32 FLAVORS of
BLACK WOMEN

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We need to give every ch

they look like, where they live, the change

hild, no matter what
e to reach their full potentential.

President Barak Obama, My Brother's Keeper Alliance

In 2014, President Obama launched My Brother's Keeper, an initiative to connect young people to mentoring, support networks, and the skills they need to find a good job or go to college and work their way into the middle class. Focused on young men of color, My Brother's Keeper addresses the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color and ensure that all young people can reach their full potential.

5.5 Million

American young a
working nor enrolle

THE PROBLEM

dults are neither
ed in school.

Zeroing in on **Race and Place, Measure of America, 2015**

A Across the United States, many young adults struggle in their transition to adulthood and are considered "disconnected". Disconnected youth are teenagers and young adults between the ages of 16 and 24 who are neither working nor in school. Being cut off from institutions of higher learning and employment not only creates a grave economic outlook, including lower wages and higher unemployment rates, but also can be linked to more disconnected youth engaging in criminal activity and having worse health outcomes.

Without the support formal institutions offer, the effects of disconnection continue to follow them well into their adult years, as they have lower wages, higher unemployment rates, and experience less job satisfaction and even less happiness than their peers who did not experience youth disconnection. They miss out on vital experiences and information needed to help them develop themselves.

This problem not only affects the individuals, but it is also felt by society - with a labor force with fewer skilled workers, a greater need for public assistance, and the high costs of crime and incarceration. Disconnected youth, on average, cost about $53,000 a year to support. Similarly, communities experience higher crime and incarceration rates, as disconnected youth are more likely to be involved in criminal activities.

Causes of Disconnection

Disproportionately young adults who are unable to find work or get in school are made up of minorities such as African American, Hispanic and Native American, who live in high poverty areas, and have a high school education or less.

INCOME/ ECONOMIC STATUS

Disconnected young people tend to come from communities that are themselves disconnected from the mainstream by segregation and concentrated disadvantage. Their struggles with education and employment mirror those of their parents and neighbors.
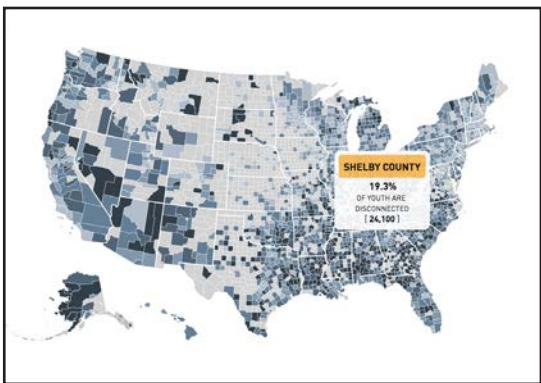
LOCATION

Regionally, disconnection rates vary, with young people in the Midwest being the least likely to be disconnected and young people in the South the most likely to be disconnected. Similarly, depending on where you live in a city affects the rate of disconnection. Young people living in rural areas have the highest rate of youth disconnection, while suburban youth are the least likely to be disconnected.

RACE & GENDER

The highest rates of disconnection occur in Native Americans, Blacks, and Latinos. Nationally, Black women are much less likely than their counterparts to be disconnected (15.7 vs 21.9). However, disconnected black girls and young women have the highest rate of poverty of any racial/ethnic and gender combination (51.4 percent), slightly surpassing that of black boys.

Who Are America's Disconnected Youth?
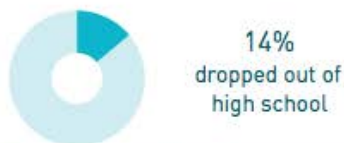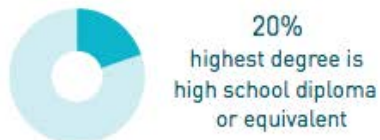
Connected Youth

33,691,218
young adults

49% — 51%

POVERTY

21%
lives in a poor
household

EDUCATION

14%
dropped out of
high school

EDUCATION

20%
highest degree is
high school diploma
or equivalent

YOUNG MOTHERHOOD

10%
women with
children

DISABILITY

4%
with a disability

Disconnected Youth

5,808,827
young adults

47% — 53%

POVERTY

39%
lives in a poor
household

EDUCATION

33%
dropped out of
high school

EDUCATION

46%
highest degree is
high school diploma
or equivalent

YOUNG MOTHERHOOD

35%
women with
children
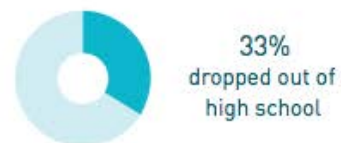
DISABILITY

13%
with a disability

Source: Measure of America analysis of U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2010 PUMS Microdata.
Note: Women with children includes biological, step, and adopted children.

