Code-switching is the act of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of languages in conversation in order to assimilate in certain environments and properly relate to the people present. We alternate our vernacular when speaking to supervisors, bosses, and other professionals. We change our tone and demeanor when addressing our close friends and significant others. In new and strange environments, we adjust our language; it may almost seem natural and innate, but its utilization and impact are certainly cultural and historical. It is a function to express and navigate through different social pressures, ideologies, and identities.

This diversification of oneself when present in different scenarios stems from a place of fear, survival instinct, and self-preservation when practiced amongst African Americans. What happens when adaptation techniques are rooted and tied to histories of discrimination, prejudice, and bias? How does one learn to deal with the societal and social pressures that lead to behaving in certain ways, and that is reflected in language decisions related to code-switching? In some circumstances, not engaging in code-switching can have significant ramifications on one’s reputation. The tug of war between what seems like two opposing dialects, African American Vernacular and Standard English, is the focus of this study. The stigma centered around AAVE, formerly called Black English Vernacular and commonly called Ebonics outside of the academic community, has been the center of major social debate arguing its validity and contrast to Standard English, which many have regarded as synonymous to “talking white.”

Many African Americans intuitively understand how their behavior and language may change in different circumstances in order to avoid inaccurate preconceptions about who they are. This pertains to how they act and react in black spaces, white spaces, as well as professional and personal spaces. According to anthropologist Avigdor Edminster, the problem with this racial patriarchal ideology is that it is founded in material inequalities that seek to maintain discrimination in wealth, power, and prestige as well as to demean black cultural forms, including language. Significant outside social and cultural pressures on African Americans regarding how members should behave can cause significant harm. As a result, one should question the values that these pressures might represent and whether they come from a place of discrimination or racism.

When someone is asked to behave in a way that doesn’t feel natural to them by cultural pressures, that harmful belief can become a habit of behavior that is
difficult to deal with psychologically. It affects social status and prestige and is interwoven in our educational system.

This study’s goal is to understand how prevalent these biases and stereotypes surrounding AAVE can be, and how these shape the social, political, and educational views of African Americans inter-racially and intra-racially. It also looks at how this reality that many African Americans face dictates how they navigate the society around them, and identifies the ways code-switching parallels itself to material inequalities that can cause physical, economical, and emotional harm. Beyond this, understanding how the constant cultural pressure to behave in ways that one does not agree with can cause a strong cognitive dissonance that can be extremely stressful. It molds and shapes the minds of our youth, contorts the vision of people of color to believe themselves to be less than and leaves lasting damages on the psyche.

**Code-Switching Defined**

Many interviewees described code-switching for themselves along the lines of “changing the way one acts in order to blend in.” Scholar Vershawn Ashanti Young defines “code-switching” as: “The prevailing definition, the one most educators, accept, and the one I’m against, that advocates language substitution, the linguistic translation of Spanglish or AAE into standard English.” Like Young, many of those interviewed regarded code-switching more as a survival tactic and reconstruction of their language and behavior in order to adhere to a certain prestige and archetype, one that highlighted whiteness as correctness.

Young synthesizes (sic) that code-switching has a rich history of racist ideologies and segregationist foundation. The idea that code-switching has been modeled ideally as a “transition” he believes was designed as an alienation tactic to make Black folks assimilate to European standards of behavior. Interviewees voiced throughout this study, the struggle to move between two worlds that were opposite in culture and expectation, whether that be their home life and school, their personal life or professional life. The fight to keep each separate and distinct was difficult and trying. It’s important to understand how code-switching has evolved and taken on multiple forms and how standard English became the language to uphold and judge all others by.

**Code-Switching in our Education and Institutions**

Communication skills are one of the single most important learning objectives across a multitude of learning institutions and universities. While introducing basic communication practices in the classroom like an introductory course to public speaking, is essential, it can prove to be a challenge to Black students whose language is deeply rooted and centered around African American Vernacular English. Black students, however, can recognize the complex social contexts that present themselves and can effectively code-switch by understanding context clues and using bi-dialectical behavior. However, these skills can have a large influence on academic performance, as well as communication in other social situations.

Code-switching is not random nor is it meaningless; its role and function are used as a linguistic tool that can become a sign for its participants to be aware of
alternative communicative conventions. Black English historically has been portrayed and deemed as inferior, because of its deviation from the mainstream “American English.” Black English speakers have experienced the brunt of this rejection, so as a method of social survival, African Americans as Green found, engaged in an almost “unconscious and reflexive” practice of code-switching; in order to avoid stigma and negative responses.

