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2024

Faculty of Social Science

Faculty Publications

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Original citation:

Godard, R., Holtzman, S., Duffield, E. M., Do, E., Chong, G., & Mathieson, C. M.
(2024). “Stuff that only mixed-race people would understand”: Community and
identity-related experiences in online groups for multiracial people. *Asian Journal of
Social Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12623>

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REGULAR ARTICLE

“Stuff that only mixed-race people would understand”: Community and identity-related experiences in online groups for multiracial people

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Funding information

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Grant/Award Number: 435-2017-0781

Abstract

Multiracial people are a rapidly growing group who may still lack social support from similar others in their offline lives. This study aimed to understand the user experiences in online groups for multiracial individuals. In a cross-sectional online survey, 300 multiracial emerging adults (79% women; mean age=23; most common ethnic identity components: 86% White/European, 44% Chinese, 17% Japanese, 16% Southeast Asian, and 13% Filipino) answered open-ended questions about their experiences in Facebook groups for multiracial people. Participants described aspects of the groups they liked and disliked most, as well as their identity-related experiences in the groups. We used reflexive thematic analysis to generate four themes within participants responses: (1) online groups as a gateway into connections with other multiracial individuals, (2) deriving a sense of belonging and community, (3) an opportunity for exploration and validation of racial identity, and (4) negative intrusions such as negative content (e.g., trolling, repetitive posting) and racism. For racial and ethnic minorities such as multiracial individuals, Facebook groups provide a space for community-building and identity-related experiences. Although online groups can foster a strong sense of community, validation, and belonging, findings also highlight potential challenges and limitations (e.g., how to delineate group boundaries, difficulty forming close relationships). Online group users and researchers should explore novel ways of maximizing these positive experiences while addressing users' concerns and negative experiences.

KEY WORDS

identity-related experiences, multiracialism, online community, online groups, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION

Multiracial individuals (i.e., those who identify with two or more racial/ethnic groups) are a rapidly growing demographic in much of the world (Törngren et al., 2021). In 2020, approximately 15% of children and adolescents in the United States were multiracial, representing an increase of

over 150% since 2010 (Rico et al., 2023). As both multiracialism and society's acceptance of it increase (Rockquemore et al., 2009), there is a growing opportunity for social scientists to study communities of multiracial individuals and members' experiences within these communities.

Multiracial Asian individuals are an important subgroup of the broader multiracial population. Among

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Americans with parents or grandparents of two or more races, Asian–White individuals are the most likely to self-identify as multiracial (70% of Asian–White individuals, compared with 61% of Black–White and 25% of Native American–White individuals; Parker et al., 2015). They are also the most likely to view their multiracial background as an advantage (58% of Asian–White individuals), compared with 25% or less of all other multiracial groups (Parker et al., 2015). These factors may make Asian–White multiracial individuals the most likely to seek out and benefit from community with other multiracial people.

1.1 | Peer influences on identity-related experiences among multiracial individuals

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of peer influences on racial identity (Jugert et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2017), including for multiracial individuals (Jones & Frank, 2023; Jones & Rogers, 2022). Similar to the general population, multiracial individuals benefit from having racially diverse peers (Cardwell et al., 2020; Echols et al., 2018). Multiracial people benefit specifically from connections to multiracial peers, who may be able to understand and validate their experiences in ways monoracial peers cannot (Castillo et al., 2020; Kelcholiver & Leslie, 2007; Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Norman et al., 2023). Research on the experiences of Asian–White and other multiracial individuals in Hawaii and California indicates that a higher prevalence of multiracial peers is associated with a greater sense of inclusion, less racial miscategorization, and greater overall well-being (Does et al., 2023). Multiracial peers can help each other navigate issues specific to the multiracial experience, such as invalidation or questioning of one's racial identity (Maragh-Lloyd & Corsbie-Massay, 2022). This may be particularly beneficial for multiracial people whose parents or extended families are monoracial.

Emerging adulthood (often defined as ages 18–29) is a particularly important period of identity development for multiracial individuals (Atkin et al., 2022; Grilo et al., 2023). According to the narrative approach to identity development, individuals create meaning and narratives based on their past identity-related experiences (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). In the context of racial identity development specifically, identity-related experiences include racial socialization messages from caregivers, experiences with stereotypes and discrimination, and exposure to racial diversity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Multiracial emerging adults experience distinct identity-related experiences compared with their monoracial peers, including experiencing racial miscategorization, receiving racial socialization messages from parents who do not share their racial identity, and

experiencing racial identity-related invalidation from monoracial family members (Atkin et al., 2022).

The ecological framework for understanding multiracial identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1997) describes how these experiences can shape multiracial identity in a variety of ways. It suggests that a multiracial person can develop a healthy relationship with their racial identity through a number of different identity development trajectories (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1997), which are shaped by both their identity-related experiences and the autobiographical narratives they construct about these experiences (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012). Yet, there has been little work on the impact of multiracial peers and community on identity-related experiences. This gap is particularly important because of the potential for multiracial peers and community to facilitate *positive* identity-related experiences and identity development (e.g., validation, belonging; Maragh-Lloyd & Corsbie-Massay, 2022).

