

# ‘I’m Going Home to Breathe and I’m Coming Back Here to Just Hold My Head Above the Water’: Black Students’ Strategies for Navigating a Predominantly White UK University

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## Abstract

Twenty-four percent of Black and minority ethnic students in the UK report facing racial harassment at university, and one in twenty leave their studies due to this. But how do those who remain negotiate a hostile climate and what can we learn from their strategies? In our focus groups conducted with 16 Black students at a predominantly white institution, we found a sophisticated awareness of multiple strategies, and awareness of the social and psychological consequences of each. Our reflective thematic analysis focuses on three of these strategies: First, the experience and expression of two versions of the self, depending on context and audience; second, performing a strategic whiteness both for personal and collective motives; and third, accentuating and embracing Blackness. Our analysis highlights how these strategies were adopted, encouraged, and discarded over time as well as the tensions between strategies; for instance, when the performance of whiteness is received as ‘inauthentic’ by other Black students. Importantly, our research troubles the notion that there are positive and negative strategies and instead emphasises the complex relational processes at play. Thus, rather than emphasising ‘fitting in’, institutions should endeavour to support the range of strategies used by marginalised students who remind us that it is not that straightforward.

## Keywords

Black students, social identity, identity recognition, university, racial microaggressions

University campuses in the UK are not safe spaces for *all* students (Ahmet, 2020; Arday & Mirza, 2018). Surveys by the National Union of Students (2011) and the Equality Human Rights Commission (2019) show racial harassment of ethnic minorities is prevalent and affects both completion and attainment. Our own research also shows that racial harassment is commonplace at university, taking place in teaching as well as social settings, such as accommodation and nightclubs, resulting in Black students identifying ‘no-go’ areas (Osbourne et al., 2023). This sees them interact with university spaces differently than their white peers (Osbourne et al., 2023). While these findings highlight how Black students attempt to avoid explicit exclusionary encounters, further research is necessary to examine the multitude ways Black students both collectively and individually negotiate a space that often challenges their right to be present. This is particularly important given that, despite persistent inequalities, Black students are the fastest-growing entrants to higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2018). Thus, it is Black students’ strategies that the current paper addresses.



## Identity and Belonging

A strong sense of student identification has long been connected to students' abilities to succeed in their studies (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Strayhorn, 2012; Tinto, 1975). Much of this work is guided by the social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987), illustrating that stronger student identification connects to deeper learning styles which positively impact attainment (Bliuc et al., 2017). According to this approach however, identities are not purely about how one sees oneself. Rather, they are relational and interactional, and to positively experience one's identity, one needs to be recognised by others and have one's belonging to groups affirmed (Reicher, 2004; Tajfel, 1979). For example, previous research showed that Black students often felt that they were stereotyped by their peers as lacking intelligence (Osbourne et al., 2023), the consequences of which can lead to students limiting their involvement in class discussions (Cornell & Kessi, 2017). However, individuals are not simply passive to such negative experiences, making it important to consider how Black students, both collectively and individually, attempt to navigate interactions where identity denial and misrecognition are expected or anticipated.

## Negotiating Identities and Navigating Spaces

Where our identities are misrecognised and our ability to belong is questioned or denied, we can experience a threat to our self-concept (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Research highlights how individuals and groups can respond to this, attempting to redevelop a positive sense of self by drawing on different identity-negotiation strategies. One of these is the notion of 'passing', a strategy used to avoid certain identities being recognised because of the possibility of consequent stigma, discrimination, and stereotyping. Schlossberg (2001, p. 3) described passing as "an attempt to control the process of signification itself". Examples can be seen in research on white British Muslims, where individuals would consciously choose to pass as 'non-Muslim' by removing religious identity markers in contexts where doing so would ease their ability to 'blend in' (Amer, 2020). However, passing is only a viable option where one's stigmatised identity can be masked or concealed in some way.

Khanna and Johnson (2010) provided insights into the strategies of ethnic minorities who cannot conceal their 'stigmatised' identity. They described the 'identity work' undertaken by biracial participants who asserted their preferred racialised identities to others through various self-presentation strategies such as selective disclosure of their identities and deliberate manipulation of hair to look more or less 'Black'. Importantly, this identity work emphasised the agentic behaviours undertaken in attempts to regain some control over what and how one's identity is recognised. Klein et al. (2007) similarly described strategic presentation strategies as examples of "identity performance"; defined as "the purposeful expression (or suppression) of behaviours relevant to those norms conventionally associated with a salient social identity" (p. 30). For instance, hyperaffiliation strategies entailing the accentuation of one's 'prototypical in-group status (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, p. 26) may be adopted in response to identity threat – particularly where identities are perceived to be incompatible (e.g., religious and LGBTQIA+ identities; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, or certain minority ethnic and national identities; Cheryan & Monin, 2005).

