "Public health campaign," in *Encyclopedia of public relations,* ed. R. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 670-674.

[15] Springston, *Public health campaign,* 670.

[16] Albert Bandura, "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means," *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 143-164.

[17] Bandura, *Health Promotion*, 149-150.

[18] Bandura, *Health Promotion*, 149-150.

[19] Vardeman-Winter, *Confronting Whiteness,* 420.

[20] Sheba George, Nelida Duran, and Keith Norris, "A Systematic Review of Barriers and Facilitators to Minority Research Participation Among African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders," *American Journal Of Public Health* 104, no. 2 (2014): e16-e31.

[21] Barbara K Rimer and Karen Glanz, "Theory at a glance: a guide for health promotion practice," 2nd ed, National Cancer Institute (2005).

[22] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a glance*.

[23] Bandura, *Health Promotion,* 159.

[24] Bandura*, Health Promotion,* 162.

[25] Robin L, Miller and Marybeth Shinn, "Learning from communities: overcoming difficulties in dissemination of prevention and promotion efforts," *American Journal Of Community Psychology* 35, no. 3-4 (June 2005): 169-183.

[26] Black Girls RUN!, "About BGR!," *Black Girls RUN!,* accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/about_bgr/.

[27] Ashley Hicks and I had an in-depth conversation about BGR! and its members while preaparing for a conference presentation. The conversation was not recorded but extensive notes were taken and I also reflected on the meeting in my research journal.

[28] *Black Girls RUN!* Facebook page, accessed March 3, 2014, https://www.facebook.com/BlackgirlsRUN; *Black Girls RUN!* Twitter account, accessed March 3, 2014, http://twitter.com/blackgirlsrun.

[29] *Black Girls RUN!* profile on YouTube, accessed March 3, 2014, http://youtube.com/user/blackgirlsrun.

[30] *Black Girls RUN!* Instagram profile, accessed November 12, 2014, http://instagram.com/officialblackgirlsrun.

[31] Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies: Two paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2(1980): 58-59.

[32] James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication," *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society,* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989),17.

[33] Raymond Williams, "The analysis of culture," in *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader*, ed. John Storey, (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006): 35.

[34] Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi, *On the case* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 7.

[35] Hall*, Two Paradigms,* 63

[36] Williams, *Analysis of Culture,* 35

[37] Williams, *Analysis of Culture, 35.*

[38] Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, Psychology Press, 1993.

[39] Nick Couldry, "Theorising Media as Practice," *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 2 (August 2004): 115-132.

[40] Couldry, *Media as Practice*, 115-132.

[41] Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance through rituals,* 12.

[42] Patricia Hill Collins, "The power of self-definition," in *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 97-122.

[43] Mz C, comment on Jaida McKie, "Black Girls RUN!," *Clutch Magazine,* October 19, 2009, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2009/10/black-girls-run/comment-page-1/#comment-29311.

[44] BlackBetty, coment on Jaida McKie, "Black Girls RUN!," *Clutch Magazine,* October 19, 2009, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2009/10/black-girls-run/comment-page-1/#comment-29330.

[45] Tamara Small, "What the hashtag?," *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 6 (September 2011): 872-895.

[46] Morgan Ames and Mor Naaman, "Why we tag," proceedings of *The SIGCHI Conference: Human Factors In Computing Systems* (April 28, 2007): 971.

[47] Andre Brock, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (October 2012): 529-549.

[48] Patricia Hill Collins, "The Power of Self-Definition," 113.

[49] Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, "Global Generations and the Trap of Methodological Nationalism For a Cosmopolitan Turn in the Sociology of Youth and Generation," *European Sociological Review* 25, no. 1 (February 2009): 25-36.

[50] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 25-36.

[51] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4

[52] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* 35-36

[53] Martin E. Dann, *The Black press, 1827-1890; the quest for national identity*, (New York: Putnam, 1971), 13.

[54] Frances Smith Foster, "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture," *American Literary History* 4 (2005), 714.

[55] Elaine J. Yuan, "A culturalist critique of 'online community' in new media studies," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (August 2013), 665-679.

[56] Susan J. Clerc, "DDEB, GATB, MPPB and Rarboy: The X-Files' Media Fandom Online and off," in *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1996), 36-51.

[57] Josh Bernoff and Charlene Li, "Harnessing the Power of the Oh-So-Social Web," *MIT Sloan Management Review* 49, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 36-42.

[58] In *Netnography* (p. 37), Kozinets details the various forms of membership in online communities, included the categroy of the Lurker, or an active observer who participates mainly through watching or reading, but has the potential to become more involved in the community over time..

[59] Steve Jones, "Fizz in the Field: Toward a Basis for an Emergent Internet Studies," *Information Society* 21, no. 4 (September 2005): 233-237.

CHAPTER TWO

STUDYING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE(S)

Every element that we analyse will be in this sense active: that it will be seen in certain real relations, at many different levels. In describing these relations, the real cultural process will emerge.
Raymond Williams

There are several different approaches to studying communities. These approaches multiply when considering communities online.[1] Online communities form when people are able to use interactive technology to connect with others who have shared interests or values.[2] When an online community is driving a social phenomenon, such as a grassroots health campaign, it is important to consider all of the components that constitute the community's success: the technology and tools used to connect, the practices that enable connection, and the shared cultural values that condition the connections and allow them to have meaning. According to Nancy Baym, a pioneering researcher of virtual communities, understanding communities rests in looking at the ordinary activities of its participants. Baym also endorsed a practice approach to studying online communities, noting that a community is built upon habitual or recurring actions.[3] As the appeal and influence of the *Black Girls RUN!* community is evident in both online and offline spaces, this dissertation uses a blend of approaches to explore the group's appeal and influence.

Typically, ethnographic research consists of a single investigator becoming immersed in a group for a period long enough to understand their culture the way that participants experience it. The principle technique for ethnographers is just "being

there."[4] Interest in studying online communities has gained momentum since the 1990s, when connecting via the Internet emerged as an option to form social relationships and strong communal bonds. Researchers have used various terms including cyberethnography or virtual ethnography to describe the use of ethnographic methods to study communities online.[5] Most recently, Robert Kozinets put forth the term "netnography" to describe a method that encompasses the traditional aspects of ethnographic research while acknowledging that there are distinct differences between physical and online communities impacting the research process.[6] According to Kozinets, netnographers should follow similar steps of ethnography (research planning, entrée, data collection, interpretation, ensuring ethical standards, and research representation), while also understanding how the language and relationships of online communities differ from offline communities.[7] Netnographic research has been used to study a wide range of topics, including the role of YouTube as an emerging news culture, customer experience as evidenced by online reviews, and the online "word-of-mouse" that contributes to food tourism in Zimbabwe.[8,9,10]

Netnography is useful in understanding how the online component of communities sharpens the understanding of some wider construct, theory, or set of concerns.[11] This study uses a blend of ethnography and netnography as BGR!'s online community is part of a larger social phenomenon that influences and is influenced by its participants' health behavior, values, and beliefs.[12] It would not suffice to study the group's online practices in isolation because the goal is to understand the relationship between engagement with BGR!'s online community and members offline health

behavior. As Kozinets states, "lurking, downloading data, and analyzing while sitting on the sidelines are simply not options" when it comes to writing quality netnographies.[13]

This chapter details how I avoided the sidelines through consistent personal engagement with *Black Girls RUN!* in both online and offline spaces. I begin with a rationale of how and why I selected Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing social network, as the primary social media site for investigating BGR!'s online community.[14] Next, I detail the process of gaining access to the group in both online and offline spaces for data collection. Following this discussion, I detail the methods used to collect and transform evidence into the reflections, themes, and conclusions presented in this research.

Research Settings

This dissertation relies on evidence collected over a time period of 18 months and includes archived social media posts, personal reflections, participant observations, and in-depth interviews. The following section details how I chose and gained access to the various settings where I collected evidence for this study.

(Web)Site Selection

Since launching in 2009, *Black Girls RUN!,* its members, and enthusiasts have created an active online community using social media sites. On Facebook, local BGR! chapters are organized into closed groups administered by chapter ambassadors. Although Facebook constitutes a large portion of the group's online presence and community, I did not consider Facebook as a site for this study due to the private nature of membership in groups. However, there are several other opportunities for women to engage with the

BGR! community online. Women who are not members of local chapters can become a fan of the organization's brand page on Facebook or by using the hashtag #blackgirlsrun on other social media sites, usually Twitter and Instagram.[15] The widespread use of #blackgirlsrun on social networking sites is one way that BGR! community members embody Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community, because most of the women who use the tag on social media "will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."[16] Although social media presents users with the opportunities to bypass barriers of time and space, for a movement the size of *Black Girls RUN!* it would be almost impossible for every woman to connect with each other.

Over time, I had been informally tracking the number of fans on the group's Facebook fan page. When I first began studying BGR! in the summer of 2013, the organization had about 75,000 fans on Facebook. In the weeks leading up to a conference presentation with the co-founders of BGR! in March 2014, the duo's Facebook page had yet to reach 100,000 fans. However, by May 2014, there were more than 113,000 fans. These rough numbers illustrate the rapid growth of the community as I was studying it. From the beginning of March 2014 to the middle of May 2014, BGR! gained more than 13,000 fans on its national fan page, a gain of about 6500 fans per month, a little more than 200 fans per day. As previously mentioned, BGR! groups on Facebook are closed, which means that interactions taking place within the group are not publicly accessible. Although I could have elected to join a group to observe group practices, I felt that gaining access to a group specifically for the purposes of research would not be fair to the

members of that group. Instead, I targeted sites where the parameters for inclusion could be more loosely determined (i.e. through the use of a hashtag).

It was at this time that I decided to conduct what Stuart Hall refers to as 'a long preliminary soak,' a span of time designated for the researcher to be immersed in the mass of material needed to determine what evidence is meaningful for their study.[17] Initially, the goal of this project was to investigate BGR!'s online community on Twitter and Instagram, as these sites support hashtag search and retrieval of publicly available content. Similar to traditional social network analysis, I established the use of #blackgirlsrun on social media as the parameters for inclusion in the online community. For the duration of the week beginning Monday, May 12, 2014, through Sunday May 18, 2014, I observed just over 500 Instagram posts using #blackgirlsrun. There were less than 50 updates made on Twitter using the tag during that time, and the majority of these were Instagram posts shared on Twitter by the user. After tallying the results of my preliminary soak, I decided to focus my project on how BGR!'s community members' use of Instagram contributed to my research questions. I reflected on my excitement and frustration about the rapid shift of BGR!'s online presence in my research journal, writing:

> *As for tracking the hashtag (#blackgirlsrun), I pretty much became overwhelmed after my preliminary soak. This movement is changing and transforming at the speed of light. Researchers who are exploring the role of technology in the development of fill-in-the-blank-insert-anything-here have to be prepared to move at lightning speed, or else suffer from being left behind in the dust. To think that I thought this was a Twitter revolution!*

As an active participant in the group's social media presence I was aware that the number of Instagram users tagging their posts with #blackgirlsrun had been climbing. When I began working on my dissertation proposal in January 2014, I studied the tag on

Instagram and felt it would suffice to retrieve tagged posts on the platform once on the same day each week, scanning back for the past seven days or for the first 100 posts. However, as I approached the time period when I would be conducting more structured research, I observed the number of posts uploaded to Instagram using the tag #blackgirlsrun was ranging from 40-100 in a time span of less than 24 hours.

I kept the duration of my preliminary soak to one week's time because in that time frame I was able to observe a large number of posts and identify important themes and patterns. Some of the emergent themes I observed in the #blackgirlsrun Instagram stream were Black women working out with friends, examples of proper nutrition, motivational quotes, and workout results. After concluding my preliminary soak I determined that in order to radically contextualize how BGR!'s members' use of Instagram empowers them to adopt healthy behaviors I would need to use a combination of approaches, including: interviewing, participant observation, textual analysis and reflexivity. After adapting my study to an Instagram focus, the next challenge was to establish access to BGR!'s online community.

Establishing Access

The work for gaining access to BGR! nation as a researcher began several months prior to my defending my dissertation proposal. In March 2014, I presented a panel with the co-founders of *Black Girls RUN!* at South by Southwest Interactive (SXSW), an "incubator of cutting-edge technologies and digital creativity," that highlighted the organization's unique approach to health promotion.[18,19] However, as SXSW is highly selective and competitive, I initially approached BGR! with the presentation idea in the

summer of 2013. Due to the extensive public PanelPicker process that SXSW uses to select its presenters, I forged relationships with BGR!'s co-founders and public relations director to help promote our panel. In turn, I was introduced to the larger BGR! online community on Twitter and Facebook through status updates, tweets, and messages sent from Ashley and Toni's personal accounts and from the organization's official accounts. I changed my Twitter profile description to reflect that I was a researcher interested in the online culture of BGR! During the promotional time period for our panel (July – September 2013), I had several BGR! members reach out to me and promote, comment on, and share the details of our presentation.

My access increased once I was able to meet the founders in person and speak candidly about our goals for the panel. We also discussed the BGR! movement in general, my hopes for completing a research project on the group for my dissertation, and the duo's fears of "guinea pig-ing." The concept of being treated as a guinea pig relates to Black Americans' fear that health researchers will use them to conduct experiments with a disregard for their overall health and wellness.[20] Ashley, in particular, shared a concern with me about the lack of trust toward health researchers among many Black women. I admitted to her that I was aware of the history of mistreatment of Black women by the healthcare industry and explained that my research would be conducted within the realm of public spaces and with careful concern for the privacy and experiences of BGR! members. After we met in person, the BGR! team signed off on my attendance at national events with the intent of meeting and speaking with members about their experiences within the group.

I took Ashley's concerns into consideration when I began to consider how I would approach collecting evidence. Eliminating closed groups on Facebook as potential data collection sites was one way that I exercised care for the privacy of the women involved in this movement. I also made an effort to accurately represent myself, and my research goals, in online spaces. In addition to Twitter, I changed my profile description on Instagram to reflect my role as a researcher and supporter of *Black Girls RUN!* (Figure 1). I created a public research blog that included personal information and described my research goals. A link to this blog was provided in my social media profiles. I also paid careful attention to my actions online. When observing posts in the #blackgirlsrun stream, I liked pictures I felt really moved me or spoke to my own experiences in some way but avoided serial liking, which could have come across as spam or motivated for the purposes of producing research results. I continued to post about my life, and not always about *Black Girls RUN!,* so that others who observed my social media profiles would come across what I felt was an authentic representation of my multiple identities; researcher included.

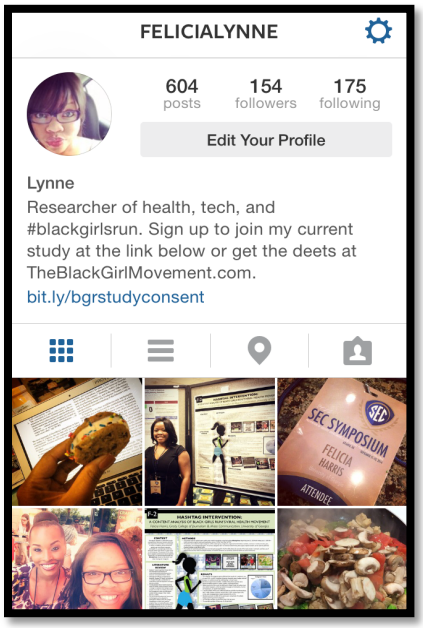


Figure 1 - Instagram Profile

One key difference between ethnography and netnography is that the process of cultural entrée into online communities is significantly less difficult. Members of online communities appear to be all of the same status and there are no official gatekeepers to grant permission to access online interactions; one simply logs online and joins the conversation.[21] Thus, access to the BGR! community on Instagram was as simple as

setting my boundaries to the stream of posts including the hashtag #blackgirlsrun. One limitation to access using these parameters is not being able to view tagged posts made by private Instagram users. However, there were thousands of posts available to observe during this study. In fact, the overwhelming amount of evidence could be also considered a limitation. More than 15,000 public Instagram posts were tagged #blackgirlsrun in the few months between my preliminary soak and the conclusion of my data collection. The sheer magnitude of the amount of posts uploaded daily made it impossible to do a thorough analysis of them all. Thus, selective sampling of online evidence was necessary.

Fortunately, gaining entrée at *Black Girls RUN!'s* face-to-face national events was equally uncomplicated. The barriers to entrée are lax for BGR!, where the organization's only rule is "No Boys Allowed." Being Black and a woman grants you access to the Sole Sisterhood even if you are not a runner. This is part of the appeal for BGR! members, who are welcomed at any stage of their fitness journeys. One of the advantages I held as a researcher of this movement was that, as a woman interested in taking control of my health, I fit the key criteria of group membership and was accepted with ease. The only time I recall feeling like an outsider was when I showed up to a national event wearing jeans, only to find that the other ladies in attendance were wearing workout attire and ready to move. This issue was easily mitigated with a quick slip into the restroom, where I changed into a pair of workout pants that I had in my bag.

Collection of Evidence

As indicated, this dissertation relies on evidence gathered online and in-person. The following section details the multiple approaches I used to collect evidence for this study.

Participant Observation

Like ethnographers, netnographers must rely largely on participant observation or risk losing the opportunity to gain the embedded cultural experiences of membership in an online community.[22] As mentioned previously, I considered myself a member of BGR!'s online community prior to beginning the research. Though my role as a participant of this phenomenon was established from the outset, I supplemented my experiences with observational and reflective field notes in a research journal throughout the duration of this study. In my journal I kept notes on my thoughts and reactions to social media content that I observed, my experiences as a researcher, my personal fitness journey, and the overall evolution of my dissertation research. For example, on Friday, January 24, 2014, I wrote:

> *When I glanced through the #blackgirlsrun stream on Instagram tonight I took a couple of screen grabs of images that I felt like represent why I'm so interested in this movement. One post is a picstitch of the BGR! website banner for the 2014 virtual 5K series and the WalkB4URun 5K medal. The hashtag that they are using for this series is #iamarunner and I love everything about this idea. The group is basically doing one virtual 5K in the spring, summer, fall and winter and for each time they'll send out medals after users upload their running times online. I like this idea because for women like me who don't have a BGR! chapter nearby or a local race to go to it gives us something to look forward to – and a medal.*

In an effort to remain in touch with the online culture of *Black Girls RUN!*, I saved searches of the hashtag #blackgirlsrun on Twitter and Instagram and regularly

checked the group's national Facebook fan page. Netnographers have the added advantage of instant archiving during the data collection process.[23] For example, a full day's worth of online interactions can be observed and archived during one visit to a social media site. When conducting observations online I often took screen captures of posts, status updates, and images that caught my interest or reflected something unique about the group's presence and actions online. I later printed those screen captures out to annotate and store alongside my research journal and other forms of evidence.

Additionally, I enlisted the use of *If This Then That* (IFTTT), a web service that allows you to indicate actions to take when certain triggers occur on various web channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. The action I used to archive posts for this study was: "If new photo by anyone tagged #blackgirlsrun, then add row to spreadsheet in lynne.felicia@gmail.com's Google Drive." This action was triggered by IFTTT once every fifteen minutes and archived post information including posts' date/time, user name, and caption. Archiving information in this way allowed me to revisit evidence during the analysis process alongside my field notes and journal entries reflecting on my time spent observing the BGR! online community. The convenience of the IFTTT-generated spreadsheet allowed me to easily revisit the archived posts and perform actions such as annotating and color-coding the posts by theme.

Interviews

After conducting my preliminary soak, I found myself jotting down several lingering questions regarding my observations. Due to my close association and personal involvement with *Black Girls RUN!,* I wanted to ensure that my conclusions would not

be biased by my experiences, but reflective of the culture of the group. As the goal of my research was to better understand how participation in BGR!'s online community influences offline health behaviors, I determined it would be useful to conduct qualitative interviews in addition to observing interactions online. As Kvale noted: "If you want to know how people understand their world or their life, why not talk to them?"[24] As a result, I took the necessary steps to receive IRB approval to initiate contact with BGR! members in-person and on Instagram.

Starting with the questions in the margins, I developed a semi-structured interview guide to conduct interviews [Appendix B]. Qualitative interviews differ from other interview or conversation types and have a main goal of acquiring meaning and experience from a particular group of participants.[25] Qualitative interviews focus on individual experiences more than general ones, using flexibility and open-ended questions to collect useful information from interviewees.[26] However, researchers conducting qualitative interviews should do so with great care, as participants bring their own interpretations of the interview context and may be prone to misrepresent themselves or their experiences.[27]

In an effort to learn as much as possible about how women understood their participation in BGR! online communities and/or running groups, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of ten participants in September of 2014. Interview participants were recruited online from within the #blackgirlsrun stream on Instagram, in-person at national BGR! events, and through word-of-mouth recommendations. Managing potential study participants on Instagram proved to be quite a challenge. As stated earlier, by the time I began collecting evidence for this study there were 40-100

new posts tagged #blackgirlsrun being uploaded daily. To help manage my online recruitment, I used IFTTT spreadsheets that archived public posts every fifteen minutes to identify potential participants. However, I encountered another challenge when, a few names into the online recruitment process, I began to question the ethics of the way I was selecting potential participants.

Initially, I was going down the list briefly reading captions to get a general idea of who I thought would be useful for this study. Although I'm aware that within qualitative studies it's not altogether necessary to be systematic, after looking at the second woman's post and commenting to a study partner that her picture was "cute" and reflected that she was most likely supportive of the BGR! movement, I paused and wondered if my approach would misrepresent the thousands by selecting posts I felt would tell the story I wanted to tell. Up until that moment I was merely recruiting from accounts that I thought would add to my story. I decided to develop a loose sampling strategy where I would consider every 25th post for participation in my study using the following criteria:

- I did not want to consider users who were using a large number of hashtags and who might not have identified with the BGR! movement.
- I did not want to consider users who appeared to be using the hashtag as a form of spam or to sell products.
- I did not want to consider men (obviously, they would not fit the criteria for this study).

When I landed on a 25th post that fell into one of those eliminating categories, I continued to the next post to see if it could be used for recruitment instead. I also decided that if I ran across a particularly interesting image or caption that I felt was relevant to the

goals of this study, I would consider that post for recruitment as well. While attending national BGR! events I recruited women who I was able to establish rapport with over the course of the event.

Once I felt confident with my loose sampling strategy, I began the recruiting process. When recruiting participants from the #blackgirlsrun stream archived using IFTTT, I was transparent about my research goals and used the following recruitment message to establish initial contact:

> Hi (user's name), I loved seeing your post in the #blackgirlsrun stream. I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Georgia and my dissertation research is on BGR! Nation. I'd like to invite you to participate in a study on online community and fitness activity. If you're interested, you can read more and sign up to participate at http://bit.ly/bgrstudyconsent. The link is also in my bio!

I used a similar script when recruiting participants at national BGR! events, explaining that I was conducting my dissertation research on *Black Girls RUN!* and referring women to my blog for more information, or exchanging emails to be in contact at a later time. All but one interview was conducted by phone, as my participants were located in various locations across the United States.