1.2 | Identity-related online communities

While some research on multiracial communities has focused on in-person friendships and peer relationships, online platforms may be similarly and perhaps uniquely conducive to facilitating these connections. Although community psychology has historically focused on offline spaces (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), it is increasingly expanding to include online communities (e.g., Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013; Reich, 2010; Ren et al., 2012). According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), communities feature membership and belonging, a sense of mattering to the group, fulfilment of needs, and emotional connection. A growing body of research suggests that these facets of community can all occur in an online medium, even among people who have never met face to face (Gruzd & Haythornthwaite, 2013). Indeed, online groups can connect people across geographic distance and be a valuable source of community and support for people with minority identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals (DeHaan et al., 2013; Fish et al., 2020), people with disabilities (Sannon et al., 2019), and ethnic minority individuals (Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Yang et al., 2020).

Although the multiracial population is growing rapidly, multiracial people (particularly adults) are still a minority and may have difficulty finding a community of similar others in their offline lives. Studies of online spaces for multiracial people are still lacking, yet emerging research has identified positive outcomes of participation in these communities. For example, Maragh-Lloyd and Corsbie-Massay (2022) interviewed multiracial Caribbean Twitter users and found that their online communities provided a sense of belonging, cultural pride, and validation. Similarly, multiracial YouTube creators connect multiracial viewers from

around the world, addressing them as if they were an in-person community (Patterson, 2017). Finally, King-O'Riain (2022) investigated multiracialism-related content produced by Asian–White biracial individuals on the short-form video platform TikTok. These creators used TikTok to build community through increasing visibility and asserting the legitimacy of their Asian identities. These findings indicate that online communities may have unique affordances for multiracial individuals, enabling them to reap the benefits of connections to similar others despite geographic barriers. These benefits include an increased sense of belonging, providing and receiving social support, and positive identity-related experiences, all of which are known to bolster psychological well-being among ethnic minority individuals (Gummadam et al., 2015; Yip, 2018).

One notable gap in the limited literature on online communities for multiracial people is an investigation of private or closed groups. Private groups are typically focused on a specific topic, have administrators or moderators, and require permission from administrators to view and contribute content. The aforementioned studies by Maragh-Lloyd and Corsbie-Massay (2022), Patterson (2017), and King-O'Riain (2022) focused on broadcasting platforms, where users post content in a public forum. While broadcasting is helpful for disseminating information, private contexts may be more beneficial for community formation, particularly when members may wish to discuss sensitive topics (e.g., identity, experiences with racism; Fullwood et al., 2019). Private groups also allow people to interact with the same users repeatedly and form social connections, making them ideal context in which to study peer support and identity-related experiences. Facebook groups have risen dramatically in popularity in recent years (quadrupling in use from 2017 to 2019; Rodriguez, 2020), and they have been linked to community formation, solidarity, and support among racialized populations, such as East Asians coping with COVID-19-related racism (Abidin & Zeng, 2020). Yet, there has been little work on how Facebook groups might operate for multiracial populations.

The overarching goal of the current qualitative study was to examine how multiracial people use and perceive private Facebook groups for multiracial people. We were interested in both general user experiences (e.g., benefits and drawbacks of group use) and in identity-related experiences specifically.

2 | METHOD

Data for this analysis were drawn from a larger mixed-methods study of social support processes in Facebook groups for multiracial people (Godard & Holtzman, 2023). We searched Facebook for private

groups that were (1) related to multiracialism, (2) had at least 1000 members, (3) had an average of at least one post per day, and (4) used English in their group title and description. We identified two groups that met these criteria: Subtle Halfie Traits (SHT; 23,000 members) and Subtle Mixed Traits (SMT; 12,000 members). SHT's administrators describe its mission as “to connect halfies from around the world to create a community that celebrates the Subtle Traits of our culture and subcultures” (Subtle Halfie Traits, n.d.). Similarly, SMT is described as “a place to empower multicultural and multi-ethnic people to share stories, memes, and information about being mixed or being part of a mixed family by birth or guardianship” (Subtle Mixed Traits, n.d.).

After obtaining permission from the group administrators, the first author posted a link on the SHT and SMT groups to recruit participants for an online survey hosted on Qualtrics. Eligible participants self-reported that they were at least 18 years old, self-identified as multiracial, and had been a member of the group for at least 1 month. Inclusion criteria for the current study differed from inclusion criteria for the broader study in that only data from participants aged 18–29 were included in this analysis. All other inclusion criteria were identical. Data were collected between August and September 2020. Participants who completed the survey were entered into a draw for one of five \$100 (CAD) gift cards. This study received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Board at the first author's institution.

Data used in the present analysis were drawn from three open-ended questions. Owing to the exploratory nature of this research, we first asked two broad questions eliciting participants' perspectives on both positive and negative aspects of the groups: “What do you like most about Subtle Halfie/Mixed Traits?” and “What, if anything, do you wish you could change about Subtle Halfie/Mixed Traits?” Next, we drew on work on online groups for people with other marginalized identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals, Fish et al., 2020; people with disabilities, Sannon et al., 2019) to assess the potential role of SMT and SHT in participants' racial identity-related experiences: “Has participating in Subtle Halfie/Mixed Traits affected your racial identity? If yes, please describe how participating in Subtle Halfie/Mixed Traits has affected your racial identity.” In the current analysis, we included a subset of those participants who answered at least one of the open-ended questions above and who were 18–29 years old.