While claims for, and strategies to ensure, recognition and belonging are crucial to acknowledge when considering identity processes, so too are moments of resistance. Acts of resistance become even more profound when considering the potential risks involved and how this can further alienate, marginalise, and stigmatise individuals and groups within various settings. For example, a perhaps less obvious way of resisting the constrained lens through which groups are seen, involves the use of humour. Dobai and Hopkins (2020) showed that for Hungarian Roma, humour was used as a strategy to constrain the majority groups' ability to act based on prejudiced notions. For instance, one participant jokingly asked a security guard whether he would like to carry her basket as he followed her around the shop. This act, framed through humour, confronted head-on the biased surveillance of Roma people and echoes explicit acts of resistance found in other research (e.g., Blackwood et al., 2015; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). However, these acts can be burdensome and are often accompanied by a carefully considered conscious awareness of the possible costs involved (Amer, 2020).

Interestingly, much existing research engages with minority group members' strategies on a predominantly individual level. However, while such strategies may be expressed on an individual basis, they stem from shared negative

experiences of misrecognition, discrimination, and other exclusionary encounters, with strategies also shared across individuals. Becker et al. (2015) note that social psychological research tends to position individual-level responses (e.g., literature on coping) and collective-level responses (e.g., collective action research) as mutually exclusive. Their research on women's responses to everyday sexism found endorsement of a combination of both individual and collective confrontation of sexism over inaction/no response. (Becker et al., 2015).

Relating this to the experiences of Black students at a predominantly white higher education institution, there are some important points to consider. We have highlighted that individuals make important decisions when faced with moments of identity misrecognition and challenges to belonging, drawing on different strategies. Moreover, while these strategies may at times be individually decided upon, they stem from negative experiences often shared by group members. As such, this paper aims to identify some of the strategies developed by Black students when confronted with, and in anticipation of, misrecognition and subsequent exclusionary experiences. More specifically, we examine the decision-making processes involved when making strategic choices, which include weighing up what is at stake within a specific context and deciding what costs they are willing to accept. We also consider how Black students engage with each other's stories, experiences and decision-making around strategies, and the extent to which these are shared or not shared, endorsed, or rejected. Doing so, we highlight how individual strategies reverberate into more collective and shared strategies of navigating spaces which marginalise, ostracise, or exclude.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The current research was conducted at a selective, pre-92 university in the UK where less than 2% of undergraduate students were Black, 7.8% were Asian, 3.6% Mixed and 72% were white (excluding international students). The local population of the university city was 90% white British according to the 2011 census of England and Wales (Office for National Statistics, 2011).

Sixteen self-identified Black undergraduate students took part in three focus groups. Participants were 12 women and four men, aged 18 to 23, from different years of study (see Table A1). All but one of the participants were Black British (referring to those born in Britain who are of Black Caribbean  $n = 2$  and/or Black African descent  $n = 13$ ). The one participant who was not Black British, identified broadly as Black African<sup>1</sup>. The research received ethical approval from the university where the research was conducted.

It is important to distinguish between race and ethnicity in research because these terms represent different aspects of a person's identity and social experience. Understanding the distinction allows researchers to accurately capture and analyse various factors that contribute to educational outcomes. For instance, when disaggregating 'Black' student data (e.g. Black International, Black British-African, Black British-Caribbean) at the University, we found that Black British-Caribbean students were particularly underrepresented. This data speaks to wider trends of underrepresentation and exclusion across selective and elite institutions (HESA, 2018).

Participant call outs were posted on the social media pages of relevant Students' Union groups (e.g., African Caribbean Society). A picture of the moderator (a Black British-Caribbean woman) was included. Participants were allocated to focus groups both by the order in which they signed up and their availability. A snowballing strategy was used after the first and second focus groups, with students referring additional participants. After the first two focus groups, the moderator made a concerted effort to recruit Black men to allow for a more representative sample and picture of Black students' experiences. However, there were fewer Black men at the university compared to Black women, and therefore fewer signed up to the focus groups.

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1) The specific ethnicity and nationality of this participant has been withheld to protect their identity.

## Design and Procedure

Focus groups were conducted with the aid of an interview schedule to ensure participant conversations were steered towards capturing data which could answer the research question. Participants were first asked to share any university experiences (positive, negative and/or neutral) that were memorable to them. The moderator then asked about how participants responded to negative or challenging experiences and asked whether there were any situations that they would handle differently. From there, the moderator then focused discussions on the strategies employed to navigate negative experiences relevant to their Black identity, probing for detail about these strategies, alternatives considered, and the range of possible consequences. Participants are referred to throughout the paper by the pseudonyms they chose at the end of the focus groups.