Memphis, TN ranked 98

rmetropolitan areas, having the highest r

th **of 98**

ate of disconnected youth in the country.

Existing Interventions

"Our objective with any youth is to get them a job. The greatest challenge we face is how to provide a framework of looking toward the future and provide the social support they need.

Jessica Croslow, Workforce Investment Network

Many organizations, nationally (i.e. My Brother's Keeper, 1000,000 Opportunities and Year Up) and locally, are working to connect young adults to jobs and educational opportunities. In the US and other countries, establishing more alternatives to the four-year college path have proved to expand options available to young people who need additional education and training after high school but are not bound for a traditional bachelor's degree program.

But when speaking to program coordinators, a job or degree isn't enough. Matching disconnected youth with one-off summer internships or low-wage jobs does not plant them firmly on the path to a productive and secure adulthood. With programs structured in a way that meets the immediate need, they are not equp to address the more in depth issues. Disconnected youth tend to need additional support to grapple with personal and family issues, gain credentials, develop soft skills and confidence, address health issues, deal with housing and transportation issues, and more.

With over 30,000 disconnected youth, my hometown, Memphis,TN, ranked 98th out of 98 metropolitan areas for having the highest number of disconnected youth in the country. To understand the issue specific to Memphis, Seeding Success, a local partnership network released a report showing that the majority of disconnected youth are African American, between the ages of 20-24 and have graduated from high school and/or attended some college. They also accounted for barriers such offenders, low income, pregnant and parenting youth, basic skills deficiency, people who need additional assistance, and financial funding to go to school for non traditional secondary tracks.

Under the Workforce Investment Opportunity Act, Memphis, Workforuce Investment Network and Seeding Success created the Opportunity Youth Collective Action Network and committed to serve 1300 youth in 2017. Through this initiative, nonprofits and contractors, who receive funds to serve disconnected youth populations in the city, meet monthly in an effort to maximize their reach and learn best practices.

RESEARCH

In Memphis, the majority of disconnected youth actually finish high school. However, there tends to be a lack of support in the transition between high school to college and career. Beyond the obvious benefits of a degree or an income, disconnected youth miss other benefits and lack support structures such as family and community organizations.

Disconnection

ADVANTAGES OF CONNECTION

- Degree/Credentials
- Skills

- Higher civic and political participation
- Greater ability to adjust to change
- Stronger and more extensive social bonds
- More stable relationships
- Better predictor of health
- Network

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Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a critical period for forming one's adult identity and moving toward independence and self-sufficiency. These years tend to set a person's long-term social and professional trajectory and cement important relationships." professional trajectory and cement important relationships."
-Measure of America

One of the main struggles of emerging adulthood is the feeling of lost identity and self-definition amongst emerging adults. Emerging adults are on an intense search for personal authenticity, awareness, and personal definition.

More affluent children are afforded the luxury of time as well as financial, emotional, and social resources as they transition to adulthood. It is hard or even impossible to focus on self actualization until basic needs are met.

"

"I want to find out who I am, what I like and see how I have developed, what things I can work to better myself. Those are questions that I ask myself a lot. This last year I've really been asking myself that.

K., Participant

Personal Development

All young adults struggle with self identity. For young adults who are disconnected, this is coupled with trying to make ends meet.

One of the most important things for reconnection is personal development - having an understanding of who they are, what they like, and where they want to go. Those who operate from a survival mentality fail to take advantage of opportunities and resources that lead to reaching one's full potential.

"I took an inventory of skills and personality tests. But nobody was really around to try dig in. I didn't know what my skills and abilities were. How do we help people tap into that which can make them self sustainable?"