We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Reflexive thematic analysis can be used in conjunction with a variety of philosophical perspectives (e.g., positivism, critical realism, constructivism) and positions along the deductive–inductive continuum. We selected this analytic method because it has been used extensively and fruitfully in prior work on offline experiences among multiracial individuals (e.g., Atkin et al., 2022; Cardwell

et al., 2020; Does et al., 2023; Grilo et al., 2023) and because it is well-suited to the exploratory nature of our research question.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) recommendations for quality practice in reflexive thematic analysis, we briefly outline our philosophical and theoretical perspective before describing the specifics of our analytic method. The philosophical perspective used in this study was constructivism, in which we viewed participants as the primary constructors and generators of knowledge (Polkinghorne, 1991). We used an experiential approach, where participants' perspectives and experiences were central to our analysis and interpretation of our findings. Because this research is exploratory and on a relatively novel topic, we used an inductive approach, where we did not come to the data with preconceived hypotheses. Yet, we simultaneously recognize that our work does not exist in a theoretical vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Although our analyses were informed by prior work on identity-related online groups, we sought to ground our analyses in the data and to maintain an openness to themes beyond those generated in previous research.

The analysis team consisted of two faculty advisors (authors 2 and 6), one graduate student (author 1), and two research assistants (authors 3 and 4). The first author identifies as biracial (East Asian and White) and has been a member of both SHT and SMT since their founding (in 2018 and 2019, respectively), but has not been involved in group moderation or administration. The rest of the research team consisted of three White individuals and two East Asian individuals, none of whom have direct experience with SHT or SMT. Throughout the analytic process, and in line with the "reflexive" aspect of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), we spent time reflecting on our own lived experiences as multiracial and monoracial individuals and how these influenced our understandings of participants' accounts.

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) recommendations, the first phase of our analysis consisted of all members of the research team reading and re-reading the data set in its entirety. During this initial phase, we identified recurring words, phrases, and concepts that resulted in general ideas for coding. We met periodically to discuss our impressions and overall understanding of the dataset. Once all team members felt sufficiently familiar with the dataset, three coders (authors 1, 3, and 4) began generating initial codes. Our goal at this stage was to derive a more succinct list of features within the dataset that still retained the complexity and richness contained within participants' accounts of their experiences in SMT and SHT. Similar to phase 1, we met periodically to discuss and refine our initial codes.

We then engaged in an iterative process of the coders independently generating themes and the research team collectively reviewing and modifying themes (phases 3–5 in Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Each coder generated multiple possible thematic maps that organized the

codes generated in phase two into conceptually related themes. The research team collectively discussed, evaluated, and modified these frameworks, again working towards a parsimonious thematic model that captured the richness of the data. We continued to reference and reconsider participant quotes from each theme to ensure that our framework remained grounded in the data. After we had reached a point where all members of the research team were satisfied that the thematic map "worked" with the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006), two coders (authors 1 and 3) coded the entire dataset using this thematic framework.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Participants

A total of 335 individuals met the eligibility criteria for the current study and completed enough of the online survey to reach the open-ended questions described previously. Of these, 35 participants left all three open-ended questions blank. These 35 participants did not differ significantly from those who answered at least one open-ended question on gender, age, ethnic identity, or country of residence. The final study sample consisted of 300 participants (mean age = 22.9, $SD = 2.6$; 79% women, 13% men, 5% non-binary, 3% other genders). The most common ethnic identities were White/European (86%), Chinese (44%), Japanese (17%), Southeast Asian (16%), and Filipino (13%). The majority (78%) of participants had two monoracial biological parents, while 22% had multiracial biological parents or grandparents. Approximately half (53%) of participants reported living in the United States, followed by Canada (21%) and Australia (12%), with similar patterns seen for citizenship (53% USA, 22% Canada, 12% Australia; 24% of participants were citizens of two or more nations). The length of time participants had been members of SMT or SHT was relatively evenly distributed between 1 and 6 months (29%), 6 and 12 months (39%), and more than 12 months (32%).

We generated four themes related to users' experiences within SMT and SHT: (1) online groups as a gateway, (2) belonging and community, (3) validation of racial identity, and (4) negative intrusions. We also identified tensions within these themes (i.e., participants expressing differing opinions or perspectives on the same topic), reflecting the diverse range of experiences described by participants.

3.2 | Theme 1: Online groups as a gateway

The first theme reflects participants' view of the online groups as a gateway providing unique access to other multiracial people. Many participants drew comparisons

between their offline social networks and the online groups:

I've always felt like I never really belonged because where I grew up most people were monoracial, so no one really understood what my life was like. SMT is a great community for making people like myself feel included and seen.

It provides a sense of community and perspective I can't find elsewhere. I don't know that many people in my life that are mixed.