All three focus groups were conducted between March and April 2019. Focus groups were audio-recorded and lasted 90 to 120 minutes. In addition, when conversations were particularly lively, the moderator noted and time-stamped non-verbal communicative responses and acts of support or disagreement (e.g., nodding, clapping). All focus groups were conducted and later transcribed verbatim by the first author, a Black British-Caribbean woman PhD student. It is important to note here that whilst there can be challenges in being an insider researcher (Ochieng, 2010), whereby participants may feel judged in some way and therefore refrain from sharing their opinions and experiences, or indeed have the illusion of sameness (Oguntokun, 1998) given the level of education for example of the moderator. However, there are still benefits, such as the easier establishment of trust, openness, and willingness to share (Bhopal, 2010). Indeed, participants commented that the focus groups functioned as a safe space providing one of few opportunities to discuss shared experiences with fellow Black students:

*Emma: I'm actually going to phone my sister afterwards and be like 'look, guys, I've found them' [everyone laughs] 'We all got recruited and guys you know what, if we can have this like once a year, actually, once every semester and we do this as a tip off, I'll go about my business, this university will let me navigate and I'll come back. I'll be okay, I'll be fine.'*

Some likened this 'safe space' to group therapy, where one can speak (mostly) uninterrupted and be heard. We see this reflected in the extracts below where there is minimal verbal interaction mid-narratives and much of the interactions instead are through non-verbal communication and physical gestures of understanding and support.

## Data Analysis

Our analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach which centres on researcher subjectivity and reflexivity. This form of thematic analysis acknowledges that the analytical process is situated and interactive and therefore themes are reflective of the data, the researcher, and the context of the research itself (Braun & Clarke, 2016, 2019). Indeed, it is worth noting here the identities of the research team (including all authors). In addition to the first author and moderator of the focus groups (whose identity is noted above) the research team comprised of a British Muslim woman of mixed North African and European heritage, a white Australian woman and a white British woman. The differences in closeness or distance to participants' experiences, particularly in relation to racial and ethnic identification, is acknowledged to have influenced how the researchers approached and interpreted the data. All members of the research team approached the data with openness and understanding as much as possible. The multiple influences from authors who occupy different identity positions in society is a strength of the paper.

The first author first read through transcripts and noted initial observations of the data, before discussing with the rest of the research team. Based on discussions, the research team were confident that there was sufficient and rich data to address the research questions (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Analysis followed an inductive approach; the first author created codes for single ideas relating to the research question and then themes through an iterative process. Numerous readings and combinations of codes led to the development of themes which captured recurrent meaning across the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2016; DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). In line with our qualitative logic, we did not create inter-rater reliability measures or codebooks. Instead, all authors discussed the codes and themes and reflected on assumptions and what may have been overlooked.

## Results and Discussion

Our participants discussed various strategies they employed to navigate a potentially hostile environment. Rather than a singular personal approach, participants described how their strategies varied across contexts. Our results are organised under three themes (1) two versions of the self, (2) performing a strategic whiteness, (3) accentuating Blackness.

### Theme One: Two Versions of the Self

Many participants spoke of spending time off campus to remove themselves from racism. Bob recalls that his absence was noticed by his peers, *'my [white] coursemates are always asking me, 'Bob every little excuse and you're just round to London', and I'm like yeah! I'm not even going to see family, I'm just tryna be home'*. The implication is that London feels like home and provides relief from the discomfort of university and is therefore taken at every opportunity.

Visits home were particularly important when interviewees had negative experiences on campus. Below, Emma reflects on a university event about multiculturalism where panellists included University staff and Senior Managers, as well as the Lord Mayor of the city. She describes being the only Black person at the event and deciding to counter the prevalent narrative of the event with her experience of being *'very uncomfortable being Black in [the university city]'*. Emma's vocalisation of her experience was met with disbelief by the Lord Mayor, who suggested that she *'try harder to fit in'*. There are many interesting observations here. Emma's strategy was to raise awareness of the issues effecting Black students, not only in spite of, but also *because* she was the only Black student present. In doing so, she placed herself, and the experiences of other Black students in the spotlight, and yet, the onus was then placed on her to assimilate with no accountability taken by those in positions of power. Emma's lived experience was thus actively denied and dismissed by one of the most powerful people in the room. Emma explains how she felt afterwards:

#### Extract 1

**Emma:** *I remember just phoning my sister afterwards and just crying in the toilets, and I was like I just wanna go back home. I just wanna go to London, live my movie in London. Come back so I can breathe! And I just think it's just that breathing aspect, every time I go home, I'm like, I'm going home to breathe. And I'm coming back here to just hold my head above the water.*

**Tom:** *Yes!*

**Emma:** *And just freeze for a bit and breathe again. And it's like, nobody really understands unless you're in those positions.*

Emma provides powerful imagery for what being home represents – the ability to 'breathe'. This speaks not just to the isolation but also the pressure felt by visible minorities at selective and elite institutions (Ahmet, 2020; Akel, 2019). Metaphorically, Emma describes trying to hold her head above water at university. Tom's agreement suggests that she<sup>2</sup> recognises and may have had similar experiences. Thus, for some, life on campus is compared to a fight for survival (Arday & Mirza, 2018).