Since the focus of my study was on Black women, the diversity in my participant pool is found in age and geographic location. Participants ranged in age from 22 to 55, with most having at least a college education and several having advanced degrees. The participants were located in New York, Richmond, Chicago, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Indianapolis, and San Diego. In each case, participants consented to being interviewed and recorded via an online consent form.

I began each interview by talking informally with participants about my personal interest in *Black Girls RUN!* and the goals of this project. As relationship building

between the interviewer and interviewee is key to the effectiveness of qualitative interviewing, I used this time to build trust with participants off the record.[28] I also reviewed consent, discussed the pseudonym process, and offered a final moment for questions to ensure that participants were comfortable before beginning to record. Each participant determined her own pseudonym for use in this project. During the interviews, I took detailed notes about the conversation, as well as jotted down key words and patterns that signified emerging themes. Each interview lasted approximately half an hour and was recorded and transcribed. Due to the personal nature of the information discussed in the interviews, I transcribed each interview personally.

In addition to conducting interviews with recruited participants, I conducted a number of unstructured interviews with non-recruited BGR! members. These interviews were conducted at times when I would meet BGR! members out-and-about or at national BGR! events. Reflections on these encounters were included in my research journal.

Interpretation and Writing

Throughout the interpretation and writing process, my goal was to ground and focus my evidence toward theoretical understandings of the influence and appeal of *Black Girls RUN!* in both online and offline spaces, as the two are intricately related. The interpretation and writing process was guided by the following research questions:

(1) How does engagement with *Black Girls RUN!'s* (#blackgirlsrun) online community empower women to adopt healthy behaviors?

(2) What are the shared cultural values that condition *Black Girls RUN!'s* (#blackgirlsrun) appeal and influence in physical and online spaces?

(3) What are the opportunities for integrating social media use in health promotion programs targeting vulnerable or at-risk populations as evidenced by BGR!'s online community?

In this section, I detail the process by which I developed and presented interpretations from my evidence.

Large amounts of evidence often present the challenge of deciding on which theories, themes, and narratives are best suited to illustrate key findings. Denzin and Lincoln suggest beginning with the research questions that are being addressed in the project.[29] Thus, using the research questions listed above, I began the interpretation process by organizing my evidence into categories of content and context. In chapter three, I focused explicitly on the practices that occur within the scope of BGR!'s online community on Instagram, using only the content that could be retrieved online. Guided by British Cultural Studies, I used textual analysis and Social Cognitive Theory to interpret a stream of 1,062 Instagram posts to demonstrate how social learning via social media sites could be harnessed for promoting health behaviors. Next, in chapter four, I situated those online practices in a larger discussion of the shared cultural contexts that allow those practices to appeal to Black women. I paired British Cultural Studies with Black Feminist Thought in my analysis of evidence collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and personal reflections. In each chapter, I connected my interpretations to the relationship between participation in the BGR! community and health promotion and behavior.

The interpretation process involves several tasks including the discovery of themes, deciding which themes are important, placing themes into hierarchies, and

linking themes to theory.[30] However, organizing my evidence according to my research questions helped simplify this task. In chapter three I used an a priori approach, developing my interpretations using the preexisting framework of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT).[31] Using the SCT concepts found during my literature review, I approached the evidence seeking to answer the question, "What is this an example of?" In chapter four I used open coding, or the act of discovering themes within the evidence.[32] As Ryan and Bernard suggest, the process of developing these themes began as I transcribed my interviews, noting key concepts or values in my notes. I took the key concepts from my interviews and used them to filter the additional evidence I'd gathered through participant observation and personal reflection. Then, I continued the process of sorting and lumping key concepts until I developed the overarching themes that best represented the evidence. This process has been described as the constant comparative method, in which evidence is continuously compared with previously coded evidence for similarities and differences.[33]

It is important to note that themes are also the result of the researcher's values, theoretical orientations, and personal experiences. [34] In order to build confidence in the conclusions of a study from the field, researchers should aim to be reflexive in their writing by providing an honest account of their interactions with subjects and challenges in the field.[35] In this dissertation I use narrative vignettes and autoethnography to offer the reader insight to my personal experiences with *Black Girls RUN!* and to provide additional context for theoretical connections. Three vignettes (*Run, Runner,* and *Running)* provide information about personal experiences with health and fitness that contributed to my interest in this study. Whereas the vignettes situate my interest, the

experiential writing that begins chapters three and four serve to highlight the personal encounters and cultural experiences within BGR! that shaped my understanding and contributed to my analyses.

Systematic writing about personal experiences and epiphanies during an ethnographic study is often referred to as autoethnography. When using autoethnography, researchers retrospectively and selectively write about experiences that shaped their understanding of a culture. These revelations are made possible by their participation within the culture and thus, through writing, the researcher's goal is to make those experiences familiar to the reader.[36] When constructing the narrative sections for chapters three and four, I referred to the interpretations made in each chapter's analysis and used entries from my research journal to recount experiences that represented those findings. Although this project is not an autoethnography in its entirety, I included the approach alongside my analyses because my personal experience serves as a compelling form of evidence together with the additional materials collected during this research.

Chapter Summary

This chapter details the blend of approaches I used to conduct a study on *Black Girls RUN!*, a community of multiple practices. This research uses methods born out of ethnography and British Cultural Studies to explore the many ways that meaning is produced and understood by members of the BGR! community. I began by revisiting the complexities of BGR! nation and the group's active engagement in several online and offline spaces. I discussed the challenges of determining the scope and selecting a social media site for collecting evidence, including the group's rapid growth and shift in online

presence. Then, I detailed how I gained access to the multiple research sites included in this study. Although cultural entrée to online communities is not as challenging as it is for physical communities, I took necessary steps to increase access to BGR! online and offline, such as revising my social media profile descriptions to reflect my role as a researcher and meeting with the organization's co-founders to discuss the goals of my project. These steps allowed me to collect evidence in a manner that was unobtrusive and respectful of the women involved in this study.

Following a discussion of my research setting and evidence collection, I detailed the interpretation and writing process. Per the suggestion of previous qualitative researchers, I used my research questions to guide the interpretation process and organized my evidence into categories by content and context. These categories became the framework for the next two chapters. Lastly, I provided information about my writing process, which placed narrative and experiential writing alongside my analyses. The goal of this writing style is to situate myself as the sole author of this research, as well as to provide additional context to complement the evidence I collected in the field. The blurring lines of my approaches reflect the blurred boundaries of the BGR! movement; however, they attempt to provide the reader with the most complete interpretation at my disposal.

Notes

[1] Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*, (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 2-5.

[2] Susan J. Clerc, "DDEB, GATB, MPPB and Rarboy: The X-Files' Media Fandom Online and off," in *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files*, (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1996): 36-51.

[3] Nancy Baym, *Tune in, log on: soaps, fandom, and online community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 21-24.

[4] Russell K. Schutt, "Chapter 10: Qualitative Data Analysis," *Investigating the Social World: The process and practice of social research,* 7th ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012). 321-357.

[5] Schutt, *Qualitative Data Analysis,* 333.

[6] Kozinets, *Netnography,* 14.

[7] Kozinets, *Netnography,* 61.

[8] Johanna Maaria Sumiala and Minttu Tikka, "Broadcast Yourself-Global News! A Netnography of the 'Flotilla' News on YouTube," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, no. 2 (June 2013): 318-335.

[9] Ahmed Rageh, T.C. Melewar, and Arch Woodside, "Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience," *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 16, no. 2 (April 2013): 126-149.

[10] Muchazondida Mkono, Kevin Markwell, and Erica Wilson, "Applying Quan and Wang's structural model of the tourist experience: A Zimbabwean netnography of food tourism," *Tourism Management Perspectives* 5, (January 2013): 68.

[11] Kozinets, *Netnography,* p. 64

[12] Kozinets, *Netnography,* p. 64

[13] Kozinets, *Netnography,* p.75

[14] "FAQ," Instagram, accessed December 1, 2014, http://instagram.com/about/faq

[15] According to *Mashable*, most major social media sites support hashtags, including: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Vine, Google+, Tumblr, and Pinterest. The

hashtag #blackgirlsrun would be searchable on any of these sites. For more info, see: http://mashable.com/2013/10/08/what-is-hashtag/.

[16] Albert Bandura, "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means," *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 4-5.

[17] Stuart Hall, "Introduction to Paper voices," *The popular press and social change* 1965 (1935): 11-24.

[18] "About," SXSW, accessed November 21, 2014, http://sxsw.com/interactive/about.

[19] "Hashtag Intervention: Why #BlackGirlsRun," SXSW, accessed November 21, 2014, http://schedule.sxsw.com/2014/events/event_IAP19738.

[20] Bernice Roberts Kennedy, Christopher Clomus Mathis, and Angela K Woods, "African Americans and their distrust of the health care system: healthcare for diverse populations," *Journal Of Cultural Diversity* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 56-60.

[21] Robert V. Kozinets, "On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture," *Advances In Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (January 1998): 366-371.

[22] Kozinets, *Netnography,* p. 75

[23] Kozinets, *Netnography,* p. 72

[24] Steiner Kvale and Svend Brinkmann, *InterViews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009), xvii.

[25] Nigel King and Christine Horrocks, *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), p. 26.

[26] King and Horrocks, *Interviews*, 3.

[27] Geoffrey Walford, ed., *Doing qualitative educational research* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001), 96-97.

[28] King and Horrocks, *Interviews,* 3.

[29] Laura Ellingson, "Analysis & Representation Across the Continuum," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Norman*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2011), 595-610.

[30] Gery W. Ryan and H. Russell Bernard, “Techniques to Identify Themes,” *Field Methods* 15 (2003), 85.

[31] Ryan and Bernard, *Techniques*, 86.

[32] Ryan and Bernard, *Techniques,* 86-87.

[33] Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 106.

[34] Ryan and Bernard, *Techniques,* 88.

[35] Russell K. Schutt, Chapter 10: Qualitative Data Analysis, *Investigating the Social World: The process and practice of social research*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE publications, 2012), 332.

[36] Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (December 2011): 273-290.

Running.

It's 7:25 a.m. and I'm running. I'm about one mile into my morning routine, smack in the stretch on Milledge Road, the street that was introduced to me four years ago as White sorority and fraternity row.

On each side of Milledge, plantation-esque homes tout Greek letters and rocking chairs. Throughout the day, sorority sisters own the sidewalks.

In pairs of two and groups of up to five or more, I brush shoulders with young, White women. They are not hostile encounters; runners are a fraternity of their own. Runners don't disappoint, especially on Milledge. No matter what time of day, rain or shine, it's almost a guarantee that I'll see a sorority girl on the sidewalk. I don't think they are as accustomed to seeing me.

I feel light as a feather in my new running shoes. I'm more confident and the fit is amazing. I've graduated from Nike to a real running brand: Mizuno. Last week, an older White woman on the track complemented me: "I just LOVE your shoes." Yes, I'm serious about running, I thought to myself. The shoes say it all.

At the end of my run, my fitness app tells me I've reached a new personal record. For a second, I wish I'd had a sorority sister running with me. I want to turn to the side and see someone like me and share my latest fitness milestone. I want to shout "I did it! I did it! I'm running!" And I want the person who hears me shout to get it. To get me. To understand my journey. This is a moment that I want to share.

In my fitness app, I press the button to share my post-run photo on social media and add the hashtag #blackgirlsrun to my post. Within minutes I'm getting virtual high fives - likes, comments, retweets, and favorites. I'm absorbed for about ten minutes scrolling through the hundreds of other posts that use the same hashtag and smiling at similar accomplishments from other Black women across the nation. I toss my phone to the side and head to the shower feeling even more satisfied with my personal achievement knowing that I'm not alone.

CHAPTER THREE

LET'S TAKE A SELFIE!

In short, taking the effect for the cause, photographic practice, subject to social rules, invested with social functions, and therefore experienced as a 'need', is explained with reference to something that is actually its consequence, namely the psychological satisfactions that it produces.
Pierre Bourdieu

I feel beads of sweat rolling down the center of my back as I search for blue signs to direct me toward I-85 South. I've just left my best friend's apartment in Duluth, which is about half an hour of travel time from downtown Atlanta where I'm headed. Although I should be pretty familiar with Atlanta's loopy interstates by now, I don't want to risk it – I'm headed to my first *Black Girls RUN!* event in real life, or IRL in Internet slang. It's hard to believe there are only about thirty minutes of lane switching and horn honking separating me from a group of women I've been cyber-watching for quite some time.

It's been over a year since I was first introduced to these women and, in all their Internet glory, they have enthralled me ever since. Several times a week, I click on the hashtag #blackgirlsrun on Instagram and scroll through the recently uploaded pictures. I'm not too keen on liking strangers' posts because I fear being perceived as a "lurker," or member of an online community who observes but doesn't post. But, every now and then I'll screenshot an image or caption that resonates with me. Then, when I need motivation to run that extra mile I pull my phone out and sneak a peek. *Look at all these Black women running* - I tell myself, before wrapping my hair and lacing up my running

shoes. Every now and again I abandon my lurking practices and join the stream by tagging a picture of my own.

I can't quite remember how much time has passed since I added the #blackgirlsrun column in my Tweetdeck account to stay tuned in to the ongoing BGR! conversation on Twitter. It's nestled right next to my #satech column, which gives me updates on the use of technology in the field of my current assistantship in student affairs in higher education. Each column allows me to see the latest posts with each hashtag in real time. In other words, I can keep up with BGR! while I do my day job. During the day, I can find out what's going on with these women with the click of a tab. Thus, on any given weekday, I can rest assured that someone has just completed a 5K, went for an invigorating morning run or conquered their first half-marathon. And, on any given day I can remind myself: you can do that, too.

My fascination with this group of women goes beyond what some would call mere fandom. Not only do I check in on their conversations during my workday, I also keep them in mind during my workout. Particularly when I'm running – right in the middle of mile two when it's the roughest – I meditate on their existence and recite their tweets like lines of poetry. *C'mon Felicia,* I tell myself, *somewhere out there is a Black woman running, and she's killing it!* As my feet hit the ground, one after the other, I drift off into a space that's completely filled with images of Black women running. I imagine women going out for their first walk/shuffle/run and celebrating when they finally reach the end. I imagine older women, with grey hair, smiling and running wearing fanny packs and BGR! ballcaps. I meditate on the countless inspirational messages found in the captions that accompany those images, and the next thing I know I'm back at the steps

leading up to my front door, pulling out my phone to become one of those women. These women have inspired me, and my fitness journey, and I finally get to meet them today.

I put my car in park and take a deep breath. I don't know how people manage to drive through Atlanta traffic. It's early Saturday morning and I nearly found myself in two accidents on the way here. The unruly traffic makes me appreciate my small college town. However, I know that the chances of meeting up with a large group of Black women to focus solely on our health and fitness are slim-to-none where I live. From my vantage point inside the car I spy Black women in workout gear heading toward the hotel that is hosting today's half-day running clinic and meet-up. Surely, these are the women that I've come to meet. It's the last stop of *Black Girls RUN!*'s Preserve The Sexy Tour and I've waited all summer for this.

I rub my knuckles down the dip in my back to try to absorb the sweat with my heather grey Nike dri-fit shirt. Unsettling my shirt brings to my attention that my sports bra isn't fitting quite like I need it to. I step out of the car and make a series of minor readjustments to my gear before grabbing my bag. In the distance I see a petite, fit Black woman heading to pay for parking. She has on running shoes and full-length tights that show off her runner's legs and muscles. Her hair, which I assume is natural, is styled in tiny twists pulled back neatly by a *Black Girls RUN!* Bondi band. For a moment I wonder if I should have ordered that black BGR! singlet after all. I eyed it for a while on the website before deciding that my college budget couldn't justify spending the $32 asking price for a shirt to sweat in. For now, my T.J. Maxx Nike gear will have to do. After my turn at the parking meter I head toward the front doors of the huge downtown Atlanta

hotel feeling like it's the first day of school. I'm heading in to have a conversation about health and fitness with these women and all I can think is: *I hope they like me.*

Inside, I follow the trail of Black women in workout clothes down the escalator to the meeting level. I swipe my bangs from over my eyes and notice the tiny sweat beads present on my forehead. We haven't even started and I'm already working up a sweat. I sneak a peek at my underarms to see if I'm developing sweat stains. The last thing I need is to be the girl with sweaty pit stains before we get started. It's a common notion that Black women have a bad reputation of not being able to come together without casting judgment on each other and, unfortunately, when it comes to making snap judgments anything could be cause to question my credibility as an authentic member of this group. The fact that I've never had to present myself in real life is largely a part of the appeal of this movement. When I click or post to the #blackgirlsrun stream on social media, the women in that virtual space aren't forced to see the parts of me that some may consider flaws – my outspokenness in group environments, my tendency to call bullshit with my facial expressions, the fact that I'm knee-deep in research that just so happens to be centered on the existence of said hashtag, or my constantly sweaty armpits. Today, any of those ticks could betray me to this group of women that I revere.

To make matters worse, I've met the two most important women in this room before and it didn't go quite as planned. It's been months since I've heard from Toni and Ashley, BGR!'s co-founders and the public faces of the *Black Girls RUN!* movement. In March, we presented a session at SXSW Interactive together, during which we discussed the impact of social media on their growth and the significance of their message for Black women and their health. After the panel, we exchanged hugs and they promised to

send BGR! apparel for me to wear while I braved the streets alone in my predominately white college town. Then, they dashed off to catch a flight to their next business meeting. That was nearly five months ago and I haven't heard from them since.

On the escalator ride down, I flashback to the first time I was scheduled to meet Toni and Ashley in person and am reminded of how things don't always go as planned when meeting in real life. When I arrived at their Atlanta headquarters, I was not necessarily surprised but definitely intrigued. Their office occupied the front part of a large vintage house that has been repurposed into several smaller working and living spaces. The neighborhood was one of those Atlanta gems with raw elements of beauty. I was amazed by the graffiti on the streets and bridges nearby. I turned from staring at what looked like tagging on the street done by no-gooders to be greeted by an elderly woman with her two mid-sized dogs on a walk. However, their upstairs neighbor wasn't as pleasant. He came outside and pulled off, looped around and took pictures of my license plates. I couldn't help but laugh. I left my car parked around back and went to knock on the front door.

Peeking through the window it was evident that the duo still hadn't settled all the way in. I knew from my research that Toni and Ashley had recently made Atlanta the BGR! headquarters, both leaving their full-time careers elsewhere to pursue their growing start-up. The floors were hardwood and there was a medium-sized square table in the middle serving as the only desk or meeting space. In the back was a kitchenette complete with odd plates and glasses lining the wall. On the wall to the left, there was a large white board covered in scribbles. On the opposite wall there was a single canvas with the statement "Do what you LOVE what you do," stacked in large block letters. For a

moment, I got lost in that sign and was comforted by the idea that this health movement is one that two women sustain every day out of L-O-V-E – in all caps. However, my warm and fuzzy feelings quickly dissipated when I realized that no one was there.

After a bunch of miscommunication – I texted the group's PR director when no one answered the door and she said they were on the way; Toni called and said she would be there in ten minutes because a meeting had run late; Ashley showed up about 25 minutes later without Toni; meanwhile, the PR director had sent a text saying they should have arrived because Toni had to pick up Ashley – I was finally shaking hands with half of the duo in front of the house. I found out later that Toni was actually headed to Alpharetta for a hair appointment. Her wild red coils are natural, too.

It was surreal to finally meet Ashley in person. She wore black skinny jeans, a white button-up shirt and glittery black pumps. From pictures on the Internet I knew she was shorter than Toni, but she seemed even smaller in real life. She was about my height, 5'1½", and her figure was what some might say is a Black woman's dream - petite and curvy, yet obviously fit. She apologized for the miscommunication and told me she was dressed up because her mother was in town to take her dress shopping for her upcoming wedding in May. As she checked her watch, I couldn't help but feel disappointed at what seemed like an almost blatant disregard of my interest in their work. The way the meeting was handled – the meeting that had been on the calendar for almost a month; the meeting I had prepped for, printed outlines and handouts; the meeting that I drove almost two hours to attend, arriving fifteen minutes early – made me feel like an afterthought.

We were meeting to talk about our presentation for SXSW, a renowned national conference targeting tech innovators and creators like themselves, and also to talk about

my dissertation, which would be an in-depth exploration of the historical, social, and cultural factors contributing to their success. In the days before our scheduled meeting, and after months of following their progress online, I had literally dreamt about meeting them in real life. However, after my brief meeting with only half of the scheduled party, I drove home feeling discouraged and questioning if I had made the right decision to spend the last year of my doctoral studies focusing solely on the ins and outs of their organization. At the urging of my advisor, I decided to move forward with my dissertation research knowing that the movement was larger than my having been let down by the co-founders.

Snapping out of my flashback and approaching the bottom of the escalator, those feelings rise up once again when I recall the email update I sent to Toni and Ashley the week before. During our conversations leading up to SXSW, Ashley had expressed concerns about researchers mistreating "their ladies" and their experiences in BGR!, so I wanted to be extra careful to keep them in the loop on my research process. The email I sent had contained details about my approved IRB application and the goals of my project, including how I planned to recruit interview participants and conduct observations at meet-ups and national events. I looked down into my bag to see the purple, black, and white-striped composition notebook I brought along to jot notes and silently prayed there wouldn't be any issues. I hadn't received a response to my email confirming that they were for or against me conducting research in-person, so I nervously tossed my research materials into my workout bag early this morning while hoping for the best.

My stream of consciousness is interrupted when I walk into the meeting room and immediately see Ashley sitting at the registration table. I guess my facial expressions have betrayed me again, because after looking at me strangely for a second her eyes widen with surprise as she matches my face with a memory. “I didn’t even recognize you!” she exclaims. We hug and exchange the usual ‘how are you’ ho-hum before I slyly mention the unanswered email. She congratulates me on the progress with my research and attributes the non-responsiveness to a busy schedule and a constant stream of emails. I somewhat believe her.

I visit a St. Jude table and register for an upcoming awareness walk before heading past a Dark & Lovely set-up with a BGR! step and repeat and making my way toward the apparel pop-up shop. There, I finally purchase my first swag items – a New Balance singlet ($30) and two Bondi bands (2 for $11) for my hair. At the register, I bump into Toni and have another awkward encounter about the unanswered email and what’s coming up with my research. She tells the cashier to give me a discount on the swag. *Well, they don’t hate me*, I think as I head to my first session on proper running form.

During the session, all feelings of anxiety subside. I stand at the outskirt of a semi-circle of women having an informal conversation with a certified running coach. These women are everything I prayed they would be. They are all ages, shapes, and sizes, and in various stages of their fitness journeys. All guards are down and we’re having a candid conversation about our challenges with health and fitness without fear of being judged or criticized. I stand amazed as the group encourages an elderly woman to demonstrate her walk/run shuffle after posing a question about improving her pace. I

even come clean about my experiences with hypertension and severe shortness of breath during my first mile on a distance run. For an hour, we go on like this. Women pose questions to the expert. He offers an answer. Then, we educate each other in side conversations based on our own experiences and knowledge. In this manner we are able to cover everything from running form and techniques, to KT tape (kinesiology tape for muscle support), and proper breathing habits while running. The energy in the room rivals the energy that flows through the online community created by the hashtag – it's fearless and fun, focused on getting as much information as possible, and reveals a serious commitment to living healthy lives.