Participants described the online groups as unique points of access to a large group of other multiracial people. Many stated that this access came with a background layer of understanding that is rare in their offline relationships. Participants described a feeling of others "getting it" or of relief at not having to constantly explain or defend their experiences and racial identity.

Feeling known/seen. There are many spaces where being mixed race you don't feel like people 'get' you and it's a pretty unique space where people share stuff that only mixed race people would understand.

As multiracial people often experience both well-intentioned (e.g., curiosity) and ill-intentioned (e.g., invalidation) questioning of their identity (Cardwell et al., 2020; Franco & O'Brien, 2018; Johnston & Nadal, 2010), these groups can provide respite from the stress of existing as racially in-between individuals in a society that demands simple categories.

3.2.1 | Theme 1, subtheme 1: Similarity and relatability

Participants mentioned that the online groups provided them with access to similar others and/or relatable content, including shared experiences of being multiracial:

It's the first time that I've felt like I have a community of people that understand what I've always felt growing up as a multiracial person. What I thought were experiences unique to me, are actually commonly shared experiences with many people in the group.

Unlike other ethnic minorities, multiracial people are unlikely to grow up around ethnically similar others (Nishina & Witkow, 2020), so they may view themselves as alone in their experiences of racial ambiguity or racial

in-between-ness. Participating in an online group for multiracial people can provide a sense of camaraderie through shared experiences with multiracialism, both positive and negative.

Some participants noted that this sense of similarity emerged despite group members having a variety of racial backgrounds:

Regardless of actual racial background we all share common life experiences and can relate to one another more so than anyone else in this regard.

For these participants, multiracialism is a distinct component of their identity that can connect them even to people with whom they share no common ethnic backgrounds. This also reflects the ecological framework for understanding multiracial identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1997), which posits that multiracial identity is more than the sum of its parts.

Participants also valued the relatability of content they encountered, which occurred even across difference:

I relate to things I see there but also reminds me of how different we all are.

Thus, online groups provide access to both people with similar life experiences and people with different yet relatable experiences.

3.2.2 | Theme 1, subtheme 2: Connections beyond the group

While online groups can serve as important gateways to new social connections, a variety of "cues-filtered-out" theories suggest that online groups may be perceived as limited in the amount of interaction and intimacy they can provide (Walther, 2011). Some participants commented on these limitations:

Facebook itself isn't real conducive to the bonding and interaction I would like.

Yet the challenges associated with forming deep connections on Facebook were not merely a deterrent to users' goals, but rather motivated some users to pursue greater intimacy through other channels. These included smaller groups on Facebook, Discord channels, and in-person meet-ups.

I wish we could almost have... something like small groups? It's not feasible in an online forum, but some sort of smaller, more close-knit break out groups where you get

to know each other more deeply and less publicly.

Despite frustration with the limitations posed by the online group medium, these comments reveal a strength of these groups in creating desire for deeper connection. Participation may open participants' eyes to a type of connection they had not previously experienced and motivate them to pursue these connections further. Thus, in addition to being a gateway to other multiracial people, these groups can also act as a gateway to deeper social connections than are available in many online spaces.

3.3 | Theme 2: Belonging and community

Next, participant described the sense of belonging and community they encountered and created within the online groups. This was often juxtaposed with a lack of belonging felt in other (predominantly monoracial) spaces:

It's one of the only places where I really feel like I actually fit in and people have common experiences. It's a group where I can escape that "impostor syndrome."

These comments indicate that SHT and SMT are a valuable source of support and community.

3.3.1 | Theme 2, subtheme 1: Inclusiveness and diversity

Participants mentioned inclusiveness and diversity as both strengths and drawbacks of the group. Some participants praising the diversity present in the group, while others raised concerns about a lack of diversity and inclusion. Participants who valued the diversity and inclusiveness of the group said they felt connected to a worldwide community of people with a variety of multiracial backgrounds:

I can learn about the experiences of multiracial people from all over the world and see how similar/different they are from mine.

Those who criticized the group's lack of diversity and inclusiveness focused mostly on ethnicity, stating that the group overrepresents and privileges those with White heritage and particularly those with both East Asian and White heritages:

The group mostly contains people who are of mixed Asian/White (which I am as well),

so the content tends to be geared towards those experiences. I do hope that as the group grows, it will become more diverse and inclusive.

Some participants felt that this lack of diversity silenced or invalidated those that did not fit the mould:

[The group should focus] more on accountability and ensuring that more marginalized members can share feelings without being invalidated.

Other participants pointed out a lack of diversity related to language and country of origin. These responses align with demographic data we collected, which indicated that respondents were mostly East Asian and White (56%) and from Western countries (e.g., Canada, USA, Europe, Australia; 93%). Participants who do not fall into these categories may emerge from interactions with the group feeling even more alone or minoritized.

3.3.2 | Theme 2, subtheme 2: Learning from others

Another aspect of belonging and community was the opportunity to learn from others. Participants described learning both from participating in "interesting discussions" and from simply "reading about the other halves' experiences." Some described these discussions as "thoughtful" and indicated that the groups facilitated civil discussions of complex topics:

[Participation caused] me to engage in topics concerning multiracial-ness that I had not been aware of/had not engaged thoughtfully in before.