- Melody Freeman

How might we provide a space for

to explore self identity and actualize their p
efficacy and confidence?

r low income, disconnected youth

ossible selves in order to increase their self-
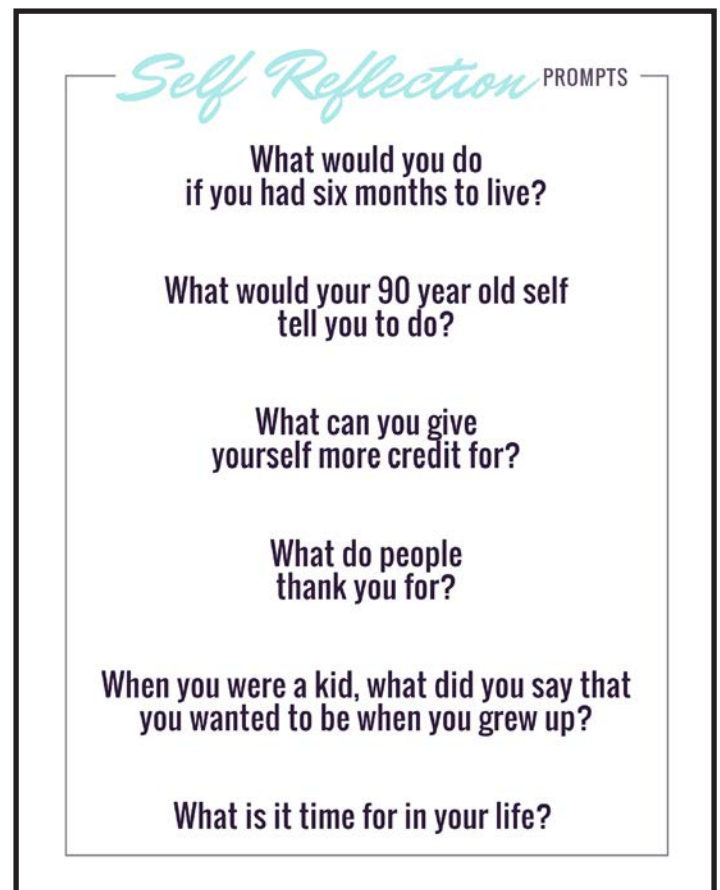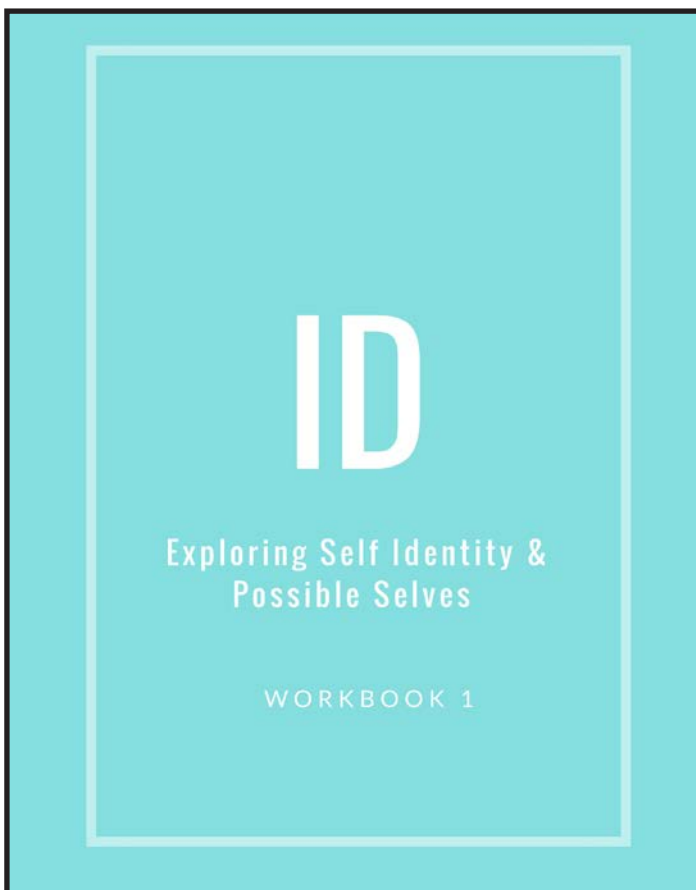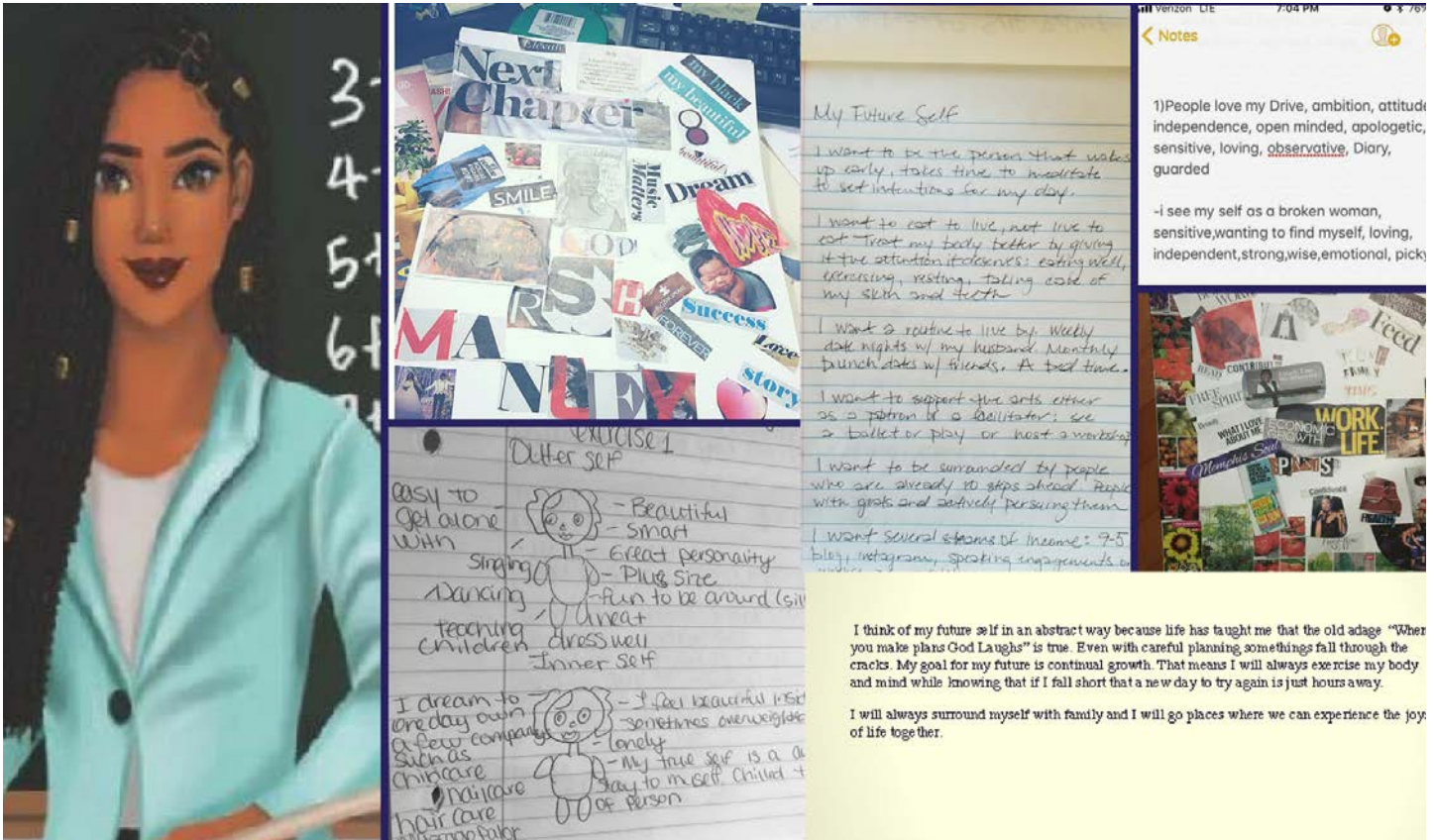
PROTOTYPES

