

# Relational maintenance, collectivism, and coping strategies among Black populations during COVID-19

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## Abstract

The current study, adopting community resilience and social creativity, explores Black individuals' relational maintenance and collectivist strategies employed amid the COVID-19 pandemic. A sample of 410 Black adults across the United States answered open-ended web-based survey questions about identifiable shifts in relational dynamics and examples of mutual support exhibited among community members amid COVID-19. Findings include individuals implementation of media technologies to maintain communication and social support, the groups' concentrated efforts toward providing health and wellness-based information, increased communal interaction, and the redistribution of monetary donations and volunteerism to support organizations promoting gender and racial equity. Outcomes demonstrate that Black populations embrace collectivist-orientated tendencies as a means of community resilience, extending the community resilience framework amid the ongoing crisis and absent of specific geographic location.

## Keywords

Black populations, community resilience, relational maintenance, social creativity, social support

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately affected communities of color in general and Black populations specifically (Soto-Vásquez et al., 2020). Within the US, Black Americans make up 13% of the population yet account for 30% of positive cases and are twice as likely to die from COVID-19 complications than their White counterparts (Johnson & Buford, 2020; Stafford et al., 2020). The relationship between Black individuals and health disparities related to the virus comes as no surprise as Black people are more likely to live in food deserts (Anderson, 2016) and in geographic locations that lack access to clean water (Mock, 2016). Moreover, Black individuals are at a higher risk of contracting the virus due to increased utilization of public transportation and overrepresentation in service-orientated jobs identified as “essential work” (Odoms-Young, 2018). Similarly, researchers note the disproportionate negative impact of COVID-19 on Black communities regarding employment, access to savings, and the ability of the group to make monthly utility payments (Lopez et al., 2020). Data from the U.S. Census’s Household Pulse Survey, which estimates delinquency rates among homeowners across racial and ethnic groups, found that Black homeowners were twice as likely to experience mortgage delinquency than White homeowners during the pandemic (Choi & Pang, 2020).

Research that examines Black individuals’ navigation of traumatic experiences and community resilience often assume that the group will assimilate or adopt dominant group (i.e., White) practices (Sonn & Fisher, 1998). This work overlooks the distinct ways Black individuals survive amid trauma, often circumventing characteristics associated with non-Black communities (e.g., individualism). Moreover, these analyses lack recognition of features such as collectivism and group collaboration, both of which are essential to Black populations (Jackman, 1996). Fittingly, scholars dispute inquiries of Black individuals’ assimilation to non-Black practices and assert the need to contemplate social practices and cultural-based traits that are unique to the group (Mays, 1986). Social practices such as religious gatherings, media viewing, and race-centered interpersonal interactions with organizations (e.g., Jack and Jill of America) draw attention to the myriad of ways that scholars may come to understand how resilience is expressed among Black individuals (Bowleg et al., 2003; Stamps, 2021a).

To address the lack of attention toward Black communities’ resilience and displayed efforts to address trauma, the current project examines open-ended survey data from a Black adult sample across the US during COVID-19. It is posited that the ongoing pandemic exacerbates health and economic disparities among the group; however, familial and community-based relationships and collectivist characteristics offer distinct coping mechanisms that afford Black individuals opportunities to navigate such obstacles. To this end, the present study investigates familial and community-based relationships by applying insights from community resilience (Holling, 1973) and tenets from social identity theory—particularly social creativity (Tajfel et al., 1979)—to investigate this phenomenon.

This examination contributes to community resilience literature in several ways. First, community resilience literature often assesses trauma or disasters (e.g., earthquakes) in a specific geographic location (Kulig et al., 2013), paying little attention to systemic issues

(e.g., environmental racism) that may impact a group outside of a specific locale. To illustrate, systemic racism, which is disputably traumatic among racial minorities, generates suffering that is not necessarily related to a particular place. Likewise, extant community resilience research is restricted by examining recovery efforts after trauma or adversity and this work negates how groups may express resilience during crises (Robinson & Carson, 2016). Oftentimes, communities with a history of hardship enact community resilience continually because trauma is interwoven into their daily lives (Bowleg et al., 2003). COVID-19, as one example, is currently at the forefront for many Black individuals, yet continual racial unrest and surging global anti-Blackness is a mainstay in society and continues to present unmitigated challenges for Black individuals (Marshburn et al., 2021; Stamps, 2021b). As Bergstrand and colleagues (2015) state, there is a continued need to address agency among marginal communities to better understand what factors drive resilience, which is not always explicitly examined among underrepresented populations or among those who are not afforded privileges due to their marginal identities.

To best situate the examination of Black populations and the groups' attenuation of the negative influence of COVID-19, a review of community resilience literature is undertaken, drawing attention to its adoption among Black communities. Following this, tenets from social identity theory, specifically social creativity, are presented. Lastly, the methodology, analyses of data, and implications regarding the current research are offered.