During the break between sessions, I'm hanging out in the hallway when a BGR! member from a South Atlanta chapter approaches me and asks if I want to take a picture. She introduces herself as Jackie and before I can answer she approaches another random passerby and asks her to join us.[1] "Let's take a selfie!" she suggests, and says we should post it in the BGR! Atlanta Facebook group. We snap a few pictures but the lights are too dim, so someone suggests we venture to the BGR! step and repeat. As we head down the hall, I observe women scattered about taking selfies and group pictures and I become aware of my role as the researcher in the room. I know many of these women are actively engaging with social media during the event – the official hashtag is #PTST14 – and I desperately want to recruit them all and ask about the nature of their enduring online health performance.

At the step and repeat I wait in line with my two new friends. I find out that, like me, both of these women showed up alone. Most members of the South Atlanta chapter hadn't felt like traveling the distance necessary to attend the midtown running clinic so

Jackie, who strikes me as someone who's never met a stranger, decided to make the trip on her own. The second passerby is a BGR! member from New York who just happened to be in town for business. After our first picture the photographer shows us the image and asks if we want to take another one. We unanimously agree, yes. After the second take, she steps forward and asks again. I see where this is headed and decide to speak up. "I really don't like taking pictures that much," I confess to the group, hoping to nip the photo session in the bud. "You know, I really don't like taking pictures either," Jackie says while swiping through her phone's camera roll and eyeing our selfie, "I never took so many pictures until I joined this group."

***

In the wee hours of an October night in 2010, a group of serial tech entrepreneurs launched Instagram for iPhone from inside an old San Francisco warehouse.[2] The app, which allows users to "take a picture, tweak it, write a caption, and send it out to the world," was downloaded by thousands of users in just a matter of hours, crashing the computer systems handling the photos.[3] Twenty-four hours after its launch, Instagram had roughly 25,000 users. By its third week, the photo-sharing app grew to 300,000 users.[4] When the company launched Instagram for Android in April 2012, it was downloaded a million times in the first 24 hours.[5] As of January 2014 – three years since its launch – the app remained home to the fastest-growing social network globally, boasting an increase in its user base by 23 percent in a span of six months toward the end of 2013.[6] At the time of writing, the site has 200 million monthly active users and over 20 billion images.[7] Furthermore, the company has managed to maintain its growth and rival

the usage of top social networking sites Twitter, Pinterest, and Tumblr despite being limited to Apple and Android mobile devices.[8,9]

Instagram has garnered its success by making photography social *and* mobile. In January 2014, *TechCrunch* reported that mobile handsets had become the most popular form of access to social networking sites, with 66 percent of site users saying they use mobile devices to access them.[10] The gravitation toward mobile has worked in favor of Instagram, which – despite having launched profiles for the web in 2012 – remains mobile driven.[11] The app's images are square and digital, mostly made by camera phones and viewed on-screen.[12] An underlying premise of the app is that the act of capturing a photo can be performed anywhere, and these photos should be shared with the world. Although little research has been conducted on the photo-sharing platform, early findings suggest that instant photography paired with the instant gratification of sharing with an extended network of friends and strangers has been the root of Instagram's continued success.[13]

The combination of digital photography and social networking make Instagram an ideal site to explore the health promoting functions of *Black Girls RUN!'*s online community. The virtual community generated by the hashtag #blackgirlsrun provides a range of clues that reveals how women in this group are empowered by the posts they upload, view, and engage with on Instagram. The purpose of this chapter is to examine how engagement with the #blackgirlsrun community on Instagram empowers Black women to adopt healthy behaviors. In accordance with Charlotte Champion's suggestion that the most important avenue through which to understand the photo-sharing platform is

its use, this chapter considers how Instagram is being used and offers an analysis of how such use results in meaning-making for Black women.[14]

Instagram: The New Photography

According to Champion, the ability to instantly share photos on Instagram is one of the important distinctions that make the app intriguing and present a key development in the history of photography. "With Instagram, so to speak, the act of sharing in the *taking* of the photograph has been superseded by the act of *sharing* in a taken photograph," Champion suggests, which allows the site to simplify photography's function as a social ritual earlier identified by Bourdieu.[15] As Bourdieu observes:

> Photographs are certainly taken just as much – if not more – in order to be shown as in order to be looked at. But reference to viewers may be present in the intention of taking a photograph as well as in the appreciation of the photographs of others, without the photograph's losing its personal relationship to the photographer; those viewers are defined by the personal relationship that links them to the photographer or the viewer of the photograph.[16]

Bourdieu's description of the intersecting relationships between a photograph, the photographer, and the viewers of a photograph comes to life with photo-sharing sites such as Instagram, where users who upload photographs can speak directly to their audience, audience members are able to speak to the photographer and each other, and any of the site's users are able to develop personal and social relationships based on the images that link them together. However, Champion argues that although photography's social relationships were previously predicated on the documentation of past events, Instagram's sense of immediacy rejects the backward-gazing motives of historical photography and transforms the practice of picture-taking into an act that precedes "'real-time' pleasures, acts and identifications that are yet to unfold." As Champion sums up, on

Instagram the photograph is not about reconciling distances in time, or what Barthes referred to as a form of *Ça-à-été*, but is rather "a form of *je-suis-là* (here I am) that no longer refers to a past but affirms a hollowed out present."[17]

Whereas it may be true that an Instagram photograph is not 'about' reconciling distances in time, the instant/anywhere accessibility of the social networking site does reconcile ordinary distance. As Rubinstein and Sluis explain, photo-sharing and social networking sites deliver images to locations where millions of people can view them at the same time. The simplified process of connecting with others through images, as opposed to writing regular blog entries, is a major appeal of online photo sharing.[18] Instagram users can upload photos with a level of ease and simplicity not typically ascribed to the effort it takes to maintain other social networking accounts. However, if a user decides, photos can be accompanied by captions or comments, adding another level of sociality to the practice of photography. Tagging, commenting, titling and other annotative forms are examples of social elements that "reinforces a sense of identity and unity which overwhelms differences and distinctions."[19] The amalgamation of visual and textual practices inherent to photo-sharing sites allows users to do more than merely connect; these practices also create communities around interests in specific images.

On Instagram, hashtags allow users to sort through the 60 million-plus photos uploaded daily and find images that are of interest to them.[20] According to Rubinstein and Sluis, such tagging systems are key community-building features on photo-sharing sites.[21] Adding a hashtag to a photo denotes connectivity with its resultant stream. In this way hashtags serve multiple functions, allowing users to categorize and retrieve specific images, while also allowing taggers to reveal contextual information about the image or

themselves.[22] Clicking on a hashtag allows users to view publicly available posts with that specific tag included in the corresponding captions or comment threads.

The many actions that occur within a hashtag's stream – pressing 'like', friending or following, commenting, or reposting – bolster social relationships and generate virtual communities of Instagram users with similar interests. Research dating as far back as the mid-1990s suggests that the Internet's ability to unbound restrictions of time and space would only continue to fuel the growth of digital communities, particularly when considering the notion that people opt to spend more time with others who share common interests over those who share common spaces.[23] Instagram is particularly equipped for a sizeable health and fitness community, as users are able to snap and upload photos on the go. As the photo-sharing platform continues to grow in number of users and server capacity, so does the type and nature of communities emerging on the network.

#blackgirlsrun: A virtual health community

The hashtag #blackgirlsrun is an example of a virtual community that is thriving on Instagram. At the time of writing, there were 59,167 publically available posts included in the #blackgirlsrun stream, with records indicating the number of new tagged posts spanned from the low-40s on a weekday to nearly one hundred posts in a 24-hour period during the weekend.[24] Instagram users who tag their posts with #blackgirlsrun include pictures of more than just the obvious (Black girls who run); tagged posts include photographic content ranging from 'selfies' and 'ussies' to photos of food, motivational quotes, workout gear, race medals, and get-fit-quick gimmicks posted by users hoping to pry on the women who might not be up for enduring the long fitness haul. Posts tend to

be accompanied by questions and comments about Black women's experiences with health and fitness, links to resources, and the occasional high-five emoji as a sign of applause for moments shared in pictures.[25] In this way, the stream represents a new means, and medium, by which Black women are experiencing and 'doing health.'[26]

Although the study of virtual health communities emerged in the early 2000s, the opportunity to examine the practices shaping a grassroots, culturally relevant, and virtual community/movement targeting Black women's health has, until now, not been available. Of particular interest is the use of Instagram as the medium through which users are able to discuss and exchange their health experiences. The visual/social aspects of photography combined with the textual/social elements of a social networking site allow Instagram users to participate in an interactive show-and-tell session on Black women's health. The result has been a significant impact in healthy behaviors offline.[27] An analysis of the #blackgirlsrun stream helps identify how Instagram and other social networking sites are being used by people with similar health experiences to generate virtual health communities that 'do' health differently and have the potential to produce significant health outcomes.

Identification of the Text

As stated in the introduction, a previous social network analysis failed to answer my questions about the influence of BGR!'s social network. In this analysis, I sought to avoid making a similar mistake by parceling out images for a content analysis or extracting comments and captions for a discourse analysis. As Stuart Hall explained when describing textual analysis, "the type of evidence which would support or disprove the

initial hypothesis of the study seemed to us not graspable in these terms."[28] Thus, the entire stream of posts tagged #blackgirlsrun served as the text for this analysis, as the hashtag and the resultant stream signify the boundaries of this virtual health community. As Mckee explains, a 'text' is anything that individuals use to make meaning. Furthermore, because different cultures make sense of the world in very different ways, the analysis of texts is one way that researchers gather information about the most likely interpretations that might be made from a text.[29]

The #blackgirlsrun stream on Instagram offers a complementary text for the virtual and physical BGR! community at-large, providing the 'material traces' of the group's growing health movement. Therefore, I considered each element of tagged posts – including photographic content, captions, audience engagement, and hashtag choice – as "a system of meaningful choices" and evidence of the meaning-making process of the users who employ them. As Hall encourages, I paid close attention to the linguistic and visual style within the stream, how photos were presented, and how users addressed images and the topic of health and fitness in comments or captions.[30] In this way, I sought to discover the implicit patterns and emphases that provide the social framework through which Black women learn about and become motivated to try new healthy behaviors.

Data Collection and Interpretation

As indicated, this analysis relies on observations and interpretations of visual and textual data included within the #blackgirlsrun stream on Instagram. In part of a larger netnography of the *Black Girls RUN!* online community, publicly available posts were archived in a Google spreadsheet using the web service *If This Then That*. Although I was

generally immersed in BGR! activity in online and offline spaces, for the purposes of this analysis I revisited and examined 1,062 posts made during the two-week time period of June 22, 2014, until July 5, 2014.[31] Each entry in the spreadsheet included the date and time of the post, user name, caption, a link to the post (which was used to go back and take screen shots and read comments), and a replication of the tagged photo.

The purpose of this analysis was to answer the research question, "How does participation in BGR!'s social network or online community empower Black women to adopt healthy behaviors?" As such, the analysis and interpretation was conducted through the framework of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a behavior change theory often used in public health to describe the ongoing process through which personal and environmental factors influence a person's decision to adopt healthy behavior and vice versa. Social Cognitive Theory evolved from Social Learning Theory (SLT), which posits that people learn from their own experiences and from observing the actions of others.[32] For example, SCT rationalizes that a person who moves to a neighborhood where the majority of people are runners might soon take up the sport, whereas someone who moves to a neighborhood where there are no runners might begin to think a daily jog isn't worth the burn (or the disapproving stares from their neighbors).

Most often, SCT has been useful in studying community-level influence on behavior change in social and physical environments, but the growing delivery of health communication via interactive technology offers what Bandura refers to as dual pathways to influence. The use of interactive media promotes behavior change by informing, modeling, and motivating, while also connecting people to social networks and virtual community settings that provide personalized guidance, added incentives, and social

support.[33] However, some researchers have postulated about the ability of health communications to effectively sustain individual-level change. As Rimer and Glanz explain:

> On the other hand, without support in the social and physical environment, health communications alone may not be enough to sustain individual-level behavior changes, may not be effective for relaying complex health messages, and cannot compensate for lack of access to health care or healthy environments.[34]

While it is fact that a digital environment can't conjure up sidewalks to run on in a neighborhood that doesn't have them, this research conceives that participation in a virtual health community can equip individuals with the complex knowledge, guidance, and willpower necessary to commit to behavior change despite the challenges they may encounter offline. In fact, the actual physical environment plays a very small role in SCT, which places emphasis on psychosocial factors such as confidence in one's ability to change, goal setting, and expectations.[35]

According to Social Cognitive Theory, a person's health behavior is influenced by their grasp on the knowledge and skills necessary to perform a behavior; the anticipatory outcomes of the behavior; their perceived self-efficacy, or confidence that they can perform the behavior; and the internal or external responses to the behavior. Although Instagram's user-interface is chic and simplified, and the rules of engagement on the platform are minimal, there are a variety of elements that deem regular engagement with the platform worthy to be considered a significant model for influencing community-level change. The *je-suis-l*à factor of Instagram photography rivals learning from others in real life with an ability to 'be' with others in real time. Furthermore, the app's interactive nature bolsters social support, guidance, motivation, and even information

gathering, as question-and-answer exchanges and hyperlinks to additional resources abound in captions and comments.

On Instagram, hashtags that promote health become conversations about health, representations of health, and encouragement of health. Thus, I examined the material traces provided by the #blackgirlsrun stream for evidence of key SCT constructs at work. Considering the stream an online community, I studied how healthy behavior was being modeled, explained, and encouraged within its boundaries. In addition, I looked for cues indicating how those practices make waves in both the physical and virtual environments of those who engage with the hashtag. The resulting analysis yielded six recurring interpretations deemed most relevant given the context of this framework: It's more than running; Training ain't 'purty;' Running has rewards; Mind over matter motivation; Yes, Black girls run: what's your excuse?, and What you're doing is awesome.

It's More Than Running

Rimer and Glanz explain that in order to perform a behavior, a person must know what to do and how to do it.[36] Instagram users who click on the hashtag #blackgirlsrun quickly learn that a runner's lifestyle does not begin and end with hitting the pavement, but requires a combination of goal-setting and preparation, proper nutrition, total body fitness and even quality workout gear.

The concept of goal setting is illustrated by a runner in Houston whose picstitch (several photos combined together in one image) includes photos of her well-defined calves, abdominals, and back muscles alongside a calendar for the month of June. The post's caption reads:

> Here it is! This is what the koolaid smile was all about in my last post. [Smiling face with sunglasses] I created a goal and smashed it!! If you're ready to get fit, lose weight, tone, lead a healthy lifestyle, switch your routine or just be more physically active, you NEED A GOAL. How do you know where to start if you haven't made a plan? Today you said, "I want to be healthy". That's great! Now tell me how you're going to do it. You need to write goals for yourself.

Other posts with similar messages emphasize goal setting and preparation, including posts by users who share resources they use to set and achieve running goals. Several users posts screen captures or results from the Nike+Running app, which allows its users to track running distances and location, set goals, challenge friends, and share results on the web.[37] Sharing a screen grab of her completed Nike+ training programs, another user writes about the app's role in helping her achieve her running goals:

> So the #nikeapp trained me for my first #halfmarathon, helped me run my best #10k yet. I feel like I need to start another training. I would love to train for a #marathon but not in this heat, no way! Think I will reserve that for the fall. For now, another #halfmarathon training to beat my last #pr? Maybe?

In another Nike+ screen grab a user shows exactly how the training app prepares you for a run. The image is from Week 1/Day 2 of her 5K training program and gives explicit instructions for the day's run: "Today's your first run day. Focus on finishing 3 mi and try out a new run-type called a "fartlek." The app then gives step-by-step instructions on how to try a fartlek before cooling down. The caption to the screen capture reads:

> Tomorrow begins the madness with Nike+Running Coach. Anxious and excited. Night!

In addition to highlighting the importance of proper training and goal setting, posts tagged #blackgirlsrun also demonstrate the importance of proper nutrition in health and fitness. Next to a sweaty selfie in which she adorns kinky coils and a makeshift tank top, one young woman writes:

> Just finished Turbofire 45…. My workouts lately have been running, NTC, Turbofire, and weights if I'm at a hotel gym. I haven't been to 24 in over a month! While I've been keeping up with my workouts, my diet has been shameful like really bad. Diet and working out go hand in hand so I'll be working on getting back on track. Starting with a juice cleanse and detox. I'll let yall know how it goes. Until then [victory hand]

A large number of posts encourage proper nutrition by simply sharing food prep routines or particularly tasty and healthy meals for others to try. Next to a photo of a split mango, a self-proclaimed 'foodie' writes:

> Prepping for my morning smoothie. This smoothie gave me life this morning because it is so good!!!! Mango, apple strawberries, spinach, H20, & Herbalife protein powder.

In another post, a fitness entrepreneur shares a photo of what she's eating and describes how the meal is helping to set her fitness goals in motion:

> Back at it!! These are my best batch of egg white muffins yet! So convenient and the macros are perfection! Carb cutting this week so only one kashi waffle :-(

Lastly, #blackgirlsrun posts demonstrate the importance of workout gear, highlighting everything from race-day outfits and Bondi Bands (trendy, dri-fit headbands) in action to the importance of quality running shoes. For example, next to a Nike+ picstitch of her running shoes and running scenery, one user writes:

> My ankle was hurting but I pushed through. I think it's time for new shoes!!

In another post, a woman shows off bright pink running shoes on a treadmill along with Nike+ results, writing:

> What a difference good shoes make!!! Killed my run this evening!! [Flexed biceps] [Flexed bieps]

Despite the occasional specificity of language used in captions, the blend of visual and textual cues provide onlookers with added information to make educated assumptions about the skills and resources required to become a runner or to manage

their health and fitness. When users are met with praises for unfamiliar apps, a particular brand of running shoes, or Google-worthy terms such as ‘detox,’ ‘Herbalife protein powder,’ ‘macros,’ and ‘carb cutting,’ they can ask for explanation in the comment threads of the post, look to the photo for added context, or drop the phrase into Google and read up on the results. In this way, users who engage with the #blackgirlsrun stream are able to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to adopt new behaviors.

Training Ain’t Purty

Another key determinant of whether or not a person will adopt a new behavior is what they expect will be the outcomes of performing the behavior.[38] As Bandura explains, outcome expectations can take several different forms, including the perceived pleasurable or aversive effects of the behavior.[39] Expectations are important because it impacts the goals that individuals set for themselves. For example, if a person thinks that an exercise is difficult, they may set a goal to perform five repetitions of the exercise, whereas a person who expects the exercise to be easy might set a goal to perform 15 repetitions. When outcomes align with a person’s expectations it increases the likelihood that they will continue to perform the activity. This is why anticipated outcomes are crucial for individuals who are considering adopting new healthy behaviors.

Lest the smiling selfies reflect that running is a glorious and easy sport, posts tagged #blackgirlsrun overwhelmingly reflect that a health and fitness journey can also be challenging, time-intensive, and slow to yield results. Next to a picstitch comprised of a straight-faced selfie, a Nike+Running route, and a textgram reading “I will. Just watch me,” one runner shares:

> Okay so I hit a little milestone today and was totally hype on the #greenway. I completed my fastest 3-miler since I started this back up at the end of May. I'm entering week 2 of an 8 week-5k #training program and I'm kind of excited to see some gradual results! I ran over half… that's big for me. Yay me! But training ain't purty lol!

In the caption of another non-smiling, sweaty selfie, a user documenting her weight loss journey speaks plainly about her workout:

> This #workout was #rough #my legs felt like wet noddles. But I managed to do #zumba and #run 1 #mile I'm #tired but I'm glad I didn't take this day off.

Contrary to this experience, some users reveal when they believe they are pushing themselves too hard. Next to an image showing results from her run on the face of a sports watch, a mother of two shares just how hard it was for her to get through her run:

> It's been a long, busy day today so I almost forgot to post my #rwrunstreak pic. It was a very tough run. Legs felt like lead the entire time. If tomorrow isn't better, I may pull back. Trying to push myself but at the same time listen to my body asking for rest.

Although the posts largely demonstrate how challenging health and fitness can be, the posts do not reflect discontent or negativity toward the fitness journey overall. In fact, most of the posts echo Melissa's sentiment of triumph after pushing through difficult workouts or setbacks. For example, the following caption reveals how one runner bounced back after her workout plans didn't go as expected:

> Yay! Pics from my Sunday 5k! Started the morning THINKING I was gonna get a long run before noon. Had this grand scheme to run the entire north and south sides of the river & have the greatest #nikeplus map ever known to man (well maybe not all that grand, but still pretty epic). Turned out to be an #epicfail. Wasted almost abt 30 minutes waiting for the app to start, then 30 more waiting for it to begin the workout before I just said Eff it! & ran til I wasn't so perturbed anymore. guesstimated that it was 5 miles. mapped it & turns out it was 7.4 miles, so at least I got to do half of my intended distance."

In her picstitch, she's pictured in one photo with a friend after completing a 5K and adorning a Hawaiian-styled grass skirt and lei. The bottom third is dedicated to takeaways from the 5K, including photos of the shirt, her race bib, and medal.

Perhaps the most prominent idea in the #blackgirlsrun stream is the importance of women embracing their starting point and working toward a goal of future fitness. In regards to setting expectations, the emphasis is on embracing healthy living as a journey that will last a lifetime and one that won't always be easy to endure. Next to a lime green textgram reading "ALLOW YOURSELF TO BE A BEGINNER. NO ONE STARTS OUT EXCELLENT," a user sums it up best with the caption:

> You don't have to be great to start but you have to start to be great. Regardless of your fitness level just get moving!

Knowing ahead of time that the journey ahead can get difficult reduces the likelihood of feeling discouraged when outcomes or experiences fail to align with expectations. Furthermore, it encourages those who engage with the #blackgirlsrun stream to set realistic expectations when adopting new healthy behaviors.

Running Has Rewards

In addition to setting expectations about what challenges and hurdles to expect throughout the fitness journey, the #blackgirlsrun stream also demonstrates that a lifestyle dedicated to health and fitness is rewarding physically and mentally. One of the most common types of posts contained in the stream is a before-and-after image, a picstitch that juxtaposes a photo of the user's body at an earlier point in their fitness journey with a photo of their body in its current state. In the before photo of one woman's post, she stands facing the mirror with her shirt lifted above her bra to reveal her stomach bulging

over her pants. In the after photo, depicting her body only from the waist down, her stomach appears to fit neatly inside the buttoned pants. Her caption reads:

> These are my summer pants. So tight they were last yr I use to have to unbutton them during the day ..

These posts often include hashtags #beforeandafter and #TransformationTuesday, popular tags used within Instagram's multiple health communities that reflect the results of sticking with a fitness regiment.

