Exploring Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Experiences of Racism within Higher Education Institutions in the United States: A Qualitative Study

Gloria N. Wafula
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, gw877754@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/all_doctoral

Part of the Higher Education Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/all_doctoral/213

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Masters Theses and Doctoral Projects at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Chester University Doctoral Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.
Exploring Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Experiences of Racism within Higher Education Institutions in the United States: A Qualitative Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

College of Education and Social Work

West Chester University

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

Gloria N. Wafula

May 2023
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family and my closest friends who have held my hand and encouraged me throughout the process. To my family in Kenya, thank you for calling frequently to check on me. To my friends in the United States, I am grateful for the phone calls and for encouraging me to be persistent throughout this process. Thank you!
Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge my Advisor Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri, my dissertation committee members Dr. Beatrice Adera and Dr. Tinago Chiwoneso, and Dr. Jackie Hodes for their mentorship throughout this whole process. Without their reassurance through this journey, I doubt I would make it this far. Thank you! To my contacts at PASSHE schools that kindly assisted with the participant solicitation and recruitment process, thank you! Lastly, I am deeply grateful to the 12 participants who took part in this study. Thank you for sharing your experiences and for your contribution to this topic.
Abstract

This qualitative study explored Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences of racism within colleges and universities in the United States. Extant research on international students’ experiences tend to be homogenous, thus assuming that all international students from different countries have similar experiences. This study specifically highlighted the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students around the issue of racial discrimination. Concepts discussed include Sub-Saharan students’ experiences of racism within colleges, perceptions of racial identity, and overall understanding of racism. To explain these concepts, the theories of neo-racism and intersectionality were employed.

The study utilized interviews for data collection. In total, the research captured responses from 12 Sub-Saharan African international students. Findings indicated that first, these students experience racial discrimination through microaggressions and through direct confrontation. Secondly, international students from Sub-Saharan Africa struggle with the racial classification ‘Black’, and lastly, that despite experiences of racial bias, some students did not describe racism as a major concern for them. Findings from this study can be useful in informing and advocating for the wellbeing of international students from the Sub-Saharan region in Africa.

Keywords: Sub-Saharan African international students, racial identity, racism, qualitative study
Tables/Figures

Figure 1: Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) .................................................. 17
Figure 2: Theoretical framework .................................................................................................................. 23
Figure 3: Study procedures .......................................................................................................................... 30
Table 1: Demographic data .......................................................................................................................... 27
Table of Contents

*Dedication* ................................................................................................................................. *i*

*Acknowledgement* ..................................................................................................................... *ii*

*Abstract* .................................................................................................................................. *iii-

*Tables/Figures* ............................................................................................................................ *iv*

*Table of Contents* .......................................................................................................................... *v*

*Chapter 1* .................................................................................................................................... 1
  
Purpose of Study.............................................................................................................................. 4
  
Rationale/Problem Statement ......................................................................................................... 5
  
Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 6
  
Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 7
  
Significance .................................................................................................................................. 8
  
Summary ..................................................................................................................................... 9

*Chapter 2* .................................................................................................................................... 10
  
Literature Review ........................................................................................................................... 10
    
Racial Experiences of African American Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education .................. 10
    
Racial Experiences of Sub-Saharan African International Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education ........................................... 11
    
Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Perceptions of Racial Identity ................................ 13
    
Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Perceptions and Attitudes towards Racism ........... 18
  
Theoretical Framework ..................................................................................................................... 19
    
Neo-racism .................................................................................................................................... 19
    
Intersectionality ............................................................................................................................. 21
  
Summary ..................................................................................................................................... 23

*Chapter 3* .................................................................................................................................... 25
  
Study Setting and Participants ......................................................................................................... 25
  
Informed Consent ............................................................................................................................ 28
  
Data Collection .............................................................................................................................. 28
    
Demographic Survey ...................................................................................................................... 28
    
Qualitative Interviews ..................................................................................................................... 29
  
Study Procedures ........................................................................................................................... 29
  
Interview Data Analysis .................................................................................................................. 31
  
Positionality and Researcher Bias .................................................................................................. 32
Chapter 1

For decades, international students from nearly every corner of the globe dream, plan, save, apply, and eventually make their way to the United States in order to pursue higher education (Institute of International Education (IIE), 2022). This dynamic has persisted through wars, cultural shifts, different political administrations, changes in national and global economies, and more (National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 2022). Immigration for postsecondary education has benefited the United States, for example through adding to the U.S. labor force after international students graduate (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Krislov, 2019; Okonofua, 2013) and through campus diversification (Lee & Rice, 2007; Vickerman, 2016). International students not only gain invaluable educational experiences in the U.S. for themselves, but these benefits also extend to their families, communities, and their home countries, for example through remittances (World Bank, 2017).

Currently, U.S. higher education institutions host about 1 million international students from different parts of the world each year. These enrollments reflect a steady increase from the 1980’s, when only some 300,000 international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities (NCES, 2022). Nowadays, international students make up about 5% of annual U.S. university enrollments (Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), 2021). International postsecondary students come from all over the world, bringing with them diverse cultures, diverse religious beliefs, various languages, worldviews, and more (IIE, 2022). The highest current enrollments are from Asian countries such as China, South Korea, Japan, India, and Nepal, and these account for about 70% of the total international student population. Students who come from Europe and Africa account for about 9% and 5% of the total international student population respectively.

International students bring a vibrancy to U.S. society through diversification and globalization of their host educational institutions (Anandavalli et al., 2020; Lee & Cantwell, 2012). Additionally, they contribute to the U.S. economy. In the year 2018 alone, international students contributed about $45
billion through paying tuition and other expenditures (iie.gov, 2022). The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER, 2022) reports that through the H1B visa program, international students take up high paying jobs within the U.S. technology industry and with global employers such as Amazon and Google. These positions often garner high wages, which further contributes significantly to the U.S. economy. For these reasons alone, it is paramount that the wellbeing and success of international students be considered by their host institutions.

When discussing international students’ wellbeing, it is important to highlight some challenges that these students face. International students have reported experiencing stress and anxiety caused by academic and social challenges while on college campuses across the U.S. Such challenges include difficulty adjusting into new academic settings (Curtis et al., 2020; Li et al., 2014), challenges with language barriers (Mbuos et al., 2022; Sherry et al., 2010), immigration issues (Anandavalli et al., 2020; Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Marbang et al., 2020; Pottie-Sherman, 2018), racial discrimination (Lee & Rice, 2007; George Mwangi, 2014), overall challenges with cultural adaptation (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Vickerman, 2016), among other challenges.

It is well-established that U.S. postsecondary students need various and overlapping forms of support, including from staff at universities and colleges (Li et al., 2013; Sherry et al., 2010). Domestic U.S. campuses have countless offices and administrative levels designed to strategically plan for and offer support and growth opportunities to postsecondary students, such as housing services, healthcare and counselling services, career services, among other offices that contribute to students’ success. International students also need support. Host educational institutions have designated offices for international student services. International student service offices work closely with international students to coordinate orientation, immigration, and housing, among other key services designed to ease the adjustment process for foreign students (Association of International Educators, 2022; Briggs & Ammigan, 2017; Di Maria, 2020).
Recent political changes in the United States have caused increased worry for international students. Some students reported experiencing feelings of increased anxiety and stress in early 2020 because the government threatened to suspend the temporary work visa for international students at the time (Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Marbang et al., 2020; Maurer, 2020). Secondly, political messaging in the recent years, such as “America first” indirectly discriminated against immigrants (Rothman, 2016). Thirdly, a travel ban was issued against visitors from some Muslim majority countries during the year 2018 (Anderson & Svrluga, 2018). These, among other political and immigration policy changes, adversely effected the perceptions of foreign students about the U.S. and impacted enrollment numbers on college and university campuses. Reports indicated a decline of about 6% in international student enrollments in the Fall of 2017, due to changes in immigration policies (Anderson & Svrluga, 2018; Bartram, 2018).

The onset of the pandemic also caused increased stress among international student communities. The Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced in June 2020 that if universities fully transition to virtual classes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, students holding visas would be forced to leave the country (Alvarez & Shoichet, 2020; Gao et al., 2022). This announcement brought about confusion and frustration among international students amid a time of worldwide travel restrictions (Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Mbuos et al., 2022). In other instances, students expressed concerns over xenophobic stereotypes. For example, students from China faced direct verbal and physical threats during the pandemic due to anti-Asian bias (Gao et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2021). These challenges necessitated even more support for international students.

As the pandemic gradually fades in significance, students from all over the world are once again setting their sights on the U.S. as a top study destination. The Institute of International Education reported some increase in international student enrollments in the U.S. starting Fall 2021 (iie.org, 2022).
Among these increased student groups, about 65% were from Asia, 9% from Europe, and 5% from African countries (NCES, 2022), generally staying somewhat proportional to pre-pandemic ratios.

This study focuses on Sub-Saharan African international students. Of the less than 5% of post-pandemic international students representing African countries, the top countries sending students to the U.S. include Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa. This comes to a total of approximately 39,000 enrollments of students from the African continent in 2021 (NCES, 2022). Although these numbers represent a small fraction of the total international student population in the U.S., studies suggest that Sub-Saharan African international students face more substantial adjustment barriers than other international students (Anandavalli et al., 2020; Baofo-Arthur, 2013; George Mwangi, 2014).

Sub-Saharan African international students struggle with racial discrimination within their host institutions in the U.S. (Anandavalli et al., 2020; Baofo-Arthur, 2013; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Lee & Opio, 2011; Okonofua, 2013). Racism occurs in form of stereotypes and microaggressions based on language skills and questioning of academic prowess (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Lee & Rice, 2007). Microaggressions can be described as indirect communication that communicates insults to minoritized and marginalized people (Sue et al., 2009). Experiences of racism can adversely affect the success of Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. (Baofo-Arthur, 2013; Wei & Bunjun, 2021). Thus, a deeper understanding of how these students experience and perceive racism within academic settings is critical.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences and perceptions of Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the United States around the issues of race, racism, and racial identity. For the purpose of this study, *Sub-Saharan African international students* are described as individuals who have immigrated to the U.S. from Sub-Saharan African countries in order to pursue either their undergraduate or graduate studies, under student visas. The terms “Sub-Saharan
international students” and “Sub-Saharan students” will be used interchangeably to refer to the same study population. This qualitative study seeks to explore the ways in which these Sub-Saharan students experience racism within the classroom and other academic settings in the U.S.

This paper adopts Salter et al.’s (2018) definition of racism, described as discrimination based on race. Racism can include stereotyping, intolerance, and differential treatment of one individual over the other, based on their racial classification (Salter et al., 2018). Racial classifications in the U.S. include White, Black/African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaska Native, among others (Census.gov, 2022). The Black or African American racial category describes individuals with origins in the Black racial groups of Africa (Census.gov, 2022), and this includes Sub-Saharan African immigrants. In the U.S. context, African American individuals continue to face racial discrimination, thus necessitating movements such as Black Lives Matter, a nonprofit aimed at eradicating racism against African American individuals (Black Lives Matter (BLM), 2013). Because Sub-Saharan African immigrants share some similar biological characteristics as African Americans in the U.S., they are subjected to similar racial bias, based particularly on their skin color (George Mwangi, 2014; Okonofua, 2013).