America has standardized its English, defined mostly by the dominant group who speaks it. It is spoken by those with power, and in power. If another dialect is spoken that does not align with Standard American English, it is ranked lower within the dominant cultural context.

A prevailing phenomenon that has become pervasive in many black communities is the slow immigration of inner-city students to suburban schools. While parents are hesitant to take their children out of the neighborhoods and school districts that they call home and know to be familiar, they recognize that the proper resources needed for a proper education all reside in the suburbs. This transition can be difficult. Besides the demoralizing messages that most black students are exposed to in regard to their home and school, these students are now disconnected from the environment that has made them feel safe. They are now surrounded by peers who are very different from their previous friends, and whose understanding of their vernacular and language is slim to none, leading them to be outcasted and mislabeled.

With this influx of children looking for better education, most times teachers are ill-prepared to teach these new students and they believe falsely that their language differences were due to them having minimal skills and abilities. This was because teachers were trained in the preparation to teach predominantly if not all white students in a middle-class setting, which made the integration of these students even more difficult.

A large corpus of literature documenting the social and educational experiences of African American adolescents usually focuses on economic despair, poverty, poor health, crime, violence, and inadequate education. Middle-class status can serve as a protective mechanism against poverty, dilapidated housing, inferior education, and malnutrition, yet it does not shield young people from the manacles of racism and discrimination (hooks, 2000).

So, while some African American youngsters may have advantages based on their social class, they may still endure forms of racial oppression as well as inter- and intra-racial strife. An example lies with a case study involving an African American student called Tiffany. Although Tiffany did not worry about food, shelter, or safety, she did experience ostracism from some of her peers. For instance, her African American peers isolated Tiffany because of their perceptions of her social class standing and concerns that she was “acting White,” given her decision to excel academically. Her White peers could only accept stereotyped constructions of African Americans as criminals involved in the drug trade, as well as an array of other stereotypes. The varying forms of ridicule she experienced from both her African American and Caucasian peers left her feeling dejected and alienated.
Public and private spaces shape and mold the behavior of African Americans consistently, and it is important to understand how these situations relate to their blackness when they are placed in different contexts: questioning how race is lived, learned, negotiated, spoken about, transformed and resisted and how these inequalities affect the educational and psychological well-being of its black people.

Racial, gender, cultural and structural constraints leave an immense amount of impact on Black students and their academic achievement. Beliefs and media images that portray and push white privilege and its supremacist agendas onto black people and people of color, lead them to a crossroads of dealing with "dual citizenship." Straining to retain the “citizenship” of the black community while in the same breath, fighting to keep afloat and seek acceptance in the hegemonic white society.

In terms of “acting white” and “acting black,” it is interesting how white individuals are still able to maintain white privilege. What Akom describes as disturbing is how it continues to be regarded as the “right” identity, something to aspire to, while black culture and identity are “socially exoticized,” and characterized at times through atypical negative behaviors, affecting how blacks view themselves and others in their communities.

Beyond just social implications, the constant need to conform in specific environments because of one’s race to avoid social pressure can affect their psychological wellbeing. Understanding the importance of stigma management which manifests itself in the form of buffering, bonding, bridging, and code-switching. Buffering the insults and marginalization that is experienced, bonding with others who share their experience and building strength and resilience, bridging their different worlds (private and public), as well as changing their speech patterns when in certain social situations to avoid stigmatization (code-switching).

A growing amount of research has highlighted the effects of racism on mental health. One such being the stress of discrimination, which is directly connected to the stigma of inferiority that saturates the minds of black people affecting some to the point that their mental health is in jeopardy.

Negative attitudes and beliefs led to this ideology that blacks were somehow inferior, and whites were superior and bled its way into neighborhoods through the legal segregation of blacks and whites, promoting again this idea that the superior should not mingle nor fraternize with those that were believed to be less than, putting minorities in neighborhoods that were underfunded and unkempt, leading to poor school resources, and lack of job opportunities.

Discrimination experienced by blacks on a multitude of levels and in broad social contexts can lead to an immense amount of distress. When studied in a controlled lab setting, acts of discrimination and prejudice led to physical reactions, some of them being cardiovascular reactions and high blood pressure. With more studies being conducted, it revealed the same recurring pattern of discrimination caused psychological distress.