In another post, a self-proclaimed 'Southern Belle' portrays an obvious transformation. Her before photo is accompanied by an after image that clearly reflects a sizeable weight loss. Her hair is longer and she wears shorts and a shirt that allows a sneak peek at her midriff. The shirt reads "WORK HARD PLAY HARD," and the picstitch has the words "No tricks… Eat clean Train dirty" underneath her photos. Her caption reads:

> The best birthday gift to myself is the gift of health. I'm so thankful that God has blessed me to see another year and as I enter chapter 29 I pray that he continues to show me favor and grace. Romans 5:1-5

Whereas one could expect to find the physical benefits of fitness highlighted in a health community, posts in the #blackgirlsrun stream also reflect the benefits that running and exercising has on their mental wellbeing as well. Next to a selfie where she is depicted slightly sweaty and smiling, one mother writes in her caption:

> Good morning! Almost 2 week streak!! #runstreak almost didn't make it out of bed this morning But I made it. I'm glad I did because now I am wide awake and full of natural endorphins

In a similar post, a nutrition enthusiast shares a selfie where she adorns a wide smile and big, loose curls, writing in her caption:

> My morning workout puts me in such a good mood and so does fitting into pre baby clothes! Incidentally, I'm also having a great hair day!

In other posts users connect the two benefits, demonstrating how a physical transformation can boost morale. In her post, one runner is pictured smiling wide with her hand placed on her hip. She's at a track and wearing a BGR! tank top. Next to her photo she provides a clue as to why her smile is so big:

> Loving the way this body is shaping up and just in time for summer! Hard work pays off! And @officialblackgirlsrun keeps me motivated!
> #PhiladelphiaMarathon HERE I COME!!!

For many users, the benefits of training hard are found in tangible rewards like running medals. A recurring type of post in the stream reflects women who are training for or participating in road races, distance-based races that take place on a predetermined street course. As previously mentioned, it was the lack of representation of Black women at road races that inspired *Black Girls RUN!* co-founders to start their blog in 2010. Consequently, a large part of the #blackgirlsrun conversation is centered on participation in these races, which give medals to participants upon completion and to the fastest runners in established gender and age groups. The race bling typically includes the race's name and distance, which most often varies between 5K (5 kilometers/3.1 miles), 10K (10 kilometers/6.2 miles), half marathon (21 kilometers/13.1 miles), and marathon (42 kilometers/26.2 miles).

In recent years the group debuted a BGR! medal hook in its online store, declaring "You have worked hard to earn the bling, so what better way to show off your race medals than with the Black Girls RUN! medal hanger."[40] In a caption next to a photo of the 2014 Triple Peach Medal – awarded by the Atlanta Track Club to runners who participate in the AJC Peachtree Road Race, Atlanta 10-Miler, and the Atlanta Half

Marathon – an Atlanta runner shares her excitement for earning the medal in the near future:

> I can't wait to get my hands on this beauty! I'll be participating in the AJC #PeachtreeRoadRace, the #Atlanta10Miler and the #AtlantaHalfMarathon over the next few months. And for completing all three races I'll get the #AtlantaTrackClub #TriplePeach medal! #racebling [grinning face] [smiling face with smiling eyes] [smiling face with open mouth] [runner] [runner]

Instagram users who engage with this community are prepared for a fitness journey that 'ain't purty,' but is essential to reaping the range of benefits also depicted in the stream. Thus, these posts assist women in developing expectations and expectancies, the value attributed to an anticipated outcome.[41] According to SCT, the greater the value associated with the anticipated outcome of a behavior, the more likely a person will be able to persevere through the expected challenges of performing the behavior. In other words, if an exercise hopeful places greater value on a before-and-after transformation than on the anticipated challenge of running in cold weather, they will be more likely to persevere toward a health and fitness goal. Whether physical, mental, or merely material, the #blackgirlsrun stream conveys that the rewards of enduring a fitness journey are well worth the challenges that are sure to come.

Mind Over Matter Motivation

In terms of goal setting, Social Cognitive Theory posits that self-efficacy, or a person's belief that they can actually perform a behavior, is just as important as knowing what to do or what to expect from a new behavior.[42] According to Bandura, self-efficacy influences an individual's health goals in ways similar to anticipated outcomes. If a person has a stronger perceived self-efficacy, they will be more likely to have higher

goals (expectations) and place more value on achieving those goals. Furthermore, individuals with high self-efficacy tend to persevere in the face of difficulty.[43] The #blackgirlsrun stream demonstrates the importance of self-efficacy in the number of posts that reflect a sense of mind-over-matter motivation. For example, next to an image of the words "mind" and "matter" separated by a horizontal line (a literal depiction of mind over matter), one user writes:

> Guess who wanted to sleep in this morning, but got up to run anyway? Me!!! This fitness thing has a lot to do with discipline. You have to make up in your mind that you are going to do what it takes to get the results you want.

In another moving post, an aspiring fitness coach offers a visual counter to the doubts that could impact her ability to stay motivated in her fitness journey. The square image depicts a body in an athletic kicking pose, with the words: "GO AHEAD, TELL ME THAT I'M NOT GOOD ENOUGH TELL ME THAT I CAN'T DO IT, BECAUSE I WILL SHOW YOU OVER & OVER AGAIN THAT I CAN!" In her caption, she writes:

> Wasn't going to workout today because I got up late. I shook it off and went and did my workout, I'm going to have those days, I will never get fit thinking like that, get up and make it happen

Although it's unclear if the posts in the #blackgirlsrun stream are meant to address the stereotypical doubts of others or the doubts from within, the sentiment that doubts can be buried through determination and hard work is clear. The posts often demonstrate how self-efficacy improves as significant milestones are met. Next to an image of a watch displaying the results of her two-mile run, one runner shares:

> I may not run 7 min mile yet but I feel like a rock star. I've never been able to run 2 miles straight until tonight/today. #nikeplus #running #blackgirlsrun #milestone

In another post, a user shares an image of a glistened woman facing the words "take PRIDE in how far you have come have FAITH in how far you can go." In the caption, she writes:

> Closer to my dreams. Ill be there soon. I'm so excited. My battle is within me continues though. Im fighting myself tooth and nail to get to my goal.

The number of posts in the #blackgirlsrun stream comprised of motivating textgrams and personal testimonies convey that, above all, belief in oneself will be fundamental to sticking to a fitness journey. The emphasis on mind-over-matter motivation reveals that health and fitness is as much about training the mind as it is about training the body. Raising belief in a person's efficacy enables them to take charge of their health.[44] These posts are examples of what Glanz et al. refer to as emotional coping responses, or strategies and tactics that people use to deal with emotional factors that impact their health behavior.[45] By sharing personal mantras and stories, the #blackgirlsrun stream encourages a strong sense of belief in one's ability to adopt a new behavior.

Yes, Black Girls Run: What's your excuse?

Observational learning is a key construct in Social Cognitive Theory that refers to the process whereby people learn from observing the actions, and results, of others.[46] Whereas most of the previous interpretations are dependent upon observations made within the #blackgirlsrun stream, it is important to note that these interpretations are also based on the perceived credibility of the posts. Rimer and Glanz suggest that offering "credible role models who perform the targeted behavior," could serve as a potential strategy to encourage behavior change.[47] Thus, inherent in the visual and textual evidence

provided in this stream are also the many hues of black and brown skin that allow these posts to resonate deeply with Black women.

As previously stated, existing research has revealed that female minorities believe public health messages fail to engage them because they do not meaningfully engage with cultural nuances, even when the messages are targeted toward their group. Women have also shared that public health messages were ineffective because they felt their racial group was being fetishized or fixated upon, talked at by condescending messages, or simply being sent the wrong messages.[48] In contrast, the #blackgirlsrun stream serves as an unstructured health community that can be perceived as authentic representations of Black women's health experiences.

Nearly every post falls into the category of proof that Black women run, as shades of brown skin in images varying from group-run pictures to brown ankles in running shoes serve as the evidence. Several photos in the stream are posted without any added caption outside of hashtags, as if to communicate: *I just want to join the stream and add to the evidence.* The pictures depict women of all fitness levels, shapes, sizes, and ages. Aside from the occasional spammer or get-fit-quick scheme, there is no reason to believe that any of these women have something to gain by sharing their experiences online. If anything, the sheer magnitude of pictures included in the stream can be perceived as hoping to convey to the world that Black women run, and to a more specific audience of Black women: *Yes, Black women run. What's your excuse?* Such is the case in one post that includes a photo of a young Black girl around the age of three of four. The girl is pictured mid-stride with a running bib pinned over a petite, pink Puma shirt. A pink headband with a colorful flower adorns her short kinky Afro. The caption reads:

What's your excuse again? #BlackGirlsRun #Can'tStop #Won'tStop

The #blackgirlsrun stream provides a boost for Black women's self-efficacy, as one click on the hashtag instantly reveals tens of thousands of posts where Black women are modeling health and fitness, speaking honestly about their experiences, and encouraging other women to do the same. It is hard to imagine that, without the visual representation of credible Black women included in this stream, this movement would be as effective in assuring other Black women that they are capable of behavior change.

What You're Doing Is Awesome

According to the cyclical nature of Social Cognitive Theory, social responses to a person's behavior also influence the likelihood that they will sustain behavior change. As Bandura explains, responses could include social approval and/or disapproval in one's interpersonal relationships, or the positive and negative reactions to one's health behavior and health status from others.[49] For example, if a person's spouse begins to comment that they are "working out too often," or "losing too much weight," an individual may be inclined to abandon their fitness regiment. Thus, positive reinforcements are more likely to encourage a person to sustain behavior change.[50]

The social functions of Instagram allow users within the #blackgirlsrun community to positively reinforce healthy behaviors depicted in tagged posts. As previously explained, users can demonstrate admiration on Instagram by liking a post, leaving a comment, or initiating a connection via following a user after observing their post in the stream. Overwhelmingly, the comments and likes for tagged posts communicate to the uploader: *What you're doing is awesome!* For example, one

#transformationtuesday picstitch, which included five pictures depicting an intense weight loss journey, received 51 likes and several comments, including “You did that.. Girl I’m trying.. Your abs [flexed biceps] [okay hand sign] [information desk person] [heavy check mark] [winking face] [thumbs up sign]” and “Those abs tho! [person raising both hands in celebration].”

In another post, one runner shares a picstitch that includes a selfie, a screen grab of Nike+Running results, and two textgrams along with the following caption:

> Needed a little more so I hit the pavement for a second run [smiling face with smiling eyes]. Not sure where this chick was hiding most of my life but I’m SO glad she is here to stay!!!!!!

Her post received 38 likes and several comments, among which included users posting “Yasssss!!!! AWESOME JOB,” “You’re doing great!!!!!!,” and “#awesome.”

Perhaps one of the most positive forms of reinforcement is having a user share in the comments that a post has motivated them to start their own fitness journey or complete their workout for the day. When a graduate student and runner shared a picstitch of her Nike+Running results, a textgram reading “30 MIN RUNS FOR 30 DAYS,” and a selfie, she received 145 likes on her post. In addition, one user shared in the comments: “Your post push me girl to get it done. Thank You! [heavy black mark] [person raising both hands in celebration].” Another user wrote: “Can you tell me what app this is. I want to start this challenge and this is a great way to track progress.”

Overwhelmingly, Instagram users who participate in the #blackgirlsrun stream are encouraged to sustain healthy behavior. Whether it’s the messages embedded within graphics and written in the captions, or the hundreds of likes and celebratory comments left underneath photos, users are consistently reminded that the healthy behaviors

depicted in the tagged posts are indeed 'awesome.' Thus, it can be concluded that women who regularly engage with health communities on Instagram are more likely to stick with their fitness journey.

Social Cognitive Theory's notion of reciprocal determinism – the influence that behavior, personal factors, and an environment exert on one another – is embodied by Instagram's constant feedback loop.[51] As more and more of the social network's users are exposed to and engage with the #blackgirlsrun stream, the more likely they are to use the tag and expose the community to others. As a result, the hashtag is able to impact the virtual environment (on Instagram) and the physical environment (where the women actually perform behaviors) by promoting and encouraging healthy behavior change.

Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how participation in the #blackgirlsrun community on Instagram empowers Black women to adopt healthy behaviors. It began with a narrative account that provided select social and historical context for the *Black Girls RUN!* movement, including a demonstration of how the hashtag has been used by individuals and encouraged by the group's co-founders to archive and access an ongoing conversation about Black women's health. Additionally, the narrative depicted some of the advantages and complexities of engaging with others in a virtual community as opposed to a physical one. The narrative account was followed by an analytic discussion of Instagram's functionality and interpretations of how those functions operate to promote health within the boundaries of the #blackgirlsrun virtual health community.

Using Social Cognitive Theory as the theoretical underpinning for my interpretations, I analyzed the visual, textual, and social practices inherent in the complete #blackgirlsrun stream, including photographic content, captions, comments, likes and overarching patterns and emphases. By highlighting key examples of posts that describe, model, and reinforce healthy behavior, this chapter has revealed how the #blackgirlsrun community on Instagram models a social cognitive approach to health promotion. Posts that reflect the importance of goal setting, the use of additional resources such as the Nike+Running training app, proper nutrition, total body fitness and quality workout gear reveal that sustaining behavior change requires more than merely trying something new. Users who divulge their challenges and triumphs provide benchmarks against which others can develop expectations and appropriate values to anticipated outcomes. Textgrams and testimonials depict mind-over-matter motivation and mantras that show others the emotional coping strategies that are necessary when the going gets tough. Comments, likes, and follows offer positive reinforcements and, above all, the multiple shades of brown and Black women (who can be perceived as authentic, credible role models) of all shapes, sizes, and ages work to raise Black women's efficacy by affirming that Black women do indeed run. In sum, examining the #blackgirlsrun community on Instagram through the framework of Social Cognitive Theory reveals how participation in online health communities can influence sustainable community-level behavior change.

Notes

[1] The names of participants or Instagram users have been changed or left out.

[2] Somini Sengupta, Nicole Perloth, and Jenna Wortham, "Behind Instagram's success, networking the old way," *New York Times,* April 13, 2012, accessed November 25, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/14/technology/instagram-founders-were-helped-by-bay-area-connections.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

[3] Sengupta, Perloth and Wortham, *Behind Instagram's success.*

[4] Sengupta, Perloth and Wortham, *Behind Instagram's success.*

[5] Sengupta, Perloth and Wortham, *Behind Instagram's success.*

[6] Ingrid Lunden, "Instagram is the fastest-growing social site globally, mobile devices rule over the PCs for access," TechCrunch, January 21, 2014, accessed November 22, 2014, http://techcrunch.com/2014/01/21/instagram-is-the-fastest-growing-social-site-globally-mobile-devices-rule-over-pcs-for-social-access/.

[7] "Stats," Instagram, accessed November 25, 2014, http://instagram.com/press/.

[8] Cooper Smith, "Here's why Instagram's demographics are so attractive to brands," *Business Insider*, August 17, 2014, accessed November 25, 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-demographics-2013-12

[9] FAQ, Instagram, accessed November 25, 2014, http://instagram.com/about/faq/.

[10] Lunden, *Mobile devices rule over PCs.*

[11] "Our Story," Instagram, accessed November 25, 2014, http://instagram.com/press/.

[12] Charlotte Champion, "Instagram: Je-suis-la?" *Philosophy of Photography* 3, no. 1 (January 2012): 83.

[13] Champion, *Instagram: Je-suis-la,* 84-86.

[14] Champion, *Instagram: Je-suis-la,* 84.

[15] Champion, *Instagram: Je-suis-la,* 84-86.

[16] Pierre Bourdieu and Shaun Whiteside, *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), 88.

[17] Champion, *Instagram: Je-suis-la,* 87.

[18] Daniel Rubinstein and Katrina Sluis, “A life more photographic,” *Photographies* 1, no. 1 (January 2008): 17.

[19] Rubinstein and Sluis, *A life more photographic,* 19-24.

[20] “Stats,” *Instagram*.

[21] Rubinstein and Sluis, *A life more photographic,* 19.

[22] Morgan Ames and Mor Naaman, “Why We Tag: Motivations for Annotation in Mobile and Online Media” (paper presented at Chi -Conference-2, 2007): 971-980.

[23] Karen Evans, “Re-Thinking Community in the Digital Age,” in *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives,* ed. Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior (Hampshire: Palgrave McMillian, 2013), 80-81.

[24] Number of tagged posts last updated December 3, 2014. Posts per day number retrieved using data collected via web service *If This Then That.*

[25] Emojis are a popular form of picture characters used to represent things, emotions, people or activities, among other things. More information can be found on the Unicode (emoji developer) website: http://www.unicode.org/faq/emoji_dingbats.html.

[26] Joelle Kivitz, “E-Health and Renewed Sociological Approaches to Health and Illness,” in *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives,* ed. Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior (Hampshire: Palgrave McMillian, 2013), 216-221.

[27] Melanie Eversley, “Running community cites boom among black Americans,” *USA Today*, accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/11/29/running-boom-black-americans/19395921/.

[28] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," *Paper Voices: The popular press and social change* 1965 (1935): 14.

[29] Alan McKee, *Textual analysis: a beginner's guide* (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 4.

[30] Stuart Hall, *Paper Voices,* 16-21.

[31] Although a total of more 1,062 were analyzed for this analysis, the samples used were exhaustive of the most commonly reoccurring themes.

[32] Barbara K. Rimer and Karen Glanz, "Theory at a glance: a guide for health promotion practice," 2nd ed. *National Cancer Institute* (2005), 19.

[33] Albert Bandura, "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means," *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 150.

[34] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a Glance,* 29.

[35] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory,* 144.

[36] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a Glance,* 21.

[37] "Nike+Running app," *Nike*, accessed December 5, 2014, http://www.nike.com/us/en_us/c/running/nikeplus/gps-app.

[38] Rimer and Glans, *Theory at a Glance*, 21.

[39] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory*, 144.

[40] "BGR! Medal Hook," *Black Girls RUN!* online store, accessed December 6, 2014, http://store.blackgirlsrun.com/BGR-Medal-Hook-_p_116.html.

[41] Karen Glanz, Rimer, Barbara K. Rimer and Frances Lewis, *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research and Practice* (San Fransisco: Wiley & Sons, 2002), 169.

[42] Glanz, Rimer, and Lewis, *Health Behavior and Health Education,* 169.

[43] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory,* 145.

[44] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory,* 146.

[45] Glanz, Rimer and Lewis, *Health Behavior and Health Education,* 169.

[46] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a glance,* 21.

[47] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a glance,* 21.

[48] Jennifer Vardeman-Winter, "Confronting Whiteness in Public Relations Campaigns and Research with Women," *Journal Of Public Relations Research* 23, no. 4 (October 2011), 427-430.

[49] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory*, 144.

[50] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a glance,* 21.

[51] Rimer and Glanz, *Theory at a glance,* 21.

CHAPTER FOUR

A CHANGED CONSCIOUSNESS

A critical mass of individuals with a changed consciousness can in turn foster Black women's collective empowerment. A changed consciousness encourages people to change the conditions of their lives.
Patricia Hill Collins

Immediately after Jackie reveals that she, too, sometimes feels uncomfortable in front of the camera I tell her about my research. "You know, I'd love to talk to you about how you use social media, specifically for *Black Girls RUN!* I bet that has something to do with the pictures you take," I tell her. She laughs and cries, "Oh, of course it does!" As we head to the next session, we reflect on how vital selfies and ussies have been to the growth of BGR! Jackie tells me she is a member of two BGR! Atlanta groups on Facebook and is known as the member who catches all of the photo-worthy moments. She promises to upload our pictures so I can tag myself and, before I can tell her that I'm not an official member of any online group, she's off to take more photos with new friends.

In the opening remarks to the next session, Toni encourages everyone to continue snapping pictures and sharing on Instagram using the event's hashtag. The whole point of BGR!, she reminds us, is to raise awareness, spread the word, and grow the movement. The women take her up on this challenge and at the end of our session on foam rolling the entire class poses for a selfie with the instructor. On my way back to the car I slip into a bathroom with floor-to-ceiling mirrors that are perfect for selfie-taking. After a series of poses, I choose a picture to upload to Instagram. In the photo, I smile and keep my sweat

stains hidden. I'm holding a large green and white striped tote bag with my foam roller and yoga mat peeking out the top. In the caption I write: *The sexy has been preserved! I had such an amazing time today and am so blessed that these moments can serve double duty as #dissertation #research! #abd #phd #blackgirlsrun #ptst14.*

Less than a month later, I'm walking into the same hotel for another *Black Girls Run!* event. This time it's for the Sweat With Your Sole Festival, the organization's annual conference and race event that brings thousands of *BGR!* members and run enthusiasts together from all over the country. I have my purple, black, and white-striped composition notebook tucked away in my tote bag. The goal for this weekend is to observe the energy of this movement in person. I have spent hours studying hundreds of photos archived with the hashtag #blackgirlsrun, but despite having a pretty good idea about how those posts empower unaffiliated BGR! members like me, I want to learn more about what happens when this group of women get together in person. I've heard through the grapevine that BGR! Atlanta running groups are like a sorority; some of my friends have even called it "cult-like" after seeing chapter members bundled together in matching paraphernalia, warming up for a road race. Although I feel a strong bond with these women as a virtual member of the BGR! community, I've never felt that sense of camaraderie in person, and I wonder if it's this strong bond between Black women that makes this health movement so alluring.

I step on the escalator and head down to the registration area below. The hotel's meeting area feels much larger now. The retractable walls are removed and the space where I learned running form and foam rolling techniques has been transformed into a health exposition with local and national vendors. Black women are everywhere. To my

right I spy a few women from BGR! Memphis in matching shirts. In the background I hear a woman call out “Heyyyyyy giiiirl!” to a friend passing by. They hug each other tightly. It’s like a high school reunion. For a moment, I reflect on how privileged this conference is. I ponder about how much money it must cost to travel to this four-star hotel with a small group of your closest running partners for the sole purpose of focusing on your health. Thankfully, I was gifted with free registration from Toni and Ashley and my friend is letting me sleep on her couch for the weekend. Otherwise, I’d be at home in my small college town, watching the fun unfold from behind the hashtag as I usually do.

When I arrive at my first session, I don’t know what to expect. It’s one of the conference sessions listed as active, a Pilates and boxing hybrid class called Piloxing. As soon as the music kicks in I know I’m about to have the time of my life. The instructor tells us that she is the only Black woman in the country certified to teach this class, and she is super excited to be teaching it to a group of her “sisters.” At the end of the hour I’m drenched in sweat. For the last move, she tells us to lock arms with our neighbors and do a high kick line. “C’mon!” she yells, “We’re all sweaty!” I lock arms with the women next to me and we end the routine laughing loudly with legs flying and sweaty arms sliding against each other as we try to keep up with our instructor. I feel that feeling again; the one I had standing in a semi-circle of Black women a month ago talking about my battle with hypertension. It’s a feeling of familiarity, comfort, and fearlessness. It’s a feeling of encouragement. It doesn’t matter if my feet are barely reaching a foot off the ground or if that drop of sweat freshly planted on my chin is from my neighbor or me. We’re having fun and we’re getting healthy.