This inquiry also draws on Barker’s (1981) articulation of neo-racism as discrimination based on an individuals’ cultural norms and their nationality. Overall, international students’ experiences of racial bias can best be explained through the lens of neo-racism, as Cantwell and Lee (2014) explained. In their research, Cantwell and Lee (2014) proposed that immigrants from countries such as Sub-Saharan Africa face neo-racism through stringent immigration processes, and through negative stereotypes of their cultural backgrounds. Theoretical approaches within the topic will be further explained in Chapter 2.

Rationale/Problem Statement

Extant literature on international students often groups international students as one, regardless of their country of origin. Limited studies have explored the specific racial experiences of students from Sub-Saharan Africa. Homogeneity in research on international student experiences
overlooks experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students. Yet, Curtis-Boles et al. (2020) and Lee and Rice (2007) suggested that immigrant students of color, such as students from the Sub-Saharan region in Africa experience more difficulty in their adjustment to the higher education system in the United States. As Curtis-Boles et al. (2020) discussed, Sub-Saharan African international students were highly likely to complain about racism, while international students from predominantly white backgrounds were not concerned about racism as challenge in the United States. This study examines the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students around the issue of race and racism.

Additionally, in the higher education literature, little to no distinction is made between African American students and Sub-Saharan African international students’ racial identities (George Mwangi et al., 2019; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Vickerman, 2016). Studies indicate that Black individuals born outside the U.S. (for example Sub-Saharan immigrants) struggle with the racial categorization ‘Black’, despite having similarities in skin color as African American individuals in the U.S. (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Okonofua, 2013; Thelamour & George Mwangi, 2014). In this study, I seek to distinguish the ways Sub-Saharan students perceive their racial identities.

Research Questions

The questions that guide this inquiry are:

1. What are the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the United States around race and racism in U.S. postsecondary settings?

2. How do these Sub-Saharan African international students describe and perceive their racial identities?

3. What is the overall understanding of Sub-Saharan African international students about the issues of race and racism?

These research questions build on existing research about Sub-Saharan students’ experiences of racism in the United States. Mitchell Jr et al. (2017) discussed that research on international student
experiences has been generalized, mostly addressing challenges with adjustment into the U.S. academic system. Scholars of African international students’ experiences such as Baofo-Arthur (2013), Beoku-Betts (2004), Curtis-Boles et al. (2020), and Okonofua (2013) have expressed concerns over the limited research on the racial experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students. Thus, the first question aims to highlight the college experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students through exploring their racial experiences such as microaggressions within campus settings.

The second question challenges the reductive thinking in the literature around immigrants such as Sub-Saharan students’ perceptions of their racial identities. The American Census Bureau classifies Sub-Saharan immigrants as Black/African American (Census.gov, 2022). This classification can be problematic for Sub-Saharan students as they navigate through the American system while experiencing systemic racial bias. Vickerman (2016) discussed this in his article ‘the sting of blackness’, where he highlighted the ways in which Sub-Saharan immigrants struggle with the ‘Black’ racial identity. The second question is designed to identify the ways in which Sub-Saharan African international students navigate and perceive their racial identities in the U.S.

Lastly, the third research question seeks to uncover the ways in which students from the Sub-Saharan region understand and consider racism in the U.S. Some studies on Sub-Saharan African immigrants’ perceptions of racism indicated an overall indifference on the issue of racism as these individuals came to the United States (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; George Mwangi, 2014; Okonofua; 2013). This research examines the attitudes of Sub-Saharan African international students on racial discrimination in the U.S., for example do they consider racism as a serious challenge in their educational journeys? If so, what ways do these students cope with racism in the U.S.? These, among other sub-questions will be explored further in the study.

Rationale for Method
This study employs a phenomenological qualitative method, with interviews and open-ended surveys as the data collection tools. Qualitative research is used to explore and understand phenomena from the perspective of the study participant (Creswell, 2009; Sofaer, 1999). It seeks to answer the questions “what” and “how” of phenomena. The view of the participant(s) guides the research. Qualitative research aims at adding knowledge to particular fields, as opposed to producing generalizable results (Creswell, 2015). As this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students, a qualitative design seems most suitable. Through interviews, I seek to gather in-depth data (such as narrations) on these students’ experiences of racism within their university environments.

Significance

As discussed above, international students contribute significantly to the United States financial economy through paying of tuition and other expenditures (Commerce.gov, 2022). Additionally, international students bring diversity to the U.S. through different languages and different cultural backgrounds. This study considers the wellbeing of international students by highlighting some challenges they face. Specifically, Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences around racism will be explored, a topic that has been overlooked in previous studies on international student experiences (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; George Mwangi, 2014; Okonofua; 2013). By highlighting the specific racial experiences of Sub-Saharan students, findings from this study can be used as a guide for higher education institutions providing services to international students from Sub-Saharan African countries. Knowing the specific needs for these student groups can help postsecondary institutions tailor their student services to better serve prospective international students from other parts of the world who experience similar challenges.

Further, this inquiry contributes to academic resources on racial discrimination in the U.S., by examining the unique perspectives of a minority group of students. Research on international student
experiences often highlights adjustment barriers such as immigration problems and academic challenges but often overlooks social challenges such as racism. Little data is available on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students around racism. Through this study, the researcher hopes to provide a clearer understanding of the racial positioning of Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the topic of Sub-Saharan African international students' experiences within U.S. colleges and universities and discussed the benefits that both they and the host country experience from international study. This study focuses on international students from Sub-Saharan Africa and aims to highlight the experiences of these students around issues of racial discrimination. The research questions are aimed at explicating ways in which these students experience racial bias, their understanding of their complex racial identities, and their overall perceptions of racism as an issue in the United States.

The next chapter will dive deeper into the existing literature on Sub-Saharan African international student experiences. Three main themes will be explored: Sub-Saharan students' racial identity, experiences with racism, and perceptions of racism in the U.S. Theoretical frameworks within this topic will also be examined in Chapter 2.
Chapter 2

This chapter is outlined in two sections. In the first section, literature sources on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. are reviewed and in the second section, a theoretical lens is discussed. The theories of neo-racism (Barker, 1991; Lee & Rice, 2007) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) are utilized for this study. Within the theoretical framework, interconnections between the two theories will be discussed.

Literature Review

This literature review on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. consists of four subsections: First, literature on the racial experiences of African American students in postsecondary education is discussed because they constitute a critically important and related student population. Secondly, data is presented on the racial experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students within the context of U.S. postsecondary institutions. Next, literature on Sub-Saharan African international students’ overall perceptions of their racial identities will be reviewed. Lastly, this study reviews a growing body of literature on the overall perceptions and attitudes towards racism among Sub-Saharan African international students. As described in Chapter 1, Sub-Saharan African international students are described as students originating from Sub-Saharan countries in Africa, who are currently on a student visa in the United States.

Racial Experiences of African American Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education

Most of the literature which examines the experiences of “Black” students in the United States is focused on the experiences of African American students, that is the descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to the U.S. against their will. This literature is robust and easily documents the racism, prejudice, discrimination, and subpar schooling practices which African American students in the U.S. continue to face at the postsecondary level (Barker, 2016; Dumas, 2016; Kelley, 2016; Okello, 2022; Okello et al., 2020). Experiences of racism against African American students occur at multiple levels. For
example, at the institutional level through discriminatory policies and practices (Coon & Parker, 2021; Kelley, 2016; Wilder, 2013), at the meso level through negative experiences within the classroom (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010), and at individual levels through experiences of racial microaggressions (Pusey-Reid et al., 2022, Sue et al., 2009).

Despite government policies (such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964) that prohibit racial discrimination, African American students continue to report incidences of racial bias. Experiences of racial discrimination cause mental stress to African American students in the U.S. (Barker, 2016; Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Newsome, 2022). In turn, poor mental health can negatively affect their academic performance and persistence in postsecondary education. Persistence in college is difficult in institutions where students do not feel a sense of belonging, especially African American students studying in Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) in the United States (Kelley, 2016). Data indicate that African American students have the lowest retention numbers because of factors related to racial discrimination (Guiffrida & Douthit, 2010; NCES, 2022; Smith et al., 2011). Thus, the racism and harm that African American students must manage is substantial.

**Racial Experiences of Sub-Saharan African International Students in U.S. Postsecondary Education**

Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the U.S. experience racism from different avenues. This can be at the systemic/institutional level or at the classroom level. At the institutional level, discriminatory practices can include racial evasion practices, for example university leaders failing to address the whole problem of racism within their campuses (Coon & Parker, 2021). Ignoring racial occurrences can worsen the problem, as Coon and Parker (2021) discussed in their study of racial evasion practices by higher education institutions in the U.S. Despite awareness of microaggressions or covert cases of racism within their campuses, these incidences were often overlooked (Coon & Parker, 2021). They further discussed that universities may choose to address some minor incidences, but if the education system still favors White students over Black students such as Sub-Saharan students, the
problem persists (Coon & Parker, 2021). Cantwell and Lee (2010) explained that the role of higher
education institutions in advancing racism against students of color is rarely acknowledged. As such, the
burden of coping with racism continues to be shouldered by the victims, whether they be U.S. citizens or
international students.

Sub-Saharan African international students in North America receive negative treatment
because of their skin color, language differences, gender, and social-cultural backgrounds (Anandavalli
et al., 2020; Beoku-Betts, 2004; Constantine et al., 2005; George Mwangi et al., 2019, Lee & Rice, 2007).
For example, in Beoku-Betts’ (2004) study of African women experiences in the U.S., participants
reported that they were always viewed as “backward” because of their African national backgrounds.
Constantine et al. (2005) reported on Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences with
verbal confrontation. In their study, one of the participants reported being called a derogatory racial slur
by a White fellow student, which led the former to drop the class (Constantine et al., 2005). These
examples of negative racial encounters against African international students coming from the Sub-
Saharan region call for a deeper understanding of the issue.

Within the classroom, international students from Sub-Saharan Africa have reported
experiencing microaggressions (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Lee & Opio, 2011).
Microaggressions can occur in the form of negative comments about their cultural backgrounds,
negative assumptions of African countries such as assumed impoverishment, and doubt of their
academic expertise. Lee and Opio (2011) reported cases where professors discouraged Sub-Saharan
African international students from taking science courses, with the assumption that such classes were
too technical. Such negative stereotypes can negatively affect these students’ educational experiences
and sense of belonging.

Fries- Britt et al. (2014) and Quinton (2019) indicated that most of the racial incidences were
perpetuated by fellow students, while Beoku-Betts (2004) and Curtis-Boles et al. (2020) suggested that
many of the racial incidences were perpetuated by professors. Some professors witnessed (and failed to respond to) incidences of racial aggravation that occurred within their classrooms. Others referred Sub-Saharan students for remedial classes with the assumption that these students lacked the academic ability to thrive in the U.S. higher education system (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Curtis-Boles et al., 2020).