## **Literature review**

### ***Community resilience***

Community resilience, originating in environmentalism, assesses how communities navigate turmoil and tragedy (Holling, 1973). More recently, community resilience is applied across varied social sciences and generally identifies how groups cope, adapt, and recover from various disasters (Bergstrand et al., 2015). Community resilience describes "the capacity for successful adaptation, positive functioning or competence [after a disaster] . . . despite high-risk status, chronic stress, or following prolonged or severe trauma" (Egeland et al., 1993, p. 517). In other words, community members' successful adaptation, including favorable actions and behaviors post-tragedy, is a vital component to community resilience. Even still, efforts such as exhibiting social support and collectivism amid ongoing trauma, are minimized within community resilience research as each is not always applicable across non-Black populations (Jackman, 1996).

Research examining community resilience distinguishes the implications of geographic location, large-scale turmoil, and how communities navigate the aftermath of particular events (Bergstrand et al., 2015; Coles & Buckle, 2004; Peters, 2019). However, research within this domain is limited in addressing ongoing systemic issues such as the intersections between structural racism and their impact on public health. The absence of interrogations regarding ongoing trauma related to racial minorities is thought-provoking considering the history of racial inequality (e.g., Jim Crow, state-supported segregation) that continues to impact Black communities. For example,

redlining—or the practice of racial discrimination that displaces Black and lower socioeconomic communities in undesirable spaces, including proximity to highways or chemical plants—often contributes to various health complications and the lack of wealth accumulation (Adams, 2020; Rothstein, 2017). Moreover, the pandemic has intensified the connection between structural racism and subsequent health disparities, rendering the Black community more susceptible to COVID-related trauma (Johnson & Buford, 2020).

A community's ability to recover from adversity may make it impossible to return to the exact conditions prior to the event. However, the process of learning how to navigate trauma, thus adopting resilience and varied coping mechanisms, remains vital (Sherrieb et al., 2010). Indeed, communities may respond to hardships with actions such as reimagining themselves as agents of change, seeking collective action to address inequalities (Breslow et al., 2015) or promoting favorable in-group characteristics such as reaffirming racial identity in social or digital spaces (Halliday & Brown, 2018). To illustrate, Black individuals often espouse an organized response to distress and trauma to challenge oppression and inequality directed at the group. These examples include organizing community-based partnerships, engaging in digital publics (e.g., Black Twitter), and coordinating large-scale efforts such as voting and seeking political office (Clay, 2019; Lu & Steele, 2019). As research suggests, overcoming adversity and planning for future confrontations, more so than recreating prior situations, is often a keen focus for Black populations (Walker & Salt, 2006). Ideally, embracing change is at the heart of resiliency, and learning from those circumstances may aid Black communities in responding to future issues.

Community resilience is a collective endeavor among people with shared identities (Coles & Buckle, 2004). Moreover, scholars note that Black communities are more racially centered, religious, and collectivist than their racial counterparts (Hayward & Krause, 2015; Stamps, 2020b; Sullivan & Platenburg, 2017). These characteristics suggest that identity-based group dynamics, including prayer groups, community meetings with local leaders (e.g., NAACP), and engagement in social organizations (e.g., Black Greek organizations) may offer social support, mentorship and group-based responses to trauma. Likewise, a sense of community, or feelings of belonging among people, fosters social support networks and increase community involvement. To this end, a discussion of social identity and, distinctively, social creativity as a means to demonstrate the theoretical underpinnings of Black populations' adoption of community resilience and group-based social support networks is well suited.

*Social creativity.* A fundamental assumption of the social identity framework is that individuals are inherently motivated to develop and reinforce positive group attributes (Tajfel et al., 1979). In particular, literature acknowledges that groups adopt behaviors that uphold favorability as a protective mechanism amid threats and one example of exercising this action is social creativity (Tajfel, 1978). Grounded in social identity-based theorizing, social creativity recognizes group members' behaviors that increase positive qualities, yet these actions are not necessarily focused on shifting the group's status. This is, enacting social creativity does not offer an advantage over another group; rather, efforts are taken to support individuals that face a particular unfavorable incident.

The adoption of social creativity among Black populations is seen anecdotally in the groups' embrace of racially identifiable cultural markers (Halliday & Brown, 2018). However, non-Black groups employ these strategies in domains such as sports fandom and in order to preserve group dominance in response to perceived threats (see Douglas et al., 2005; Jones, 2017).

