



# Undergraduate Journal

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### **H.Y.P.E. (Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged) Media: Empower Youth to Change Their Community's Narrative**

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#### **Introduction**

Disruption, “the act or process of disrupting something: a break or interruption in the normal course or continuation of some activity, process, etc” (Merriam-Webster). It is a pause in progression. It has the power to delay change or negate progress. When disruption occurs, it makes certain issues more noticeable because the ability to continue like nothing has happened is altered, perhaps indefinitely. To move forward without looking back. Suddenly, there is a spotlight on points of contention that have always existed, but we have remained ignorant of whether that be of our own volition. Disruption also requires the need for adjustment, the need for adaption. Are you able to respond to this unanticipated change? If so, how well? Your ability to adapt determines your means of survival. Your capacity for negotiating with yourself--mentally, physically, and emotionally--allows for your continued existence. These facets of disruption and the capacity to adapt heavily factored into how I as well the community organization I worked with for my research study operated during COVID-19. Through viewing how disruption in the form of the pandemic and persistent social inequality is mediated by black girls on a spatial, societal, and lastly personal level, a group whose continued existence, which has invariably been based on their ability to adapt to disruptive forces, can be observed. This paper is organized into several main sections: background information on the community organization I partnered with as well as the area it is located in, how the various forms of disruption effected the organization and its members on different levels, and lastly how disruption effected my research process on a personal level. By the end, the main takeaway that should be established is how supportive community networks can help mitigate the effects of disruptive external forces.

#### **What is H.Y.P.E. Media?**

During the summer of 2020, as part of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College Fellowship, I worked with Homewood Youth-Powered and Engaged (H.Y.P.E.) Media. H.Y.P.E. Media is a critical literacy digital humanities program that through a series of lessons/program meetings works to equip black high school students with new media skills (e.g., video, social media, etc.) to begin to shift the narrative about their neighborhood and tell its story through their own lens. The program is being piloted with connection to Homewood Children’s Village, an organization that works to provide a supportive network for youths within the community. As an university partner, H.Y.P.E. is organized by an English professor with support from social work, graduate, and undergraduate (add in students/professors). Youth leaders from Pittsburgh’s Westinghouse academy make up the program’s community contributors. Due to disruptions, the program lost over 65% of its youth leaders due to issues of access and other constraints. Ultimately, the program included the Black female students during the summer months. Prior to disruptions from the pandemic, H.Y.P.E. met each week in-person. During the summer, sessions

were held virtually via Zoom. Each session we would check-in with youth leaders and engage in lessons/discussions related to black girlhood and social justice issues. H.Y.P.E. Media provided a safe environment as well as the tools and resources for these girls to discuss topics related to their identities as Black girls. They could learn and grow in an environment that would not stifle them but instead supply comfort and encouragement. But what happens when the ability to provide this safe environment as well resources and comfort are interrupted in some fashion?

### **Background on Pittsburgh's Homewood Community**

MSNBC host Rachel Maddow, named Homewood, a primarily Black Pittsburgh community, the “most dangerous neighborhood.” in the nation (Nuttall). Neighborhood stigma is a concept sociologists have found to be largely determined by race, as race is considered a “statistical marker that stigmatizes not only individuals but also places in which they are concentrated” (Sampson and Raudenbush, 2005:7). Neighborhoods that experience stigmatization are found to have a negative influence on their residents' identities, increase the levels of discrimination and exclusion they experience (Anderson, 2011; Link & Phelan, 2001), and lead to economic destitution (Besbris, et al., 2015). Moreover, in a study conducted by Brookings Institute, from 2010-2015, “The median wage increased 8.1 percent for whites in the Pittsburgh region, but decreased 19.6 percent for Black Pittsburghers” (Ray). Additionally, the adverse status of Black Pittsburghers face is only exacerbated by the lack of comfortable Black spaces for individuals of the community to congregate (Deto). Therefore, while Pittsburgh has held the title of, “Most Livable City”, that sentiment does not pertain to all residents, especially black individuals, and even more specifically black girls (Mock). In a study conducted with several other cities that operate on a comparable level, black girls, and women in Pittsburgh “suffer from higher poverty rates, birth defect rates, death rates, unemployment rates, and school arrest rates than black girls and women in just about every other city examined” (Mock). As a city, Pittsburgh fails to provide a supportive environment for black people and even more specifically black girls. They do not supply them with a means to thrive or even at the most basic level, survive. Begging the question, who will check in on these girls? Who will provide them with the opportunity to voice their thoughts and concerns, and additionally supply a space for them to work through the challenges they face daily in an effort to find solutions?