While racial discrimination against Sub-Saharan African international students is common in PWIs, studies have reported incidences where Sub-Saharan students experienced worse discrimination from their fellow students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) (Lee & Opio, 2011; Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Okonofua, 2013). For example, in Fries-Britt et al. (2014) study of foreign-born Black students learning about race in the U.S., a participant reported that they experienced culture shock at an HBCU because their fellow students isolated themselves and commented that he was “foreign” and therefore not part of their group. Additionally, there have been incidences where Sub-Saharan African international students faced discrimination from other international students from Europe or Asian countries (Constantine et al., 2005).

While studies have shown that Sub-Saharan African international students experience racism, it is also acknowledged that these same students struggle with being racially categorized as ‘Black’ by larger U.S. society (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Habecker, 2012). As such, the next section of this study examines literature on Sub-Saharan African international students’ perceptions of their own racial identities. Literature pertaining to racial identity formation processes in the U.S. is examined, including Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI).

**Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Perceptions of Racial Identity**

There is a robust literature on racial identity development within the U.S. context (Alvarez, 2002; Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1993; Patton et al., 2016). These studies examine different groups’ racial identity development processes. For example, Ferdman and Gallegos (2001) proposed ways in which different social orientations influence Latinx people’s identities in the U.S. Alvarez (2002) studied the
racial identities of Asian Americans, while Hardiman (1982) and Helms (1993) proposed models for White individuals’ racial identities. Cross’ (1971) Nigrescence Model was proposed to explicate the racial identity formation process for Black individuals in the U.S. It seems important to review this latter model in detail since so many Sub-Saharan students are lumped by others in the larger “Black” category in the U.S.

**Nigrescence and Other Models.** The Nigrescence Model indicated that Black individuals formed their identities within five stages, namely pre-encounter, encounter, immersion, emersion, and internalization (Cross, 1971). Cross (1971) explained that within the pre-encounter stage, Black individuals were initially socialized into the dominant culture, specifically White culture. The model asserts that after encountering racially motivated and hurtful events, African Americans start thinking more deeply about their own identities. Within the immersion stage and emersion stages, the Black identity was centralized while Black individuals developed a deeper sense of understanding and re-establishment of Blackness. Internalization occurred when Black individuals’ value systems were rooted in the Black identity (Cross, 1971). Sue and Sue’s (1999) stages of Racial and Cultural Identity Development (RCID) share similarities with Cross’ (1971) model. RCID stages include conformity with the dominant culture, learning of racial identity through questioning mainstream cultural groups, resistance of the dominant culture, introspection, and lastly, consolidative awareness of individual’s racial/cultural identity (Sue & Sue, 1999).

Sub-Saharan African international racial identity formation process bears some semblance to Cross’ (1971) and Sue and Sue’s (1999) models of racial and cultural identity development. In their study of immigrant ethnic-racial socialization, Thelamour and George Mwangi (2021) discussed that before coming to the U.S., Sub-Saharan African international students had vague notions of racial discrimination. In fact, some of these students were cautioned against integrating with African Americans because of negative stereotypes associated with African Americans, for example laziness.
As they arrived in the U.S., Sub-Saharan African students learned about race and racism through personal experiences and through the classroom (Mitchell et al., 2017). Further, these students learned and sympathized with the racial experiences of the African American community and because of this, some Sub-Saharan African international students became allies with African Americans (Thelamour et al., 2019). This example can be likened to some of the stages of Cross’ (1971) and Sue and Sue’s (1999) models explained above. That is, the pre-encounter stage could constitute the time when Sub-Saharan African international students were not aware of the depth of racial issues before coming to the U.S. The encounter stage would encompass when Sub-Saharan African international students learned and encountered racism, and the introspection and immersion stages would include when students started questioning their racial identities and became allies with African Americans (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015).

Ethnic Identity Development. In addition to Cross’ (1971) and Sue and Sue’s (1999) works, other models for U.S. Americans bear relevance on the investigation of Sub-Saharan African international students’ racial identities. This includes Phinney’s (1993) Ethnic Identity Development model which investigated the stages and processes of ethnic identity formation. Three stages were proposed in Phinney’s (1993) model. First was unexamined identities, in which the individual showed detachment to their racial identity. Next comes the searching stage in which Black individuals examined their ethnic identities, and lastly is the achievement stage where individuals became aware of their ethnicities. In their study of ethnic identity development processes for immigrant families, Phinney and Ong (2007) emphasized the importance of family on the enhancement of ethnic identity in youth. Their study however failed to account for immigrants such as international students who come to the U.S. without their families. Clear linkage is yet to be established between this model of ethnic identity formation and the identity formation process for Sub-Saharan students.
**Limitations.** Various studies have explored the limitations of the above models in examining the identity formation processes for Sub-Saharan African international students (Fries-Britt et al., 2014; Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Johnston-Guerrero, 2016; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014). Theories proposed on the racial and ethnic identity development processes have taken on a linear and stage by stage model, thus assuming that racial identity formation occurs in specific patterns (Johnston-Guerrero, 2016). Malcolm and Mendoza (2014) disputed this approach in their study of Caribbean immigrants’ identities. They suggested that classic identity models have yet to account for the changing processes that students from outside the U.S. encounter, for example the immigration and socialization processes (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014). Similarly, Sub-Saharan African international students experience different socializations in the U.S., which can shift their racial identity formation processes.

**The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity.** Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. hail from different countries throughout eastern, western, and southern Africa, with various socio-cultural backgrounds. These students bear various social identities, including nationality, ethnicity, religion, ethnicity, and more. Upon arrival in the U.S., Sub-Saharan African international students become exposed to a highly racialized society, which emphasizes differences between individuals based on phenotype and skin tone (Baofo-Arthur, 2014; Lee & Opio, 2011; Vickerman, 2016). Thus, this calls for a multifaceted approach such as Jones and McEwen’s (2000) which explored the many ways in which identity development processes interconnect and can shift from time to time.

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000) (see Figure 1) considers how various factors such as family background, career decisions, and social cultural processes come together to influence individuals’ social identities. The core represents personal values and the “inner-self.” For example, a person can state that they are kind and friendly, and these qualities would be part of the core of the individual (Jones & McEwen, 2000). The rings represent shifting social factors and how these are related to the core. Dot placement within this model depict salience, or how much importance
individuals ascribe to social and external factors in relation to their core values at a given time (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

**Figure 1**

*Jones and McEwen’s (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity*

![Diagram of Jones and McEwen's Model](image)

*Note.* A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

As depicted in the figure above, many aspects can influence an individual’s identity, and this is especially the case for Sub-Saharan African international students. Multiple factors can influence how these students perceive their racial identity, including national origin, gender, and cultural background. Some Sub-Saharan African international students have rejected the “Black” racial categorization ascribed by the U.S. Census and by larger society (Thelamour & George Mwangi, 2021).

Habecker (2012) studied the perceptions of African immigrants on their racial categorization. In her research, Ethiopian participants proposed that the U.S. Census Bureau should add more racial categorizations to accommodate national and ethnic identities (Habecker, 2012). Awokoya (2012) documented how Nigerian students struggled with Blackness. These students adamantly stuck to their
national identity and indicated ‘other’ while choosing racial categories (Awokoya, 2012). Beoku-Betts (2004) studied the influences of gender on racial experiences among African graduate students and concluded that African female students were more concerned about sexism, as opposed to racism. Thus, factors such as national and ethnic origins intersect and influence how Sub-Saharan African international students perceive their racial identities in the United States.

**Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Perceptions and Attitudes towards Racism**

This section highlights varying perceptions of racism among Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. To understand Sub-Saharan African international students’ attitudes towards racial bias, it is important to mention some ways in which these students learn about racism. Mitchell et al. (2017) discussed that international students learn about racism before they arrive in the U.S. through international media. While in the U.S., international students become aware of racism as it is taught in the classroom, through interactions with their peers, and through personal experiences of racism. Understanding the racial positioning of Sub-Saharan students can help guide host institutions on what strategies they can use to assist international students navigate and cope with racial discrimination.

While research indicates that Sub-Saharan African international students continue to face racism in the U.S., studies such as Fries-Britt et al. (2014) and Tauriac and Liem (2012) suggested that these groups of students have shown indifference to U.S. racial issues. Some participants expressed clear disconnections from racial issues. Fries-Britt and colleagues (2014) reported that although some students experienced microaggressions such as racial slurs, they did not feel deterred by this. Other participants reported that racism in the U.S. was not a big deal to them because they were from outside the U.S., and thus racial bias did not affect them much (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). On the other hand, for other students, experiences of racism motivated them to work harder academically in order to beat the racial stereotypes ascribed to African American individuals in the U.S. (Johnson, 2018)
Tauriac and Liem (2012) discussed that Sub-Saharan African international students viewed racism as a temporary problem because they were more focused on the temporality and uncertainty of their immigration status. In Fries-Britt et al.’s (2014) study, some students were less concerned about racism until they experienced some form of racial bias. Further, studies on African female students (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017) suggested that African female students ascribed their experiences of discrimination as a gender issue, as opposed to a race issue. In doing so, these students appeared to be more concerned about sexism than racism.

As discussed above, a number of Sub-Saharan African international students positioned themselves outside U.S. racial discourse by centralizing their national backgrounds and cultural identifiers (Awokoya, 2012; Beoku-Betts, 2004). In fact, some students hyphenated their racial categorization, such as “Nigerian-American,” thus placing emphasizing on their country of origin as opposed to complying with purely U.S. racial categories (Awokoya, 2012; Thelamour & George Mwangi, 2021). Habecker (2012) suggested that this was a coping mechanism, allowing Sub-Saharan African international students to dissociate with the emotional burdens of U.S. racism. More research has suggested that international students from Africa choose distinct cultural identifiers such as unique African names (Girma, 2020) or wear African fabrics (Beoku-Betts, 2004) in order to distinguish themselves from the highly racialized and oppressed African American population. To enhance the understanding of how Sub-Saharan African international students experience and perceive racial bias in the U.S., several theoretical frameworks are elaborated below.

**Theoretical Framework**

This section explores theoretical approaches relevant to this topic. This study explores ways in which Sub-Saharan African international students experience racism through the lenses of neo-racism (Barker, 1981; Lee & Rice, 2007) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989).

**Neo-racism**
Barker (1981) defined neo-racism as discrimination based on an individuals’ cultural norms and their country of origin or simply, their nationality. While it seems natural that citizens would be proud of their national and cultural values and would therefore wish to uphold those values above other countries’ norms, Barker (1981) argued that neo-racism is still racial discrimination, masked within citizens’ pride in their cultural ways. That way, the dominant culture can justify its oppression of immigrant or minority cultures. When applied to the United States, neo-racism allows White American cultural norms to be considered ‘above’ African American and other minority group cultures. Balibar (2007) referred to neo-racism as “racism without race,” implying that while racism on its own is solely based on biological features, neo-racism goes farther to include characteristics such as language, cultural background and country of origin. Both writers (Balibar, 2007; Barker, 1981) argued that neo-racism is still a form of racial discrimination, hidden within other forms of discrimination.