Besides discrimination playing a key role in the mental health of African
Americans, racism and its attacks on the ego and identity of the victim can cause significant damage. Negative images of blacks in the media are pervasive, showing subtle signs of racist stereotypes, symbols, and images that are present in the English language. These categorical beliefs of the biological and cultural inferiority of a marginalized group of people can deteriorate the self-worth of some of the members of this group, undermining their purpose of their existence. Evidence shows that the internalization of these cultural stereotypes creates expectations and anxiety that can directly affect social and psychological functioning, leading to a recurring pattern of poor academic performance.

Socially, economically, professionally, and academically, students of color are affected by rampant stereotypes, microaggressions, and racism in all its forms. Code-switching merged as not just a way to differentiate one’s actions in personal and professional settings, but as a protective measure for African Americans against these threats that wreak havoc on their psychological wellbeing. Research shows how the history of language and representation of AAVE and Standard English can construct environments that are unwelcoming and uninviting. As Black students and adults move throughout a society that prides whiteness as correct and upright, it leaves space for an inferiority complex that can leave lasting damages on communities of color.

Methods

Participants

This study aimed to understand the dynamics of power and prestige at play when African Americans code-switch in personal and public environments, as well as analyze what role this has on their self-image and mental health. Twenty potential participants were contacted via a Facebook listing and invited to complete an interview that would be centered around their academic, professional, and social experiences as an African American. Ten of these participants were younger adults ages 18 through 30, most of them were native-born Americans or immigrants from parts of West Africa. The remaining 10 participants were older adults ages 30-60, 5 of them being African immigrants specifically. To fully understand how code-switching manifests itself in different contexts and among different types of black people, it was important to have a diverse set of backgrounds, ideologies, sexualities, and ethnicities to grasp the scope of code-switching’s influence and find the overlap between its use intergenerationally.

Materials and Procedures

First participants reached out via Facebook to express interest, followed by setting up a time and place in which they would feel most comfortable speaking their truth without outside distractions. Most interviews took place at the participant’s home or a private library room. Participants were then given a consent form that highlighted the risks and benefits of the study as well as the purpose and where it will be seen and possibly published. After agreeing to all the terms, participants were then asked a series of 15 questions centered around the topic of education, culture,
race, self-esteem, and code-switching. They were free to pass on certain questions; however all participants answered all 15 questions asked of them, as well as adding in their anecdotes that further elaborated on their experiences. The interview lasted between 1 hour to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Interviews were recorded on the primary investigator’s phone using a recording app, and additional notes were taken during the interview. The recorded interviews were later transcribed and reviewed for further understanding and analytical purposes. Following transcription, recordings were deleted.

Discussion

During this study, informants were more than open and comfortable sharing their stories, plights, and experiences navigating the world as African Americans and utilizing code-switching as a coping mechanism and tool in various situations and scenarios. “I definitely change up the way I talk all the time. Code-switching to me is basically changing your language when you’re in different situations where it’s appropriate or pertinent that you sound a certain way.” Leslie, a 24-year-old grad student recounts her definition of code-switching confidently, adding, “I for sure sound different when I’m in a room full of my friends versus in a room full of... strangers, or when I’m around certain people.” The phrase “certain people” had a specific unnamable connotation behind it, [more so] than I had first expected, as many of the other informants also echoed Leslie’s sentiments when sharing their definitions of code-switching.

“Yeah, changing your language patterns for sure, I’m not going to walk into a room of people I don’t know saying ‘yo what’s good fam?’ I’m not trying to be looked at as different” Many of the young African American informants hinted at their discomfort speaking in African American Vernacular around said “people”. When asked to elaborate, they universally said “white individuals.” However, this push for them to be explicit about whom they spoke of took some questioning as many still felt uncomfortable fully saying “White people.” This seems to fall into another reoccurring theme of comfort and self-sacrifice to make the dominant group feel more at ease with something that seems very opposite of them: to be comfortable with their blackness. Often the realization that they are the only minority member in a large population of mostly white individuals can be daunting and an unexplainable need to escape from that space seems to lead many into avoiding the obvious elephant in the room: race. It seemed like they fought to not cause friction since most times these “certain people” hold the opportunities they need to elevate themselves in society. Often, racial issues seem to be spoon-fed lightly into the mouths of those who don't understand, and black youth are cognizant of this dynamic.