At lunch, I sit alone in a nearby food court and watch the small clusters of *BGR!* members walking by. Like BGR! Memphis, several group members have come sporting their matching chapter gear. Although I sit by myself to write in my journal, I don't feel lonely. Every set of eyes I meet is warm; almost every woman offers a smile. On Instagram, the selfie that I posted after my first session has already received several likes and the class's instructor has left a comment thanking me for coming. I click on her profile and press follow before exiting the app to respond to text messages from friends who aren't at the conference but have seen my social media posts: *How's it going?… What are you learning?... Take Notes!*

The next day, I have a slightly different experience in my West African dance class. The room is twice as large as the room where I took Piloxing and it's brimming with Black women. Once again, they're all ages, shapes, and sizes. I look over my notes before taking off my shoes and socks and heading to the center of the floor. Halfway through the class, I almost bump into a woman who has left the formation to take pictures. She's holding her camera about a foot over her head trying to get the whole group as I approach her sweating, hip thrusting, and hands flailing. *What are you doing?* I think, as I sashay my way around her, annoyed. I'm too busy trying to keep up with the tricky eight-count to think about taking pictures. Why isn't she doing the same?

I watch women step out of our dancing formation, one after the other, to take pictures of our session and I can't help but wonder why documenting every moment is so important to them. As a member of the virtual community, I know I benefit from seeing pictures and posts online, but what are the benefits of stepping out of formation to snap pictures fir posting and why do so many women feel compelled to do it? For the rest of

the day, I'm aware of the obsessive camera phone usage. In almost every corner of the hotel there's a woman posing for a selfie or a chapter taking a group picture. In my purple, black, and white-striped journal I write:

> *In my African dance class, which I LOVED, I almost walked right over someone because she was ALL up in the way trying so hard to take a video. I know that this movement [in numbers and likes] is taking off and being fueled by pictures, but if we're so busy sharing, when do or how do we focus on the fitness – or is it even about that?... I think* BGR! *could benefit from making sessions "selfie free" or camera phone free – maybe take pics before or after but not during the session – the focus is on the fitness.*

The next morning, I take my own advice and upload a selfie I snuck in the bathroom of my friend's apartment before heading out to *BGR!*'s road race. In the caption, I write: *Just a lil' morning run with a few thousand of my sole sisters #blackgirlsrun ☺ #nikeplus #SWYS14.* When I get out of the car and start my trek toward the starting line in Piedmont Park, I'm committed to the experience. I'll use my phone to take notes, I tell myself, but other than that I just want to run with this group of women. There will be no obsessive camera phone usage from me. A few moments later, I'm approaching the starting line and I get chills. There are thousands of Black women huddling together waiting for the race to start. I've never seen anything like this. I sneak out my phone to snap a few pictures. There's no way I could describe this scene with words.

When the race begins, a young girl runs past me with her mother. I guesstimate that she's about ten years old. A wave of emotion hits me. Minutes later, I see a woman stop and start running in place. She's waiting on a friend. Her friend tells her to go ahead without her, to which she replies "I'm not leaving you." She jogs in place until her friend catches up and then matches her pace. I run past them jogging side-by-side. When I turn

the corner, I'm at the bottom of a hill and you can feel the collective groan amongst the group. In the background I hear some sort of chanting. I turn my music down and realize it's a woman yelling at the group. I come in at the end as she says something about sweating. Then I hear: "That's because we're awesome! Let's get it!" She repeats the chant again and again. I wrestle my phone out of my waist pack and try to capture the moment but between the uphill climb and the steady motion of running, it's too hard to get any usable footage. I give up and put my headphones back in, telling myself to stay in the moment and finish the race. I pick up the pace as I run past that woman, her lips curled and throat straining as she yells out another chant.

I've run a few races but it's never felt like this. Women are giving each other high fives, laughing, and chanting. Onlookers stop in their tracks as a sea of Black women runs through downtown Atlanta. By the time I cross the finish line, I've completely abandoned my notion that camera phone use should be restricted. I want to share this moment with every Black woman I know. While on the hunt for a post-race snack I walk past two women, probably in their late-20s, discussing how it felt to complete their first 5K. Later, while resting on a bench, I sit next to a mom and her six-year-old daughter who have just completed the race. The girl is wearing black tights with pink racer stripes, a pink tank top, and a pink BGR! Bondi Band. Her hair is pulled back with tiny pink barrettes and bow ties. I take a moment to admire her, noting how the race bib almost completely covers her entire upper body. She doesn't even look like she broke a sweat. "How did she do?" someone asks the mother. "Eh, she did about 30… 33," the mother responds. We had crossed the finish line within minutes of each other.

I fight back tears while looking at this young girl. I know she won't have the same love-hate relationship I have with running when she grows up. I didn't have the courage to run my first 5K until I was 24 years old. I think about my current fitness journey and how challenging it gets. Some days it feels so unnatural to wake up and go running, to eat baked chicken instead of fried, or to opt for water over soda that, even though I know better, I choose the unhealthy route. Then, I reflect on my six-year-old son waiting for me at home, and how he routinely helps me decide on healthy meal options or shares the new exercises he's learning at school. I can't remember how old I was when I realized what it really meant to live a healthy lifestyle, or when I made the connection between health and quality of life. For this woman's daughter and my son, that connection will be natural and they'll grow up practicing habits I'm struggling to adopt.

On the way back to my car, I encounter the second wave of runners heading toward the finish line. These are the women who opted to run the 15K, or 9.3 miles. More than an hour has gone by since the first wave of women completed their race. At the crosswalk, I watch an elderly woman run-shuffle past me singing a gospel song. "I hear the chains falling," she sings as she inches past me. I think about my mother, who has diabetes and hypertension, and my aunt, who's had more than one open-heart surgery. I wish they could witness what's happening at this morning's race. I wish they could feel as empowered as this woman must feel as she heads into the last stretch of a grueling nine-mile run. As I watch her run-shuffle toward the signature BGR! cheer tunnel – lines of Black women cheering on both sides of the path leading up to the finish line – the wave of emotion returns and I feel the rush of tears.

I pull out my camera phone and snap away. Through tears, I take a series of photos and videos to share later. There are no words to explain how powerful this moment is. This is something you have to see to believe. "The 'chains' are indeed falling," I sigh to myself. Finally, I get it. The pictures aren't just about capturing the moment; they provide evidence needed to share the moment. The pictures are to show the next Black woman what she missed and what she can be a part of, too. When I get back to my friend's apartment she asks me about the race. I start telling her about all of the women – the first-time runners, the babies, the young girls, and the grandmas. I pull out my phone and plop down on the couch. "You have to come with me next year," I say, swiping through the footage. "You've got to see this."

***

Black Girls RUN: A Netnography

In chapter three, I conducted a textual analysis to explore how the photo-sharing app Instagram is being used to influence community-level change in the health behaviors of women who engage with the hashtag #blackgirlsrun. Through a combination of visual and textual practices, Instagram users reconcile distances in time and space and are able to model and promote healthful behaviors to their peers. Although the practices inherent to social media (photo-sharing, commenting, tagging, liking, etc.) strengthen the reach and impact of BGR!, it is important to note that they occur within larger social and cultural contexts that allow these practices to create meaning and have substantial impact within the lives of Black women. The purpose of this chapter is to discover shared cultural values that condition BGR!'s influence with Black women in online and offline spaces, as the two are greatly intertwined. As Stuart Hall explains, "culture is threaded

through all social practices and is the sum of their inter-relationship."[1] Thus, this chapter uses evidence gathered from qualitative interviews, archives of social media posts, and participant observation to situate Black women's use of media to communicate about their health experiences within the larger contexts of a dire health crisis, underrepresentation/self-representation in the media, and the benefits of group identification. The resulting discussion is useful for understanding the influence of *Black Girls RUN!* as a hashtag, an online community, and as a growing presence on the pavement.

Black Women's Health Crisis: A Cultural Issue

Black women are in the midst of a dire health crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, African Americans have "the most, and many times the largest, differences in health risks when compared to other minority groups."[2] As mentioned in previous chapters, Black women, in particular, have some of the poorest health outcomes in the country. In addition to disproportionate experiences with chronic, and often preventable, diseases, Black women are confronted with adverse experiences within the health care system, too. Black women suffer from inequalities in access to care and quality of care, and although these facts have been well documented, the solutions to solving such inequalities are all but simple. As Norman Daniels explains, reducing our nation's racial health disparities is "no simple matter," and the solution is justifiably complex. Although many inequalities in health between racial and gender groups are unjust, the solution is not as simple as allocating extra resources to certain groups or developing special interventions that specifically target vulnerable groups. These types of

solutions would require a discussion of which groups suffer from the worst form of injustice and which groups should benefit from preferential treatment, conversations that are not likely to be had in a system that aims to promote population health fairly.[3]

The inability of larger institutional and governmental agencies to adequately address or mitigate Black women's health issues places the onus of this health crisis into the hands of Black women. According to Patricia Hill Collins, it is during times when Black women's very survival is at risk when the need for an honest dialogue on their experiences is most critical.[4] This understanding was supported by my fieldwork and interviews, through which I discovered that many of the women who engage with *Black Girls RUN!* are aware of the critical state of Black women's health and, hoping to mitigate their community's increased vulnerability to poor health outcomes, take personal stake in discussing and promoting health within their communities.

For many of these women, the connection between health and quality of life occurred after they reached adulthood and were exposed to different cultures with various perspectives on health, such as the principle that running is a fitness activity that Black women can take part in. Alana, a BGR! member in Atlanta, attributes the group with opening her eyes to health and fitness after moving to the city from a northern state. When she was younger, Alana says, "[health and fitness] wasn't really a significant part of my life cause I wasn't really aware of it. I think that comes from family and cultural backgrounds, but now as I've been exposed to different people and have different experiences, I've learned a lot on my own." As a result, Alana aims to share those new perspectives on health with other Black women she meets.

Similar to Alana, several of the women I interviewed acknowledged a sense of cultural ambivalence toward discussions of health and fitness. Nettie, a 55-year-old runner in Philadelphia, told me that with her generation health was not a priority, especially for Black women. At that time, she said, organized sports were mostly male-centered and fitness in leisure activities (swimming, running, golf, etc.) wasn't emphasized. To make matters worse, Nettie says, there were "certain issues that only Black women deal with" that prevented them from being able to maintain a focus on health and fitness:

> And let's face it, especially in my generation when we had the straightening comb, a lot of women didn't want to sweat, because they didn't want to mess their hair up. And I know it's a whole generation of women that didn't want to learn how to swim, because they didn't want to get their hair messed up.

Now, in her role as a school counselor and public health advocate, Nettie makes a personal effort to model her activeness for the next generation with hopes of standing in the gap of role models from her generation, which she says is critical for the Black community:

> It's invigorating to, when you go to a race, to see a group of Black women running. Especially in our community with the high incidence of obesity and Black women being overweight. You know that that woman is a nutritional gatekeeper to her family, so BGR! extends into our community and into families.

A few years ago, Nettie decided to transition her natural hair into a style consisting of rope-like strands called locs so her hair would not be an impediment to her fitness lifestyle. At work, she keeps a picture of herself crossing the finish line after a race visible so that young women who come into her office can see that fitness is a lifetime venture, and not something that's limited to a certain time period of one's life, like high school or college. Among the women I spoke with, even the ones who

participated in sports during high school and college discussed the challenges of maintaining consistent fitness outside of organized sports. Deidre, a 22-year-old marathon runner from San Diego attributed her transition into adulthood as one of her largest fitness setbacks, whereas Nicole, a 30-year-old BGR! member in Atlanta, conveyed that her brief stint as a basketball player in junior high was forgettable and hadn't trickled over into a desire for consistent fitness as an adult.

Previous research has suggested that Black women's cultural views toward body shape might be an impediment to their perceptions of health and fitness, and thus their desire to maintain an active physical lifestyle when it's not perceived to be required, as is the case with team sports. In regards to weight, Black women don't aspire to thinness like white women do and are more likely to be satisfied with their body shape than white women.[5] Francis, a 31-year-old runner from Chicago, explained how she viewed beauty as being bigger when she was growing up:

> I've always been a bigger girl, and all the women in my family have been bigger women. I guess I always saw beauty as being bigger… cause that's what all the women in my family were. They were all big women, you know, so that's what I looked up to… I wouldn't say that I had a negative view of being fit or healthy, but that was what my role model was. You learn how to cook; you learn how to eat… That's what it was.

Like Francis, Jane, a 30-year-old BGR! Atlanta member, grew up with bigger body frames as the norm in her household. However, for Jane, it was more than bigger women being considered beautiful; poor health outcomes associated with obesity were also normalized. This is how Jane described how she envisioned health when she was growing up:

> Health was like, you know, everybody has diabetes, everybody has high blood pressure, so you just… Everybody has it so, you know, people have it… But you could still be like healthy, right?

It wasn't until Jane continued to gain weight in college and had her own adverse health experiences that she began to understand the connection between physical activity and health and wellness, which is the connection that many women see as the driving force behind the appeal of *Black Girls RUN!*

Bianca, a 27-year-old runner from Philadelphia, says that although she's not an official member of the organization she uses the hashtag #blackgirlsrun on social media to promote health in Black women. Bianca, who describes herself as a 'small' woman, agrees that conversations about running should be more about being healthy than about being thin:

> I remember when I used to run track in high school and that was the best shape that I was in. So for me, now, if I'm walking up a ton of steps I don't want to be out of breath. Just because I'm small doesn't mean I'm in shape, or that I can't have problems that other people have… Because my mom is little, she has problems with high blood pressure. I want to make sure I don't get that. She's tiny like me, so it's not always about the size that you are; it's how you want your body to be. You want it to be in shape and be healthy.

Jane echoed Bianca's sentiments when describing her motivations for running:

> My motivation is not for it to be, you know, I have to be this-size skinny. That's not really my motivation. My motivation is I want to keep away diabetes, high blood pressure… I don't ever have to be small, small. The women in my family are framed a little bit differently. I could be smaller if I, you know, did some more toning. And that's cool. I want a toned body; a leaner body. I want to be able to be active and do what I want to do.

The group's mission of encouraging African American women to make fitness and healthy living a priority influence's the organization's national programming and online presence. In 2014, *Black Girls RUN!* held its third annual national conference and race weekend event, the Sweat With Your Sole Festival, in Atlanta, Georgia. During the event, women attended a series of active sessions and mind and body lectures. While the

active sessions got heart rates pumping with classes like Spin and Piloxing, the mind and body lectures served to reiterate the group's purpose of empowering women to take an active role in preserving their health, specifically in the face of a dire health crisis. The promotional material for the event features one of BGR!'s frequently used statistics, courtesy of the Center for Disease Control: "4 out of 5 African American women are overweight or obese." The fact is followed by the group's subtle call for collective action: "We can change that" [Appendix C].

During the session "Discover A New You," the group's leader guided women in an interactive conversation about the importance of setting attainable goals designed to jump-start their fitness journey. When the conversation turned toward personal challenges and triumphs with healthy living, the women in the room started an honest exchange about personal health experiences that extended far beyond weight loss. A *BGR!* Birmingham member shared that after nine years of being on Zoloft, she was able to get off of her prescription toward the end of the summer in 2014. For this woman, running three times per week had contributed to her new sense of happiness and helped her beat depression, a sometimes-taboo topic for Black women that appears to be welcomed by this group.[6] Other women began to chime in, sharing testimonies that ranged from one woman shedding an excess of fifty pounds to another finally eliminating three of six blood pressure medications at the age of 60. As time ran out, the speaker encouraged members to continue sharing stories with one another, and to continue motivating each other to live their best, healthful lives.

From the conversations at national events to conversations that take place online, it remains clear that with these women losing weight is an added bonus for doing what it

takes to live a healthy life. Reversing hypertension diagnoses and reducing other adverse health outcomes that result from sedentary lifestyles are trace effects of BGR!'s focus on fitness, the main goal of which is to extend the lives of Black women, not to promote thin bodies. Another popular session from the organization's Sweat With Your Sole Festival was *Ask the Doctor*, presented by United Healthcare. The session was designed to bring a feature of BGR!'s blog to life, in which women are able to submit some of their "most burning health questions" to be answered by a doctor in future posts.[7] The women who post messages online are just as aware of the health-first rhetoric of the women who meet at national events and local running meet-ups. The online exchange stemming from the group's blog also promotes a sense of trust among the women, who reach out to each other in addition to, and sometimes instead of, health experts. This is evidenced by their use of social media as spaces to pose important health questions to other health-focused women. For example, on May 13, 2014, I observed an Instagram post in which a user shared concerns about her recent experiences with poor blood circulation while running to the #blackgirlsrun stream. In the caption to her image she wrote:

> Mother's Day weekend messed me all up… I ate terribly. Trying to Amp up my cardio this week to undo some of the damage [see-no-evil monkey] Side Bar: As of lately I'm getting poor circulation in my hands when I run… it swells soooo bad! Anyone know what could be the cause or experiencing the same thing?! #mindovermatter #PayingforItNow #teamgetfit #stayingmotivated #determined #blackgirlsrun #running #kellydrive #coralpants #poorcirculation #runnerproblems #cardio [running man] [tennis shoe]

In the comments below, the user received answers including "might be too much salt, and cholesterol… take it easy" and "Watch your sodium intake and drink plenty of water!" Another user posted: "I don't like that. Go 2 a doctor asap," to which the original poster replied: "Lol Sis, I'm one of those people that has to be practically dying to go to the

doctor." This online exchange conveys why several Black women are flocking to virtual communities and physical groups that are health focused as they claim ownership of their health: the communication that takes place in these spaces is convenient and open, and, the answers they receive online prevent many of these women from having to make unwanted trips to the doctor.

Black women's weak reliance on health care providers stems from many intersecting factors, such as generations of racism, poverty, and cultural beliefs. For instance, a growing body of knowledge attributes Black women's obligations to manifest strength, suppress emotions, and avoid vulnerability with postponement of self-care, including scheduling visits to the doctor.[8] Unfortunately for Black women, the result is that often when they do receive care, they are more likely to receive it too late and beyond the point when previously treatable ailments have surpassed easy remedies, making it difficult to see the positive side of seeking care.[9]

Another reason why Black women may be reluctant to seek health care is the track record of Blacks' mistreatment by the United States health care system. As previously mentioned, Blacks in America have a troubling history with the health care industry, and the impact can be seen in the dismal rates at which Blacks access care. Previous research has shown that African Americans tend to report less positive perceptions of doctors than whites.[10] For a lot of Black people, poor perceptions of physicians stem from mistrust rooted in fear that hospitals will take advantage of their private information or subject them to harmful experimentation.[11]

During our conversation, Nettie mentioned how important it is for groups like BGR! to continue to emerge in Black communities, especially in spaces where Black

people are more likely to trust each other, such as the church. According to Nettie, the issue is that in other spaces, like ones where Black people aren't primary decision makers, "minorities in health and fitness tend to get left behind," she then added, "Tuskegee is still fresh in our minds." Nettie is referring to the now infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which 399 Black men were left untreated for syphilis so that physicians could document the natural progression of the disease. The Tuskegee study is one of the seminal studies used to explain the deep-rooted mistrust of medicine and public health in Black communities.[12] However, the study is joined by a long list of other notable cases, such as the story of Henrietta Lacks' stolen cancerous cells that allowed Big Pharma to make millions while her family scraped for pennies and fought for retribution. The story has seen resurgence with the widespread success of Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* published in 2010.[13] Unfortunately, the *New York Times'* bestseller can also be seen as another reminder of the many reasons Blacks have to not trust the healthcare industry.

Influenced by cultural beliefs, poor perceptions of care, and past racial experiences within the healthcare industry, the strained status of Black women's health is wreaking havoc on their lives at disproportionate rates. One shared value of the women who engage with *Black Girls RUN!* is that Black women's current and dire health state demands they take control of their health and inspire others to do the same. In the following excerpt from her interview, Jane discusses her enthusiasm for promoting *Black Girls RUN!* at a local race she plans on attending, and why it is so important to spread the message within Black communities:

> I'm buying a *Black Girls Run!* shirt for my half marathon in December and I would have never tried to do a half marathon. I wouldn't even try to do a 10K

> before *Black Girls Run!*, like, it was not what you did. You know… you can do all this stuff, but running isn't what you can do…
>
> The thought that only slim people or that only certain [people] have access to fitness, that's just foolishness, and it's engrained in our culture. I want to break that, cause otherwise, if only certain people have access to fitness culture or groups where activity is prominent then it's going to be the same stuff over, and over, and over again. Which is not getting active, people feeling like they can't, or they're feeling defeated, [and] that's foolishness.

By relying on each other to make sense of their unique and adverse health experiences, Black women have found a way to cope with and possibly transcend a collective health crisis. As evidenced by the observations, social media exchanges, and interviews included in this section, these women not only depend on their peers, but also take it upon themselves, to stand in the gaps of social support and information sources needed to deal with important health issues, in lieu of trust in health care providers, physicians, and mainstream media.

Seeing is Believing: Shared Experiences Standing in the Gap

In her inquiry into Black women's responses to literature and film Jacqueline Bobo writes, "Black women are aware, along with others, of the oppression and harm that come from a negative media history. But Black women are also aware that their specific experience, as Black people, as Black women, in a rigid class/caste state has never been adequately dealt with in the mainstream media." Bobo goes on to add that the proliferation of creative works by Black women, and their positive reception by other Black women cultural consumers, stems from a desire to "construct works more in keeping with their experiences, their history, and with the daily lives of other black women."[14] This desire remains evident in Black women's engagement with online health

communities and groups similar to *Black Girls RUN!* The creation of the hashtag #blackgirlsrun offers commentary on Black women's fitness experiences, and serves to challenge and resist common perceptions about Black women's willingness to take ownership of their health experiences. The same could be said of other popular hashtags #blackgirlslift, #blackgirlsworkouttoo, or #blackgirlsdoyoga.

During our SXSW panel presentation, Ashley mentioned that one of the reasons why Black women enjoy group runs and Facebook groups is because they become "safe spaces" where they can ask questions and get "real" answers they wouldn't be able to get elsewhere. For example, a curvaceous woman with large breasts might ask how other women manage their challenges with finding a good sports bra. In her interview, Jane offered an example exchange depicting how social media users get trusted and useful health or fitness-related information within BGR!'s online communities:

> People know where they can give you hints and they're really honest. I'm in the *Black Girls RUN!* Atlanta Facebook group and people are pretty open and honest there. So, if you say like, "Hey' I'm looking for plus-sized workout clothes," they won't be like, "Oh, you're not fat, you're just…" They'll be like, "Okay, plus-sized stuff that holds up, you can find it here, here, here, or here's been my experience with it."