Neo-racism can be seen in many social and political settings in the U.S. As Lee (2006) and Yao (2018) discussed, neo-racism is evident in North American immigration policies and within immigrant social encounters with U.S. citizens. Lee (2006) highlighted the lengthy and disheartening immigration processes that immigrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (people of color) undertake, in comparison with easier immigration processes that exist for White Canadian and Europeans. While visitors from Europe and Canada can take advantage of the visa waiver program, visitors from Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and Latin America are required to book appointments with U.S. embassies in their home countries (DHS.gov, 2022). Such a lengthy process can limit the access of Sub-Saharan African international students to U.S. academic institutions.

Lee and Rice (2007) discussed neo-racism within higher education institutions, and posited that immigrant students from outside the U.S., such as Sub-Saharan African international students do not necessarily experience traditional forms of racial discrimination. Rather, Sub-Saharan students face discrimination based on their cultural backgrounds, for example foreign languages. In a later study,
Cantwell and Lee (2010) indicated that these student groups have limited access to jobs and services on campus, due to their foreign student statuses. The authors noted that better career choices were available to White students while Sub-Saharan students were assumed to lack academic prowess and thus had poorer career prospects (Cantwell & Lee, 2010).

The assumption of White cultural dominance can fuel neo-racist practices against students coming from outside the United States. Cantwell and Lee (2010) suggested that universities in the U.S. were more accessible to international students who were presumed to be intellectual (that is, White students from Western Europe), as opposed to those who were presumed to be less intellectual (that is, Sub-Saharan students). The authors explained that neo-racist practices that favor White culture led to discriminatory immigration practices (Cantwell & Lee, 2010). This can be reflected in the stringent visa processes and changing immigration policies against international students in the recent years (Marbang et al., 2020).

**Intersectionality**

Another important theoretical perspective that bears on this topic is Crenshaw’s (1989) theory of intersectionality. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) introduced the theory of intersectionality, defined as the ways in which systems of oppression and discrimination are intertwined. The author explained that there are different ways in which social factors of discrimination can be explained, for instance Black women can experience bias along both the vectors of race and of gender (Crenshaw, 1989).

Collins and Bilge (2016) enhanced Crenshaw’s (1989) definition by suggesting that the theory of intersectionality can be used as an analytic tool to foster a better understanding of the levels of social inequality. Further, Collins and Bilge (2016) gave an example of African American women’s positions in the U.S. during the civil rights movements. They explained that in fights against racism and sexism, Black women’s needs fell through the cracks because they were masked within larger social movements. The authors discussed that within larger social movements such as anti-sexist movements, there is a need to
recognize sub-divisions within gender itself (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Similarly, Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences of racism can be observed through multiple lenses, for example their skin color, immigration processes, effects of gender, and nationality, among other factors.

Sub-Saharan African international students may differ in their concerns about racial discrimination, due to their multiple intersecting social factors (George Mwangi et al. 2019; Hernandez & Murray-Johnson, 2015; Okonofua, 2013). On one hand, an international student from Sub-Saharan Africa may identify primarily as an immigrant, which bears its own challenges, such as lengthier visa screening (Marbang et al., 2020). On the other hand, the Census Bureau classifies Sub-Saharan immigrants as Black or African American (census.gov) and therefore a minority group in the U.S., which subjects these students to somewhat similar racial experiences as African American individuals (Fries-Britt et al., 2014). Additionally, gender differences among Sub-Saharan African international students can determine their racial positioning within the classroom and within their social networks in the U.S. (Beoku-Betts, 2004; Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017). Further, national origins determine international students’ adjustment, as Lee and Rice (2007) suggested that international students from Europe and Canada will rarely complain about racism, while students from Central and South American countries, Asian countries, and Sub-Saharan Africa will often highlight racial bias as a major challenge.

Generalizing the experiences of disadvantaged groups tends to downplay their experiences of discrimination (Curtis-Boles et al., 2020). Thus, considering Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences through the lens of intersectionality illuminates the unique challenges that these groups of students face. This, in turn, will help tailor policies pertaining to their specific needs. Through the lenses of both neo-racism and intersectionality, scholars, educator, and higher education administrators can gain a better understanding of the experiences of Sub-Saharan students. Not only do these students experience bias based on their cultural and national backgrounds, but further dissection into their social
identities clarifies other levels of racial bias. The diagram below simplifies the theoretical application of neo-racism and intersectionality in the study of Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences.

**Figure 2**

*Connections between Neo-racism and Intersectionality*

---

**Summary**

In this chapter, literature on Sub-Saharan African international students’ racial experiences within higher education institutions in the United States was reviewed in four subsections: First, the study presented literature on the racial experiences of African American students in postsecondary education. Secondly, the study presented a discussion of the racial experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students within the context of U.S. postsecondary institutions. Third, literature on Sub-Saharan students’ overall perceptions of their racial identities was outlined. Lastly, the study presented a review of the overall perceptions and attitudes towards racism among Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S.
The theoretical framework outlined the interconnections of neo-racism (Barker, 1981; Lee & Rice, 2007) and intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) in the experiences of Sub-Saharan students. In the next chapter, the research design, including methods and data collection procedures will be presented. A figure will be presented on participant recruitment, obtaining informed consent, data collection tools, and qualitative data analysis through coding. Further, positionality and validity will be discussed in the next chapter as potential concerns in qualitative studies.
Chapter 3

The main objective of this qualitative research was to understand the ways Sub-Saharan African international students experience racism in postsecondary education institutions in the United States. Additionally, the study sought to identify the perceptions of this student population on racial identities in the U.S. context. As extant research indicates, Sub-Saharan students vary in their understanding of the racial categorization “Black” (George Mwangi, 2014; Malcolm & Mendoza, 2012; Vickerman, 2016). This study sought to explicate the varying perceptions of racial identity, and overall understandings of racism as an issue in the U.S. The study drew on the application of neo-racism (Barker, 1981; Lee & Rice, 2007) within higher education practices in the U.S., and the application of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) in the experiences of international students from the Sub-Saharan region in Africa. This section explores the use of qualitative methodology in the study.

The chapter begins with an overview of the study settings, the participants and participant consent. Next, data collection is discussed. Study procedures such as recruitment and data recording are outlined. Lastly, data analysis is discussed. Within this section, I also discuss my positionality as a researcher and validity as a concern during research.

Study Setting and Participants

As mentioned in Chapter 1 above, qualitative research aims to explore the “what” and “how” of phenomena (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Qualitative methods are especially useful in providing in-depth descriptions of complex phenomena, for example in examining the lived experiences of individuals (Sofaer, 1999). In this study, the lived experiences of Sub-Saharan international students were examined, centrally around the issues of race and racism in the United States. The study drew on the insights of participants from postsecondary institutions in the United States, specifically from one State on the East Coast. The institutions were selected because of personal connections with staff who work in the international student support functions in each one. The
personal connections helped facilitate my access to potential study participants. Surveys designed to collect demographic data and consent were distributed electronically to Sub-Saharan international students studying at each institution. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

First, the study considered postsecondary, Sub-Saharan African international students. Since the study focused on international students, the first criterion identified students that were present in the U.S., holding F1 or J1 student visas. The F1 visa is a student visa issued to international students studying full time at the postsecondary level, while J1 visas are issued to international students studying on a part-time basis (USCIS, 2022). The first criterion also included students that were specifically from the Sub-Saharan region in Africa, which describes all African countries excluding the Northern African region (World Bank, 2022). Visa status was used as a strategy to gather information on the immigration processes for international students.

By examining the visa process, I sought to explore how immigration policies affected Sub-Saharan students. Studies indicate that the pandemic and recent immigration policies deeply affected international students from Sub-Saharan Africa (Laws & Ammigan, 2020; Lee & Opio, 2011; Marbang et al., 2020). Lee and Rice (2007) discussed international students’ experiences of neo-racism through stringent immigration policies. I sought to explore Sub-Saharan international students’ experiences through the lens of neo-racism.

Secondly, participants were selected based on current or previous enrollment at either institution at the selected state on the East coast. This criterion was based solely on the fact that I, as the researcher, had connections with international student offices at the higher educational institutions. Thus, I chose these schools out of convenience in terms of easier access to potential study participants. There were a total of 12 participants in this study, all from Sub-Saharan Africa. Of the 12 participants, seven had recently graduated from graduate level studies, three were enrolled in graduate school, and two were enrolled in their undergraduate studies. Table 1 below illustrates participants’ country of
origin, their gender, major/field of study, how long they have been living in the U.S., and their visa status at the time of entry into the U.S.

**Table 1**

*Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>Years in U.S.</th>
<th>Visa status at the time of entry into the U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meredith Grey</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Clinical Psychology</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matooke</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JK</td>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cath</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>J1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Organizational Psychology</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabs</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Statistics</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Public Health</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annee</td>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Dentistry</td>
<td>5+ years</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pikachu</td>
<td>Botswana</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>Less than 2 months</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lily</td>
<td>Swaziland</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>F1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table 1 above, six participants were from West Africa, four came from East Africa, and two came from southern Africa. From the demographic data, many of the participants were interested in fields of study related to science. Most of the participants came to the U.S. on a full-time student visa (F1), except for participant Cath who came to the United States on a student exchange visa (J1). In terms
of gender, half the participants were male while the other half were female. The sections below outline the informed consent, data collection, and an overview of overall study procedures.

**Informed Consent**

Each participant gave their informed consent before participation in this study. The consent information (embedded within the Qualtrics survey- Appendix A) provided an overview of the study, including the significance of the study, what type of questions the participants were asked, participant confidentiality, and potential risks that the study posed. Additionally, the informed consent form outlined participants’ rights during the study, for example the right to withdraw their permission even at any point during the study.

**Data Collection**

The study utilized Qualtrics to collect demographic data. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as the main data collection tool. 12 participants were interviewed virtually via Zoom. Below, I detail the data collection procedure.

**Demographic Survey**

A survey was administered through Qualtrics to collect demographic data. The consent form was linked within the demographic survey, which prompted participants to sign before proceeding with the study. Data collected in this section included gender, country of origin, major/course of study, duration of residency in the U.S., and type of visa granted at the time of entry into the U.S. All participants had to be 18 years or older at the time of study. Appendix A below outlines information on informed consent. Upon obtaining participant consent, the participants were prompted to continue onto the study criterion. Participant criteria were outlined right after information on participant consent. Participants who met the study criterion and gave consent for the interview were then prompted to share their email and schedule an interview. I followed up via email and scheduled the interviews.
**Qualitative Interviews**

I conducted semi-structured, individual interviews with the 12 participants. All the interviews took place virtually, via the Zoom platform. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative research utilizes open ended questions that allow the respondents to voice their experiences without interference from the researcher’s perspective. Interview questions covered topics such as Sub-Saharan African international student’s racial experiences, racial identities, and perceptions of racism in the U.S. (see Appendix B for interview questions).