Of course, the feeling of being on guard in situations where you are the minority is a constant realization for many young black Americans. They hide their common colloquialisms under a shroud of being more “presentable” or “intelligent.” However, these same feelings aren’t shared with older generations interviewed, especially those from immigrant backgrounds. When asked about her definition of code-switching, 50-year-old mother and immigrant Jassah, furrowed her brows in confusion. “The stuff they do on computers?” Like many other informants in her
category, Jassah who was born and raised in West-Africa, grew up with a different
culture and dynamic that didn't champion a certain vernacular as superior. When
asked about her comfort level speaking openly even with a pronounced accent
she laughed. "I'm proud of my heritage and where I come from, when people hear
my accent I'm more than happy to tell them that yes, I am an immigrant, and I'm
proud of it." Many of the following informants expressed the same attitudes. Being
that young African Americans and youth are raised in America conscious of their
presentation to others and the steady stream of microaggressions that come from
every corner, they equip themselves mentally and emotionally to deal with these
things as they present themselves.

When it came to education and the many institutions that govern and make
up the U.S, many of the interviewees voiced how code-switching played into their
employment, their classes, and what they learned in school. "So, I'm from the ghetto,
right? But I went to this really boujie school in the suburbs" Malia an 18-year-old
incoming freshman relays her experiences working between somewhat opposing
dynamics, her predominantly white middle school, and her all-black neighborhood.
"I was consistently told that I had to 'talk properly' and for the longest time I was
like, 'I am talking properly, what do you mean?' Eventually I understood, I had to talk
how the white kids talked and honestly that never changed as I grew up in school,
but it was hard going back home and having to switch that off so that I wouldn't
seem, boujie or stuck up or too good." Malia shakes her head at the memory of her
consistent back and forth between two almost opposite worlds, a dilemma many
young African Americans find themselves in. Malia understood the societal pressure
to fit in and not subscribe to a stereotype that was created for many of her black
peers to fall into. "Even in my freshman orientation, it was a struggle. I was the only
black girl there, and I felt like, expectations had already been set." She recounts
the urge to not speak "normally" which would be categorized as African American Vernacular English, but instead, she talked “white”, utilizing Standard English. She
confided that she felt that this was the only way that she could be seen, where her
voice would hold weight and validity. This theme was constantly reappearing in
many of the stories told by informants. Standard English was the standard to which
everything was measured, often being synonymous with “intelligence,” “grace,”
“poise.” all terms used frequently by the informants in its descriptions. However,
quite the opposite was applied for AAVE.

"No disrespect, but if I walked into my work sounding like a hoodrat, I would
lose my job" Darnell, a law student currently interning at a prestigious law office,
shrugged at his statement. "I'm just being honest, there's just a certain standard, and
if I break that..." he failed to continue finishing his sentence, but the realization that
standard English holds a certain amount of prestige and power is important to note as
the other informants added on extensively on this point. The need to “make it” and
the strategies used to achieve social capital and worth in a society that had already
rejected who they were as individuals since birth was a lot of pressure. "I don't want
to be looked at as scary, or stupid, or incoherent; I already have dreads, so people
already side-eye me when I walk into a room, but once I talk everyone seems to take
a deep breath; could you imagine though, how people would react if I walked in
sounding like Tupac or something?" Darnell laughs but the stereotypes that sit heavy
on the backs of African Americans are no joking matter. The pressure to make others around you comfortable often at the expense of your discomfort is often a sacrifice that has to be made.

"I feel like, you’re taught in school that sounding one way is really ignorant, and then when you go home, and you listen to your family and friends, there’s this internal struggle because I’m thinkin’, well my mom is like, the smartest person I know.” Jessie shares how much of an emotional toll it is to have your culture and language devalued as something not worthy or valid. “It sucks, because it’s like I’m adding on layers and layers of makeup and even when I go home to wipe it off, I still can’t recognize who I see when I look in the mirror, does that even make any sense?” She laughs, but the discomfort is still evident in her face even after her statement.