Social creativity tactics often intend to minimize adverse outcomes. To illustrate, Black individuals combat racial discrimination in workplace settings by documenting, via personal narratives and photos, culturally-specific characteristics such as natural hairstyles by using hashtags including #Blackgirlmagic and #naturalhairjourney (Halliday & Brown, 2018). Social creativity, including use of digital platforms to highlight racial issues, has created a groundswell of support that has captured policymakers' attention. For example, H.R. 5309, also known as the CROWN (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act, addresses racial discrimination specific to Black individuals and hair stylings in workplace settings and offers a remedy to mitigate racial prejudice directed at the group (Bennett, 2020). The summer of 2020 included an increase in collective action on behalf of Black lives in general and toward the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Elijah McClain in particular. Here, social creativity tactics, including engagement in social unrest, resulted in Black individuals and non-Black allies' engagement in collective endeavors such as coalition building, activism, and political action, exhibiting community resilience processes (Hajnal et al., 2017). These kinds of creative strategies such as these redefine the group by promoting desirable group characteristics, including acknowledging positive group-based traits and providing social support in the form of activism and policy creation.

### *Black communities, community resilience, and social creativity*

Varying factors contribute to the harm enacted on Black communities, including economic hardship and discrimination within organizations such as the criminal justice and healthcare systems (Bowleg et al., 2003; Mock, 2016; Odoms-Young, 2018). These inequalities impact many facets of life and contribute to systematic trauma (Alang et al., 2017). Black individuals are twice as likely to experience harassment and violence by law enforcement than their racial counterparts (Fryer, 2019). There are also numerous accounts of police responding to Black individuals engaging in commonplace behaviors from bird-watching to selling bottled water (Hill, 2020). Black individuals' presence in these spaces is often met with aggression from law enforcement, vigilantes, and other non-Black individuals, and it often includes unfavorable outcomes and overwhelmingly shows that discrimination remains an ongoing crisis (Fryer, 2019). Scholars note that the tools Black communities use to confront disparities and mitigate harm may not be applicable to other racial groups (Alang et al., 2017). Camara and Orbe (2010) draw attention to creative strategies that Black individuals use to acknowledge discrimination driven by racist and bigoted behaviors. Of particular interest and related to the current work are the authors recognition of displays of racial consciousness and community ties that help attenuate the impact of distress.

For decades, Black communities navigate systemic oppression by responding to racial disparities and trauma drawing upon creative and culturally-specific actions and

philosophies that enact resilience (Essed, 1991). Mays (1986) acknowledges the Black church and its role in protecting the community amid heightened racial tension. According to Mays, church has been a space of refuge for many Black members dating back to enslavement, and a place to build social support and community resilience. Bowleg and colleagues (2003) recognize the Black church as a space of communal response to combat prejudice and interpersonal trauma and to recognize additional external environmental settings. This included group gatherings (e.g., retreats) singularly focused on racial, gender, or sexual identities that provide tools for individuals to challenge racism, sexism, and homophobia. Sonn and Fisher (1998) draw attention toward Black liberation movements and cultural identifiers—including Black music, style of dress, and linguistic practices—that collectively express community resilience and aid in minimizing distress.

Researchers acknowledge distinct forms of relational maintenance and community resilience among Black populations. However, other racial and social groups may use cultural identifiers that contribute to their group's resilience. Stafford (2011) notes common features related to relational upkeep, including task performance between relational members and the significance of networks, and these are not unique to specific racial groups. As such, the current work centers on Black individuals not to exclude individuals or minimize other social groups' adoption of relational maintenance and resilience, but to highlight one of many groups that are often dismissed or absent in community resilience literature.

### *The current study*

Research and media coverage on COVID-19 reveal that the pandemic has had unprecedented effects on society, including an impact on the economic realities and health of Black communities. Literature adopting community resilience acknowledges that Black individuals' responsive actions are often collectivistic, combating an often generalized narrative that Americans, as a cultural identity, embody individualistic, self-serving traits. Collectivist activities, or collectivism, place an importance on the group's well-being compared to an individual who is singularly focused on personal goals and personal well-being (see Hofstede, 2001). With this in mind and building on the literature above, the current study incorporates community resilience and social creativity as mechanisms employed by Black individuals to combat the historical disparities and trauma that COVID-19 intensifies. Due to the integrated perspective of community resilience and social creativity, we propose a series of research questions to examine Black individuals' relational dynamics and support amid the pandemic. Specifically, we asked:

- RQ1:** What have been some identifiable shifts in relational dynamics among a sample of Black participants since the beginning of the pandemic?
- RQ2:** What have been some examples of mutual support exhibited among a sample of Black participants since the beginning of the pandemic?

## Method

### Participants

Using the third-party crowdsourcing platform Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), 431 participants were recruited online on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Due to the current investigation's goals, non-Black participants ( $n = 2$ ) and incomplete questionnaires ( $n = 19$ ) were removed from the analysis, leaving a final sample of 410 participants. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 76 with an average age of 35 ( $SD = 11$ ). Among the remaining sample, 48% ( $n = 196$ ) identified as female, 51% ( $n = 204$ ) identified as male, and 1% ( $n = 10$ ) identified as non-gender-conforming or decided not to answer this question. Lastly, 85% reported attending at least some college, and 28% of the sample was either unemployed or worked part-time at the time of data collection. The sample population represented 38 states across the US.