Going into the data collection process, I was concerned about two things- first, I was concerned about collecting little data from participants. Creswell and Guetterman (2018) discussed the concern of collecting very little data during interviews, particularly if participants are not willing to share more than they are comfortable. I went around this challenge by asking prompting questions. I probed my participants with follow up questions such as, “Can you please explain more?” Additionally, the interview questions had built in sub-questions that were designed as further prompts to gain more understanding. In some cases, the interviewees requested for the questions beforehand. This enabled them to ponder on the questions and prepare before the interview.

Secondly, data collection can also prove a challenge if the researcher does not get enough respondents (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). In this research, it was helpful to have the contacts at the universities beforehand. My contacts assisted immensely during the solicitation for participants. As a small incentive, I offered $10 gift cards to all the participants that took part in the study. Figure

**Study Procedures**

In the section below, I discuss the study procedures in more detail, starting from participant selection and recruitment to data collection and recording, and finally, data analysis. Figure 3 below outlines the study procedure. Additionally, I discuss my positionality and ethical concerns in this section.
Upon obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (Appendix E, IRB Approval Letter), I sent out a participant recruitment email to my contacts. The contacts (names withheld) forwarded the recruitment email to both international students at their institutions and other institutions affiliated with the study. Appendix C below outlines the wording of the email. In the email, I provided the topic of study and an overview of the study. Any other information was provided separately upon request from any of the institutions. Within the email, I included the Qualtrics demographic survey and consent form information.

Once I secured participants, I followed up with them directly provide more information pertaining the study (see Appendix D). Upon receipt of consent to take part in the study (Appendix A), I scheduled interviews via Zoom.

The interviews were conducted virtually on Zoom. While participants already gave permission through the consent form to record the interview, I reminded them once again during the interview that the study would be recorded. Before recording the interview, I requested participants to change their
names as they appeared on the Zoom screen to non-identifiable pseudonyms to protect their identities. Once pseudonyms were established to ensure participants’ confidentiality, interviewing ensued. Each interview was between 30-45 minutes. The interview process was conducted in a secure manner that protected the interviewees’ identifying information. Data was recorded on Zoom, in a password protected computer device. After recording the interview responses, data was transcribed into text using both Zoom transcription and the software Temi. I started the data transcription process using Zoom text transcription, but this produced unclear sentences. Thus, I opted to utilize Temi, which produced cleaner transcripts with less grammatical errors. Next, the data was prepared for analysis, as outlined in the section below.

**Interview Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, coding is a process by which researchers analyze the meanings provided in data, often using labels (Roulson, 2019). In this section, I outline the data analysis process, starting with data transcription.

- Data was transcribed into text using two software: Zoom and Temi. Any participant identifying information was de-identified, for example participant names which were replaced with pseudonyms.
- Data was prepared for coding, which involved reading through the entire raw data and checking for errors such as spelling mistakes.
- Data was cleaned, which included removing typos and any misspelling from the transcription process.
- Coding ensued. This process involved assigning labels to various portions of the data (Creswell, 2009). Coding was conducted manually using Microsoft Word. Themes were identified by sorting and highlighting common phrases. These common phrases were grouped together and saved as files using Microsoft Word. Findings were reviewed multiple times and themed. For this
study, both deductive and inductive codes were utilized. Deductive codes were utilized for the majority part, based on themes pre-identified in the research questions—experiences of racial discrimination, perceptions of racial identity, and attitudes towards racism in the U.S. Two inductive codes emerged from the findings—Motivation to Study in the U.S. and The Visa Process. These themes and other interesting data will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

- During this study, data saturation occurred around the 9th and 10th participants. At this point, the responses sounded similar and some themes had already emerged from the data.

**Positionality and Researcher Bias**

My positionality as researcher is included in this section to explain concerns about researcher bias. In reflecting about my own experiences as a Sub-Saharan African international student, I realize that I never gave much thought to racial injustice until I came to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies. I grew up in Kenya, where individuals mainly identify with their tribal groups, languages, or religious affiliations. As of the Kenyan Census in 2009, there were about 40 tribes, with more than 60 languages (Global Health Data Exchange [GHDx], 2022). While religion and tribal affiliation differentiate Kenyans, they do not cause systemic inequalities, in comparison to how racial bias can be seen in the daily lives of U.S. citizens (Kiuchi, 2016).

After moving to the U.S., I regularly experienced negative interactions focused on my accent. As I read about microaggressions and overt racial bias, I realized this experience was a subtle form of racism (Sue et al., 2009). My personal experiences as an international student from Sub-Saharan Africa are very closely aligned with the study topic. Thus, in some ways, I consider and reflect on my own experiences in this study. I also grapple with immigration challenges I have faced in the past, and I continue to face while here in the United States.

My experiences guided my research topic on the experiences of Sub-Saharan African international students as I wish to advocate for the needs of students like myself. I believe there are
other important stories and lessons to learn from other Sub-Saharan African international students residing in the U.S. My goal for this study was to shed light on the perspectives and experiences of these students, to contribute to their well-being, and add to the ongoing conversation around racism and equity in the U.S. Next, I discuss study validity and reliability.

**Study Validity and Reliability**

Creswell and Miller (2000) discussed the importance of validity in qualitative research. Qualitative researchers need to demonstrate that their study is credible and reliable (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To achieve this, various methods have been proposed, for example through data triangulation which involves using multiple tools or techniques in the same study to explicate the central phenomena (Rose & Johnson, 2020) and reflexivity which involves the researcher reflecting on how their position can influence the researcher (Bott, 2010). Some qualitative studies employ peer reviewing and member checking as strategies to enhance reliability (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

In this study, I employed both memoing and data triangulation. I utilized memos while collecting and analyzing data, to help me reflect on how my perspective as a researcher could influence the research process. I referred to my notes and memos while analyzing the data. Additionally, I conducted data triangulation while establishing themes and in the process of tying the findings with the theoretical framework. Triangulation involved reading through the findings multiple times to establish common themes.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the research procedures, including participant recruitment, obtaining participant consent, data collection, and data analysis. Within this chapter, I highlighted a few concerns with qualitative studies, for example researcher bias and study validity. In the next chapter, I will provide the findings from the data collected from participants, including themes that were derived from the data.
Chapter 4

This chapter is an overview of the findings of this qualitative study to explore the experiences of racism among Sub-Saharan African international students in the U.S. The research questions guiding the study were focused on experiences of racism within higher education institutions, perceptions of racial identity, and overall perceptions of racism as an issue in the United States. Five themes emerging from the interview data will be discussed. These are: Motivation to Study in the U.S., The Visa Process, Experiences of Racism, Perceptions of Racial Identity, and Attitudes Towards Racial Bias in the United States. Finally, I will conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings from the study.

Motivation to Study in the United States

The first theme highlighted by the data concerns motivation to study in the U.S. When asked about their motivation to study in the United States, participants reflected on the reasons why they chose the U.S. for their studies. There were many remarkable attributes about education and other opportunities in the U.S. In this section, I explore reasons why Sub-Saharan African international students decided to study in the U.S. Two main sub-themes stood out. First, some respondents were wary of dire situations in their home countries and therefore were seeking better opportunities for themselves and their families. Secondly, some respondents received scholarships to study in the U.S. and thus the decision to come to the U.S. was influenced by the ability to pay for their tuition and expenses during their studies.

Seeking Greener Pastures

I begin this section with Annee’s reasons for choosing to study in the U.S. Annee was a dental student and had been in the U.S. for more than five years. She shared:

So back home, I think, it's kind of hard. As you know, Nigeria is a developing country. So pretty much in healthcare, you spend so much to go to school but you really don’t earn much. Apart from that, I just wanted to move higher in my career and then get a better life for myself. I think
that was just the motivation. Plus when I came here as a dental student for my exchange
program, I marveled at the dental advancement that I had seen. And it was something that I was
sure I was willing to explore. I just knew I was going to be back somehow.

Annee, along with a fair number of the other participants, indicated a deep admiration for the
education system and other networking opportunities that can be attained while studying in the United
States. Responses like Annee’s above were common during the study, suggesting that African students
were motivated to seek better educational opportunities outside their home countries. Henry, a male
student from Kenya who completed his master’s in organizational psychology, expressed:

I think the biggest factor was definitely opportunities. The program that I wanted to do a
master’s in didn’t have a lot of universities offering it back home. And generally, it was a newer
course back then, so not in the major universities. Once I graduated, I knew what I wanted to
do. The U.S. and Europe to some extent were leading in this field. The U.S. was definitely a
world leader in this field and had several universities with a lot of different programs in the area.
I think the second reason was probably wanting some international exposure.

Charles, a male participant from Nigeria with more than five years residency in the U.S.,
expressed concern over the few opportunities available in his home country. He studied Statistics for his
Bachelor’s degree in Nigeria, but felt that he did not receive any practical experience out of his
undergraduate studies. While still in Nigeria and upon an encounter with visiting professors from the
U.S., his interest in Applied Statistics piqued, and thus he decided to apply to study in the U.S. In terms
of applicability, Matooke (Male, Ugandan student with close to six years residency in the U.S.) also
studied Applied Statistics and concurred with the sentiments that the United States provided more
applicability in the field of Statistics.

Full Academic Sponsorship to the U.S.
The second sub-theme that emerged from participants’ responses to questions about motivation concerned academic sponsorship. Three of the twelve participants received full academic scholarships to study in the United States. Thus, their main reason for applying to study in the U.S. was due to the availability of financial resources to pursue education abroad. Lily (female student, 8 months residency in the U.S.) grew up in Swaziland. She found a foster family in the U.S. who assisted with her tuition, housing, and other school related expenses. She said, “I have my foster family that helps me with my education, fees and stuff. I wanted to take a degree in Business Management and they suggested a few colleges that were close to them, so that’s why I am here.” Participant Pikachu (male student from Botswana, recently moved to the U.S. for his Bachelor’s degree) had been working in his native country for more than 10 years and felt that he needed a change. When his government offered full scholarships, he took the opportunity to study in the U.S.

The availability of financial resources such as scholarships can be a great motivation for students to study in the United States. As participant Grace (Female, from Ghana, more than 10 years residency) expressed:

I am not from a privileged background so to say. After I graduated from high school, I was home for three years because my parents could not afford tuition for me to go to the university in Ghana. While in high school, I was running a communication center and I decided to send some applications to schools that were affiliated to my church here in the United States that were providing scholarships. I did that and I forgot all about it, hoping that something would come out of it. But it was not set in stone and I was not counting on it to yield any fruits. But then one day I received an I-20 from the school. That was pretty much the only reason why I applied for schools here and not my country because I couldn't afford it if it wasn't for the scholarship.

The responses above indicate that the availability of scholarships can create opportunities for international students seeking education opportunities in the U.S. With higher tuition rates for
international students, having a scholarship makes the decision to pursue education abroad easy. Whether international students are seeking better opportunities in the United States or whether they receive funding, they still have to undergo immigration processing as discussed in the next section.