Self Identity & Possible Selves

Through a series of activities and conversations, participants were asked to explore self identity as a means to find one's true purpose and unlock potential. A workbook was developed to help resolve any discrepancies that may have existed between her current self and future self, understand how one expresses identity, and craft a better definition of who she is in the world and what her values are.

Possible selves represent individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming. The workbook aslo gave each woman space to have a better understanding of her possibilities and obstacles in place of them.

After a series of conversation, a workshop was developed to furter exlpre identity together and served as a co-creation workshop where the facilitator and participants discussed solutions as a continuation of the exploration of possible selves.

ID

Exploring Self Identity &
Possible Selves

WORKBOOK 1

Self Reflection PROMPTS

What would you do
if you had six months to live?

What would your 90 year old self
tell you to do?

What can you give
yourself more credit for?

What do people
thank you for?

When you were a kid, what did you say that
you wanted to be when you grew up?

What is it time for in your life?

Being Black & Being Woman
In the Process of Self Discovery

"I never thought of myself as anything but black. There was never a distinguishing characteristic. I'm just black....then I came to Memphis and realized there's like 32...hundred flavors of black girls."

D., Participant

Sitting with a group of young black women, they begin to discuss identity, from their unique persective. They expressed the feeling of inferiority they feel not only from outside, but also from within.

Everyday, black women wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity as the world around them demands that they be accommodating and resist being their authentic selves in order to be recognized. This double consciousness, as described by WEB Dubois, or intersection of being black and being a woman, as coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, makes it difficult or impossible to have one unified identity.

Black women are considered strong, oversexualized, magical. They are the backbone of their family and their communities. As Melissa Harris Perry said in her book, Sister Citizen, "The strong black woman is easily recognizable. She confronts all trials and tribulations. She is a source of unlimited support for her family. She is a motivated, hardworking breadwinner. She is always prepared to do what needs to be done for her family and her people. She is sacrificial and smart. She suppresses her emotional needs while anticipating those of others. She has an irrepressible spirit that is unbroken by a legacy of oppression, poverty, and rejection.

But strong, angry, and loud can all make it very difficult as one tries to understand who they are. Without being proud of being a black women, young black women are hindered in their process of self-discovery.

Being Black & Being Woman
In the Process of Self Discovery

DOUBT

Black women doubt themselves because they don't fit into expectations/ stereotypes of what a black women was suppose to look like, act like, etc.
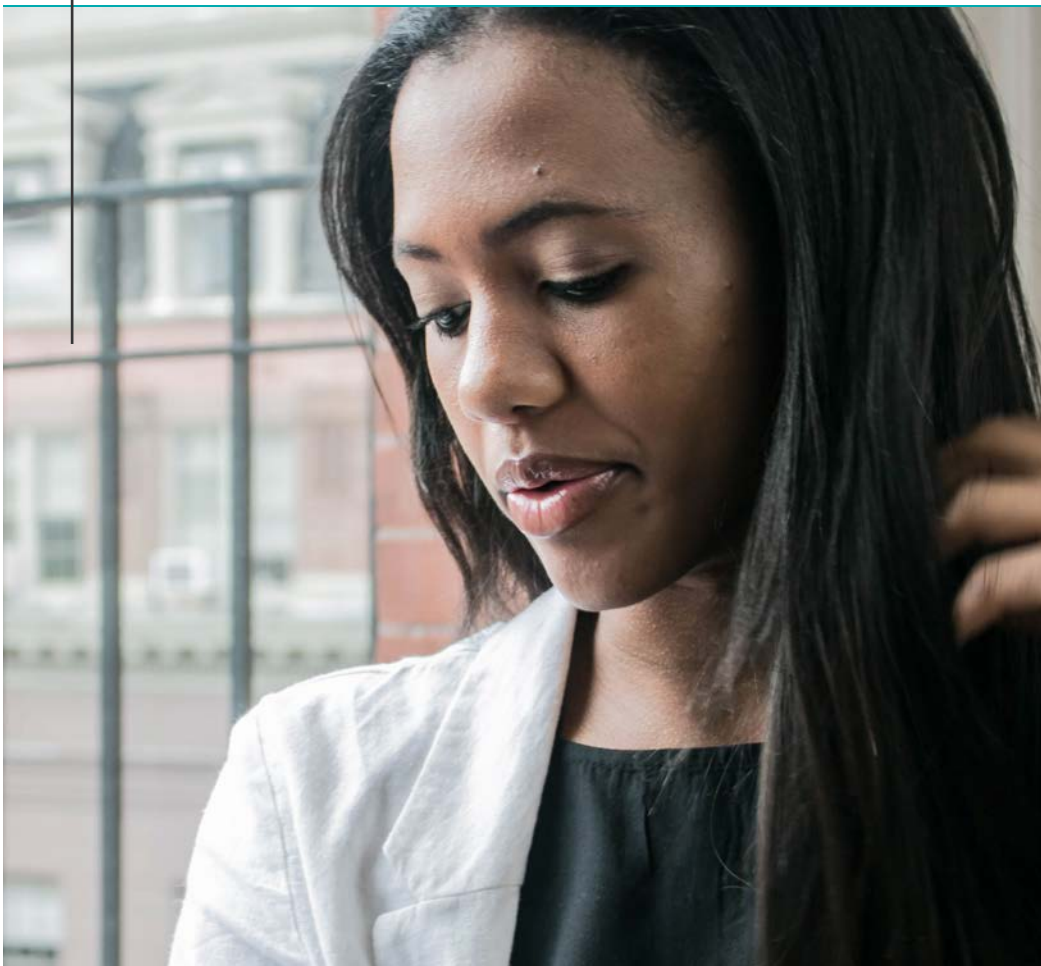
DIVISION