The sentiment that I gathered from Jane and other women was that the guidance received within the BGR! community is such that physicians or running magazines might not be able to provide. Ashley's language during our panel was reminiscent of Patricia Hill Collins, who described "safe spaces" as realms where Black women could speak freely and express voices that contribute to collective, alternative definitions of what it means to be Black and to be a woman. She identifies Black women's relationships with one another, Black women's blues tradition, and the voices of Black women writers as three traditionally safe spaces where Black women have been able to construct individual

and collective voices in the United States. Additionally, she mentions institutional sites, such as extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations, as ideal spaces for Black women to engage in safe discourse that opposes the controlling images found elsewhere; for example, at schools or through print and broadcast media.[15] Today, Black women's relationships with each other, writings to each other, and conversations with one another are largely occurring via social media, and with the help of popular hashtags like #blackgirlsrun.

In "What the Hashtag?," Tamara Small explored the role of hashtags in spreading the news. She notes: "one function of mainstream media journalism is to disseminate info 'we've' determined to be reliable… but the reliance on Twitter/Facebook is essentially throwing the doors open to any and everything."[16] While supporters of mainstream media may lament Small's suggestion, the notion that mainstream media have never adequately supported the experiences of Black Americans yields a sense of triumph for the rise of new platforms that allow Black women to quickly and easily spread reliable information about their health experiences, particularly in the face of glaring under- and misrepresentation in mainstream health forums.[17,18]

For several of the women that I spoke with, reliability of the information they encounter on social media is directly correlated with the authenticity and relevance of posts, established through pictures and language that assured them women posting online were 'everyday women' with experiences similar to their own. In turn, having access to the many reliable sources on Black women's fitness journeys inspires these women in meaningful ways. When asked what it was about *Black Girls RUN!* that caught her interest, Alana responded:

> The fact that people were similar to me, you know it wasn't – you have some "runner" runners that, you know, definitely look like runners, of which I don't. But, you have people that are just regular, everyday people that like to run and like to get out there.

Similar to Alana, it is the ordinariness of the women that Francis encounters online that allows their experiences to resonate.

> I had every excuse in the book as to why I couldn't run: I'm too heavy, my boobs are too big, this is going to chafe, I don't feel like paying that much for shoes… like, every excuse in the book… I think even if my doctor would have been like "Maybe you should start, you know, maybe you should train for a 5K,' I would have been like, "Pssh.. No!.. Next!"… I just had it so ingrained in my mind that I couldn't do it until I started seeing other people who look like me, do it!

A similar revelation inspired Jane to get active with *Black Girls RUN!* After declining an invite from her sorority sister to go for a run, she found herself looking at photos on social media from a BGR! conference held the next year and started to believe that maybe she could become a runner:

> My prophyte lives in Virginia, but she used to run all the time; she was in *Black Girls RUN!* and I was like "Oh, okay, well that's cute but I'm chubby; I don't run." And then they had a conference in 2012 and I was like "Now, wait a minute, I'm looking at these pictures and everybody in there ain't skinny." So, if they out here running, walking, shuffling, however the getting there, I can do it, too.

As discussed in the previous chapter, photographs play a large role in promoting self-efficacy in Black women by allowing women to observe and model health behaviors within a group of credible peers. The interactive nature of social media sites also allows this group of women to build virtual running partnerships and seek accountability amongst their peers across vast distances in time and space, which helps sustain healthy behaviors, particularly in the earliest phases of change.[19] Bianca notes that the constant accessibility of social media and connectivity with friends pushes her in her fitness journey. Originally from Virginia, Bianca's move to Philadelphia for school took her

away from friends and loved ones who lived active lifestyles. However, she says, as Instagram grew in popularity she could stay up-to-speed on her friends' runs and see posts with captions such as "I ran two miles today," or "I ran four miles." Seeing those posts, she says, makes her think, "Okay, you know they're doing it, let me get out there and run." After a while, this sort of motivation was gained from women who were outside of Bianca's immediate social circles, and who used the hashtag to share their fitness journeys with the public #blackgirlsrun stream:

> I'll just click on the link and of course scroll through and it'll take me to certain people's pages, just to see what they're doing, and how, what they're motivation is, and how far they've come along in their journey or what they're doing… You see a lot of people doing it for weight loss and you can just see the transformation that they have gone through… I'll see one girl who's ran thirteen miles and I'm like "Man, let me see what she's doing this for." So, it's just that curiosity and just to motivate myself and do more… it just keeps you motivated to do stuff when you see others doing it.

Involvement with BGR!'s online communities has worked in similar ways for BGR! Atlanta member, Jane, who recently moved from the city to pursue her doctoral studies in a small, predominately white college town where she sees very few women of color on the pavement, if any at all. With the help of social media, Jane created a custom hashtag to host a virtual 5K with virtual running partners to celebrate her 30th birthday. The small group of runners logged a total of 26 miles and posted to Instagram and Facebook using the hashtag #alljaneeverything. Because of her experiences with virtual partnerships and social support within *BGR!*, Jane now trains virtually with a personal trainer based out of California. Her sessions are conducted via Skype and she and a few other clients check in with each other using social media groups or web-based group messaging services. Similarly, Deidre, a 22-year-old marathon runner from San Diego

who found out about the BGR! movement in *Runner's World*, has used the hashtag #blackgirlsrun to build virtual running partnerships with other marathon runners in places as far flung as Atlanta and a city in France:

> There's this female in France – I don't know her actual name but we always like each other's photos or are always commenting on each other's photos and she's really motivational. We both try to like, you know, after we see a post that the other has made, comment like "Hey, good job!" or "Oh, I'm sorry that was a bad run, the next one will be better," or "We all have those days."… It's just nice, it's like our own little community of Black women and we kind of are always shooting words of encouragement on each other's posts, so that's fun. It makes me feel good to know that other people are kind of following my progress and I can follow their progress – even though it's all online – it still feels comforting to have that network.

The motivation from the virtual BGR! network comes in useful for women who are not proximally close to fitness-minded others, or, for times when women may want to abandon being fitness-minded themselves. For several of the women I spoke with, posts on social media also serve as a key motivator to lace their sneakers up and literally get out of the door. My interviews indicated two ways that engaging with *Black Girls Run!* on social media helps get women up and out the door: social media is constantly accessible to seek motivation, and, the constant stream of social media posts remind women about their health and fitness goals, even when they are not entirely motivated. Lee, a 29-year-old stay-at-home mother, first encountered local *BGR!* members while participating in a road race and started using the #blackgirlsrun hashtag shortly after. Although she hadn't officially begun running with the group at the time of our interview, she still attributes the virtual running buddies she's gained with helping her make the progress she's made so far:

> Not too many people in my personal circle are focused on fitness or health right now…. it's just nice to be around people who have similar goals, in order to surround yourself, and it's really easy to do with social media. Because if I had to

> rely on people that I know, like those physically near me, I wouldn't have that same type of inspiration or, you know, boost of motivation when you don't feel like doing things.
>
> I think for me it's more of just having the information kind of constantly flowing through my mental space… I take the time to look at Instagram anyway, so if I've kind of focused Instagram on the health-related accounts then I'm getting more information than I would have doing other things… I think, especially with Instagram, you can see the people doing what they say they're doing so it's, "Okay, this works," because they're doing this and I can try that… versus reading an article from, I don't know, like Health.com or something.

Lee's story demonstrates how the women within BGR! are being proactive about adopting new healthful behaviors. Not only are these women willing to attempt the health and fitness behaviors of the women they encounter online, they use social media to learn how to reach their health and fitness goals by actively searching to see what other women who are similar to them are doing and asking for additional information. For example, Alison, a 30-year-old BGR! member from Indianapolis, currently has a goal of running longer distances without becoming exhausted. Alison originally found out about BGR! from her god sister in North Carolina and, since being put in touch with the Indianapolis group, she uses social media to seek motivation and information on how others have been able to achieve running goals that are similar to hers. She uses the #blackgirlsrun hashtag to see how many people are posting and searches for run pictures using the Nike app to get information about people's times and distances. "Sometimes I ask questions about their distances or times," Alison says, posing questions in the comments underneath such as "What keeps you running so long?" or "How long was it before you were able to run this far?"

Women who post to social media using BGR!-related material also do their fair share to make sure they are motivating other women and encouraging them to interact. In

a January Instagram post made to promote the 2014 *Black Girls RUN!* virtual 5K series one user captioned: "Got my new bling today! #iamarunner #blackgirlsrun #walkb4urun. Next session starts soon!" and in the comments below, she wrote: "Join the movement ladies!" In the image, she displays the medal, which is sent to race participants after completing a 5K run at their own pace and uploading the results online. Many of the women I spoke with visit social media for this type of motivation at regular intervals, such as in the mornings or evenings when they are trying to muster up strength for a run. Francis explains that she checks social media first thing in the morning before she runs because the stream reminds her that all of her excuses for not running just aren't good enough:

> All my excuses for why not to run were like, "Ooooh, you got big boobs," or "Oh, I'm real slow," … When you see all these women who have those same situations and yet they're still making it happen, you're like, "Oh!" Plus, on top of that, they're like "I got kids and I got a husband," and I don't have any of that, so it's like "Wait a minute!... You also working two jobs and then coming home to take care of your kids and then going to run? Aw man, I ain't got no excuse!"… Whenever you have a day where you're like "Uh, I just don't feel like doing this, I will go through what other people have posted and that will motivate me to get up and go. And it's not like a competition thing, it's just like a – You know what, that's what I needed cause I want to look like that and I want to feel like that… It's like I'll wake up in the morning and go through posts and be like "Man, she just motivated me to put on my clothes and go."

In sum, the widespread success of *Black Girls RUN!'s* online communities and place-based running groups demonstrates that an honest dialogue surrounding Black women's health experiences matters. The textual analysis in the previous chapter and the evidence collected from archived posts and interviews included in this section reveal that, for many of these women, social media has emerged as a safe space where they are able to seek credible fitness-related guidance that rivals a sometimes-unreliable health care

system, off-the-mark public health messages, and mainstream media that seem to be unconcerned with the totality of Black life.

Toward the end of our conversation, Francis reflected on the importance of social media in her fitness journey by sharing the following:

> I think social media works like the same way it works for families… you live somewhere else but your family is across the country; you can still interact and be a part of the family even though you're not nearby. I think the same goes for fitness. I think you can get support, you can get those tips, and I mean, hell, this is hard… it's hard… this is hard. It's so nice to have the online community for people to be like… just to post their stuff so you can be like, "Alright, so-and-so is doing it, let me get back on this wagon."

In addition to summarizing how Black women are using social media to confront the challenges inherent to health and fitness, Francis's revelation that her use of social media is comparable to being part of a family depicts another shared cultural value for the Black women who engage with *Black Girls RUN!:* being a part of something larger than themselves matters, too.

Group Identification Matters: A Sole Sisterhood

In May, I grabbed a screen shot of one Instagram user's post-run selfie with her run group. In her caption she wrote: "So I joined a running group and today was my first walk/run! I'm excited to be apart of the #BlackGirlsRun community! [tennis shoes] Can you find me? LOL" In the photo, eight Black women are photographed smiling and celebrating with their newest group member. I'm not sure which woman is the one who posted the image, but I reflected in my journal that it gave me a warm feeling to consider how much more likely she will be to return for another group run. The next day, I encountered a post that depicted a woman running through a cheer tunnel at the end of

her group run. The caption read: “Love the sisterhood and support of Black Girls Run! @officialblackgirlsrun #bgratlanta #blackgirlsrun #runhappy #irun.” During the course of my interviews, Jane was the first participant to mention the concept of “sole sisters,” a popular expression used by BGR! members to indicate the sisterly bonds they share with the women they run with. As indicated in the previous chapter, Social Cognitive Theory rationalizes that an individual is more likely to sustain a behavior change when they are able to set goals, observe the actions of other credible peers, and receive positive reinforcement.[20] In other words, positive communities and group involvement encourages healthy behavior change.

My interview with Alana illustrated how important it is that women consider themselves a part of the larger BGR! community. In the following quote, Alana recounts how her attempts at becoming a runner were not successful until after she got involved with the BGR! Atlanta chapter:

> When I did my first race five years ago, I did one other one the next year, and then I didn’t do any more. When I moved to Atlanta I was not really running, I was just more so going to the gym and working out. It wasn’t until I got involved with Black Girls Run! that it really like heightened for me, and it’s more, it’s like a community of runners, and along with community comes certain aspects as far as you feel a part of a group, you know, you feel encouraged, inspired… they look for you, so I think it’s beyond just running, it’s the whole experience of being a part of the group.

Kimberly, a 41-year-old BGR! member from New York, has had a similar experience. Although she has been a runner for years, Kimberly shared that she’s seen her longest consistent stretch with running and fitness since joining the group. When it comes to the appeal of the group, she noted, “I guess just not having to do it alone because sometimes, if we are left to ourselves to get our exercise on, sometimes we fall short. At least that’s how I initially was. I’ve learned to create better practices for myself.”

According to Patricia Hill Collins, it is from within the context of their communities that Black women can become fundamentally empowered. "Self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others. Instead, self is found in the context of family and community," Collins explains, detailing how change in Black women's collective consciousness directly impacts the individual woman.[21] One of the key drivers of *Black Girls RUN!'s* virtual community and place-based groups has been their explicit tie in to Black womanhood: for whom and what the community is for cannot be escaped. Like being born into a family, the barriers to entry for BGR!'s "Sole Sisterhood" are low, consisting of only two loose requirements: that women identify as Black (although non-Black woman are welcomed to join and support the movement) and have some minimal interest in taking control of their health.

Of the ten women I interviewed formally, only half were currently involved with a local BGR! chapter. The remaining women unanimously voiced a sense of belonging based on the health goals and experiences that bond them with other Black women. Lee laughed off that she was altogether unaware of how to become an official member of the organization, but claims that she still connects with the community online because she identifies as a black girl who runs. Similarly, Deidre expressed gratitude to the founders of *Black Girls RUN!* for igniting a movement that inspires Black women all over the country to share a sense of pride in running, regardless of official membership:

> I'm not actually in a group or in a chapter near here, I still feel part of it, I feel like the online community is very strong, even though it's not like a face-to-face connection. It still evokes a sense of inspiration and pride even though you're just posting photos on Instagram. So yea, I definitely feel a part of the movement and I'm contributing to it in some way by being a black female who runs and also inspiring other people.

For many of the women who engage with *Black Girls RUN!*, their participation is just as much about the message's contribution to Black womanhood as it is about getting in shape. The term 'movement' continued to come up in interviews, social media posts, and on BGR!'s official website. Francis touched briefly on the word choice in her interview, stating:

> I feel like I want to be a part of it; I want to be a part of the movement, you know? I mean that sounds very dramatic, but it's true. You want to feel like you're a part of the community and I feel like that's [using #blackgirlsrun] an easy way to feel like you're into the community.

The term suggests a sense of social/political advancement in the realm of Black women's health and embodies a commitment to the larger reasons for spreading the message, such as combatting harmful stereotypes about Black women's bodies and abilities, or encouraging other women to take a much needed role in advancing their health. Bianca shared that she started adding #blackgirlsrun to her posts to make a statement after being questioned about being a runner by the doorman in her building. His disbelief rubbed her the wrong way and she feels that by adding her pictures to the stream she is helping to show people that Black women run because they have good reason to:

> It's not just, you know, the stereotypes that we don't want to work out because of our hair, or what it's going to do, like looks, and that we're going for a certain body frame, cause a lot of people think that Black women want to be, you know, like this thick person and that we don't want to work out because we don't want an athletic build and I'm like "No, some people like that." You just want to be healthy for yourself, so you're working out your body to have longevity.

Other women discussed using the hashtag as a form of giving back to the community that empowered them to reach their goals. Jane, who was originally turned onto BGR! after seeing pictures online, says that she shares pictures using the hashtag now to show other chubby people and even unmotivated smaller people, that if they have

two feet that can move, they can walk/shuffle, too. The ability to add back to the larger collective of women is something that many women considered an added motivator or sense of empowerment. When Nettie posts pictures, links, or articles to Instagram or the BGR! Philadelphia Facebook group she says it makes her feel empowered because she's spreading information that will hopefully become a benefit to other members.

After a while constant engagement with *BGR!*, whether online or off, becomes a sort of give-and-take relationship, according to Alison. "I know that other people are looking for those kinds of posts," Alison says, acknowledging that her online fitness persona has encouraged her to "keep it up" for her sake, and for the sake of others who have grown accustomed to seeing her posts in their feeds. For example, when uploading a picture of a meal prep that she's done for the week, Alison says she often thinks, "Maybe this will help someone feel motivated to pack their lunch today."

Overall, the stories of these women demonstrate that they envision their participation in this movement as action that is much larger than self – a consideration that heightens our understanding of the success of this movement's appeal and influence. As Collins explains, "By being accountable to others, African American women develop more fully human, less objectified selves."[22] Simply put, for these women, considering their selves a part of the Sole Sisterhood is just as crucial to their success as taking the necessary steps to procure their health.

This shared cultural value rests in embracing identities as Black women and spreading a public sense of pride in the unique existence that comes along with that territory. In physical spaces, this manifests simply as a group of Black women running together. However, in online spaces, this is manifested through Black women sharing

their experiences in photos and video on social media, and tagging their posts with #blackgirlsrun to align themselves with a larger group. Not only does tagging on social media signify membership in the Sole Sisterhood, it also conveys a collective understanding of what this membership means and serves as a resource for sharing experiential knowledge about that identity.[23] In their quest for self-definition, women who engage with the BGR! community are participating in a form of cultural politics that Stuart Hall says "engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends in part on the cultural construction of new identities." Whereas Collins suggests that the category of "Black woman" makes all Black women visible and open to the objectification of Black women as a category,[24] the new identity of proud affiliate of #BlackGirlsRun serves to empower.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described three shared cultural values that have contributed to the influence and appeal of *Black Girls RUN!*'s online community and place-based groups. It began with a narrative account depicting the experiences that contributed to my understanding of BGR! as a cultural movement resulting from Black women's precarious relationship with health and healthcare in the United States, lack of adequate representation in the mainstream media, and the changed consciousness that can result from aligning with a larger collective. Additionally, the narrative served to demonstrate the need to place social interactions that occur online within the context of Black women's everyday experiences with and understandings of those interactions. The narrative account was followed by a discussion of three key cultural values, informed by

evidence collected through a series of in-depth interviews, archived social media posts, and reflections I made while observing practices occurring within the group's online communities and at national events.

The discussion was informed by the work of Patricia Hill Collins, Stuart Hall, and other critical scholars who describe how culture is expressed through everyday practices, such as posting online or using hashtags, and how such practices inform our understanding of how individuals make sense of their realities. Patricia Hill Collin's essay, "ThePower of Self-Definition," spoke specifically to the resistance and empowerment that occurs when Black women are able to construct and share voices that are more in line with their lived realities, as opposed to the controlling images that they commonly encounter. While the placed-based groups of BGR! serve as a safe space where this cultural work can be performed, the online community emerges as a necessary component for the movement's influence and appeal, as the women in the interview reveal this is the space where they are able to truly connect with other women. As Collin's states, "One can write for a nameless, faceless audience, but the act of using one's voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection."[25] As these women publicly share and seek out information on the health experiences of women who are similar to them, they appear to become even more committed to the movement, the message, and to each other. Both Collin's and Hall's works were useful for explaining why Black women gravitate toward the message and the mission behind *Black Girls RUN!,* both which embrace a newly formed identity of 'Black Girl Runner.' This new identity shuns the objectification of Black womanhood, embraces healthful progress, and connects women with a social/political agenda of changing the consciousness of other

Black women. In sum, this netnography of *Black Girls RUN!* reveals that as Black women are made aware of the critical state of their health, they are willing and able to do what has always been necessary for their survival: bond together and actively work toward collective change.

Notes

[1] Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies: Two paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2(1980): 60.

[2] "Minority Women's Health," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed December 23, 2014, http://www.womenshealth.gov/minority-health/african-americans/index.html.

[3] Norman Daniels, "Reducing health disparities: No simple matter," in *Inequalities in health: Concepts, measures, and ethics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 180-181.

[4] Patricia Hill Collins, "The Power of Self-Definition," in *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 112.

[5] Nicole Overstreet, Diane Quinn, and V. Bede Agocha, "Beyond Thinness: The Influence of a Curvaceous Body Ideal on Body Dissatisfaction in Black and White Women," *Sex Roles* 63 (July 2010), 100.

[6] In 2011, Black women reported higher levels of chronic conditions and poor health statuses, they also reported a significantly lower rate of diagnoses pertaining to anxiety and depression. This could be the result of a lack of perceived health need (feelings of depression or anxiety are not perceived as valid health issues deserving medical attention), an avoidance of a perceived health need, or, the result of a lack of trust in their health care provider. (Usha Ranji and Alina Salganicoff, "Women's Health Care Chartbook: Key findings from the Kaiser Women's Health Survey," Kaiser Family Foundation (May 2011), 6-8.)

[7] Jay Ell Alexander, "Ask the Doctor – Round 2," *Black Girls Run!*, May 29, 2013, accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/ask-the-doctor-round-2/.

[8] C. L. Woods-Giscombe, "Superwoman Schema: African American Women's Views on Stress, Strength, and Health," *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (2010), 668-683.

[9] "Minority Women's Health," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed January 3, 2015, http://womenshealth.gov/minority-health/african-americans/.

[10] M. P. Doescher et al., "Racial and ethnic disparities in perceptions of physician style and trust," *Archives of family medicine* 9, no. 10 (2000), 1156-1163.

[11] Ebony L. Boulware et al., "Race and Trust in the Health Care System," *Public Health Reports* 118, no. 4 (2003), 358-365.

[12] Vanessa Gamble, (1997) "Under the shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and health care," *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (1997) 1773-1778.

[13] Rebecca Skloot, *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York : Broadway Paperbacks, 2011).

[14] Jacqueline Bobo, "*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. John Storey (London: Pearson, 2006), 237-245.

[15] Patricia Hill Collins, *Self-Definition*, 104.

[16] Tamara A. Small, "What the Hashtag?" *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 6 (September 2011): 872-895.

[17] A 2010 Pew study revealed that over the course of one year only 643 out of 67,000 national news stories related in a significant way to the lives of Blacks in the United States, revealing the depths of underrepresentation/misrepresentation of Black life by the mainstream media. More info available at: "Media, Race and Obama's First Year," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2010, accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.journalism.org/2010/07/26/media-race-and-obamas-first-year/.

[18] Susan Duerksen et al, "Health disparities and advertising content of women's magazines: a cross-sectional study," *BMC Public Health* (2005).

[19] Albert Bandura, "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means," *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 150.

[20] Bandura, *Social Cognitive Theory;* Barbara K. Rimer and Karen Glanz, "Theory at a glance: a guide for health promotion practice," 2nd ed. *National Cancer Institute* (2005), 19.

[21] Patricia Hill Collins, *Self-Definition*, 113

[22] Patricia Hill Collins, *Self-Definition*, 124

[23] Sarah Florini, "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter," *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (March 2014): 223-237.

[24] Patricia Hill Collins, *Self-Definition*, 110

[25] Patricia Hill Collins, *Self-Definition*, 114

Runner.