The Visa Process

In this second theme, I discuss the immigration processes involved before international students can study in the United States. The United States Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS) provides policies and guidance for international students seeking visas for the U.S. After securing admission at a university, a prospective foreign student can then apply for a student visa. First, admitted foreign students seek a certificate of eligibility, an I-20 document. To be granted this document, the prospective student needs to prove that they can support themselves financially while in the U.S. Depending on the level of education and the type of institution, the minimum amount required on the bank statements is about $30,000 per academic year. Upon receipt of the I-20, the student is required to pay immigration fees to the Student and Exchange Visitor office. Full time students seeking the F1 visa pay $350 dollars, while students seeking short term visas pay $220 (ice.gov/sevis, 2023). Third, students submit a visa application and pay visa fees ($160 or more) at a U.S. consulate or embassy in their home country. Fourth, they can book an appointment to appear for an interview at the embassy. When all the steps outlined above are complete, the student can then make travel arrangements to travel for their studies (Uscis.gov, 2023).

The visa process outlined above can take as little as a few months, or in some cases, more than a year. For the study, I asked participants to describe their visa application experience. For some, the process was quick and easy. For Pikachu from Botswana, for instance, the process took about a week from the time he filled out the application with the embassy to the time his visa was issued. Similarly, Lily from Swaziland, as well as Kabs and Annee (both from Nigeria) described the process as very smooth
and fairly easy. The two participants from Nigeria attributed their seamless experience to previous visits to the U.S. Another student, Matooke from Uganda, described his visa application process below:

The visa process took me about one month, and what that entailed was scheduling for a visa interview and then paying for it, then showing up for the visa interview. And I should say the interview process wasn't so cumbersome, just showed up on the day and presented the requirements that were needed.

While the visa application process was seamless for the five participants above, it was tedious and hectic for other applicants. Henry (male, from Kenya, has been in the U.S. for more than 5 years) described the process as “pretty stressful.” He explained:

It's difficult to get an interview. It's a big financial burden what international students need to prove in terms of ability to pay for their education and upkeep while in the States. It is very nebulous decision making. Sometimes you don't know why you get turned down for a visa. It is stressful. I saw the people ahead of me and I still remember to this day, one person getting rejected for unclear reasons. And the person he was with who had just gone before him got accepted. It’s a very stressful process I’d say.

Similarly, participant JK (male, from Uganda, has been in the U.S. for about 5 years) described a hectic process:

The whole process is a bit complex because so many things are involved. You have to pay some fees, through a specific bank. If you stay in the rural areas, you have to go to the city and then pay through that bank and then get that receipt... Once you have confirmed your payment and scheduled your visa interview, the tricky part is that they specify what to bring for supporting documents...You have to bring more than they have asked because they can always ask questions outside the scope of what they have shared with you. If you stay in the rural areas,
you probably have to bring letters of support from your local government leaders to show that you’re part of the community and that they know you.

As discussed in Chapter 2, a lengthy visa process can be a barrier to enrollment for international students. For instance, in Charles’ (male, Nigerian, 5 years residency) case, he was forced to defer his admission by a year. He said, “I had to defer the admission just because I put in my application later. I wouldn’t be able to get interview dates because of the timeline, so I needed to defer the admission.” Participant Cath’s (female, Kenyan, 3 years residency) experience was also negatively impacted by the lengthy process. In Cath’s case, the process took over a year.

Similarly, participant Meredith Grey (female, Ghanaian, more than 5 years residency) explained her visa process as follows: “The visa actually determines if you are able to pursue that education. So you can be qualified, you can have a very good GPA, but then if your visa gets denied, that's a whole different story altogether.” Although Meredith Grey was able to secure her visa, she described the overall visa process as nerve-wracking.

The visa experiences outlined above depict the great resiliency that international students must employ while hoping to pursue higher education in the United States. While some participants waited months or even longer than a year to process their student visas, they stayed on course and finally got to the U.S. The next sections outline Sub-Saharan African international students’ encounters with racial discrimination within college campuses in the U.S.

Experiences of Racism within Campus

In this section, I discuss participants’ experiences of racial bias within their college campuses. This section covers responses from interviewees about their experiences of racism while they attended college, describing both classroom experiences and experiences within campus environments.

Participants shared their experiences of racism in the form of microaggressions, alienation from group
work within their classrooms, among other forms of discrimination. I begin with descriptions of microaggressions.

**Microaggressions**

Participants Meredith Grey and Henry classified their experiences as microaggressions. As defined within the literature review, microaggressions can be described as indirect communication that communicates insults to minoritized and marginalized people (Sue et al., 2009). Meredith Grey stated, “I would say that I have experienced more microaggressions than racism.” She shared two distinct examples while on campus:

I remember there was one time I was going to the chow hall, like a dining hall and the lady who was swiping the card asked me if I prefer to be called colored or black. (I thought) how about you just call me by my name? You know? And then she just got frustrated and angry because I was holding up the line. It was so uncomfortable. I was holding up the line and then she said, “Okay, you can just go.” And I thought about that until today, I think about that question. I ask myself, “What was the right answer to give?” It just didn't make sense to me. Meredith cited this as a microaggression. She explained that this interaction utterly shocked her. She mentioned that while the experience happened a while back, she still recalls the pain she experienced from the interaction.

In her second example, Meredith recalled two students making unfriendly racial comments. She expressed that while walking to the library, upon seeing her, two students said, “It just got darker over here.” Meredith chose to ignore the two individuals but recalled the incident as a form of microaggression because the two students were White. She continued to explain that the remarks made her uncomfortable in the moment, but she chose to disregard the incidence. Meredith’s experiences offered examples of indirect insults to minoritized groups, as defined by Sue et al. (2009).
Henry also shared his experiences of microaggressions, “I can’t remember any specific statements, but I received different types of comments (usually negative) based on my country of origin or my accent.” As discussed within the theoretical framework, some Sub-Saharan African international students experience racial bias through microaggressions. Such experiences include negative comments on their cultural background, as in Henry’s example above.

**Classroom Experiences**

Within the classroom, participants shared their experiences of direct confrontations from fellow classmates. Participant Grace cited some incidents where fellow students asked her to go back to her country. “My classmates would verbally profess- go back to Africa. You're here just trying to get all our trophies and stuff,” she shared. To Grace, these remarks shocked her because she experienced this while studying at a Historically Black College where most of the students were Black. She expressed that the experience made her feel alienated and confused.

Other respondents described feelings of alienation during group discussions within their classrooms. In these cases, the students observed that other students, especially White students, seemed uncomfortable including Sub-Saharan students in their group discussions. Some participants recalled having their contributions during group discussions dismissed, while contributions from White students were acknowledged by their instructors. Cath shared her experience working in groups:

I think that some of the students just don’t want to be in a group discussion with you. When you speak, they are already biased, and you can see that they are siding with fellow White students. Even if the other students are saying something that is wrong, they are ready to help them build on what they’re talking about. But they sideline you...They claim that they do not understand what you are talking about. And even if you explain and explain, they will tell you to go and ask the professor.
Charles recalled having a difficult time making any friends in his classroom. Particularly, he expressed how difficult it was to make friends with White students. He explained:

You want to make friends coming into a new place. You want to learn their culture and the system of education, and you wouldn’t be able to learn this if you didn’t work with [your] fellow students. Coming in, I tried to make friends with White American students in the classroom, but there is this vibe like they want to keep you at a distance. When you get to the class, sometimes when you find an empty seat next to someone, they stylishly stand up and sit two seats or further away from you.

In continuation, Annee shared bitterly that her contribution towards a group paper was intentionally omitted by a White fellow group member. Despite working on the paper as a group, her contribution was disregarded. She explained:

I was working at a lab. I was a Graduate Assistant to one of my professors. He had started research and me and other Graduate Assistants joined the project. During presentations, one of our classmates excluded our names from the abstract. Both of us (excluded from the paper) were Black, while the other members were from other races. The other people were White, and their names were all included in the abstract. That left a very sore taste in my mouth. I do feel that that was something that revolved around racism.

The above experiences sum up different ways that international students from Sub-Saharan Africa have experienced racism while in the U.S. These negative experiences can lead to feelings of isolation, disconnection, misunderstanding and can harm the well-being of international sub-Saharan students. Negative classroom experiences can discourage prospective international students from applying to study in the U.S. These findings call for a deeper understanding on the overall experiences of international students studying in the U.S. In the section below, I turn to the second Research Question
and discuss Sub-Saharan student’s perceptions of their racial identity and the racial category Black/African American.

**Sub-Saharan African International Students’ Perceptions of their Racial Identity**

I included this Research Question to determine how participants perceived their racial identity while in the United States. I asked, “How do Sub-Saharan African international students describe and perceive their racial identities?” From the literature review, some Sub-Saharan individuals have struggled with being racially categorized as Black by larger U.S. society (Malcolm & Mendoza, 2014; Habecker, 2012). Thus, I sought to identify the views of Sub-Saharan international students on racial identity in the U.S. Responses indicated an overall sense of hesitancy with the racial categorization “Black.”

When asked about their racial identities, the majority of the participants expressed hesitancy. Responses indicated that prior to coming to the U.S., these students did not have to consider their race. According to respondent Cath, tribes were the main distinction between citizens of her home country (Kenya), and thus she did not have to think about racial bias before coming to the U.S. Lily from Swaziland and Annee from Nigeria also shared similar thoughts; while in their home countries, they only identified with their tribal groups but even then, racial and tribal conflicts were uncommon. They added that racial bias was not an issue because the majority of people “looked the same,” referring to their skin color.

Participants expressed hesitancy and confusion at the racial category “Black/African American” when they would fill out any forms or documents with this option. Meredith Grey expressed the following:

Um, I've thought about this question. I check the box Black or African American. And I do understand that, but I feel like there should be like a difference because our experiences are completely different. Yes, I would consider myself obviously a Black woman, but I would rather
check African or Black African as they (referring to African Americans) would also check Black American. Because there are White Africans as well. I feel like the category should be a little bit separated because our experiences are different. If they want to dive more into statistics, then they could separate the two.

Participant Charles from Nigeria seemed upset with the categorization Black. He felt the label Black was dehumanizing. He said, “I am not black. If you look at my skin color, [I] am brown. I check the box Black/African American because Africa is represented in there.” Other participants felt that their native countries or national citizenship would be a better option for their racial identifications, as opposed to skin color. Participant JK from Uganda thought that the category Black/African American was better than the term “alien” which often appears in immigration documents. JK further stated that if the U.S. was keen on diversity, they would include the term African as a category on its own. Henry concurred with the sentiments on diversity:

I have seen different ways they capture that. Sometimes it is a bit more inclusive where you have maybe Black, African, Caribbean, African American as a category. Sometimes you only get African American, which I don’t really identify with. Sometimes you just get Black, which I don’t mind. I think definitely some forms need to be updated to be a bit more expansive of different types of Black people.

Overall, the idea of racial categorization was a new concept for Sub-Saharan African international students when they came to the United States. In addition, when students encountered U.S. classifications of racial difference, they expressed feelings of confusion or disappointment. Pikachu felt that racial categorization should be eliminated altogether. He justified his thought as follows:

In a way it is racial profiling. The options (racial categories) should not actually be there. Even though it didn’t bother me much, I feel like such profiling is not quite good because you wonder,
if I chose Black, maybe I wouldn’t be accepted in this school? Maybe if I chose Hispanic I wouldn’t be accepted in this school?