### Procedure

Due to the constraints of collecting data during COVID-19, all data was collected online. Participants were U.S. residents and compensated \$3.00 for their time. Data were gathered during June 2020 and July 2020. Participants responded to several open-ended questions about coping amid the pandemic with a specific interest in familial and community engagement (see Appendix for the list of questions). They also responded to closed-ended demographic questions, including age, education, gender, and race. Participation in the study averaged 20 minutes.

Researchers acknowledge that third-party crowdsourcing platforms, including MTurk, tend to have fundamental differences from the general population as samples are typically more educated and less religious compared to the US population (Goodman et al., 2013). However, MTurk remains a reliable tool for data collection compared to convenience samples drawn from college populations that tend to be young and lack racial diversity (Ramsey et al., 2016). Research also denotes consistent reliability of MTurk samples recognizing greater attentiveness among MTurk samples due to the incentive structures and the opportunity for researchers to reject data and rate participant engagement (Miller et al., 2017; Rouse, 2019; Thomas & Clifford, 2017). As such, and with appropriate parameters in place, MTurk provided the opportunity for targeted recruitment of Black participants and allowed for social distancing protections for each participant and the research team.

### Data analysis

The research team included racial and ethnic identities, including Black, White, Jewish, and self-identified males and females. We recognize and acknowledge these identities as self-reflexivity is a vital process in the qualitative inquiry of social groups (Stamps, 2020a). To begin the analysis process, each author independently read through all participants' open-ended responses and created preliminary groupings of positive, negative, and neutral reactions to each research question. Next, the team adopted the frequency, extensiveness, and intensity structure for qualitative data analyses (Kam et al., 2019).

**Table 1.** Themes and descriptions.

Theme	Description/Examples
Reimagining of Human Connection	Participants emphasized the importance of common activities that uphold community and protects everyone during the pandemic (e.g., Zoom church services and drive-by birthday parties).
Increased Established Communication Tactics	Participants noted an increase in previously used communication methods (e.g., writing letters).
Adoption of New Media Literacies	Participants noted new media technologies as a form of interpersonal connection and social support during the pandemic (e.g., e-mail prayer requests).
Monetary, Emotional, and Task Oriented Support	Participants noted receiving monetary and emotional support, and task-oriented support (i.e., help with running errands)
Leveraging Skills and Resources	Participants leveraged their skills, hobbies, and employment to support communities in the form of meal prep and distribution, sharing produce from personal gardens, and gathering supplies from their workplace.
Institutional Support	Participants noted an increased in financially supporting and time spent volunteering with arts organizations, local businesses, community-based non-profits, and social justice groups.

This process included highlighting statements based on the number of times a repeated comment surfaced (i.e., frequency) and if an issue or narrative was particularly descriptive (i.e., extensiveness). Lastly, the context, or emotional quality in which the participants shared their statement(s), including the use of all caps or exclamation points (i.e., intensity), was examined. Following this step, each researcher identified supportive details and descriptions to support each research question. Following Kam and colleagues (2019) procedures, the authors merged common groupings to form overarching themes (see Table 1 for themes, definitions, and examples) and selected representative quotes to demonstrate each theme. To further contextualize data, we employed Carballo-Diéguez and colleagues' (2011) exploration of participants' actions and behaviors. Each action or behavior was categorized under topics such as risk reduction strategies or contextual constraints, and the noted actions and behaviors were not mutually exclusive to just one specific topic (see Table 2 for list). We aimed to note how individuals demonstrate social creativity and community resilience and how these actions identify favorable behaviors such as harm reduction. To illustrate, a participant volunteering to deliver meals to neighbors during COVID-19 is recognized as evidence supporting our research question addressing community resilience. This example is also considered a contextual facilitator, meaning the action explicitly works to minimize in-person contact, keeps individuals safe, and lessens food scarcity among communities impacted by the pandemic (see Table 2 for topics and definitions). Following this stage, the research team used a constant comparative process to audit the findings and compare notes (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The final round of scrutiny functioned to increase validity by confirming or challenging discrepancies in the team's interpretations of materials



**Table 2.** Topics and descriptions of each.

Topic	Description
Contextual Constraints	Characteristics of the surrounding environment that may restrict or impede individuals' activities or communication efforts
Contextual Facilitators	Characteristics of the surrounding environment that support or alleviate the burden of individuals' communication efforts
Risk Reduction Strategies	Behaviors, including communication or actions, that mitigate risk, which may include avoiding, challenging, or confronting issues that may reduce adverse outcomes
Relational Connectedness	Motivations targeted toward building, maintaining, and sustaining interpersonal connections, including but not limited to familial and community-based relations
Emotional Involvement	Expressive or responsive connection by means of activities, circumstances, or communicative efforts

(Miles & Huberman, 1994). Lastly, an external researcher was given access to the raw data, themes, topics, and the final manuscript to corroborate the narratives and to ensure that the findings were representative of the raw data. Representative quotes listed in the findings section include descriptive data such as the gender, age, and geographic location of the participant.