Spending more time at home was not always a viable strategy and so participants spoke of the importance of having strategies to help navigate campus life. One common strategy was a change in patterns of speech (i.e., accent, use of slang, tone) to adhere to, or *perform*, normative campus behaviours (Khanna & Johnson, 2010). For some, this change appeared to be conscious whilst for others such as Christina below, it appeared to be unconscious:

#### Extract 2

**Christina:** *My friends in London, they'll be like your accent changed a little bit and I'll be like oh sorry let me put back on my normal voice [laughs, Chantélle, Rachel and Jane laugh]. Like I don't, I don't realise I do it, but I do do it [Rachel says yeah] and my brother says I do it all the time, if I FaceTime him he'll be like, 'your voice has changed' and I'll be like oh sorry.*

2) Tom identifies as female and chose a traditionally male name to communicate white male normativity.



**Rachel:** *So there's a Christina in London [interrupted]*

**Christina:** *[interrupting] There's a Christina in London and a Christina in [university city]*

**Christina:** *Yeah*

**Rachel:** *Wow*

Importantly, it is not Christina but her family and friends who notice the change in her behaviour in London. Her surprise in the moment (*I didn't realise I do it*) suggests that this change in how she presents herself is not a conscious choice, but an unconscious response to normative expectations (Amer, 2020). What is a conscious choice is putting back on [her] normal voice when in London, by which we understand that the voice she has adopted at university is abnormal and Christina simply needs reminding to switch back to her 'authentic' self. Whilst Rachel's first interjection (*So there's a Christina in London*) suggests understanding of the experience and what Christina is doing, the 'Wow' is more ambiguous. Nevertheless, there is a shared recognition of the compartmentalisation of Christina's life. Indeed, different versions of the self are needed for different contexts, even if the everyday acts are enacted on an unconscious level (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; see also literature on 'code switching' – Auer, 2005; De Fina, 2007).

Other participants were clearer about making conscious, strategic choices. Below, Jade explains her thinking about her identity performance on campus:

### Extract 3

**Jade:** *I make sure to speak very properly, very properly to just... cos I ... the last thing I want is to adhere to that stereotype and then be treated like I'm not smart and that my opinion doesn't matter. Cos I know... I mean... If I feel like... I mean obviously I've always been this way cos from a young age it's been... my mum's taught me about it and she was like... You have to be a certain way... at home, you can be whatever you want, you can do whatever you want to, you can sit however you want, you act however you want but... when you're out there and you're talking to somebody you have to speak a certain way, you have to act a certain way, you have to... you know...*

Here, Jade shares her clear representation of what speaking 'properly' means, in that it is different to how she usually speaks (e.g., at home). She displays conscious counter-stereotypic behaviours on campus, attempting to distance herself from being seen through the lens of negative 'racial' stereotypes (less intelligence) that may be triggered by how she speaks. Interestingly, this strategy is passed down from her mother who stresses the importance of understanding how she (and other Black people) are perceived 'out there' and how as a result, there is a need to present oneself in 'a certain way'. This highlights how relevant speech, and as a result one's public identity, is for Black students. Importantly, the "language of whiteness", while not explicitly said by Jade in the above extract, not only evokes racial hierarchies in society, but also signals, and is intertwined with class status which collectively allow marginalised groups to "gain temporary access and legitimacy within mainly white spaces" (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 16).

However, strategies of identity compartmentalisation or presentations of alternative versions of the self are not straightforward, not least when considering the different audiences within the university space. Consider Chanté's observation about a fellow Black student:

### Extract 4

**Chanté:** *I know one girl when she comes to ACS [African Caribbean Society] she's very like Afrocentric, she's very like [mimics voice and action] 'hey guys, how you doing', and everything, but when I see her with her white friends, she's like a completely different person and she's like... She almost like put on the white voice as well like I feel like we all know what the white voice is, like when you're speaking on the phone, and it's like why are you acting up and switching up for a whole other set of people? Why don't you just be yourself? In both situations, that type of thing.*

**Moderator:** *Right, and why do you think she does that?*

**Christina:** *You have to*

**Holly:** *You have to play the game*

**Moderator:** *I want to come back to that but first tell me what you mean when you say, ‘white voice’?*

**Chant lle:** *My white voice, oh it’s like... [puts on voice] ‘oh hi Sandra, I’m ok, erm oh yeah I’ll do that for you later’. Whereas like... My normal voice, I’ll probably throw in a bit of slang in there just... subconsciously without even realising it.*

Despite saying she uses ‘white voice’ herself, which has parallels to what Jade refers to above as ‘speaking properly’, Chant lle reveals the complexity and unspoken “rules of racial engagement” when navigating ‘race’ in higher education (Rollock, 2012). Two important complexities should be noted. Firstly, if white voice is used in a way that is perceived to be inappropriate (i.e., with friends rather than at work), there is the suggestion of inauthenticity (*she’s like a completely different person*). Secondly, visibility and audience are important not just to how and when one conforms to outgroup norms (Klein et al., 2007), but to how one does so under the gaze of fellow in-group members. Thus, while white voice is a way for Black students to distance themselves from stereotypical Blackness by performing a strategic whiteness, a point supported by Holly and Christina, distancing from one’s Blackness may come at a cost. There is the risk of double jeopardy as attempts to dilute Blackness for acceptance by a white audience (which is not guaranteed) can result in one’s Blackness being called into question by Black in-group members (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014).