As the responses above suggest, most Sub-Saharan international students did not consider the color of their skin as a negative characteristic until they came to the U.S. While in their home countries, they were distinguished by their tribal affiliation and economic class, among other characteristics. When asked about their racial identities, some participants suggested that the U.S. should consider adding individual countries of origin to distinguish immigrants within the category “Black.” This discussion leads into the next section on Sub-Saharan international students attitudes towards racism.

Attitudes towards Racism

This section addresses the last Research Question which focused on the overall understanding of Sub-Saharan African international students about the issues of race and racism. I sought to determine students’ attitudes towards racism in the United States. Responses indicated that some Sub-Saharan international students viewed racism as a secondary problem. For example, Annee from Nigeria shared that for her, there are more pressing issues before she could consider racism as a problem. She shared:

For me I pretty much have confidence. I think most Nigerians are like that, maybe because of where we’re coming from. We come from a place where it's difficult growing up. So things like that (referring to racism) are not things that will bother you or make you get worried. I feel like there are more important things that will make you get worried. For example, what you have to eat or what you have to take care of yourself and all that. Basically, things that would help you in life. Am not saying that racial disparities or problems are not things to consider, but for us Nigerians, I feel like there are more important things that I would put as priorities before racism comes into play.

Similarly, Charles from Nigeria shared similar sentiments. Despite feeling alienated in the classroom during his first semester, Charles seemed unfazed by any experiences of bias. He stated:
I was only battling these things within my first semester, but I don’t care. I know why I came to this country. If they don’t want to be my friend after I’ve made myself friendly, then I think I would rather let it be.

Multiple responses from the interviewees indicated a sense of distance and disconnection from the issue of racial discrimination. When asked about their overall perceptions of racism in the U.S., several participants expressed that racism did not affect them personally. For instance, when asked about his personal experiences of racism, JK from Uganda mentioned that he was not concerned about racism at all. He explained that he was less concerned about racism because he did not recall any personal experiences with racial bias. He continued to mention that if he did experience any racism, he did not pay attention because he was busy with schoolwork.

Further, the research explored the level of involvement in movements and organizations that work to end racial discrimination. The study highlighted Black Lives Matter, a movement started to raise awareness of racism against Black individuals in the U.S. Ten out of twelve participants shared that they did not take part in movements or organizations fighting racial discrimination, for example Black Lives Matter. Some participants cited that they were unsure about the missions of these organizations, while some participants seemed indifferent about joining such movements. Participant JK shared:

Well, it would be a deep thought to consider. Yes, they have some good values they’re fighting for. But within those values, sometimes they have some others embedded in and which I don't understand. And of course, one needs to really understand the whole, not just run with the first value. So I wouldn’t say that I would be involved any time soon, but I would want to understand what's going on.

Some students were hesitant to take part in organizations fighting against racism because of controversies that they heard. Meredith Grey stated, “I heard there was a controversy about the
founder of Black Lives Matter.” She went further to question the mission for diversity and equity for some of these organizations. She expressed worry that many organizations are not keen on diversity:

A lot of organizations are talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion since the George Floyd situation. I feel like they’re sprinkling it around just for the sake of organization. I don’t know if they understand the depth of what it means to have diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Overall, participants showed little concern about racial bias going on in the United States. Kabs from Nigeria expressed more concern about his immigration status than experiences of racism. Kabs felt that the only form of discrimination he had experienced was because to his visa status, and not because of his race. Kab’s response indicated that some international students were more concerned about immigration policies, than they were concerned about racial bias. Below, I provide a summary of the findings from this study.

**Summary of Findings**

Chapter 4 outlined the findings from the study on Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences and perceptions of racism within college campuses in the U.S. Five themes were discussed, namely: Motivation to study in the U.S., the visa process, experiences of racism within campus, perceptions of racial identity, and finally, overall perceptions of racism in the U.S. The findings indicate difficulty among Sub-Saharan African international students in securing their students visas to study in the U.S. While in the U.S., these students reported experiences of racism through microaggressions, negative classroom and group dynamics within the classrooms. Despite having encounters with racism, the participants indicated a hesitancy accepting the Black racial identification, because in most of their home countries, these students identified with other characteristics such as tribes. Further, Sub-Saharan African international students in this study had little to no concern about the issue of racism while studying in the U.S. In Chapter 5, interconnections between the findings and the theories outlined in Chapter 2 will be discussed.
Chapter 5

This qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions of race and racism among Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the U.S. In this chapter, I begin with discussing connections between the literature and findings from the study. I then discuss the limitations of the study, followed by implications of the study and recommendations for future studies. I conclude the chapter by providing a summary of the whole study.

Connections between Theory and Findings

In this section, I discuss connections between the findings and the literature discussed in Chapter 2. I start with a discussion of participants' racial identity in relation to the racial identity formation models discussed in Chapter 2. Next, I discuss connections between the theories of neoracism and intersectionality, and how these two lenses relate to the findings.

Racial & Ethnic Identity Development

Cross's (1971) Nigrescence model, Phinney's (1993) Ethnic Identity Development model, and Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity helped shape the theoretical framework for this study. Thus, I sought to identify how Sub-Saharan international students understood and perceived their racial identity. Responses indicated that prior to coming to the U.S., a number of these students did not consider their racial identities. Back in their home countries, the prevalent distinguishing factor was tribal affiliation. When these students arrived in the U.S., they were forced to examine their racial identities especially when filling out identifying documents. When asked if the racial categorization "Black/African American" reflected their racial identity, participants expressed hesitancy. They felt that this categorization was not a clear reflection of their race. Some respondents suggested that "country of origin" should be included within racial categories on forms.

From the literature review, it appeared that Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity bore the most relevance to Sub-Saharan international students’ perceptions of
their racial identities. As depicted in the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), many aspects can influence an individual’s identity process. In this study, Sub-Saharan international students expressed confliction with the racial identity “Black”. While filling out documents, these students suggested that they would rather include their nationalities under racial categorizations. Some participants explained that the racial identity “Black” was not a reflection of their identities because they did not have similar experiences as African Americans. Factors such as cultural backgrounds, immigrant experiences, and nationality influenced Sub-Saharan African international students’ perceptions of their racial identities.

Responses from the study also indicated semblance to Phinney’s (1993) Ethnic Identity Development model. Specifically, the first stage of unexamined identities where individuals showed detachment to their racial identity seemed to capture much of what participants shared in the interview conversations. In their responses to this study, participants showed clear detachment from the racial categorization “Black”.

Further, responses matched with the first and second stages (pre-encounter and encounter) of Cross’ (1971) Nigrescence model. I compare these stages to Sub-Saharan students’ perceptions of race before they come to the U.S., and after they arrive in the U.S. Before coming to the U.S. participants shared that they did not use race as an identifier. According to the respondents, most African countries identify with their tribes. Upon arrival in the U.S., these students started considering their racial identities. Similarly, in Cross’ (1971) model, African Americans did not initially consider their racial identities until they encountered racial bias. After encountering racially motivated events, African Americans started thinking more deeply about their own identities (Cross, 1971).

**Neo-racism**

Findings from this study affirmed Lee and Rice’s (2007) proposition that immigrants such as Sub-Saharan international students experience neo-racism while in the U.S. The authors explained that
international students experience racial bias based on their cultural backgrounds and their nationalities. In this study, participants shared that they received negative comments about their language and accents.

Further, Lee and Rice (2007) proposed that neo-racism can be evident in stringent immigration policies against immigrants from some countries. Participants in this study complained about lengthy and tedious visa processes. In one instance, a participant felt that the only form of discrimination they had encountered was through immigration policies, and not their skin color. While these findings reflect a small population of students from Sub-Saharan Africa, the findings indicate that Sub-Saharan international students have struggled with immigration bias.

**Intersectionality**

The second theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) was proposed for this study to explore different ways in which social factors of discrimination can be examined. This study examined ways in which Sub-Saharan African international students understood the issue of racial discrimination in the U.S. Findings indicated that these groups of students experienced racism within their classrooms and through microaggressions, for example negative comments about their language skills. Within the classroom, participants shared that their classmates (mostly White) seemed hesitant to include Sub-Saharan students within their small groups. Thus, participants reported that they felt isolated and alienated by their classmates from different races.

Responses also indicated that not only do these students experience racism while in the U.S., but they also experience tough challenges with immigration procedures. Thus, these students were caught at the intersection of difficult immigration procedures and the challenge of racial discrimination while studying in the U.S. Through an intersectional approach, advocates for international students’ well-being can advocate for supports for both challenges with racism and challenges with stringent immigration policies. Next, limitations of the study are discussed in the section below.
Limitations of the Study

There were some limitations in this qualitative study. I refer to Creswell and Guetterman’s (2019) discussions on the limitations for qualitative research. Here, I discuss two main limitations, namely, generalizability and researcher bias. I also discuss strategies that I utilized during the study to minimize on the limitations.

Generalizability

In many cases, qualitative research cannot be generalized (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). This study explored the experiences and perceptions of Sub-Saharan African international students around the issues of race and racism. The study covered the experiences from 12 participants, six male and six female, from large universities in one state on the East Coast of the U.S. The study aimed to report on the experiences of racism among these student groups. Additionally, the research questions aimed to identify the immigration processes that international students undergo before they arrive in the U.S. Findings indicated that most Sub-Saharan international students undergo lengthy visa processes. Experiences of racism were observed at the classroom level, and through microaggressions. While these findings cannot be applicable to the overall Sub-Saharan international student population, insights generated from the participants are essential in identifying more supports for Sub-Saharan students around their challenges with racism and immigration processes.

Researcher Bias

My experiences as an international student from Sub-Saharan Africa were very similar to some of the participants’ experiences. This can be both a benefit to the integrity and depth of the study, or, looking from a more positivistic lens, it could be considered as a source for potential bias. I attempted to reduce any personal bias by using a few strategies. First, I explained my positionality during the interview and clearly explained the objectives of the study. I restated the objective of the study to each participant at the beginning of each interview.
I believe that my positionality and past lived experiences proved to be an advantage during the study, because I was able to understand some jargon used commonly among Sub-Saharan students. For example, while explaining the immigration processes, I was able to create easy connections with terms such as I-20, CPT or OPT (the I-20 is a document needed for international student admission to the U.S., while CPT and OPT are work authorization documents provided to international students). This might have created a more comfortable space for the participants to share more in-depth information about their experiences. Further, I employed memoing during the data collection and coding processes. Through this process, I was able to reflect on my position as a researcher during the study.

Additionally, data was collected from a diverse pool, based on eligibility criteria. From the 12 respondents, there was diversity in terms of gender, level of education, duration of residency in the U.S., various courses of study, and country of origin. Data was collected from a diverse pool of participants to minimize the level of bias. In the next section, I discuss the study’s implications on future research and implications for practice.

**Study Implications**

Findings from this study can be greatly informative for future studies on Sub-Saharan international students. Additionally, this study can inform policies and practices around international student services in the U.S. I start by discussing implications for practice, followed by recommendations for future studies.