Although themes and topics generated from the research team reflect the data collected, these findings only reflect a subset of Black individuals. The topics and representation of data may not be universal because the analysis focused on coherence and cohesiveness compared to seeking generalizability (Stamps, 2018). Within this work, we acknowledge that Black individuals, as with other racial groups, exist at the intersections of race, gender, class, geographic location, and different identities. Identities, such as class, are impacted differently regarding relational dynamics and adjustment to changes amid COVID-19, and findings do not intend to represent all group members.

## Findings

### **Research Question 1: What have been some identifiable shifts in relational dynamics among the sample of Black participants since the beginning of the pandemic?**

Across the sample, 65% ( $n = 265$ ) of participants cited positive shifts in relational dynamics. Findings illustrate that Black individuals utilized three main tactics to maintain positive relationships during the pandemic, these include: (1) a reimagining of human connection (e.g., Zoom church services and drive-by birthdays), (2) increased in established communication tactics (e.g., letter-writing and mental health check-ins), and (3) adoption of new media literacies (e.g., electronic prayer requests and engagement in Facebook groups).

*A reimagining of human connection.* Multiple statements offered anecdotal evidence of community resilience among Black participants since the beginning of COVID-19. Although the pandemic has impacted in-person gatherings, participants noted a reimagining of human connection through the use of new media platforms such as video conferencing services. Participants' comments stressed an increased desire for human interaction and to maintenance of familial and community-based relationships even though congregating in person was limited. The impact of COVID-19 on Black communities, including the fear of becoming sick or potentially losing a loved one or job, was present among statements. Participants leaned on relationships with their church and community members in unconventional ways while navigating concerns and anxieties related to the pandemic, as shown by the following comment from a 56-year-old female participant from North Carolina:

We are attending worship services via live streaming. This weekend we're holding a "wave-by" for our eldest church member who just had a birthday, and we will caravan past her home, honking horns, waving, and dropping cards/gifts in an outside box. We're "zooming" with friends and family, making check-up calls to one another, and praying for one another at a distance.

Several topics surfaced in this comment that reimagine relational dynamics and demonstrates resilience amid the need for physical distancing. These actions included the participant circumnavigating contextual constraints due to the limited interpersonal interactions (e.g., holding a "wave-by") and also recognizing relational milestones (e.g., celebrating birthdays), both of which are seen as significant and worthy of prioritizing as a focal point for interpersonal connection. According to this participant, the pandemic impacted important moments, yet these events were prioritized to maintain a relational connection. Lastly, the participant implemented risk reduction strategies, such as staying in the car when visiting others and using video conferencing (e.g., Zoom), to remain protected during COVID-19. These actions center on building community, sustaining relationships, and nourishing human connections.

*Increased established communication tactics.* When addressing identifiable shifts, participants noted an awareness and increase in community engagement as demonstrated by this response from a 36-year-old female participant from New York:

Given the nature of COVID-19, I think we all take each other less for granted. My neighbors seem to be more friendly and, even with social distancing, will say hello, wave, and smile more. We cannot physically touch, yet distance brought us together.

This participant's statement identifies a reassessment of relational connections (e.g., "I think we all take each other less for granted") and recognizes a small but meaningful emotional engagement among community members (e.g., waving and smiling more). Likewise, interactions and communication between neighbors and community members were minimal before the pandemic but have since improved, suggesting an increase in empathy and communication among community members amid COVID-19.

Although participants mentioned alternative ways of achieving connectedness and engagement with others, such as remaining in vehicles to adhere to social distancing guidelines and using video conferencing to communicate, participants also discussed the use of longstanding activities, such as letter-writing and talking on the telephone. Before COVID-19, these activities may not have been a prominent means of maintaining communication as e-mail and texting are mainstays, but each form of outreach holds renewed importance. As a 37-year-old female participant from Tennessee shared:

I have been able to write letters to provide spiritual encouragement to my neighbors, communicate with friends, and emotionally support family members. I use Zoom, but I can't remember when I last picked up a pen and paper to write a letter until now.

Several topics of interest surfaced here, including the use of contextual facilitators (e.g., writing letters) and a dedication to emotional involvement (e.g., providing spiritual encouragement and emotional support) targeted toward community members and family members.

In addition to increased contextual facilitators and the reassessment of relational connections, participants witnessed or experienced shifts in increased emotional involvement. For example, a 29-year-old female participant from Kansas noted:

A change I can honestly recall is just family and friends being more helpful towards one another when it comes to helping out with bills or getting essential items. As far as community, the neighbors have become more talkative and helpful during COVID-19. Some neighbors even bought us hand sanitizer when we needed it.