Black women create divisions among themselves based on layers of identity - such as physical, emotional, and other insecurities

DECIDE & DECLARE

One's identity isn't just about how they see themselves. It is also influenced by their interaction with others. If you feel good about being a black woman first before, then you can even begin to feel good about who you are.

How Might We Create a Space

to regularly explore self identity regularly in a saf
black women to be heard, accepted and validat

e for Black Women

e non judgmental environment, a place for
ed in their process of self-discovery?

When I identified with certain things, I would feel like the things I identified with were wrong because it wasn't typical black women things. So you begin to question yourself."

Carmeon, Participant

INTERVENTION

Affinity Groups

An affinity group is a gathering of people where all members share a common identity such as race, gender, sexuality, interest. In many organizations and institutions, these groups exist as a place where members can explore, celebrate, sustain, and process their experiences around the common identity.

Our understanding of identity is not limited to how we see ourselves, but also take into account our interactions with others, the groups we belomg to, and the value placed on those groups both internally and externally. We all experience a multifaceted identity, but search for a place where we can share experiences with those in common with us.

Affinity   groups   have   two   main   purposes - emotional and instrumental support. First, affinity groups provide emotional support by allowing a place for one to express sensitive emotions.

Parsons and Ridley (2012) claim "the relationships students   gain   through   race-based   affinity groups enable them to feel less alone with their emotions and help them build a stronger sense of self". Additionally, affinity groups offer instrumental support by giving a place to work towards one's personal goals as well as share information. Regardless of the affinity group type, they provide social support around identity, a place for collaboration, create space to legitimatize the shared identity.

Specifically, for black women, there are many types of affinity groups that exists such as sororities, professional groups,   and interests group. But these groups have exclusive memberships bound by age, professional and educational status, social class, and interests, leaving a group of black women, specifically those who are disconnected, without the support they need and without the space they desire.
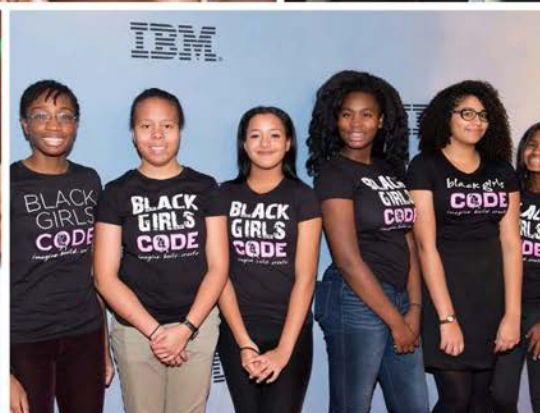
A F F I N I T Y   G R O U P S

- **PROMPTS REFLECTION**
- **CREATES A SENSE OF BELONGING**
- **PROMOTES SELF-IDENTITY**
- **DEVELOPS EMPATHY**
- **NETWORK & SHARE INFORMATION**

A F F I N I T Y   G R O U P S

AGE

PROFESSIONAL STATUS

EDUCATION STATUS

AFFINITY GROUPS

SOCIAL CLASS

??