### **Disruption's Effect on H.Y.P.E. Media**

Due to the nature of this program, how disruption affects black girlhood heavily factors into this conversation. The ability of this program to adapt influences their ability to survive. If the program itself was forced to dismantle because of its inability to adjust, that would mean the continued erasure of black girls' experience. The continued designation of invisibility in terms of their stories, their thoughts, and their feelings. The way the world is structured has forced black girls to be fluid in the way they existed for their continued survival. Disruption affected my research experience on several different levels including community, societal and personal. Prior to COVID responses by the nation, the university, and the school district, H.Y.P.E. Media met at the University of Pittsburgh's Homewood Community Engagement Center; however, due to COVID-19, these meetings had to be conducted virtually via Zoom. The inability for meetings to be in a designated physical space led to several challenges -lack of spatial separation, forced integration of homelife and H.Y.P.E. life, and inability to form in-person connections- which had various negative consequences. H.Y.P. E. Media operates as an out-school-program. This type of program provides a “... safe environment where youth are

engaged in essential developmental relationships with fellow peers and adults, including activities ranging from highly structured academic programs to less formal activities...” (Strawhun 1) Therefore, the program is notably separate from home life. And although learning does occur, it is separate from school as well. However, when the capacity to provide designated spaces for each of these facets, falls apart, which is what occurred due to COVID-19, boundaries of separation collapse as well, resulting in even more disruption. Because H.Y.P.E. Media sessions had to be conducted from our own homes, it affected how members were able to participate in the program.

Due to H.Y.P.E. youth leaders not being in a separate designated space, their presence of being at home impacted what they were expected to do by their guardian figures. At home, there were more distractions in terms of having to do chores or taking care of younger siblings, which in turn affected who could attend meetings and for how long as well as how much work could be completed. Moreover, program attendees experienced emotional and physical disruption as well. As a result of us not being able to meet in-person, our ability to form community bonds and operate collaboratively was hindered. This process of community-building in relation to groups of black girls is incredibly important because it gives them a space to talk amongst themselves about the intersectionality of being both black and a girl, and by figuring out their own definitions of black girlhood, they, in turn, refuse to accept the claims others have made concerning what it means to be a black girl. Within these collaborative environments, they can figure out and establish their own meanings of black girlhood without the gaze of white supremacy observing them with presumptuous beliefs. Disruption hindered the ability for this form of interaction to take place, therefore, hampering the capacity for these girls to formulate ideas concerning their identities without intruding forces. Every opportunity these girls had to connect directly added to their level of comfort leading to a sense of security in themselves, as well as their place in the world. That is why even the inability to do simple activities such as eating lunch together, which would normally occur during in-person sessions, had such a heavy impact. Activities such as eating lunch with each other provided the opportunity for program members to simply spend time in one another's presence. Activities like this were all done to cultivate a community connection, however, without that community space our capacity to do so was heavily impacted. We were unable to engage with other members and to uplift one another. In order to preserve their existence and the mission of community-building they set out to complete, H.Y.P.E. Media had to figure out a way to operate through technological means while still fulfilling their intended purpose.