**Implications for Practice**

Findings from this study can inform policies and practices affecting international students from Sub-Saharan Africa. I discuss two implications of this qualitative study. Firstly, the findings can inform immigration policies for prospective international students. Participants expressed frustration with the visa and immigration processes. Respondents indicated that the visa process is a lengthy and extremely tedious process, especially for Sub-Saharan individuals. Some students were forced to defer their
semester of enrollment because of the immigration timeline. Information from this study can be used by institutions hosting international students to find easier ways for these students to secure their visas in good time. Data from this study can be used by host colleges and universities to advocate for easier and more convenient immigration procedures for prospective international students wishing to study in the U.S.

Secondly, participants expressed frustrations upon encountering racism within their classrooms and within their college campuses. These findings present an opportunity for international student offices and host institutions to better prepare prospective students on issues around race and racism in the U.S. It would be helpful for international students to learn about racism during their orientation to the U.S. culture. Host institutions should offer inter-cultural learning opportunities to foster better interactions between domestic and international students. In the next section, I propose recommendations for future research on the topic.

**Recommendations for Future Studies**

From the findings, I propose three main recommendations for future studies. First, future studies should explore and compare the experiences of both Sub-Saharan international students and White international students. Specifically, examination of the visa process and how immigration policies affect White international students. While this study discovered that Sub-Saharan international students encounter strenuous visa processes, it would be helpful to study and compare the experiences of students from other parts of the world seeking to study in the U.S.

Secondly, overall studies on international students could benefit from a broader scope. While the findings from this study are greatly informative, these only reflect responses from students within one state. In the future, researchers could broaden the scope to nationwide, to gather data from across the United States. Diversity in the participant pool can produce more rigorous findings.
Findings from the question on racial identity can benefit from a deeper dive. This study explored Sub-Saharan international students’ perceptions of their racial identities. Responses indicated a hesitancy with the racial categorization “Black/African American.” Participants indicated that prior to coming to the United States, they were not conscious of their racial identity. Within their home countries, these participants were aware of their tribal affiliations and their ethnicities but even so, these factors did not cause discrimination as much as race is a factor of discrimination in the U.S. Thus, future studies can explore how Sub-Saharan students become racially conscious while in the United States.

**Conclusion**

Sub-Saharan African international students travel to the U.S. with hopes of seeking better educational opportunities. This study examined the experiences of 12 Sub-Saharan international students within U.S. college campuses. In particular, the study explored these students’ experiences of racism and their perceptions of racial identities. Further, the study identified the overall perceptions of racism among Sub-Saharan international students studying in the U.S. Findings indicated that these students experience racism through microaggressions and within their classrooms. Despite experiencing racial bias, some respondents indicated that they were less concerned about racial bias in the U.S., but more deeply concerned about stringent immigration policies. On the question of racial identity, participants were hesitant to identify as Black. Findings from this research can inform and influence better policies and practices around Sub-Saharan African international students.
References


https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i4.210


https://www.jstor.org/stable/4317037


https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-013-9194-8


https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109356736


https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1035969


https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.w54750105q78p451


https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.1.57


https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.598232


https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20419

https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0049

https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244013499162


https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.54.3.271

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.07.015

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2022.03.004

https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000091


Taylor, B. (2019, November 24). Intersectionality 101: What is it and why is it important?
https://www.womankind.org.uk/intersectionality-101-what-is-it-and-why-is-it-important/


Treisman, R. (2020, July 6). ICE: Foreign students must leave the U.S. if their colleges go online-only this Fall. ICE: Foreign Students Must Leave The U.S. If Their Colleges Go Online-Only This Fall: Coronavirus Updates : NPR


[https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-021-09446-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-021-09446-w)

Appendix A

Sub-Saharan African Students' Experiences of Racism within Higher Education Institutions in the U.S.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Gloria Wafula as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to examine the experiences and perceptions of Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the United States around the issues of race, racism, and racial identity. Your participation will take about 30-45 minutes to complete an interview and you will receive 10 dollars in the form of a Gift Card. There is a minimal risk of discomfort sharing your personal experiences or views around racism. Should you feel uneasy to continue with the interview, you may inform the researcher. Overall, the study involves minimal risks to the participants.

Participants will get the opportunity to share their stories and experiences with the researcher. Participants will get the opportunity to be part of a crucial study. The first 24 participants will receive a $10 dollar gift card upon completion of the Zoom interview. Data from this study could be a useful tool to the university departments serving international students, such as admissions, academics, international students’ advocates, and offices for international program. This study will be a continuation of awareness efforts around the challenge of racial discrimination in college campuses in the United States. This study will be an important addition to literature around Sub-Saharan students' experiences in the United States.

The research project is being done by Gloria Wafula as part of their Doctoral Dissertation to examine the experiences and perceptions of Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the United States around the issues of race, racism, and racial identity. If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. You may ask Gloria Wafula any questions to help you understand this study. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. What is the purpose of this study? The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the experiences and perceptions of Sub-Saharan African international students studying in the United States around the issues of race, racism, and racial identity

2. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following: Complete interviews via Zoom. This study will take 30-45 minutes of your time.

3. Are there any experimental medical treatments? No

4. Is there any risk to me? Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: Racial experiences can be sensitive in nature, and therefore you may not be comfortable sharing your personal experiences. Overall, the study involves minimal risks to the participants. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Student Counselling Services. If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

5. Is there any benefit to me? You will get the opportunity to share your stories and experiences with the researcher. Participants will get the opportunity to be part of a crucial study. The first 24 participants will receive a $10 dollar gift card upon completion of the Zoom interview. Other benefits may include: Data from this study could be a useful tool to the university departments serving international students, such as admissions, academics, international students’ advocates, and offices for international program.
This study will be a continuation of awareness efforts around the challenge of racial discrimination in college campuses in the United States. This study will be an addition to literature around Sub-Saharan students' experiences in the United States.

6. How will you protect my privacy? Interviews will be recorded using the Zoom software. Your records will be private. Only Gloria Wafula, Orkideh Mohajeri, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses. Your name will not be used in any reports. Records will be stored in a Password Protected File/Computer. Interviews will take place in a private space. During the interview, participants will be asked to choose a pseudonym before recording begins. Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion.

7. Do I get paid to take part in this study? Participants will get 10 dollars in the form of a Gift Card upon completion of the Zoom interview.

8. Who do I contact in case of research related injury? For any questions with this study, contact: Primary Investigator: Gloria Wafula at ########## or gw877754@wcupa.edu. Faculty Sponsor: Orkideh Mohajeri at ####### or omohajeri@wcupa.edu. For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Please indicate Yes or No with your name and the date below:

________________________________________________________________

Please choose what applies to you in this section

☐ International student on F or J visa

☐ Citizen of a Sub-Saharan African country

☐ Currently enrolled or recently graduated from a U.S. university on the East Coast

☐ None of the above applies to me

Demographic Questions

☐ What is your nationality? __________________________________________________

☐ What is your gender identity _____________________________________________
What is your age?

- 18-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61 and above

How long have you been in the United States?

Are you currently enrolled as an undergraduate or graduate student?

- Undergraduate
- Graduate

What is your current major field of study?

________________________________________________________________

If you recently graduated, what was your major/field of study?

________________________________________________________________

Thank you for your interest in the study! Please share your email address below. I will reach out to you to schedule a 30-45 minutes interview. You may also email me directly at gw877754@wcupa.edu

________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Exploring Sub-Saharan African Students' Experiences of Racism within Higher Education Institutions in the United States

Date/time of interview:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

(About the researcher/information about the study)

Questions:

1. Please tell me about yourself, for example what is your home country?
   a. What motivated you to apply to study in the U.S.?
2. What was the college application process like?
3. How was the visa application process?
4. How long have you been in the U.S.? (How is the community that you live in? Do you have friends?)
5. How much did you know about racism in the U.S. before you came to the U.S.? What is your understanding of racism in the U.S.?
   a. Did you have anything similar within your home country?
6. Have you experienced racism within your college here?
   a. Can you think of any specific incidents with fellow students?
   b. How about with faculty or staff at your institution?
7. How would you define your racial identity?
   a. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies individuals from Sub-Saharan Africa as “Black/African American.” Do you believe this classification to be a representation of your racial identity? Please share more.
8. What is your overall perception of racism as a challenge within U.S. institutions?
   a. Do you feel like racism affects you personally?
   b. Do you feel personally impacted by racially motivated crimes, for example the murder of George Floyd?
   c. Are you involved in any anti-racism movements within campus of outside of campus for example Black Lives Matter?
   d. Are there resources within your institution that you can rely on?
9. Would you like to share any other information about the topic?
10. Do you have any questions that I can answer for you now?
Appendix C

Re: Request for international students’ participation in a doctoral research project

Dear .............

I am writing to request for University X international students’ participation in a doctoral research. I am currently enrolled in the Ed.D. program at West Chester University, and therefore am seeking your support in obtaining students’ emails.

My study is about Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences of racism within higher education institutions in the United States. With this study, I hope to highlight some challenges that these students face with racial issues in the United States. I believe that this study will be a great contribution to existing literature on the topic. Additionally, findings from the study can assist U.S. universities and colleges to tailor services for current and prospective students.

I will provide the informed consent form to participants. Data collected from this study and participant information will be stored confidentially. I can provide any other information concerning this study, upon your request. This research has been approved by West Chester University’s IRB protocol number IRB00005030, and my supervising dissertation advisor is Dr. Orkideh Mohajeri in the Department of Educational Leadership and Higher Education Administration.

Participants taking part in this study will be provided with $10 gift cards upon completion of the Zoom interviews.

I attached the recruitment flyer and the link to the consent form below.

https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9SMD3N727VGetCd

Thank you for your support.

Gloria N. Wafula

gw877754@wcupa.edu
Appendix D

Re: Participation in a Doctoral Dissertation Study

Dear Student,

My name is Gloria Wafula, and I am a doctoral student in Education Policy, Planning, and Administration at West Chester University. Am conducting a study for my Doctoral Dissertation, on Sub-Saharan African international students’ experiences with racism in the United States. This research has been approved by West Chester University’s IRB protocol number IRB00005030. The study covers both current and previous international students at PASSHE institutions.

I kindly request your participation in this research. All information shared during this study will remain confidential and will follow procedures as outlined in the consent form.

To participate, please follow the link below:

https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_9SMD3N727VGtCdg

The interview will take about 30-45 minutes of your time, via Zoom. Please let me know what days/times work best for you.

I have also attached a recruitment flyer, kindly forward this to any other current or previous international students that you know of.

As a small token of appreciation, you will receive a $10 gift card for participation upon completion of the interview.

Thank you!

Gloria N. Wafula

gw877754@wcupa.edu
Appendix E
IRB Approval Letter

Dec 6, 2022 9:15:14 AM EST

To: Gloria Wafula
Col of Education & Social Work


Dear Gloria Wafula:

Thank you for your submitted application to the West Chester University Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Exploring Sub-Saharan African International Students' Experiences of Racism within Higher Education Institutions in the US.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,
West Chester University Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155