However, it is not merely the *switch up* to white voice that causes Chant lle discomfort, but the perception that the girl is *very like Afrocentric* in Black spaces (i.e., ACS). Thus, the combination of her use of white voice in white spaces and Afrocentricity in Black spaces places her under suspicion.

## Theme Two: Performing a Strategic Whiteness

The second theme focuses more closely on the complex negotiations involved in how Black students choose to orient (or not) to white audiences. Participants in one focus group explained that in majority-white spaces on campus, they judge their strategy option on the racialised makeup of the space and their past experiences with white students within these spaces. Notably, these criteria were used to consider potential strategic reactions even when participants were on the receiving end of offensive comments. Consider Holly’s experience of being called the n-word:

### Extract 5

**Holly:** *I remember now in first year this girl called me a nigger and she’s like tall and blonde haired and blue eyed, so you know everyone’s gonna be on her side. Like classic. So I started crying, [whispers] obviously I’m not that upset by it [other participants laugh]. But yeah, I’ll play the game. And then everyone was like to me ‘oh but Holly, she feels so bad, you’re making her feel bad’. [Christina says ‘yeah’, Jane says ‘oh my god’] But even when you do have situations, I think you have to learn, almost it is like a work situation. You have to almost learn to play the game because you can’t get annoyed with all of them otherwise you’re gonna not have friends.*

**Rachel:** *That’s true*

**Jane:** *Not even that, then you become the angry Black woman*

**Christina:** *the angry Black girl [Holly, ‘yeah the angry Black woman’, Chant lle ‘yeah’. That’s what I didn’t, that’s what I didn’t wanna be*

**Jane:** *That’s another thing I fear, you become the angry Black woman*

**Christina:** *the angry Black girl*

**Holly:** *Exactly so sometimes you have to be like, d’you know what I’m just gonna have to take it [Christina says ‘yeah’ in agreement]*

Here Holly shows a sophisticated understanding of racialised gender identities and how they are performed (Butler, 1990). Her response rests on the assumption that the majority group will not empathise with her despite her being the victim of racist abuse. She describes how the perpetrator's prototypical gender-race identity (*blonde hair and blue eyes*) means that she is ultimately protected by those who witness the interaction (*everyone's gonna be on her side*). To account for this, Holly strategically *plays the game* by crying (even though she is *not that upset*) to garner sympathy and recognition of her experience. However, the strategy is unsuccessful as the witnesses do not fully acknowledge the act and impact of the racist abuse, and instead shield the perpetrator.

There are important reflections to be made regarding the complexity and significance of Holly's strategy to play the game. She understands that how she reacts could have personal consequences for her social life. In this context, a negative response (*getting annoyed*) was perceived to potentially cause difficulty in making and maintaining friendships. Jane and Christina express an additional consequence such a reaction would create – being stereotyped as 'the angry Black woman/girl'. While arguably avoided by Holly in this instance, the stereotype and the constraints it can have on one's behaviour is acknowledged by others in the group (*that's another thing I fear*) and speaks to previous research which emphasises the prevalence and power of the 'angry Black' stereotype (Osbourne et al., 2023). The repetition of the 'angry Black woman' phrase here acts as a form of shared understanding and recognition of its negative connotations and consequences, demonstrating the salience of its meaning for the participants.

Participants placed high value on having closed-door conversations with fellow Black students. They used these discussions to share similar experiences and to give and receive advice. In one focus group, Holly who has the most experience in the group, makes the case for an extreme version of playing the game, and advises other students to adopt this strategy too:

#### Extract 6

**Holly:** *You have to like, you know how they say play the game in work, you need to play the game on an everyday level, you really do. Like, like I said certain people that I call my friends, they're really not my friends, but I'm not gonna tell them that they're not my friends. And I'm gonna say Mary, I know Mary might be calling me a nigger at home but me and Mary will still he he ha ha, we'll have your tea, we'll clink the tea, we'll talk, we'll network. Because you have to play the game.*

Holly explicitly names and discusses social rules that are often unspoken; in this case, the need to maintain the pretence of friendship, even with someone who is racist. This strategy resonated with other participants such as Kofi who said, 'I made friends with like the Tories, not because I like them, but because I wanted to have connections and stuff like that, and to be like an appealing person to all communities'. Importantly, this strategy challenges the idea that one seeks 'authentic' self-presentation in each setting (Hart et al., 2020). Instead, participants attempt to assert some control over how they are seen by others and in doing so, shift the power asymmetries involved in the recognition process (Amer, 2020). Holly does what is necessary to be included in *the game* and has the confidence to mobilise other participants to reconsider their identity-performance practices (Klein et al., 2007). This knowledge of the dominant culture (*playing the game*) confers an advantage on Black students as they navigate the homogeneous university and working worlds and thus the continued need to consider and adopt strategies well beyond the university context. Of course, playing the game does not guarantee success with the majority group, but participants felt that if one did not play the game, they would *lose out or struggle* (Jane).