I like that people talk about inclusivity and try to see things from multiple perspectives. It's a breath of fresh air when people realize that there isn't only one right way or right answer and that different experiences and perspectives are beautiful and valid.

At the same time, others criticized the lack of "serious discussions" and wanted more "deep conversations" rather than shallow or repetitive content.

3.3.3 | Theme 2, subtheme 3: Laughing together

The third subtheme under belonging and community was laughing together. Laughter and shared humour are central parts of many communities (Mullan, 2020).

In these groups, this was accomplished through memes (i.e., an idea or concept that is replicated and passed on; Díaz & Mauricio, 2013) and inside jokes. Many participants mentioned how memes posted in the group were specific to multiracialism and would not be comprehensible or relatable to others:

The humour is always uplifting, I can laugh about relatable situations that no-one in my life circle would understand.

This reflects the concept of the group as a gateway discussed in Theme 1. Group members use humour to create an in-group based on shared life experiences that enable others to “get” the joke. This then creates a sense of community as members experience a deeper connection to others through inside jokes, shared references, and community lore. These responses indicate the important role humour plays within the social dynamics of the community.

3.3.4 | Theme 2, subtheme 4: Positive, respectful environment

Finally, a small number of participants commented on the generally supportive and respectful environment of the groups:

The feeling of belonging... mutual interest, respect, involvement.

I like that people respect each other and are open to hearing how someone else's experience might have been different from their own. I like seeing people uplift and encourage each other even if they don't have 100% the same shared experience.

Feeling that one is respected and supported is a critical part of belonging to a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), yet, it is not something that is always common in online spaces (Primack et al., 2019). These responses indicate that these groups may be a uniquely positive and supportive space on social media.

3.4 | Theme 3: Validation of racial identity

In addition to the interpersonal processes described in Themes 1 and 2, many participants described intrapersonal effects of group membership, particularly involving identity-related experiences. For example,

[Group participation] reassures me that my life experiences as a mixed person are valid.

As multiracial people commonly experience exclusion and invalidation (Cardwell et al., 2020; Johnston

& Nadal, 2010), these validating experiences may have a substantial positive impact on participants' sense of identity.

3.4.1 | Theme 3, subtheme 1: Self-Acceptance And confidence

Some participants described feeling greater self-acceptance and confidence in identifying as multiracial or as a component ethnic identity.

I think I am more accepting myself as I am, I always thought I was “lacking” in identifying with my own ethnic identities.

I never knew how to identify myself before because I didn't realize that I had the valid power to even do so, especially since I couldn't recognize how mislabeled and judged I'd been until joining this group. I didn't even feel like I could boldly claim myself as biracial, which I am, before this because I didn't feel like I was enough of anything to claim it. This group has validated my right to self identify and to correct others when they mislabel me and to embrace all the parts of me proudly.

As predicted by the ecological model of multiracial identity (Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1997), participants expressed security and satisfaction with a variety of different racial identities, including identifying primarily with one ethnic identity, equally with two or more ethnic identities, or with a multiracial identity as distinct from component ethnic identities. This indicates that the online groups are broadly providing validation yet not pushing members towards one particular identity state.

3.4.2 | Theme 3, subtheme 2: Self-exploration and self-work

Some participants mentioned that participating in the online groups had spurred them towards self-exploration and self-work.

Being exposed to more halfie content has surely encouraged me to think more about my own racial identity than I would have otherwise.

While people talk about their experiences and their feelings, I am slowly coming to terms with how I feel, and what I accept as a mixed person.

Participants' descriptions of how the online groups have facilitated self-exploration parallels past work indicating the importance of racial diversity among peers for ethnic identity exploration (Cardwell et al., 2020; Echols et al., 2018). The quotes above indicate that observing others discuss and work through their multiracial identities can help group members in their own identity processes. Online groups may provide a unique opportunity for this, as they allow access to a large group of people who are likely to be exploring their racial identities (i.e., multiracial young adults) and facilitate conversations specifically related to multiracial identity.

3.5 | Theme 4: Negative intrusions

Despite the primarily positive experiences described in Themes 1–3, some participants reported negative experiences. These negative experiences spanned a variety of domains, including poor moderation, arguments between members, and general toxicity, and negativity. For example,

Better moderation. Sometimes some rather unsavoury posts sneak their way in that I would rather not see.

Some people have very obtuse ways of viewing the world and tend to post quite often.

3.5.1 | Theme 4, subtheme 1: Racism, prejudice, and stereotyping

One pattern we identified within the theme of negative intrusions related to racism, prejudice, and stereotyping. Most participants who discussed racism did not describe specific experiences or issues but mentioned that they wanted the group to be less tolerant of racist beliefs. A few participants also described encountering other forms of prejudice (e.g., sexism, homophobia) within the group.

Several participants also mentioned disliking how group members embrace or contribute to stereotypes about multiracial people:

Sometimes there is a lot of posts like “guess my mix” that requires people within the group to stereotype a person's look which makes me uncomfortable. I feel the group can be very based on looks as well with photos being posted of fabulous looking people, to me clearly looking for attention. I'd rather the group be about our universal experience we share as identifying as mixed, rather than about how attractive

mixed people are (to me a negative objectifying stereotype).