The negative connotations often ascribed to AAVE plays, a large role in how our African American informants saw themselves and each other. “I mean, I love slang, everyone uses it, it’s popular now for everyone to have that ‘black aesthetic’” Informant Jallisa added her take on her views of AAVE, and its perception societally. As the interviews continued, there was a common thread amongst the informants about where their views and perceptions of the language they use so frequently came from and why most times they were overwhelmingly negative. “I mean it’s all over T.V” Jason, 23, a recent college grad says this matter-of-factly. “When you look at common movies that portray black actors, there’s always the black sidekick, who isn’t anything but comedic relief and at times extra boisterous and ignorant, and more times than not, they’re talking stereotypically black, it’s almost like the spectacle of blackface all over again, but our own people are the ones doing it.” Stereotypes are prevalent and consistent within many cultures and grossly misrepresent and paint entire communities with one broad stroke. However, the informants confided that the repercussions of the stereotypes on the black community can be a lot more disastrous for their physical and mental wellbeing and goes farther than just a joke that was in bad taste. “People around the world see these stereotypes and quickly internalize them, black and white folks,” Jason continued. “And for the few white people who have never seen or actually interacted with a black person before, they take those depictions literally.” Leslie also adds on to this sentiment by saying, “When we are shown to be so loud, boisterous, dangerous and threatening, that transfers to how our employers see us, people on the street see us, how police see us, and if you can’t quickly code-switch or communicate, then that could easily be a life or death situation and the realization of that is kind of saturated in everything, it makes you lose a bit of hope.”

When it came to identity and its importance to not just youth but the older generation of informants, there was a clear commonality on where they stood. “I love being black, I think we’re so dope.” Blessing smiles. “We’re resilient and creative, and there’s this unsaid unity amongst us that I don’t think the majority of people have.” This solidarity that is prevalent in the black community is backed by the rest of the informants. “When I walk into a space that I consider to be unwelcoming or predominantly white, and I spot a black person it’s like a weight is lifted. I’m like ‘I see you brother, I see you.” This almost universal respect for one another is one of the many things the informants draw on for their strength and resilience when it pertains to living and navigating American society. When it comes to how their language
related to their identity, the informants all seemed to make AAVE an extension of themselves. "It's really cool how we have our own way of communicating and using words and phrases to mean something that only our community understands." Jallissa who is also the daughter of African immigrants gushes about how she loves speaking to her other African friends, how conversation flows so easily, as bits and pieces of their dialect manifest themselves in every sentence. "It's almost like we're an exclusive club, our phrases are goofy and may seem bizarre to other people, but it makes sense to us, and being in America where everyone has to sound the same, it's cool to feel a little different." This was also a common theme, as informants one after the other expressed how their language bonded them. Even in the midst of fear, social strain, and racist ideologies, they found ways to make their language staple (sic) to their identity and community.

**Conclusion**

Code-switching has universal importance to all human beings on this planet. Its usefulness in navigating new spaces and retaining our social safety is something most people can relate to. It is used as a means of academic prosperity, as well as professional and social gain. However, as African Americans consistently navigate different spaces within American culture in which they are minorities, or even at times the majority, it becomes their refuge and safety against the never-ending parade of microaggressions and prejudice, and while it can be a protective behavior, it can have significant psychological costs. It is also what keeps them bonded with family friends and physically safe from those who may regard their demeanor as threatening. However, as they navigate the world, both old and young, we need to understand the power dynamics that are on a never-ending loop in our society and how it affects us and those around us as we yearn to be better friends, parents, and educators.

Future research would do even better to look at the intersecting identities of gender, as well as an incorporation of other minority groups and an in-depth look at their comfortability with each other. Would code-switching still happen as much and with the same motivation of protection and avoidance against racial profiling and stereotype threat?

The next step, as teachers, educators, administrators and those functioning in high positions within our institutions, is to apply this knowledge to dismantle white supremacist history and its agendas that pride one group over the other. Utilizing this can help us create a more conducive and inviting environment for everyone.
References

Appendix A
Interview Questions Given to Participants:
1. How would you personally define code-switching?
2. Do you believe code-switching to be a positive or negative thing, why?
3. Why do you code-switch?
4. Where and when do you code-switch?
5. What environments do you think code-switching is most necessary?
6. What environments do you think code-switching is least necessary?
7. Do you code-switch amongst family and friends?
8. Do you code-switch in academic institutions, why or why not?
9. Do you code-switch in professional institutions, why or why not?
10. Is it difficult for you to code-switch, or is it second nature?
11. What does it mean to talk “Black” or “White?” What stereotypes are associated with this?
12. What’s the hardest thing about code-switching?
13. How do you think code-switching affects your community? And why do you think that is?
14. What environments do you feel most comfortable in and why?
15. What environments do you feel least comfortable in and why?