However, there was one group of Black students who were perceived to be able to opt-out of performing normative or counter-stereotypic behaviours and be able to avoid such risks:

#### Extract 7

**Jane:** *Oh god, I don't wanna like add to stereotypes, but I feel like, it's not wrong, but international students can be like. You see with the microaggressions, whereas I or like another home student may sort of laugh things off or find a more tactful way of saying ok that's not cool. An international student would blatantly tell them, be a lot more confrontational with it, a lot more aggressive with it and get their point across. Which I'm not saying that it's... I don't want to say that it's wrong because obviously that's their approach, that's their character, like that's the way they are kind of thing. But at the same time, it doesn't necessarily work here.*



**Moderator:** *And why do you think that is? What makes it different for home and international students?*

**Holly:** *I think it's kind of a good thing sometimes, actually having the two mixtures. Like you know like with every movement, you need the aggressor then you need the passive. You need the Malcolm X, and you need the Martin Luther King. They're the Malcolm X, we're the Martin Luther King, that's how I see it.*

Here Jane introduces the idea that how one responds to racism can be influenced by the intersections of other social identities such as nationality and class. As such, Black international students were perceived to have greater social freedoms (i.e., the ability to be confrontational and aggressive) as they were also members of a privileged group (*middle class*). Put differently, class privilege was thought to insulate Black international students from the weight of racialised stereotypes and microaggressions, despite both sharing the superordinate category of 'Black students'. What is more, Black British students perceived that a key difference between themselves and Black international students was that the former have insider knowledge of how to navigate racism in the UK (i.e., *laugh things off or find a more tactful way of saying ok that's not cool*). Whilst Jane expresses some dismay, Holly views this difference in approach as a strength, providing an opportunity for combined social change strategies amongst the wider Black student group.

Whereas above we see the presentation of strategic performance as an option for social mobility within existing social and political structures, Rachel states explicitly that she wants political and social change. Here she is responding to the question, 'How would you describe your relationship with the university?':

#### Extract 8

**Rachel:** *I don't know. I feel like I played them a bit, I played the, the white card a bit, I tried to like relate to people in the uni a bit cos I, I want. At the end of the day, I want change, right, and I kind of recognised the way to get change is kind of to like, play into their hands a little bit and kind of get them on board as well and then once you know. I kind of worked with them, that's when I kind of pushed my points out cos right now, I'm kind of like oh yeah you know, this would be great for all students, this would be fantastic for students. You know, student experience overall would improve if we do this but my agenda is obviously to make things better for like Black students and I can only push that really once you know they're comfortable and have people believe in you, if that makes sense?*

Again, there is a sophisticated understanding of the majority group's preferences and ways to use this to one's advantage. Specifically, Rachel implies that the university adopts and prefers colour-blind approaches to change on campus over targeted interventions. This is supported by extensive research showing that majority groups prefer assimilative strategies and identification based on higher level identities (Ellemers et al., 1990; Hehman et al., 2012). She extends what we have seen in previous extracts by adopting a combined strategy. She is able to both perform normative (white) behaviours by focusing on benefits to overall student experience as well as being able to *push my points out once they're comfortable*. Whilst this may appear to be a personal strategy, Rachel notes that her actions have consequences that can potentially positively affect Black students as a whole, highlighting how individual and collective agency is interrelated.

### Theme Three: Accentuating Blackness

Not all participants discussed performing white normative behaviours. For instance, some participants felt that in a context where 'you naturally stand out', university was the 'place where you test the resilience of your Blackness and where your identity really gains strength' (Emma). Thus, whilst we have documented how some Black students distance themselves from 'Blackness' in some way, particularly where certain presentations would result in them falling into stereotypes, others were less concerned about potential negative perceptions and were motivated to accentuate their Black identity. For these participants, active performance of their Black identity was embraced. Take for instance, Adé's experience:

**Extract 9**

**Adé:** *I think it was just like, just embracing... like who I am, more. Because I know I can't be like everybody else... so I'm just gonna... if I'm gonna be Black, I'm gonna be Black as I can be! [laughs]. The Blackest [laughs] it was really weird, it was the opposite, most people tone it down, but I rank it up [laughs]. I don't know why [laughs], it was literally my coping mechanism. So strange.*