Subtle Halfie Traits seems to focus on mixed race meaning an unhealthy childhood sometimes. But I'm not the result of a fetish or had a bad upbringing.

These comments reflect a potential challenge of celebrating shared traits without reinforcing stereotypes. While some participants valued seeing others who look like them or who experienced similar childhood difficulties related to being multiracial, others saw these topics as reductive and harmful.

3.5.2 | Theme 4, subtheme 2: Group boundaries

Finally, a small number of participants raised issues about drawing appropriate group boundaries. All communities require boundaries determining membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), yet these boundaries can also cause harm to those excluded by them. Some participants described the groups as gatekeeping, indicating that boundaries were drawn too harshly.

Many “halfies” are far too dictatorial about who is and isn't a halfie, too quick to judge others.

Maybe [the group should] clarify inclusion of those in adoptive mixed families (through interracial adoption, interracial blended families, etc). People in these situations also are part of the mixed experience.

At the same time, others felt that the group was too open and that boundaries needed to be drawn more strictly.

Less allowing non mixed people in. Feels like I [am] in a zoo and these monoracials come to judge us and our problems.

These responses reflect a tension inherent in community formation, in which some individuals must necessarily be relegated to the out-group while others are welcomed to the in-group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). They also raise questions about how online groups should police and regulate membership, particularly in the context of identity-related groups.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study provides important insights into the ways that online groups can support multiracial individuals

as they navigate issues of belonging and identity. While multiracial individuals continue to face stigmatization and exclusion, accessing multiracial peers who can understand and relate to both positive and negative aspects of being multiracial may mitigate these harms (Kellogg & Liddell, 2012; Maragh-Lloyd & Corsbie-Massay, 2022; Norman et al., 2023). This study suggests that online groups can serve as a gateway to finding similar others who can provide valuable validation and social support.

The first theme we identified, online groups as a gateway, reflects the unique role that online spaces can play in facilitating connections between multiracial individuals. Scholarship on multiracial identity has thus far focused primarily on offline influences, such as family members and offline peers (Rockquemore et al., 2009). Yet, the rapid development of the internet, particularly social media, suggests that online experiences are an increasingly important influence. In this study, many users described SHT and SMT as supportive communities, which was reflected in the second theme of belonging and community. Participants overwhelmingly described the communities found in SHT and SMT in positive terms, highlighting the opportunities they provided for laughter, learning, and belonging. While the online medium provided some challenges to forming close relationships, these were largely overshadowed by the more global sense of belonging and support participants were able to establish.

The third theme, validation of racial identity, reflects how group participation encouraged both self-exploration and self-acceptance. While many users described being drawn to the group for its funny and relatable memes, participation often involved deeper identity-related experiences, including considering how racial identity affects experiences in the dominant culture, evaluating one's level of privilege, and experiencing shifts in racial identity. Furthermore, a number of participants described how group participation affected identity processes in the offline world, such as giving them confidence to claim their racial identity or to participate in cultural practices. These concepts were particularly prevalent from individuals who described themselves as “white-passing” or having a non-50/50 ethnicity split (e.g., claiming a racial identity despite being “only ¼”). The group appears to be expanding the boundaries of the “halfie” or multiracial category to include individuals who may not be perceived as multiracial by the broader monoracial population.

The first three themes of similarity, belonging, and identity validation may intersect and mutually reinforce one another. For example, participants may experience both belonging and validation when viewing memes or inside jokes that mark them as part of the multiracial in-group. The experience of relating to SMT or SHT content may also serve as a source of validation, both of the legitimacy of participants' multiracial identities and of their belonging to the SHT or SMT communities. These

interconnections were reflected in participants' descriptions of their experiences, which often weaved together facets of multiple themes into one coherent narrative. Thus, the themes of relating to others, feeling belonging, and experiencing validation of one's racial identity may constitute an upward spiral that may help explain positive self-reported outcomes of group use.

The fourth theme, negative intrusions, identified concerns related to racism and prejudice, (insufficient or overly restrictive) group boundaries, and generally negative or inappropriate member behaviour. While respondents mentioned some negative intrusions, it is important to note that we directly asked what participants would change about the groups. Furthermore, some participants explicitly stated that they would not change anything about the group (e.g., “it's a great group, no suggestions come to mind”). Even participants who mentioned negative intrusions sometimes qualified these statements (e.g., “[toxicity] goes for every... group”, “people are just being people”). At the same time, addressing issues such as racism, repetitive posting, and general negativity could improve the participation experience for existing users and make the group more appealing to potential new members.