The alarm goes off and my body instantly awakes; it's time for my morning run. I stall for a moment before reaching over and slapping the alarm clock silent. I'm imagining myself pounding the pavement at an amazing pace. I read somewhere last month that if you imagine great performance, your workout improves.

After getting out of bed, I begin my pre-run routine by cranking the music up loud in the bathroom and pumping myself up for the morning cool. My gear is already laid out: a striped black and white tank top with matching black running pants. I fumble through my drawer to find my lavender sports bra. Together, my outfit matches my newest pair of Mizuno running shoes, which are white, black, and purple, with neon yellow strings.

Outside, I effortlessly go through the warm-up stretches I've learned over the months. Swinging my pointed toe from left to right in front of my body, I stare at the sky. I have a feeling about today's run. It's going to be good. I switch my focus to my hip flexors and gluteus minimus, muscle groups that I now adore, even though I just learned they existed a few months ago.

Before I start my run, I plug in my headphones and switch to my running music, something up-tempo with a little bit of funk. In my Nike+Running app, I select the option for a basic run. No need to put restrictions on time or distance, I'm just going to see where the wind takes me. Over the months, I've watched the background in my app change from yellow to orange to green, indicating the running level I'm on, or amount of miles I've ran. I hit green at 155. I'll reach the next level, blue, when I hit 621.

As I turn the corner onto Milledge Road, I take a left instead of my usual right. I'm switching it up for the day. Taking the advice of the running coach who spoke at BGR!'s Preserve the Sexy Tour*, I have learned to slow down my breathing and focus on inhaling through my nose and out through my mouth. The difference is unbelievable.*

I'm on unchartered territory now, running a route that I didn't plan, and I feel great. This must be what it feels like to be a real runner. I'll be happy to report to my doctor that I took his advice, and with the lowest-dose possible that he's prescribed, I hope to have my hypertension under control soon. But right now, I'm tension-free. As I turn another unknown corner, I check my pace. I shaved ten seconds off the time of my first mile. Finally, I've found my stride.

CHAPTER FIVE

HOW "HEALTHY" GOES VIRAL: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is clear that traditional public health and medical care has not worked for the disenfranchised populations of the United States, as evidenced by the disparities in risk, morbidity, and mortality particularly among African Americans as compared to Whites. Health professionals must become more "nontraditional" in their approach to communities and cultures where they are viewed as outsiders.
Daniel Blumenthal and Ralph DiClemente

The seeds of this research were planted by a desire to uncover how one hashtag was a trend on Twitter when, according to its social network analysis, a large number of the tag's users were not having conversations with each other or establishing relationships. After preliminary research, I learned that Internet users have both functional and social motivations for tagging their posts.[1] As a result, over the past eighteen months, I've studied the use of #blackgirlsrun in an effort to understand how the tag is being used, and how those practices contribute to the momentum of the *Black Girls RUN!* movement. As the online community flourishes, the number of women who adopt running and join the organization's place-based groups also continues to climb, with the latest tally reflecting more than 120,000 members in 70 groups across the nation.[2] However, as this research has revealed, the group is doing far more than having a conversation about hitting the pavement; the messages of *Black Girls RUN!* and women who use #blackgirlsrun serve to promote a lifestyle complete with an emphasis on health and wellness, sisterhood, and self-defined identities.

The growing number of Black women being reached and impacted by BGR!'s "healthy" message demonstrates a learning opportunity for both public health professionals and communication scholars. The purpose of this dissertation was to explore how, and why, this message is being spread across social media and in what ways it has been able to empower women to adopt healthy behaviors. Using a blend of ethnographic approaches, British Cultural Studies, and Black Feminist Thought I sought to answer the following research questions: 1) How does engagement with *Black Girls RUN!*'s (#blackgirlsrun) online community empower women to adopt healthy behaviors? 2) What are the shared cultural values that condition *Black Girls RUN!*'s (#blackgirlsrun) appeal and influence in physical and online spaces? 3) What are the opportunities for integrating social media use in health promotion programs targeting vulnerable or at-risk populations as evidenced by the BGR! community?

According to Blumenthal and DiClemente, community-based research advances the science of public health and guides health workers who are interested in improving the health of populations. Furthermore, the authors claim that a focus on prevention, multidisciplinary research, and participants who continue their usual activities "in their natural surroundings" often characterize community-based research. [3] However, media studies reveal that traditional concepts of community must be challenged as evolving communication technology makes it possible for people to "surround" themselves with others whom they are close to socially as opposed to geographically.[4] This dissertation contributes to the literature of community-based health research by investigating the practices contributing to the formation of an online community and resultant health movement. Furthermore, this research contributes to the literature of communication

studies, as it seeks to reveal the relationship between emerging communication practices and culture. In the following sections, I provide a summary of the previous chapters and discuss the implications of this research for public health and communication studies. Lastly, I outline the opportunities for future research and limitations of this study.

Community, Culture, and Consciousness

In my first chapter, "It's More than Social, it's Cultural," I reviewed literature to explain the significance of *Black Girls RUN!* as a social, cultural, and health community. I also introduced the theory that would shape my interpretation and outlined the relationships between communication practices, community, and health promotion. Social Cognitive Theory posits that health is a social issue and that individuals learn from within their environment.[5] However, for many Black women, health information and behavior models are not always readily accessible or relatable, which is why being able to connect online with a community of credible peers is meaningful.

In addition, I introduced British Cultural Studies and Black Feminist Thought as guides for interpreting the practices that shape the BGR! community. Often times, scholars who are investigating online communities work from within the discipline of cultural studies, which conceives that our ordinary behaviors and habits are expressions of culture.[6] As Nancy Baym explains, understanding communities rests in understanding the ordinary activities, or cultural practices, of their participants.[7] Taking a practice approach to studying *Black Girls RUN!* and the use of #blackgirlsrun allowed me to interrogate what the movement and messages were expressing, and how/why they have been effective.

In my second chapter, "Studying Communities of Practice(s)," I detailed the blend of approaches used to explore this dynamic community. I also discussed the challenges of working with rapidly evolving technology and constantly shifting media practices. The #blackgirlsrun stream on Instagram, determined as the most useful representation of the group's virtual community, is marked by a combination of visual, textual, and social practices. Thus, I used textual analysis to approach the entire stream as evidence of the meaning-making process that occurs for users who engage with that space.[8] Because the BGR! community is engaged in both online and offline spaces, I also detailed my use of other ethnographic approaches including in-depth interviews, participant observation, personal reflection, and autoethnography. As noted in the chapter's conclusion, the blurring lines of my approaches demonstrate the blurred boundaries of *Black Girls RUN!* and reveal the complexity of the group's appeal and influence.

In chapter three, "Let's take a selfie!" I introduced the significance of the group's online community using personal experiential writing. Through my narrative, I provided additional social context for the subsequent textual analysis of #blackgirlsrun, and demonstrated how the tag was being used to archive and access an ongoing conversation about Black women's health experiences. Then, using Social Cognitive Theory, I analyzed the visual, textual, and social practices included in the #blackgirlsrun Instagram stream to reveal how the social networking platform is being used to influence community-level change. In sum, the combination of practices (photography, video, captions/comments, likes) allows women to describe, model, and reinforce healthy behavior. As a result, women are able to learn from one another and set expectations,

anticipate outcomes, and look forward to demonstrating healthy behaviors of their own. My analysis revealed that women who engage with the #blackgirlsrun stream are met with six recurring interpretations: 1) a healthy lifestyle is about more than running; 2) training is not always going to be easy; 3) running and fitness has rewards; 4) a health journey requires mind-over-matter motivation; 5) yes, Black girls run so there's no excuse; and 6) pursuing a healthy lifestyle is awesome.

In the following chapter, "A Changed Consciousness," my goal was to situate my findings from chapter three within the context of the shared cultural values that have contributed to *Black Girls RUN!*'s online community and place-based groups. I opened the chapter with a narrative account of my experiences with the group at a national event and described how I came to further understand the significance of BGR! as a cultural movement. Using evidence collected from in-depth interviews, participant observation, archived social media posts, and personal reflections, I used Cultural Studies and Black Feminist Thought to explore how BGR!'s influence and appeal is a product of three shared cultural values among women who participate in the community: 1) Black women's health crisis is a cultural issue; 2) the importance of Black women to be able to share, and see representations of, their own experiences; and 3) being part of a larger collective inspires individual change.

The analyses in chapters three and four answered my first two research questions, which addressed the influence and appeal of the BGR! movement, specifically. However, the conclusions drawn from those analyses reveal the opportunities for integrating social media use in future health promotion programs targeting vulnerable or at-risk groups, providing the answer for my third research question.

Discussion of Conclusions

Based on the analyses presented in this study, two important conclusions can be drawn about the use of social media to promote health in vulnerable or at-risk groups. First, online communities are an important space for connecting with and learning from others. Secondly, for marginalized groups, communication practices performed online continue to be a means to resist and exist.

Online Communities: An important space for social learning

My analyses demonstrate the opportunities for public health practitioners to move beyond traditional notions of health communication and community-based health programs. This move requires considering new concepts of community, which can be as simplified as engaging with a designated hashtag online. As Stuart Hall explains:

> Since our way of seeing things is literally our way of living, the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to tensions and achievements of growth and change.[9]

The visual, textual, and social practices inherent to social media platforms like Instagram allow online posts, groups, or hashtags concerning health to become interactive hubs where individuals can discuss activities, exchange new ideas, and interrogate previous notions of health. As demonstrated in my third chapter, "Let's Take a Selfie!" these virtual communities serve as important spaces where individuals can model, question, learn, and support the adoption of healthy behaviors.

For members of marginalized, and often vulnerable, groups, the ease of connecting with and learning from a group of credible peers helps remedy issues of social isolation in physical environments. For example, many of the women who I interviewed were able to remain socially connected with virtual running groups or partners despite being geographically distant. Jane, a displaced BGR! Atlanta member, trains virtually with a group of friends and a trainer based out of California while pursuing her doctoral degree in a small, predominately White college town. Similarly, Deidre trains for marathons in San Diego and is encouraged by another Black female marathon runner who lives in a city in France. Outside of their virtual relationships, these women express concerns of often being the only Black woman (or one of the few) interested in leisure running in their physical environments.

Previous research has found that social isolation was related to physical inactivity, even after controlling for confounding factors such as socio-economic status. The authors of the study suggest that the relationship reflects that physical activity is often a social phenomenon that groups of people do together.[10] With social media's ability to eliminate barriers of distance and time, users can now participate in fitness activities with others by communicating online. Fortunately, for public health workers seeking to impact the health behaviors of marginalized groups, individuals who feel marginalized in society often search for and connect with others in virtual spaces.[11] Take, for example, Jane's virtual race where she and a group of friends logged more than 26 miles on her birthday using the hashtag #alljaneeverything. Or, on an even larger scale, consider BGR!'s virtual race series, where in December of 2014 nearly 500 women hit the pavement to complete a 5K race.[12]

In the past, mainstream health education targeting behavior change has failed to reach minority populations. As a result, health researchers emphasize the need to identify the most commonly used sources for health information to target hard-to-reach groups.[13] Members of marginalized and vulnerable groups overwhelmingly populate social media sites. Women, children, young adults, individuals of low socio-economic status, and members of Black and Hispanic minority groups report being highly active on social media.[14] High levels of engagement among these groups position social media as a useful source for promoting health. Furthermore, the ability for messages and ideas to spread rapidly suggests that, with careful consideration, health promoters could potentially amplify their reach to beyond even their intended scope. This is certainly evident for *Black Girls RUN!*: nearly half of the women I spoke with during the course of this research were not directly affiliated with the organization, but were faithful supporters and promoters of the movement's ideas.

Although health professionals remain the central source of health information for most Americans, the concept of peer-to-peer healthcare remains relevant. One in four Internet users report watching and reading about someone else's health experiences in the past year, while roughly one in five report going online to find others who might share the same health concerns.[15] For the women of *Black Girls RUN!*, the ability to learn from a group of women with similar experiences who also "look like them" has been crucial to the group's – and hashtag's – popularity. The strong sense of social identification with the women they interact with online allows them to trust one another's experiences while empowering them to create and share health experiences of their own. This bond, which I described as the "Sole Sisterhood" in chapter four, exemplifies collective efficacy, or the

aspect of the social environment that reflects the extent to which community members trust and are willing to help each other.[16]

Although typically evaluated in place-based communities, researchers suggest that addressing collective efficacy in health interventions may be important to improving diet and physical activity.[17] In online communities, collective efficacy is built upon the values that allow people to feel socially close and connected. As evidenced by *Black Girls RUN!*, health workers seeking to create or target virtual health communities in a meaningful way should start by establishing the values that would allow members of the desired group to form strong social connections. Those connections could result from a shared interest or hobby, race/ethnicity, or particular identity (e.g. "runner"). The next steps would be identifying how specific health issues impact the community and providing the group with an action, or actions, to address the issue as a collective. Ideally, the group's members would spread the ideas and actions within the online community, where they are socially connected to the others whom they hope to impact or influence. As Kozinets explains, online communities are changing notions of the self, systems of social support, interpersonal relationships, and social activism.[18] The close social ties within online communities are what motivate members to look out for each other in ways similar to a person looking out for their neighbor in a physical environment. For example, Nettie constantly considers her BGR! Philadelphia members when searching for health information on the Internet and often shares useful information she finds within the group's Facebook page. This small act of kindness makes Nettie feels good because, she says, it could help someone else in the group. A key factor of the success of *Black Girls*

RUN! and widespread use of #blackgirlsrun has been the group's primary focus on health and its relation to the entire community.

As public health workers continue to explore the use of online platforms, a focus on media as practice, and not just message, should be adopted. As Nick Couldry suggests, health communicators should ask themselves what newer media platforms are being used *for*, in addition to understanding *how*.[19] A quick look on Instagram could lead one to believe that hashtags similar to #blackgirlsrun are merely being used to describe pictures in a stream; however, this study reveals that the tag is being used for far more than that. In sum, health workers could benefit from abandoning the practice of looking to see what's trending online and attempting to mimic the success that comes with fleeting online engagement. A practice approach to media would allow health communicators to move beyond developing successful health campaigns to sustaining effective virtual health communities, a distinction that would allow healthy messages to have greater reach, more appeal, and significant influence.

Hashtagging Health: A means to resist and exist

My analyses validate the need for public health workers and health communicators to consider the culture of the groups they hope to impact. As noted in the introduction, Black women often feel as though health messages don't acknowledge the cultural nuances of their lives.[20] In addition, previous research suggests that the variations in the quantity and quality of racial health-related information in mainstream media may contribute to the imbalance in health outcomes.[21] As a result, the use of the word 'black' catches the attention of many women who become involved in *Black Girls RUN!*

According to the women I spoke with and observed, the message – and identification with the BGR! community – becomes a form of filling this void. These women share their experiences online to show the world that they do exist and, in turn, resist the common misconception that Black women need not concern themselves with matters of health and fitness as women of other ethnic groups do.

The strong identification with "black" embodies what Stuart Hall referred to in *New Ethnicities* as a "shift in Black cultural politics." For Hall, 'black' was a way of referencing the common experience of racism and marginalization. During this shift, use of the word 'black' became a way to "challenge, resist, and where possible, transform the dominant regimes of representation." He added, "there was a concern not simply with the absence or marginality of the Black experience, but with its simplification and its stereotypical character."[22] Several of the women I spoke with expressed frustration with the stereotypes concerning Black women's health experiences, and many were motivated by a need to counter the under- and misrepresentation of Black women in the media.

In "A Changed Consciousness," I discussed how the women of BGR! viewed tagging their posts with #blackgirlsrun as one way to address the often stereotypical and bounding views of health and fitness within, and beyond, the Black community. In her study of hashtags on Twitter, Sarah Florini revealed that Black users often used tags as a way to prioritize the performance of their racial identity and to address the mainstream construction of "Blackness." For example, Florini says that users who tagged their posts with #blacknerdsunite were expressing frustrations with "the narrow, monolithic way that "Blackness" is often understood as in opposition to all things intellectual or technological." This research has shown that many of the women who comprise the

BGR! community feel a similar frustration regarding the ways that Black women's health experiences are discussed and understood, and use #blackgirlsrun to express/address "Blackness" in ways related to those discussed by Hall and Florini.

According to this research, the appeal and influence of *Black Girls RUN!* and #blackgirlsrun results from a desire for credible representation in addition to a healthy lifestyle. The growth of the group's online presence demonstrates how the social relationships and communication practices that sustain online communities are shaped by the culture, or way of life, of their members.[23] Often times, it is the issues and experiences that place people on the margins that inspire them to seek out others with similar experiences online. For example, the women of BGR! benefit from having online discussions about managing their kinky and curly hair while working out, or where to find fitness gear that will hold up for shapely and curvier body types, topics that not everyone in their physical environments would be able to weigh in on.

For communication and media studies scholars seeking to understand how ideas rapidly spread across the Internet, this research demonstrates how social media users are pulled in by, and share, messages that allow them to express the conditions of their existence. It also reveals that the nature of online communities and networks are not readily explained by visible interactions online, as often times the bonds that tie are imagined and not always expressed.

Health workers seeking to use social media to impact vulnerable or at-risk groups (which are often marginalized) should consider using content that is specific to the culture of the group's members, or providing a space where members can address those issues with each other online. As this research notes, a shared sense of culture allows

members of marginalized groups to connect with and learn from each other's shared experiences. This project adds to research that explores the use of culturally grounded narrative as a potential behavior change communication tool for eliminating health disparities in the United States. A recent study found that, among Mexican-American women, women who viewed the culturally grounded video "Tamale Lesson" showed a significant increase in cervical cancer screening.[24] Social media encompass the tools and reach necessary for the widespread dissemination of similar health messages. However, given the ease with which individuals can avoid messages online, health promotion on social media should consider opportunities for engaging, and allowing users to express, a sense of culture. Doing so could result in increasing the odds of targeted individuals taking notice – and ownership – of the message.

Limitations and Future Research

In "Hashtag Intervention: How #blackgirlsrun are making 'healthy' go viral," I sought to tell the story of *Black Girls RUN!* Yet, as with many social movements, the story of BGR!'s success is not a simple one to recount. From a theoretical perspective, it encompasses elements of health promotion and behavior change theory, communication and cultural studies, and Black Feminist Thought. Using these frameworks, this study offers the most comprehensive perspective at my disposal. The interdisciplinary nature of this study presented several limitations and many opportunities for future research.

While netnography and ethnography served as useful guides for studying communities online, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the reach of *Black Girls RUN!* Women of BGR! are engaged on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and even on

Pinterest. For the purposes of this study, I selected Instagram as the site that would best represent the practices that empower women engaged in BGR!'s online community to adopt healthy behaviors. From my perspective, Instagram's focus on photography was essential to understanding how women model and participate in the performance of healthy behaviors online. Although I was able to touch briefly on the social significance of photography, my discussion was limited by the goal of chapter three, which was to examine Instagram as a text inclusive of photography and other visual, textual, and social practices. Future health research could examine the potential of photography for sustaining health. For example, what would be the outcomes if participants in a physical activity or diet intervention were asked to take photographs periodically throughout the duration of a study? If photography as a social ritual is as much about showing an image to others as it is about looking at one, would participants be more inclined to achieve results that were visible, or better yet, showable?

Unfortunately, by limiting my scope to Instagram, I was unable to include extensive details about the remaining social media sites and online community (-ies) that would have helped provide more context for the relationship between BGR!'s online presence and its members' fitness activity. For example, the online groups on Facebook correspond with the place-based groups, and membership often reaches into the thousands. Based on my interviews, the women in these groups develop more intimate relationships and are often able to hold each other accountable (in-person) for the health goals that are discussed online. Future research could evaluate how participation in online communities that are extensions of place-based groups impacts an individual's willingness to adopt or sustain healthy behaviors.

Another limitation of working with a constantly growing, yet already quite large, community of women is the difficulty of obtaining quantifiable data. Even the co-founders of *Black Girls RUN!* have expressed the challenges of keeping numerical counts on the group's official membership and impact. Many women run in groups and are not members, or are members and do not run. To be clear, that does not bother the group's co-founders at all. As discussed in chapter four, the mission of BGR! is to get women to take ownership of their health. The sense I gathered from Ashley and Toni is that success for them means more Black women are getting healthy, not being able to *prove* that they are. For Black women, obtaining data for the sake of research is often contrary to the "safe space" atmosphere found in BGR!'s online and place-based groups. As a result, it is difficult to ascertain the effectiveness of the group, even though the online presence and rapid growth portrays it as such.

Unfortunately, it is hard to convince others to replicate or support health campaigns or interventions that have not been proven to be effective. With future research, I hope to gain further access to the BGR! community, with hopes of fulfilling the "show me the data" desires of health workers. I am particularly interested in how many women adopt running as a new behavior as a result of their exposure to BGR!, and how participation in BGR! over time impacts health outcomes. To conduct this research, I hope to design a survey instrument to disseminate to members and to recruit members for participation in a mixed-methods longitudinal study.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I did not mention the privilege that characterizes participation in this sort of group. Issues of privilege and access were addressed in the narrative of chapter four, where I found myself in awe of the women

who could afford to travel across the nation for a fitness weekend in a downtown Atlanta hotel with a group of their sole sisters. Several of the women I interviewed discussed barriers that prevent them from offline engagement with BGR!, such as lack of childcare, distances from running groups, or long work days.[25] For these women, the online community has been a key component to maintaining their health. Unfortunately, we know that access to online communities is not an opportunity equally afforded to all. Although many members of marginalized groups are engaging with social media there is still a ways to go before social media can become a primary tool for eliminating health disparities in the United States. However, until that time, we can learn from and support movements like *Black Girls RUN!*, whose members reach beyond the boundaries of connectivity to model health in their families and homes, and which addresses an obesity epidemic that impacts millions of Americans each year, irrespective of socioeconomic status, education level, or race and ethnicity.

Notes

[1] Morgan Ames and Mor Naaman, “Why We Tag: Motivations for Annotation in Mobile and Online Media” (paper presented at Chi -Conference-2, 2007): 971-980.

[2] JayEll Alexander (BGR! Public Relations Director), e-mail message to author, September 28, 2014.

[3] Daniel S. Blumenthal and Ralph DiClemente, *Community-based health research : issues and methods* (New York: Springer Publishing, 2004), 3-5.

[4] Karen Evans, “Re-Thinking Community in the Digital Age,” in *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives,* ed. Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior (Hampshire: Palgrave McMillian, 2013), 80-81.

[5] Albert Bandura, "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means," *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 150.

[6] Robert V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online*, (London: Sage Publications, 2010), 37.

[7] Nancy Baym, *Tune in, log on: soaps, fandom, and online community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 21-24.

[8] Stuart Hall, "Introduction," *Paper Voices: The popular press and social change* 1965 (1935): 16-21.

[9] Stuart Hall, "Cultural studies: Two paradigms," *Media, Culture and Society* 2(1980): 59.

[10] Willey et al., “Social determinants of physical inactivity in the Northern Manhattan Study (NOMAS),” *Journal of Community Health*, 35, no. 6 (2010), 602–608.