Adé admits that it feels 'really weird' and 'so strange' to rank up her Black identity given that others are 'ton(ing) it down', yet she ultimately makes sense of this as a coping mechanism. In a context where her 'racial' identity means that she 'can't be like everyone else', she hyper-affiliates with her 'racial' identity to be as 'Black as [she] can be' (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014). Adé's experience resonated with others who detailed the specific ways that they had embraced their racialised and cultural identities on campus:

**Extract 10**

**Tellema:** *So, I've learnt to embrace who I am, I really like it... even like my mum speaks Lingala to us, so I speak Lingala. Even, being here has improved it significantly, because I don't hear it, like at home I hear it on the bus or whatever, I always hear it. It's like that's kinda my home, so when I call my mum I speak Lingala, when I call my two best friends, we always speak and type. Because I miss it. So in a way, I'm kinda glad there's no Congolese people here because it means that I'm not taking it for granted, I appreciate stuff a bit more.*

Tellema's reflections reveal somewhat unexpected advantages to being a stark minority – an appreciation for her own cultural identity. This is not to glamourise the minority experience, but to show that there are many strategies participants used to navigate the same environment. Choi and colleagues (2011) found that one response option is to change the way one perceives the situation; when faced with racism and homophobia, some men of colour chose to dismiss or ignore the stigmatisation, pity the stigmatiser, or see the stigma as a reflection of wider societal ills. Moreover, whilst out-group judgements may be difficult to navigate, creative identity performance can allow one to better realise one's minority identity (Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013). This is arguably the case for Tellema who views the underrepresentation of Congolese students on campus as an opportunity to embrace her cultural identity and *avoid taking it for granted*. Consequently, where majority groups would expect Tellema to avoid speaking Lingala, she displays a cultural retention strategy that celebrates and accentuates her identity.

For many participants, accentuating one's Blackness was experienced as a self-preservation strategy usually employed after several other strategies had been attempted. For instance, Kofi described his initial approach as performing 'respectability politics', but after trying this strategy for a year, he felt it came at a personal cost.

**Extract 11**

**Kofi:** *Well first year I was doing what my mum said and being a... I was living respectability politics, like in essence.*

**Moderator:** *Tell me more about that.*

**Kofi:** *So I came to university and I was like, ok like, I dunno. I went through a lot of phases at uni cos I'm trying to understand myself, I am reading and listening and talking to different people. But there was a phase where I was trying to live respectability politics, so I dressed smart. I was... I wasn't on time still, but I made more of an effort to be like articulate, I do speak articulate, and I can switch it up. But I made more of an effort to speak articulate, like 24/7. I made friends with like the Tories, not because I like them, but because I wanted to have like, I dunno... what's the word?... I wanted to be that guy that was like, like I'd go to politics society even though it was like dominated by white people and I was like [mimics laugh], laughing at the same jokes as them even though I didn't find them funny. But I wanted to have connections and stuff like that, and to be like an appealing person to all communities. But then I realised, it came to a point where I'm like, I'm not enjoying myself. What is respectability politics? It's just tryna mould me into a person that isn't necessarily me.*

Kofi's extract shows that strategies are dynamic, changing over time and context (Amer, 2020; Dobai & Hopkins, 2020). Despite effectively *playing the game* for a year, as suggested by his mum, Kofi found this identity performance at odds with his sense of self, causing psychological toll over time. This made it an unviable long-term strategy (Franklin, 2019). Instead, Kofi questioned, re-evaluated, and became critical of wider concepts which deem Blackness non-normative. He demonstrates that Black students are not passive in their experience, and actively contest and resist negative perceptions of Blackness. He rejects *respectability politics*, the idea that by performing normative behaviours, minority groups can gain the respect of the majority, becoming protected from acts of discrimination (Higginbotham, 1994). Kofi's refusal to *mould into a person that isn't necessarily me* also connects to research findings on Black students' experiences of racial bias at university (McGee & Martin, 2011). McGee (2016) found that Black students would present stereotypically Black behaviours to show that one can be ostensibly Black and successful. Whilst we do not know whether Kofi had this specific purpose in mind, his use of slang challenges the idea that one must adopt white, middle-class normative practices (*posh accent*) to be respected.

Our findings have shown the multiple and strategic ways that Black students navigate their campus. These students demonstrated a sophisticated and complex way of considering the possibilities available on both the individual and collective levels. Importantly, there was no consensus on which strategy was most effective, rather the available options were accepted and used in tandem, changing across time and context.

## Conclusion

It is well-documented that university campuses can be hostile for Black and minority ethnic students (Ahmet, 2020; Akel, 2019). Selective and elite higher education institutions in the UK have historically been populated with white, middle-class students and contain white normative ideals (Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay et al., 2010). Given this context, our research examined how Black students form strategies to navigate campuses where they may encounter racism and negative stereotyping. Four key insights can be drawn from this research.