The following statement from a 40-year-old male participant from Florida reflects the same sentiment: "With the community, we have developed this new sense of sharing what we have, and we feel more compassionate toward families who lost their love ones." It is also encapsulated in this statement from a 39-year-old female participant from Kansas: "As far as the community, my neighbors and random people in the community have all been very understanding and helpful. That's something I never experienced before; togetherness as a community has blossomed."

Participants acknowledging an increase in relational maintenance while abiding by social distancing and stay-at-home orders is encouraging. Black communities note increases in connectedness including efforts to respond to each other's needs and increased social engagement. Among the responses, participants referenced how they assisted one another and received assistance from family members, neighbors, and local organizations. Types of assistance received by individuals included monetary support to pay utility bills and purchase groceries, hand sanitizers, and face masks.

*Adoption of new media literacies.* Responses also included the adoption of new media technology as an additional means of relational maintenance. Individuals emphasized technology being interwoven into community gatherings, as shown by this excerpt from a 49-year-old male participant from Maryland:

Our church holds virtual meetings for all their usual activities such as Sunday service, vesper meetings, and Sunday school. Also, we communicate our concerns and needs to each other by email now; it's a place to virtually send our prayer request.

Here we see contextual facilitators adopted by individuals to curtail the lack of in-person contact. Within this comment, group gatherings continued amid the pandemic, including those documented as meaningful among Black communities, such as spiritual meetings (Bowleg et al., 2003; Hayward & Krause, 2015). Reimagining relational connectedness included digital tools to send prayer requests over email, emphasizing how technology may influence building community resilience. For this participant, an emotional connection was vital, sought out, and achieved by adopting digital technologies. A 34-year-old female participant from Utah also shared this sentiment:

I have joined a Facebook group that is very positive; my group provides comfort and care to many people, whether they are friends or strangers. I have felt a great sense of inclusion there and even a desire to help community members.

Additional statements, such as the following from a 60-year-old female participant from Virginia, provide evidence of digital technologies as a means of maintaining connection: "We have started a weekly family Zoom session with family members throughout the U.S. and those who are international, we are working to stay connected." This statement from a 37-year-old male participant from Maryland also shows the impact of digital technologies: "My family has been staying in touch with me far more often than usual. We use Facetime and Zoom to call each other throughout the week."

Participants identified and adopted technology to preserve and build community and safeguard relationships, and they recognized the need to support digital literacies among family and community members. Digital literacies are defined as using communication technologies to find, evaluate, and create appropriate means of connectedness (Amgott, 2018). Unprompted, participants discussed the role of digital literacies as a tool to help and support family and friends. As this 23-year-old male participant from California states, "I have been able to teach my parents how to use the internet more. My family now has a dedicated chat group that we use through a mobile app to stay in contact with each other." This participant emphasized using contextual facilitators (e.g., the use of the Internet and group chat) to promote connectedness when individuals' ability to engage in person is restricted. Participants' use of technology, including digital applications and video conferencing platforms, to educate others in acquiring the skills to navigate these platforms are vital. After COVID-19, the need for digital literacies will continue to increase, and the dependency on technology to maintain relational dynamics and build community resilience may be the beginning of that expansion.

Collectively, these examples recognize identifiable shifts in Black Americans' relational dynamics amid COVID-19. The positive comments suggest that community resilience, including maintaining relational dynamics and increases in connection using innovative and unconventional tools during COVID-19, were present among the sample.

**Research Question 2: What have been some examples of mutual support exhibited among the sample of Black participants since the beginning of the pandemic?**

Of the surveyed participants, 88% ( $n = 361$ ) of participants cited positive reciprocal support among family, community members, and local organizations. Across the data, three themes emerged, including (1) providing monetary, emotional, and task-related support (e.g., offering money for utility bill payments), (2) leveraging skills and resources (e.g., grocery store clerks taking neighbor's orders and delivering groceries after their shift), and (3) providing institutional support (e.g., donating money to non-profit organizations aimed at addressing anti-Blackness and community well-being).

*Monetary, emotional, and task related support.* Participant quotes highlighted task-orientated support, including running errands, distributing supplies, and providing personal materials for community members. Several quotes reference how family and neighbors support participants with monetary gifts, tangible items (e.g., toiletries), and emotional comfort. To illustrate, this 47-year-old participant from Virginia shares,

My family offers financial assistance when they feel I need it and emotional support when I feel bored or worried about the COVID-19 crisis. My neighbors provide me with supplies when I need items I cannot obtain immediately. They also give me lunches provided by the school district for my son and provide pantry items to keep my kitchen stocked. People in my community have also offered rides to bring my groceries home.