### **Digital Kinship as a Form of Adaption**

The concept of forming community bonds via technological means is not a foreign concept to black women and girls. They have always existed as knowledge producers but historically their thoughts and opinions have been diminished by the dialogue of a white patriarchal system (Muhammad & Haddix 2016), therefore, their forms of thinking have been under disruption by a system that chooses to belittle their discourse. In response, they have chosen to enact various forms of community-building. The concept of digital kinship is defined by Wade (2019) as “a relational practice through which familial ties—with both origin family and chosen family—are established and/or maintained through digital technologies” (pg. 81). Regardless of the various measures white supremacy has taken to leave black families in ruins through, slavery, mass incarceration, and inadequate job opportunities, the family still plays a large role in Black American's lives (Wade, 2019). One approach Black Americans have utilized to cultivate family

bonds despite state violence is through the broadening of how kinship structures are perceived (Wade, 2019). Although communities cannot automatically be denoted as kinships, those who participate within digital communities do possess a feeling of shared experiences that determine how they engage with others and how they prepare these digital spaces to be prime environments for the creation of kinship bonds (Wade, 2019). In past research conducted by Carmen Kynard, environments known as sista-ciphers acted as secure digital channels for young black women to engage in collaborative problem-solving and provided them with the opportunity to validate others' social and cultural literacy processes (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard, 2010). Additionally, these digital hush harbors gave an environment that allowed these women to develop critical literacy without being situated under the fixed stare of whiteness (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard, 2010). These students were given the opportunity to discuss advice concerning the presentation of a political stance in classwork, providing comfort when talking about their interactions with microaggressions, and investigating language systems that validate their identities and culture (Price-Dennis, 2016; Kynard, 2010).

In response to the need for adaptive efforts, H.Y.P.E. Media created spaces based on similar notions of digital kinship. Firstly, the program began hosting virtual team meetings that took place each week. This allowed for both conversations centered on black girlhood to still take place albeit virtually and the cultivation of relationships between team members. Moreover, "Check-ins and Checks-outs" were created. These scheduled interactions were the H.Y.P.E. Media youth leaders' response to elements of physical as well as social disruption the program was faced with. Each week, Monday-Friday, H.Y.P.E. youth leaders were expected to call a H.Y.P.E. facilitator, once in the morning and once in the afternoon. The team members would ask questions centered on thoughts, feelings, declaration of affirmations, and goal setting for that day. These sessions allowed for the cultivation of a relationship between team-management members and youth leaders. Essentially, "Check-ins and Checks-outs" were a new venture of digital kinship that operated within our program. The girls were given the opportunity to express personal sentiments ranging from their doubts as well as worries to their triumphs and accomplishments. In these sessions, participants would reveal the struggles they faced with regards to the type of environment they were situated in and how they felt those issues might impede their ability to engage in program content. They spoke about what actions they might take to improve their situation and later on during the day they discussed if those actions were sufficient, and if they were, why and if they weren't, why not. Through these Check-ins/outs I was able to obtain a better understanding of the impact of disruption. As the girls spoke about their personal goals, struggles, and triumphs I was able to comprehend how disruption can affect every part of an individual's life which in turn affects how they approached certain situations. When disruption occurs, individuals are forced to stop their routine endeavors. Their fixed program of regular series of actions are interrupted. When they are forced to adapt, they must enter new spaces or pathways to get to their regularly scheduled destinations. This divergence leaves them vulnerable to unfamiliar external forces. These unfamiliar factors that the individuals previously did not have to deal with can set them off course or "distract" them. The intruding elements of distraction they now have to face can be distressing due to their encroachment on spaces that were formerly unexposed to outside stimuli. The only person who can designate what is considered an unfamiliar force of distraction and what is not, are those who are on the receiving end of them; those who have to determine a way to remedy the issue and set themselves back on course.