Firstly, our data highlights that identity strategies are contextualised and complex rather than fixed and mechanistic. Namely, there were particular private spaces (family home, informal networks, and societies) where strategies were seen as (mostly) unnecessary. The unpredictability of public spaces (nightclubs, lecture theatres) however, saw Black students consider multiple (individual and collective) strategies based on perceived opportunities and constraints within the context. This is particularly relevant as our findings highlight that minority groups are especially attuned to how they are seen by powerful others (Blackwood et al., 2015; Lammers et al., 2008).

Secondly, we propose that being attuned can be burdensome; certainly, one cannot simply act in accordance with one's wishes. But some participants suggested that knowledge of the majority group could be regarded as hard-won wisdom to use in pursuit of desired outcomes. Examples included learning how to 'play the game' to get ahead or securing the support of white students for social change initiatives. These examples were not mere reactions aimed at fitting in or protecting oneself from negative attention. Instead, they were conscious strategies (Amer, 2020; Hopkins & Greenwood, 2013; Howarth, 2002) which benefitted not only oneself, but the collective.

Thirdly, the strategies discussed reveal additional considerations minority groups contend with, as both the meta-perceptions of the powerful group and the expectations of the marginalised in-group become consequential. This was most apparent in discussing the use of 'white voice', which was seen as necessary when interacting with white outgroup members, but which could garner judgement from Black ingroup members. Indeed, a tension arises between strategies that are seen as important when navigating hostile spaces versus acts that may be regarded as inauthentic by one's group. However, such considerations of inauthenticity, where the hallmark of authenticity is acting on one's own terms, could be challenged (Hart et al., 2020). Such conceptualisations reify the atomised and self-interested individual and neglect the ways that identification and positioning are relational processes that can therefore be constrained and controlled. This confines authenticity to a limited set of possibilities (Hart et al., 2020). Interestingly, there were also those who actively chose not to fit in and embraced racialised and cultural pride through being their 'Blackest self' in white contexts.

Fourthly, as an underrepresented and socially devalued group, research suggests that Black students may avoid settings that encourage 'inauthentic' representations (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Whilst our research points to Black students carving out informal support networks for themselves and future cohorts (such as the African Caribbean Society), they do not have the option to disengage or avoid other spaces completely. Where race-ethnicity based societies and other informal spaces are generally seen as positive, there is still the need to explore why some students see these spaces as crucial to their ability to navigate university life. What does this tell us about the university environment and the ability for all students to thrive? What are the consequences for minority students' feelings of belonging when they deem it necessary to support each other because such support is absent or inadequate at an institutional level?

Universities are keen to display their commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion, and more recently 'decolonisation' (Begum & Saini, 2019). However, a notable implication of our research is that these institutional claims are not supported by Black students' everyday experiences which include the navigation of (sometimes) hostile and exclusionary spaces and interactions. As such, it is important to acknowledge how educational spaces exude pre-defined notions of who belongs where (Ahmet, 2020; Cornell & Kessi, 2017; McGee, 2016). In higher education, these pre-defined notions are based on white normativity which positions Black students as space invaders who stand in opposition to the 'default' white, middle class male student (Puwar, 2004; Reay et al., 2010). Thus, commitments to equality, diversity, inclusion, and 'decolonisation' need to more actively address both the psychological and physical realities of the Black student experience.

Rather than emphasising 'fitting in', institutions should endeavour to support the range of strategies used by marginalised students who remind us that it is not that straightforward. When considering the variety of strategies taken up by Black students, we must resist binary notions of positive and negative strategies that may idealise choices made in the face of exclusion and constraints. Instead, this variety of identity-negotiation strategies brings to the fore the conscious weighing up of options and their consequences. This reflects the complexity of Black students' experiences within the university context, where any strategy taken comes at some cost. Our research offers important implications for understandings of identity, belonging and engagement within educational contexts by providing insights for staff, students, practitioners, and academics to learn and be active in ensuring their spaces are truly open and safe for all.

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## Appendix

**Table A1**

*Details of Focus Group Participants*

Pseudonym	Sex	Year of study	Race-ethnicity
<b>Focus Group 1</b>			
Holly	Female	Final Year	Black British Caribbean
Jade	Female	Second Year	Black British African
Christina	Female	Final Year	Black British African
Chantélle	Female	Second Year	Black British African
Jane	Female	Second Year	Black British Caribbean
Rachel	Female	Final Year	Black British African
<b>Focus Group 2</b>			
Emma	Female	First Year	Black British African
Sarah <sup>a</sup>	Female	Second Year	Black International Student
Gwen	Female	Second Year	Black British African
Tom	Female	Final Year	Black British African
Tellema	Female	Final Year	Black British African
<b>Focus Group 3</b>			
Bob	Male	Final Year	Black British African
Adé	Female	Second Year	Black British African
Boss	Male	Final Year	Black British African
Mas	Male	Final Year	Black British African
Kofi	Male	Final Year	Black British African

<sup>a</sup>Sarah was the only international student, the specific ethnicity and nationality of this participant has been withheld to protect her identity.