Examples showcase that the range of support from family and community members, as the previous statement suggests, took on many different forms. The activities included participants connecting community members with local organizations (e.g., school districts) and providing transportation, both of which reduce contextual constraints such as individuals having to use public transportation and thus minimize contact in social settings. Additional examples include this response from a 34-year-old female participant from Arizona: "I personally have supplied things from stores that my elderly neighbors next door weren't able to go out and get, and I sanitized items before I hand them over." Additional example of support can also be found in this response from a 30-year-old female participant from New York: "I have assisted my community with buying hand sanitizers for the families that can't afford it." This quote from a 47-year-old female participant in New York also exemplifies extended support measures:

I am helping my family financially when I am able and offering advice and emotional support when they are in need. I have also provided my neighbors with essential items, such as toilet paper. I run errands for some of my disabled and elderly neighbors.

At face value, these statements read as noteworthy but possibly trivial. However, we propose that these acts demonstrate risk reduction strategies amid the pandemic. Actions such as purchasing and distributing products for community members, specifically among populations at greater risk of health concerns due to the pandemic, are overt

examples of resilient actions. We posit that small, supportive tasks showcase resilience, highlight collectivist tendencies, and exhibit strengthened relational dynamics. The impact of these activities may be especially relevant among communities historically sidelined by commissioned programs and policies constrained in eliminating impediments. One such example includes access to nourishment-based programs (e.g., Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program) that aim to decrease food insecurities but are regulated and often do not fully support the populations as originally intended (Anderson, 2016; Braithwaite et al., 2005).

*Leveraging skills and resources.* In addition to running errands and providing supplies, individuals leveraged their skills, hobbies, and occupations to offer provision, as shown in this response from a 45-year-old female participant from Tennessee:

I support my family and neighbors by making one large meal and dividing it up among several of my neighbors. I work at a grocery store. My neighbors and family know they can text me, and I'll bring them anything they want from the store. If that keeps one less person from being exposed, I'm glad to do it.

At the time of data collection, this participant worked at a grocery store and took the opportunity to gather food and supplies orders from community members, cook meals, and distribute food to minimize others' exposure to COVID-19. This quote offers examples of risk reduction strategies. The following passages also supports that narrative: from a 60-year-old female participant from Virginia, "For those out of work, I notify them of pop-up food drives in the community. I have a vegetable garden, and I share the produce"; and from a 40-year-old male participant from Florida, "... I spend a lot of time with my kids, teaching them computer programming and robotics to keep them busy learning and distracted during this time. I have grown a garden in my backyard, and I share fresh garden produce with my neighbors." The use of contextual facilitators (e.g., notifying others of opportunities to procure supplies) and risk reduction strategies that kept community members from having to venture out in public settings were prominent among the data. Additionally, these examples did not focus on protecting the participant but rather focused on safeguarding their community and family members. These statements suggest that a collectivist identity is meaningful among participants, and the act of mitigating risk for others is a collective effort.

*Institutional support.* Lastly, participants offered statements supporting communities on broader levels such as arts organizations, community-based non-profits, and social justice initiatives. Within the data, participants advocated for equity-focused institutions and discussed redirecting funds and personal time to support organizations that promote systemic change and racial justice. The following quotes from a 32-year-old female participant from Georgia and a 28-year-old female participant also from Georgia, respectively, suggested as such: "Since I'm not using public transit for a while, I'm canceling my transit order and allocating the funds from that to donations to local arts orgs, mutual aid organizing groups, and buying restaurant gift certificates. It feels good"; "I am participating safely and supporting BLM (Black Lives Matter) protests and

fundraisers and participating in anchored sessions from Therapy for Black Girls.” The latter quote addresses support that exceeds concerns related to the pandemic and recognizes Black communities’ general well-being.

Statements that identify broader support for Black communities outside of the pandemic did not make up the majority of data. However, the comments offered support for community resilience apart from the current pandemic and recognized that individuals adopt thoughtful actions (e.g., redirecting funds) to thwart ongoing issues that impact the Black community. Various types of bias and discrimination, such as the continued criminalization of Black people and the marginalization of Black women and girls, occurred before COVID-19 and will remain after the pandemic (Braithwaite et al., 2005; Halliday & Brown, 2018). All the while, participants voluntarily mentioned supporting community organizations and discussed the need to address systemic issues that Black people face, including racism and sexism.

Across over 400 participants, Black individuals identified actions that align with community support and resilience. These deeds, including advocacy for community members, stress the importance of relational maintenance amid the uncertainty of participating in face-to-face engagement. Participants discussed how relationships with local community organizations, neighbors, and family members were important to manage anxiety and stress from the pandemic. In response to that stress, participants adopted various modalities to continue building and maintaining relationships. Multiple activities such as writing letter and embracing digital media—including video conferencing and group chat applications—to stay connected and facilitate wellness checks with families and neighbors were of keen interest within the data. Digital technologies are often viewed as tools utilized in innovative spaces (e.g., Silicon Valley) and by young, tech-savvy individuals (Amgott, 2018). However, this particular sample, reflecting a range of age groups, suggests that the adoption of new media is growing, and variables such as age and geographic location may not curtail the use of technological tools.