[11] J. Patrick Williams and Heith Copes, "'How Edge Are You?' Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum," *Symbolic Interaction* (2005) 85.

[12] “Dec. 20 Latest Results,” *Black Girls RUN!,* accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/walkb4urun/race-results/dec-20-latest-results/.

[13] Ann S. O’Malley, Jon F Kerner, and Lenora Johnson, "Brief Reports: Are we getting the message out to all? Health information sources and ethnicity," *American Journal Of Preventive Medicine* 17, (January 1, 1999): 198-202.

[14] "Social Networking Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Internet Project*, accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/.

[15] Susannah Fox and Maeve Duggan, "Health Online 2013," *Pew Internet Research Project,* accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/.

[16] Chanita Halbert et al, "Collective efficacy and obesity-related health behaviors in a community sample of African Americans," *Journal Of Community Health* 39, no. 1 (2014):129.

[17] Halbert et al, *Collective Efficacy,* 129

[18] Kozinets, *Netnography,* 40

[19] Nick Couldry, "Theorising Media as Practice," *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 2 (August 2004): 115-132.

[20] Jennifer Vardeman-Winter, "Confronting Whiteness in Public Relations Campaigns and Research with Women," *Journal Of Public Relations Research* 23, no. 4 (October 2011): 412-441.

[21] Susan Duerksen et al, "Health disparities and advertising content of women's magazines: a cross-sectional study," *BMC Public Health* (2005).

[22] Hall, Stuart. "New ethnicities." *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (1996): 441-49.

[23] Kozinets, *Netnography,* 37; Williams, *The Analysis of Culture,* 33.

[24] Lourdes A. Baezconde-Garbanati et al, "*Tamale Lesson*: A case study of a narrative health communication intervention," *Journal of Communication in Healthcare* 2014; 7(2), 83-89.

[25] During our interview, Nettie noted that this might explain why many of BGR!'s official members are older, as they are just now finding the time and ability to participate in leisure activities as a result of empty homes and financial security.

REFERENCES

"About BGR!." *Black Girls RUN!* Accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/about_bgr/.

"About." South by Southwest. Accessed November 21, 2014, http://sxsw.com/interactive/about.

"About us." Social Media Reasearch Foundation. Accessed January 13, 2015, http://www.smrfoundation.org/about-us/.

"Adult Obesity Facts," Center for Disease Control, accessed February 1, 2014, www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html.

"Hashtag Intervention: Why #BlackGirlsRun." South by Southwest. Accessed November 21, 2014, http://schedule.sxsw.com/2014/events/event_IAP19738.

"Health Status of African American Women." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health. Accessed February 1, 2014, minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?ID=3723.

"Media, Race and Obama's First Year." Pew Research Center, July 26, 2010. Accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.journalism.org/2010/07/26/media-race-and-obamas-first-year/.

"Minority Women's Health." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Accessed December 23, 2014, http://www.womenshealth.gov/minority-health/african-americans/index.html.

"Obesity among Non-Hispanic Blacks." Center for Disease Control. Accessed January 13, 2015, http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/table-non-hispanic-black.html.

"Obesity and African Americans." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, last modified October 15, 2013. Accessed November 21, 2014, http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=25.

"Social Networking Fact Sheet." *Pew Research Internet Project*. Accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/.

Aday, Lu Ann. *At risk in America: the health and health care needs of vulnerable populations in the United States.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001.

Alexander, Jay Ell. “Ask the Doctor – Round 2.” *Black Girls Run!*, May 29, 2013. Accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/ask-the-doctor-round-2/.

Ames, Morgan and Mor Naaman. “Why we tag.” Proceedings of *The SIGCHI Conference: Human Factors in Computing Systems,* April 28, 2007.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* New York: Verso, 2006.

Baezconde-Garbanati, Lourdes A., Joyee S. Chatterjee, Lauren B. Frank, Sheila T. Murphy, Meghan B. Moran, Lisa N. Werth, Nan Zhao, Paula Amezola de Herrera, Doe Mayer, Jeremy Kagan and Dave O'Brien. "*Tamale Lesson*: A case study of a narrative health communication intervention." *Journal of Communication in Healthcare* 2014; 7(2), 82-92.

Bandura, Albert. "Health Promotion by Social Cognitive Means." *Health Education & Behavior* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 143-164.

Baym, Nancy. *Tune in, log on: soaps, fandom, and online community.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000.

Beck, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. "Global Generations and the Trap of Methodological Nationalism For a Cosmopolitan Turn in the Sociology of Youth and Generation." *European Sociological Review* 25, no. 1 (February 2009): 25-36.

Bernoff, Josh and Charlene Li. "Harnessing the Power of the Oh-So-Social Web." *MIT Sloan Management Review* 49, no. 3 (Spring2008 2008): 36-42.

Blumenthal, Daniel S. and Ralph DiClemente. *Community-based health research: issues and methods.* New York: Springer Publishing, 2004.

Bobo, Jacqueline. “*The Color Purple*: Black Women as Cultural Readers,” in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 3rd ed., ed. John Storey (London: Pearson, 2006), 237-245.

Boulware, L. Ebony and Cooper, Lisa A. and Ratner, Lloyd E. and LaVeist, Thomas A. and Powe, Neil R. (2003) Race and Trust in the Health Care System. Public Health Reports, 118 (4). pp. 358-365.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Shaun Whiteside. *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*. Translated by Shaun Whiteside. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Brock, André. "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation." *Journal Of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56, no. 4 (October 2012): 529-549.

Carey, James W. "A cultural approach to communication." *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society.* Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

Centers for Disease Control, "Adult Obesity Facts," Center for Disease Control. Accessed February 1, 2014, www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html.

Champion, Charlotte. "Instagram: Je-suis-la?" *Philosophy of Photography* 3, no. 1 (January 2012): 83.

Clerc, Susan J. "DDEB, GATB, MPPB and Rarboy: The X-Files' Media Fandom Online and off." In *Deny All Knowledge: Reading the X-Files*, 36-51. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 1996.

Cohen, D. A., Finch, B. K., Bower, A., & Sastry, N. (2006). Collective efficacy and obesity: The potential influence of social factors on health. Social Science and Medicine, 62(3), 769–778.

Cohen, D. A., Inagami, S., & Finch, B. (2008). The built envi- ronment and collective efficacy. Health Place, 14(2), 198–208.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "The Power of Self-Definition," in *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 2009) 107-132.

Couldry, Nick. "Theorising Media as Practice." *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 2 (August 2004): 115-132.

Dahan, Michael, and Gabriel Sheffer. "Ethnic Groups and Distance Shrinking Communication Technologies." *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics* 7, no. 1 (Spring2001 2001): 85.

Daniels, Norman. "Reducing health disparities: No simple matter." In Inequalities in health: Concepts, measures, and ethics, 178-196. New York, NY, US: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Dann, Martin E. *The Black press, 1827-1890; the quest for national identity*. New York: Putnam, 1971.

Deusen, Amy Van. "6 Reasons to Start Running." *Women's Health,* March 22, 2013. Accessed February 1, 2014.

Doescher, M P and Saver, B G and Franks, P and Fiscella, K. "Racial and ethnic disparities in perceptions of physician style and trust." *Archives of Family Medicine*, 9, no. 10 (2000). 1156-1163.

Duerksen, Susan C, Amy Mikail, Laura Tom, Annie Patton, Janina Lopez, Xavier Amador, Reynaldo Vargas, Maria Victorio, Brenda Kustin, and Georgia Sadler. "Health disparities and advertising content of women's magazines: a cross-sectional study." (2005): *Minority Health Archive*, EBSCO*host* (accessed November 21, 2014).

Dyson, Anne Haas, and Celia Genishi. *On the case*. New York : Teachers College Press, 2005.

Ellingson, Laura. "Analysis & Representation Across the Continuum." *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Norman*. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2011. 595-610.

Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research* 36, no. 4 (December 2011): 273-290.

Evans, Karen. "Re-Thinking Community in the Digital Age." *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives.* Edited by Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior. Hampshire: Palgrave McMillian, 2013. 80-81.

Eversley, Melanie. "Running community cites boom among black Americans." *USA Today*, November 29, 2014. Accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/11/29/running-boom-black-americans/19395921/.

Florini, Sarah. "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin': Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter." *Television & New Media* 15, no. 3 (March 2014): 223-237.

Foster, Frances Smith. "A Narrative of the Interesting Origins and (Somewhat) Surprising Developments of African-American Print Culture." *American Literary History* (2005) 714.

Fox, Susannah and Maeve Duggan. "Health Online 2013." *Pew Internet Research Project.* Accessed January 21, 2015, http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/01/15/health-online-2013/.

Gamble, Vanessa. "Under the shadow of Tuskegee: African Americans and health care." *American Journal of Public Health* 87, no. 11 (1997). 1773-1778.

George, Sheba, Nelida Duran, and Keith Norris. "A Systematic Review of Barriers and Facilitators to Minority Research Participation Among African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Pacific Islanders." *American Journal Of Public Health* 104, no. 2 (February 2014): e16-e31.

Glanz, Karen, Barbara K. Rimer and Frances Lewis. *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research and Practice.* San Fransisco: Wiley & Sons, 2002.

Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research.* London: Transaction Publishers, 1999.

Halbert, Chanita Hughes, Scarlett Bellamy, Vanessa Briggs, Marjorie Bowman, Ernestine Delmoor, Shiriki Kumanyika, Rodney Rogers, Joseph Purnell, Benita Weathers, and Jerry C. Johnson. "Collective efficacy and obesity-related health behaviors in a community sample of African Americans." *Journal Of Community Health* 39, no.1: 124-131.

Hall, Stuart, and Tony Jefferson, eds. *Resistance through rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. Psychology Press, 1993.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural studies: two paradigms." *Media, Culture & Society* 2, no. 1 (January 1980): 57-72.

Hall, Stuart. "Introduction." *Paper voices: The popular press and social change*, 1965, 11-24.

Hall, Stuart. "New ethnicities." *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (1996): 441-49.

Hicks, Ashley. "About." Black Girls RUN!, April 19, 2009. Accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.blackgirlsrun.com/about/.

Jones, Steve. "Fizz in the Field: Toward a Basis for an Emergent Internet Studies." *Information Society* 21, no. 4 (September 2005): 233-237.

Karen Glanz, Rimer, Barbara K. Rimer and Frances Lewis, *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research and Practice* (San Fransisco: Wiley & Sons, 2002), 169.

Kennedy, Bernice Roberts, Christopher Clomus Mathis, and Angela K Woods. "African Americans and their distrust of the health care system: healthcare for diverse populations." *Journal Of Cultural Diversity* 14, no. 2 (2007 Summer 2007): 56-60.

King, Nigel, and Christine Horrocks. *Interviews in qualitative research.* Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010.

Kivitz, Joelle. "E-Health and Renewed Sociological Approaches to Health and Illness." *Digital Sociology: Critical Perspectives.* Edited by Kate Orton-Johnson and Nick Prior. Hampshire: Palgrave McMillian, 2013. 216-221.

Kozinets, Robert V. "On Netnography: Initial Reflections on Consumer Research Investigations of Cyberculture." *Advances In Consumer Research* 25, no. 1 (January 1998): 366-371.

Kozinets, Robert V. *Netnography: Doing ethnographic research online.* London: Sage Publications, 2010.

Kvale, Steinar, and Svend Brinkmann. *InterViews: learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing.* Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2009.

Lunden, Ingrid. "Instagram is the fastest-growing social site globally, mobile devices rule over the PCs for access." *TechCrunch*, January 21, 2014. Accessed November 22, 2014, http://techcrunch.com/2014/01/21/instagram-is-the-fastest-growing-social-site-globally-mobile-devices-rule-over-pcs-for-social-access/.

Mkono, Muchazondida, Kevin Markwell, and Erica Wilson. "Applying Quan and Wang's structural model of the tourist experience: A Zimbabwean netnography of food tourism." *Tourism Management Perspectives* 5, (January 2013): 68.

McKee, Alan. *Textual analysis: a beginner's guide.* London; Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2003.

McKie, Jaida. "Black Girls RUN!," *Clutch Magazine,* October 19, 2009. Accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2009/10/black-girls-run/.

Miller, Robin L, and Marybeth Shinn. "Learning from communities: overcoming difficulties in dissemination of prevention and promotion efforts." *American Journal Of Community Psychology* 35, no. 3-4 (June 2005): 169-183.

Overstreet, Nicole, Diane Quinn, and V. Bede Agocha. "Beyond Thinness: The Influence of a Curvaceous Body Ideal on Body Dissatisfaction in Black and White Women." *Sex Roles* 63 (July 2010), 91-103.

O'Malley, Ann S, Jon F Kerner, and Lenora Johnson. "Brief Reports: Are we getting the message out to all? Health information sources and ethnicity." *American Journal Of Preventive Medicine* 17, (January 1, 1999): 198-202.

Rageh, Ahmed, T.C. Melewar, and Arch Woodside. "Using netnography research method to reveal the underlying dimensions of the customer/tourist experience." *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal* 16, no. 2 (April 2013): 126-149.

Ranji, Usha and Alina Salganicoff. "Women's Health Care Chartbook: Key findings from the Kaiser Women's Health Survey." Kaiser Family Foundation (May 2011).

Rimer, Barbara K. and Karen Glanz. "Theory at a glance: a guide for health promotion practice," 2nd ed. *National Cancer Institute* (2005).

Rubinstein, Daniel and Katrina Sluis. "A life more photographic." *Photographies* 1, no. 1 (January 2008): 17.

Ryan, Gery W. and H. Russell Bernard. "Techniques to Identify Themes." *Field Methods* 15 (2003), 85.

Scarinci, Isabel C., Artisha Moore, Theresa Wynn-Wallace, Andrea Cherrington, Mona Fouad, and Li Yufeng. 2014. "A community-based, culturally relevant intervention to promote healthy eating and physical activity among middle-aged African American women in rural Alabama: Findings from a group randomized controlled trial." *Preventive Medicine* 69, 13-20.

Schutt, Russell K. "Chapter 10: Qualitative Data Analysis." I*nvestigating the Social World: The process and practice of social research,* 7th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2012. 321-357.

Sengupta, Somini, Nicole Perloth, and Jenna Wortham. "Behind Instagram's success, networking the old way." *New York Times,* April 13, 2012. Accessed November 25, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/14/technology/instagram-founders-were-helped-by-bay-area-connections.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

Skloot, Rebecca. *The immortal life of Henrietta Lacks.* New York: Broadway Paperbacks, 2011.

Small, Tamara A. "What the Hashtag?." *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 6 (September 2011): 872-895.

Smith, Cooper. "Here's why Instagram's demographics are so attractive to brands." *Business Insider*, August 17, 2014. Accessed November 25, 2014, http://www.businessinsider.com/instagram-demographics-2013-12

Springston, Jeffrey. "Public health campaign." *Encyclopedia of public relations,* ed. R. Heath (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 670-674.

Sumiala, Johanna Maaria, and Minttu Tikka. "Broadcast Yourself-Global News! A Netnography of the 'Flotilla' News on YouTube Broadcast Yourself-Global News! A Netnography of the 'Flotilla' News on YouTube." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 6, no. 2 (June 2013): 318-335.

The Office of Minority Health, "Health Status of African American Women," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, minorityhealth.hhs.gov/templates/content.aspx?ID=3723 (accessed February 1, 2014).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, “Obesity and African Americans.” Last modified October 15, 2013, accessed November 21, 2014, http://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=4&lvlid=25.

Vardeman-Winter, Jennifer. "Confronting Whiteness in Public Relations Campaigns and Research with Women." *Journal Of Public Relations Research* 23, no. 4 (October 2011): 412-441.

Walford, Geoffrey, ed. *Doing qualitative educational research*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001. 81-98.

Willey, Joshua Z., Myunghee C. Paik, Ralph Sacco, Mitchell S. V. Elkind, and Bernadette Boden-Albala. "Social Determinants of Physical Inactivity in the Northern Manhattan Study (NOMAS)." *Journal Of Community Health* 35, no. 6 (2010): 602-608.

Williams, J. Patrick, and Heith Copes. "'How Edge Are You?' Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum." *Symbolic Interaction* (2005), 67.

Williams, Raymond. "The analysis of culture." *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader*, ed. John Storey, (Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006).

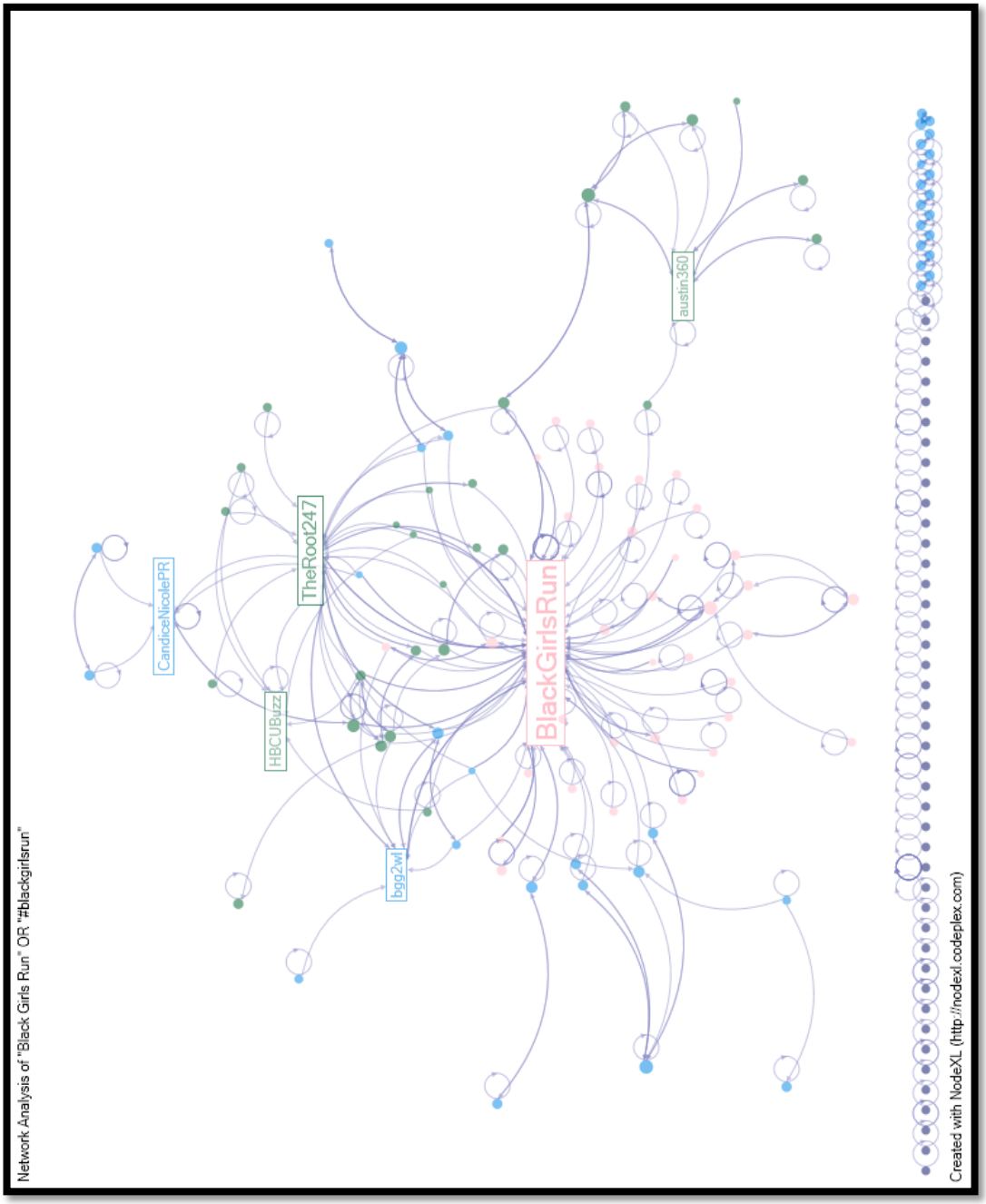
Woods-Giscombe, C. L. “Superwoman Schema: African American Women's Views on Stress, Strength, and Health.” *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (2010). 668-683.

Yuan, Elaine J. "A culturalist critique of ‘online community’ in new media studies." *New Media & Society* 15, no. 5 (August 2013): 665-679.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

NETWORK ANALYSIS OF BLACK GIRLS RUN



APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

#BlackGirlsRun: Assessing the relationship between online community and fitness activity

Interview Guide

(Revisions made after start of interviewing process reflected in red.)

Introduction

Hello. My name is Felicia and I am a doctoral candidate in the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. I am conducting a research project on the relationship between online community and fitness activity in black women. Specifically, I want to learn more about how your interactions with Black Girls RUN! in online and offline spaces have contributed to your fitness journey. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today about this very important topic.

Before we begin the interview, I would like to remind you that the information you share will be kept confidential as explained in the consent form. I will not use your name or any other identifying information about you that might allow someone to figure out who you are. Feel free to skip any questions you do not want to answer and at any time you may end the interview. I anticipate that the interview will take approximately 15 - 45 minutes. If at any time you have questions throughout the interview, please feel free to ask. At this point, do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interview Questions

- Tell me a little bit about yourself.
- Tell me about your fitness journey.
    - Were you a runner before learning about Black Girls RUN?
    - How often do you run now?
- How did you first learn about BGR?
- What was it about BGR that caught your interest?

Now, I'm going to ask you a few questions about your use of social media as it relates to BGR!...

- Do you post messages on social media related to BGR?
    - If YES:
        - How would you describe those messages?
        - Do you use any BGR! hashtags in your post? If YES, why use the hashtags as opposed to posting without one?
        - What feelings or emotions do you experience when you make a BGR related post online?
        - Who do you imagine sees your posts?
        - What type of feedback do you typically receive when you make these posts?
- Do you actively seek out other BGR related posts on social media? For example, do you ever click on the hashtag to see pictures?
    - If YES:
        - What feelings or emotions do you experience when you see BGR related posts made by others?
        - What type of feedback do you typically give others for BGR related posts?
- Please describe your interactions with BGR! members or fans on social media (i.e. Do you like others' posts? Do you leave comments?)
    - Please share what sites you use to interact with BGR! members or fans.
    - Do you mind sharing what sort of activity takes place in the Facebook groups?
- How do you interact with BGR! members or fans in offline spaces (i.e. BGR events, running groups, etc.)?
- Do you feel like your online interactions contribute to your offline physical activity? (Does it motivate you? Encourage you? etc.)
        - Tell me more about this.
        - Do you think you would be as active without BGR's online presence?
- How has being active on social media altered or reinforced your thoughts about health in fitness?
- How has your participation in BGR altered or reinforced your thoughts about health and fitness?

As this is the end of the interview I wanted to give you an opportunity to share anything that you have not already shared. Is there anything you would like to add?

Thank you so much for sharing your experiences with me. I appreciate your insights and the time that you spent with me today. If I have follow-up questions can I contact you?

APPENDIX C

BLACK GIRLS RUN PROMOTIONAL MATERIAL