INTEREST
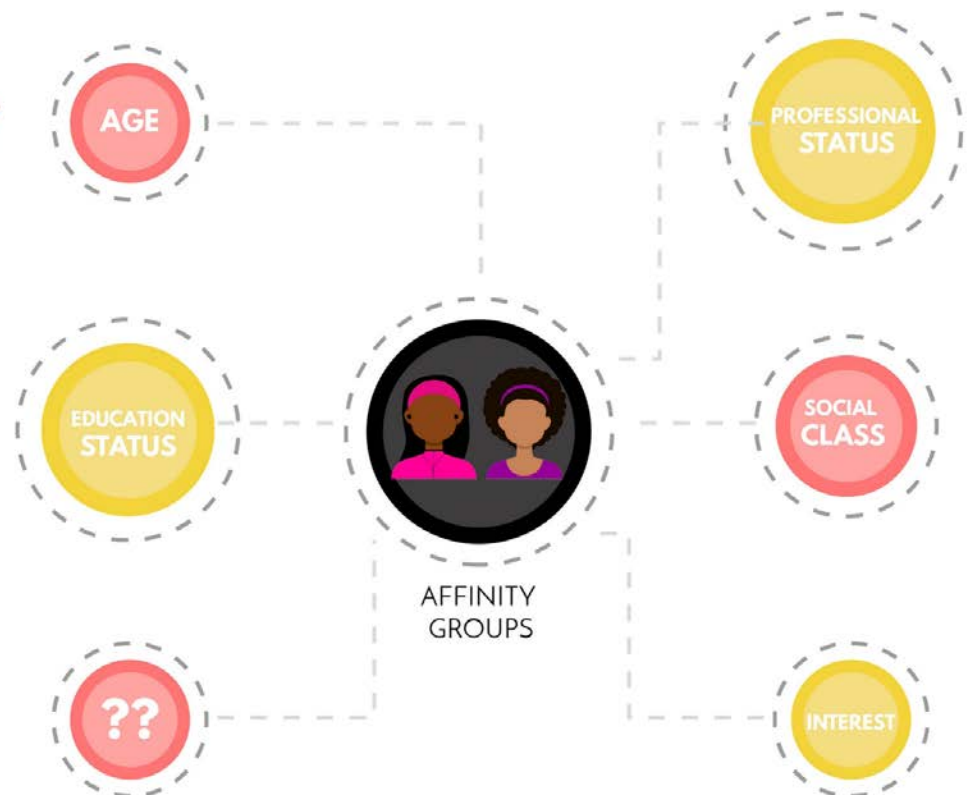
32 Flavors of Black Women create

to exploring identity through a series of acti
understanding of who they are and be affir

I LIKE BEING

es a safe space for Black Women

vities and discussion. They are able to gain
rmed in their multifaceted identity.

ABLE TO SHARE EXPERIENCES WITH OTHER
BLACK WOMEN.

THE EXERCISES CAUSED ME T
ABOUT MY IDENTITY I

TO SELF REFLECT AND THINK
IN A DIFFERENT WAY.

After a series of successful prototypes, it is my hope to continu[e]
feedback and creativity of black women, I want to take 32 F[lavors]
all over the country. Bringing together the old and the young[er]
ultimately be a place where black women realize they are end[...]

e to prototype 32 Flavors in Memphis through 2018. Using the
Flavors beyond Memphis and create spaces for black women
, 32 Flavors hopes to not only provide emotional support, but
ough.

NEXT STEPS

LEARNINGS

Through this thesis process, I learned to trust myself, trust the process, and when things are going the way they should, keep going. The work that we do as social designers is not easy, requires immense dedication of our time and energy.

More importantly, through this research specifically, I learned that I as a black women need a place where I too can learn and become the best version of myself. Many times, I questioned myself. As I looked at the problem from outside and from within, I realized more than anything, problems are truly about perspective and having a unique perspective is valuable. I look forward to working more in the field of social design and bringing my full self to every project and in every process.

Acknowledgments

**I would like to acknoweledge and give a special thank to all of the support
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Research/Workshop Participants

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blk creatives

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