Finally, data revealed a collectivist identity among this sample of Black participants, specifically, individuals who prioritized family and community members’ needs and took strides to support one another by providing food and supplies (Healy et al., 2004). Participants discussed sharing information from community-based food programs and providing health and wellness updates. Several individuals mentioned distributing produce from their gardens and delivering meals to neighbors and acknowledged their efforts to protect loved ones and neighbors. Participants delivered toiletries, paid family and friends’ utility bills, and noticed an increase in neighbors’ and community members’ attentiveness and favorable communicative efforts.

Numerous quotes expressed a concentrated effort to provide social support amid a lack of in-person contact by using cell phones, smartphone applications (e.g., Facetime), and video conferencing (e.g., Zoom). Participants extended comfort to family and community members by utilizing email as a tool for sending and offering prayer requests and by visiting community members while adhering to social distancing guidelines (i.e., remaining in their vehicles).

Altogether, among this sample of Black individuals, participants showcase community resilience in a way that is uniquely associated with navigating the pandemic. Black

people are not necessarily a homogenized racial group; however the data showed commonalities including a focus on community support and collectivist engagement. Currently, COVID-19 is a leading contributor of death among Black individuals. Likewise, the pandemic impacts numerous systemic issues, including health disparities (Lopez et al., 2020). However, Black individuals support one another, prioritize community and familial relationships, and demonstrate resilience as continued devastation overwhelms the group.

## **Conclusion**

Adopting the community resilience framework and tenets from social creativity, the current study sought to examine Black individuals' relational dynamics and community support amid the pandemic. Previous community resilience research often centers on a singular trauma or environmental devastation but does not focus on continuing distress or how groups create and display resilience as they face longstanding systemic issues. The current work aimed to address this shortcoming. However, as with all research, there are limitations; therefore, the findings should be interpreted thoughtfully. First, the study utilized online data collection methods, which was appropriate during a global pandemic that required social distancing to keep individuals safe. However, online data collection excludes participants who lack digital access or digital literacy skills. Future research may benefit from in-person focus groups or one-on-one interviews, which allow for follow-up questioning and further contextualization of data.

Second, the sample may have biases introduced by eligibility criteria, such as excluding non-Black participants and individuals' self-selection in the MTurk platform. This project sought out Black individuals, and although narratives offered here may apply to non-Black (e.g., Latino, Asian, and Indigenous) communities, those voices are absent from the current conversation. Additional research in this domain should include a more extensive, racially diverse population.

Third, although the sample population represents varied intersectional identities including gender and geographic location among Black individuals, some identities (e.g., sexuality, ability status) were not assessed. Bowleg and colleagues (2003) note that among the Black community, lower-socioeconomic status individuals deal with stressors related to oppression and discrimination in specific ways that differ from their high-socioeconomic status counterparts. Among the sample represented in this work, only 15% of participants did not attend college and we note that MTurk offers an over-representation of college-educated and middle-class participants (Goodman et al., 2013). The lack of intersectional representation among Black populations is apparent, and future research should consider ways to mitigate this issue.

Lastly, the civil unrest during summer 2020 in response to law enforcement and vigilante killings of Black individuals also contributed to potential trauma and distress while Black communities navigated COVID-19. The impact of the protests, imagery of Black lives lost, and media coverage of both was a particularly salient experience and may have intersected with community resilience developmental processes.

Despite these limitations, the data and subsequent findings provide insight into how Black communities demonstrate community resilience, maintain relational dynamics,



and establish social creativity during the global COVID-19 pandemic. In a departure from primarily deficit-focused examinations of Black individuals' experiences (see Stamps, 2020b), this study contributes to a critical conversation on how Black communities survive and thrive despite insurmountable hardship.



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### Open research statement

This research was not pre-registered. The data and materials used in this research cannot be publicly shared but are available upon request, please contact the first author with requests at [dstamps1@lsu.edu](mailto:dstamps1@lsu.edu).

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## Appendix

### Research questions presented in survey

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1. What are some shifts in your relationships, positive or negative, with family members since the beginning of the pandemic?
  2. What are some shifts in your relationships, positive or negative, with community members since the beginning of the pandemic?
  3. What are some ways that you have supported family members since the beginning of the pandemic?
  4. What are some ways that you have been supported by family members since the beginning of the pandemic?
  5. What are some ways that you have supported community members since the beginning of the pandemic?
  6. What are some ways that you have been supported by community members since the beginning of the pandemic?
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Note. Questions were presented in an online survey with open-ended text boxes provided for responses and there was not a time limit for participant to answer each question. Participants were told that their responses were anonymous and that they could quit the study at any time without penalty. Due to the nature of the questions, participants were offered resources in the consent form, including contact information for The National Alliance on Mental Health and the website: [www.mentalhealth.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.gov).