Issues regarding group boundaries are likely more difficult to address given differing perspectives among respondents on whether boundaries were drawn too loosely (e.g., “allowing non mixed people in”) or too tightly (e.g., excluding transracial adoptees). The desire for SHT and SMT to have more expansive, inclusive boundaries may reflect multiracial individuals' tendency to defy boundaries and categorization within monoracial society (Jimenez, 2004; Williams et al., 2022). As described in theme 3, participation in the group validated participants' “right to self identify and to correct others when they mislabel [them].” These perspectives were expressed both by those who are generally recognized as multiracial within society (i.e., racially ambiguous, 50/50 ethnicity split) and by those who are not (i.e., those who are “only ¼” of an ethnicity, “white-passing” individuals), suggesting that racial identity and belonging are policed less strictly in SHT and SMT compared with broader society. Yet, other participants' perspectives suggest that this has gone too far, and that “non mixed” people *should* have their belonging in SHT and SMT questioned. Negotiating group boundaries is likely to be particularly challenging in identity-related (versus interest-related) online groups, as delineating an in-group is necessary for developing and maintaining a social identity (Sanders, 2002). Yet, it remains important to address this negative intrusion to maintain a strong sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Interestingly, a widespread sense of belonging was noted across the sample, despite reports some of negative intrusions. Some of this apparent tension may be attributable to differences in what users consider to be negative intrusions. For example, a post-celebrating the

attractiveness of multiracial individuals may be viewed as stereotyping or exoticization by some and as community-building, relatable content by others. Moderators may be unlikely to intervene in such ambiguous situations, which may have contributed to some participants' dissatisfaction with group moderation. Adverse experiences may also emerge from users discovering the diversity *within* the multiracial communities of SHT and SMT. After experiences of exclusion and invalidation from monoracial society, users may expect a group of other multiracial individuals to universally “get” them and agree with their perspectives and opinions. Yet, multiracial individuals are a diverse group where disagreements and differences will inevitably arise. For some users, these negative intrusions may be enough to prompt them to leave the group. However, the overwhelming sense of community and belonging expressed by participants suggests that for those who remain, the benefits of group participation outweigh the downsides.

4.1 | Implications

Results of this study suggest that multiracial people can experience community, belonging, and validation in online contexts. This finding supports the channel expansion theory of computer-mediated communication, which highlights the role of users' investment and experience in facilitating the rich communication needed to maintain a strong and supportive community (D'Urso & Rains, 2008). Invested users were able to discuss complex issues and experience community in ways that are often difficult to achieve through online platforms. This study also adds to a growing body of research indicating the self-reported benefits of online communities for people with a variety of minority identities, who may not have access to similar others in-person (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals, DeHaan et al., 2013; Fish et al., 2020; people with disabilities, Sannon et al., 2019; Wentzer & Bygholm, 2013; racial/ethnic minorities Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Maragh-Lloyd & Corsbie-Massay, 2022; Mayhew & Weigle, 2018; Patterson, 2017).

Our findings suggest a potential benefit to seeking out supportive online communities for those who lack access to in-person support from others with similar identities. Social support and connection are strong predictors of overall health and well-being (Siedlecki et al., 2014). This is particularly true for minoritized groups (Gummadam et al., 2015; Yip, 2018), for whom a strong affiliation with one's community is critically important (Frost & Meyer, 2023). The particular benefits of identity-related online communities may be due in part to identity affirmation, or positive emotions associated with belonging to an identity-based group (Ghavami et al., 2011). For both ethnic minority individuals and other minoritized groups, identity affirmation mediates the relationship between identity exploration and increased psychological well-being (Ghavami et al., 2011). Our findings that

SHT and SMT participants reported both identity exploration and identity affirmation (e.g., sense of belonging) suggests that these groups may also bolster broader psychological well-being.

This study is the first to our knowledge to investigate private online communities for multiracial people. Much of the literature on identity-related experiences in online contexts focuses on LGBTQ+ spaces (DeHaan et al., 2013; Fish et al., 2020), particularly the role of such spaces in supporting those who have not “come out” within offline relationships (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Yet, SMT and SHT members, many of whom identified as visibly racially ambiguous, also described the groups as a safe space to explore and develop confidence in their (racial) identities. Therefore, the internet is not only a stopover on the route to greater offline self-disclosure, but also a destination in its own right. This suggests the need to consider a variety of ways that online groups might facilitate identity-related experiences for both visible and concealable identities. Future research could examine how these experiences contribute to identity development trajectories, in-group identification, identity centrality, and overall self-esteem.

This research also points out several potential pitfalls within online groups. Although one possible solution to the issues of racism, prejudice, and negativity is better moderation, Facebook group moderators are typically volunteers who have limited time to monitor participant behaviour. One participant who self-identified as a group administrator said they wanted to change “lots of things” about the group but could not, yet it remains unclear why they felt powerless to pursue change. Thus, the issue of how best to support and empower group moderators remains important to address.

Issues raised regarding group boundaries suggest the need for greater clarity on the goals and boundaries of the groups. For example, SMT's group description appears to include transracial adoptees (“being part of a mixed family by birth *or guardianship*”; Subtle Mixed Traits, n.d.), yet one SMT participant felt that those in interracial adoptive families were not adequately included. Others felt that group boundaries were too relaxed, saying that the presence of monoracial individuals made the group feel unsafe. A related issue is one of representation: Although the groups contain people with a variety of ethnic backgrounds, many identified that East Asian and White multiracial individuals' stories were elevated above other experiences. While negotiating boundaries is a necessary task for any community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), more explicit discussion of group boundaries may ease this process.