### **How Disruption Reveals Structural Inequalities**

On an even greater scale, my research process was heavily affected by the societal disruption in the form of racial injustices. Injustices that have always existed but were compounded by the effects of COVID-19. As the black community was hit the hardest by the virus, a lens was put-on socioeconomic issues that heavily relate to class structures which are the basis of systematic racism. When disasters occur whether that be in the form of diseases, nature, or economic downturns those at the bottom are always affected the most. It is incredibly important during this time that we pay attention to how black girls, as well as the wider black community, have been affected by major events that occurred in the year 2020 and continued to persist into 2021. It has been evident, even from the earliest stages of the virus, that the black community has been disproportionately affected by it. From the time of April in 2020, "In Chicago, Blacks represent 70% of people who have died from coronavirus" (Ray). This same trend was represented in North Carolina, South Carolina, and New York, however, with smaller gaps (Ray). This evidence of health disparity is due to several structural conditions (Ray). In comparison to white individuals, black individuals are more likely to reside in locations that lack nutritional food choices, space for outdoor activities, buildings for recreational purposes, safe environments, and light (Ray). These suboptimal living conditions are a result of the historical repercussions of redlining. Black people are also less likely to have a fair level of accessibility to healthcare, i.e., hospitals are harder to get to and their pharmacies are lower in quality (Ray). Furthermore, black individuals are more likely to be a part of the "essential worker" category as they represent around 30% of bus drivers and almost 20% of fast-food employees, janitors, and cashiers (Ray). This leads to the black labor force, and as consequence, their families, being overexposed to the virus (Ray). In the case of Pittsburgh specifically, "According to Allegheny County Health Department data, Black people make up 13% of the county population" (Kaplan). However, at the time of July 2020, black individuals were representative of a higher amount of major COVID-19 demographics based on data provided by the health department: "26% of total cases, 32% of hospitalizations, 31% of ICU admissions, 20% of deaths" (Kaplan). Like other black communities, Pittsburgh's was disproportionately affected by the virus from the very beginning and for a similar reason as well: they disproportionately represent a large number of essential workers (Kaplan). The disruption of COVID-19 revealed systematic abuses concerning levels of accessibility to certain resources not only in terms of healthcare and wealth affordances but education as well. These structural deficiencies affected H.Y.P.E. youth leaders', ability to learn and, therefore, their capacity to fulfill their desired quality of life as well as create change for themselves and those around them.

### **How Disruption Reveals Systematic Abuses of Power**

In relation to issues of police brutality, on June 6, 2020, the number of Black Lives Matter protests peaked when around 500,000 people, 600 of those people being from Pittsburgh alone, showed up in almost 550 protest locations nationwide (Buchanan). It's important to keep in mind that this was only one day in months of protests. In polls taken from July 2020, Civic Analyst, "...science firm that works with businesses and Democratic campaigns...", reported that around 15 million to 26 million individuals in the United States took part in protests related to the death of George Floyd as well as other police brutality-related deaths during that time (Buchanan). Following George Floyd's death, there were several weekends of protests and demonstrations taking place throughout the Pittsburgh area (WPXI.com). In Homewood specifically, there was a Pray for Peace March that occurred during this time of turmoil (WPXI.com). Because H.Y.P.E.

Media is based in Homewood and H.Y.P.E. youth leaders live in either the community or neighboring ones, they faced these issues first-hand as they witnessed members of their own community protesting in the streets of Pittsburgh.

### **H.Y.P.E. Media's Social Media Campaign as a Disruption Response**

As a facilitator, I was able to observe as well as take part in a social media campaign managed by H.Y.P.E. that was centered on affirmations. Affirmations are defined by H.Y.P.E. Media as something positive a group member believes about themselves that helps set the tone for their day. The main goal of these affirmations is to establish a community of positivity around black life and black girlhood. Each week one of the girls was tasked with creating an affirmation post every day which consisted of a picture of themselves, an affirmation, and a caption that included an explanation for their affirmation along with a call to action urging others to post their affirmations in the comments. Their capacity to enact this campaign was integral in preserving as well as improving these girls' overall well-being. The campaign essentially acted as a means of comfort. Due to the disruption that was occurring on a spatial, societal, and emotional level, they were exposed to external forces that led to states of distress. The origins of these stressors being from places such as their life at home or the present state of turmoil society is in. When the H.Y.P.E. youth leaders took the initiative to start this campaign, they created a separate space of communal interaction where they could partake in self-comfort in a safe environment.