4.2 | Strengths, limitations, and future directions

A strength of this study was the large, diverse sample, which provided access to a variety of perspectives

and experiences. Many participants offered detailed, thoughtful accounts of their experiences in SHT and SMT, both positive and negative. These responses provided novel insights into the ways multiracial individuals use Facebook groups to build community and exchange social support.

The majority of participants in this study were multiracial Asian individuals, whose experiences may differ from multiracial individuals with other ethnic identity components. Additionally, the majority of our participants lived in the United States, Canada, Australia, or western Europe. Multiracial individuals are a minority in these contexts, which likely influenced participants' overall experiences as multiracial individuals as well as their specific experiences within SHT and SMT. At the same time, we did not assess how long participants had resided in these contexts, and many participants reported holding additional citizenship(s). Additional research is needed to assess whether participants' migration history and degree of acculturation to their country of residence is associated with different experiences in online groups for multiracial people.

Similarly, the timing of data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated anti-Asian racism meant that our participants may have been particularly likely to engage with and benefit from connections to similar others in online groups (as has been demonstrated with monoracial Asian individuals during the pandemic; Abidin & Zeng, 2020; Yang et al., 2020). These factors make SHT and SMT ideal contexts to study the impact of online group use, yet they may also limit the generalizability of our findings. Further research is needed to identify whether online group use has similar effects for multiracial individuals who are not experiencing acute racial stress or discrimination.

Participants in this study were likely to be highly engaged and invested users relative to others in the group. On one hand, these users are an ideal population for study since they are likely to experience the largest effects of participation, both positive and negative. At the same time, past research (Fullwood et al., 2019; Sannon et al., 2019) indicates that passive users (i.e., lurkers) may still reap substantial benefits from support groups. Some participants noted that they still enjoyed using SHT or SMT despite being passive users. Recruiting a broader spectrum of users (e.g., lurkers, occasional users, new members) could provide greater insight in future research.

Another limitation of this study was the use of an online survey for data collection, which produced some unclear or vague responses. Nonetheless, the large number of respondents ensured that common themes were described in sufficient detail by at least some participants. Finally, our study is limited by the cross-sectional nature of the data, which could introduce bias when participants describe identity-related processes that unfold over time. It is possible that users did not accurately

remember their experiences in SHT and SMT. At the same time, we were primarily interested in users' subjective perspectives on their participation in SHT and SMT, so asking participants to retrospectively reflect on their identity-related and group experiences was an appropriate methodology for this research question.

The results of this study reveal the need for further research into online communities for multiracial people. Multiracial people are a growing demographic who are increasingly seeking to form communities around their unique identities and experiences. Online spaces are ideal for this type of community formation, yet there is very little research on user experiences in these spaces. Future research could use a longitudinal design to capture changes in participation, sense of community, and racial identity over time. A longitudinal design would be particularly beneficial for addressing questions about racial identity development. Although our study investigated participants' reflections on their identity-related experiences, the use of a cross-sectional survey precluded exploration of deeper developmental processes. Future research can build on our investigation by examining how multiracial individuals create meaning and narratives out of their online identity-related experiences (McLean & Pasupathi, 2012).

Future research could also test whether participating in groups like SHT and SMT could serve as an effective intervention for multiracial individuals experiencing social isolation or lack of acceptance and understanding from their offline communities. Past work on online support interventions has shown positive effects, but these studies have largely focused on health-related groups (Zhang et al., 2017). Yet, support from similar others may be even *more* beneficial in an identity-related context because of the potential for identity affirmation, or increased positive feelings about one's minoritized social group (Ghavami et al., 2011). Although findings from this cross-sectional study must be interpreted cautiously, they suggest the potential for positive outcomes from online social support interventions (e.g., online groups) for non-health-related identities and concerns.

Finally, future research could also examine effects of online group use for multiracial individuals of different ages, particularly adolescents. This could identify developmental factors that impact multiracial people's experiences in online groups. Recruiting a more diverse sample in terms of gender, ethnicity, country of residence, and frequency of use of online groups could also provide a more complete picture of online group use for multiracial people.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study provides a valuable first step into the intersection of two increasingly important topics: multiracialism and online group use. It suggests that

multiracial individuals report numerous inter- and intrapersonal benefits from online group use, despite some notable concerns around moderation and group boundaries. Future research is needed to better understand the ways multiracial people use online groups and the impacts group use has on community, belonging, and identity.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Rebecca Godard: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; project administration; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Susan Holtzman:** Formal analysis; funding acquisition; supervision; writing – review and editing. **Enya M. Duffield:** Formal analysis. **Elisa Do:** Formal analysis. **Gale Chong:** Writing – original draft. **Cynthia Mathieson:** Formal analysis; methodology; supervision.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was supported by an Insight Grant to the second author from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (435-2017-0781).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research materials are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval for this study was obtained from the first author's institution (H20-01480).

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How to cite this article: Godard, R., Holtzman, S., Duffield, E. M., Do, E., Chong, G., & Mathieson, C. (2024). “Stuff that only mixed-race people would understand”: Community and identity-related experiences in online groups for multiracial people. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 00, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12623>