#### **Effects of Disruption on a Personal Level**

On a personal level, COVID-19 affected how I engaged in the research I was partaking in through the fellowship. Due to me not being able to meet with the girls face to face, I experienced personal disruption in terms of how I initially believed the research would proceed. My initial plans included bonding with the girls and forming a strong personal connection, however, with the group not being able to meet in-person I was unsure if this bond could still be cultivated. This disruption in turn influenced how I engaged with the girls. Participating in Check-ins and Checks-outs became part of a way for me to formulate and strengthen the connections I wanted to bring to fruition. The aspect of relationship-building was already a key factor of my research process, but with the difficulties brought on by disruption, forming that bond became an even more critical part of my exploratory work. I approached my research process by focusing on "understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Butina 1). The two subpoints of that general objective were: 1) Concentration on grasping participants' interactions with the goal of fully communicating these experiences 2) The actual researcher is an essential mechanism in collecting data for the purpose of (Butin, 2012). Therefore, establishing a bond with participants was already an acknowledged necessity, however, a large part of my research process began centering on ensuring that the element of justice was considered when thinking about equitable risks and benefits for the community (Ross, 2010). Although community-engaged research heavily pays attention to "fairness in distribution" of gathered and analyzed information, a main part of it is centered on non-distributive components of justice often referred to as social justice" (Ross, 2010). Taking social justice into consideration while conducting research means that the well-being of all socioeconomic communities, vulnerable ones, in particular, are prioritized throughout the process (Ross, 2010). Through encouraging social institutions and practices that provide communities with means of self-determination, respectful encounters can be guaranteed (Ross, 2010). The social practices I planned to utilize during my time as a researcher, to ensure these amicable interactions, were centered on directly operating

within the community. Therefore, my ability to form interpersonal bonds was a key factor in my capacity to ensure the presence of social justice.

This experience of adaption also led to me cultivating new skills in a virtual setting in order to set myself on a successful path. In terms of verbal communication, this experience has been key in helping me cultivate my ability to express myself clearly and succinctly. As we were not there in-person to communicate with one another, any input or directions given needed to be comprehensive and concise to avoid confusion. Furthermore, I was able to work on my interpersonal skills as I tried to figure out how to effectively communicate my ideas and concerns. Additionally, we were not able to complete all the projects we had proposed in the beginning, this led to me changing how I would gather research. Instead, I focused on mining for research data in other activities we participated in. Additionally, evaluating past interactions to obtain data led to me having to gain more mastery over analytical thinking. As I was conducting qualitative research; I already understood that I would have to reflect on past conversations within this program setting and see how they fit into my exploratory work. However, due to disruptions that accompanied COVID-19, I had to adjust what subject material I would be analyzing and how I would be analyzing it.

## Conclusion

While operating as a H.Y.P.E. facilitator during the program's pilot year, I've gained a great deal of insight concerning the effects of disruption. I was able to witness how disruptive forces can affect every facet of an individuals' life, in part due to a domino effect that occurs. One break in routine can lead to the need for adaption, and whatever shape or form that adaption presents itself as, can lead to another part of a person's life, that was initially unaffected, being impacted consequently. For some, this form of adaption is not a new concept. Black girls in particular have constantly had modified their existence due to their forced position of vulnerability within societal structures. They tend to preserve themselves by forming community bonds and creating spaces of comfort and safety no matter what shape those bonds or spaces have to take. They truly emulate what many individuals attempt to do during times of disorder or interruption: figure out ways to cope with this pause in normalcy, and when coping mechanisms are established, moved forward and if possible, attempt to prosper.

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