

3 Beyond the Band and Game

The sociocultural impact of a Historically Black College and University homecoming experience

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Introduction

Although the traditions and cultural importance of homecomings vary by each institution, Historically Black College and University (HBCU) homecomings create a space to celebrate Black culture and excellence. As a week-long festival, HBCU homecomings are planned to celebrate the history and culture of Black excellence among students, alumni, and community members (Allen, 2020; Taylor, 2011). HBCU homecomings provide a unique space for congregation and celebration as a week-long festival rooted in a tradition distinctive to the collective experience of African Americans (Foster, 2022).

The historical significance of HBCU homecomings dates to times of legal segregation and enslavement in the United States when African Americans were prohibited from gathering during times of leisure (Lande, 2020). As marches and protests for civil rights have occurred across the United States, homecomings continue to provide a space for African Americans to gather and celebrate the history and legacy of HBCUs that embrace Black culture and identity without fear of threat or violence from non-Black community members.

History of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

The history of HBCUs often contributes additional meaning to the transformative experience of attending homecoming, including the feelings of pride and unity described by participants in this unique event. The first HBCU was established in 1837, and the number of HBCUs founded in the United States began to grow after the end of legal forms of enslavement through the passage of the Emancipation Proclamation at the end of the American Civil War (1861–1865). Despite the end of slavery, legal forms of racial segregation, also known as Jim Crow laws, which prohibited African Americans from attaining higher education opportunities at historically white institutions (HWIs), continued to exist throughout the United States (Brown II, 2013).

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While the earliest HBCUs were private institutions established by religious organisations to educate enslaved people (Brown & Davis, 2001), the second Morrill Act passed in 1890 required state governments with racially segregated education systems to provide land-grant funding for public Black colleges and universities. The mission of HBCUs includes six specific goals (Brown II, 2013, p. 5; Walters, 1991):

1. Maintain the Black historical and cultural tradition (and cultural influences emanating from the Black community);
2. The provision of key leadership for the Black community, given the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs;
3. Provide an economic centre in the Black community;
4. Provision of Black role models to interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact Black people;
5. Provide college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority and majority population groups;
6. Produce Black agents for specialised research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities.

While a few HWIs, such as Oberlin and Amherst College, accepted African Americans, HWIs were permitted to uphold legal forms of racial segregation and deny applications on the basis of race (Brown & Davis, 2001). Between 1890 and 1964, the majority of HBCUs were established in the United States to provide African Americans with the opportunity to seek a college education despite the ongoing maintenance of segregation in the U.S. Institutions provided students with a range of academic programs and vocational training that empowered students and provided social advancement opportunities for African Americans during times of legal segregation in the United States. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, HBCUs became centres for activism, and students led marches and sit-ins, and participated in Freedom Rides and other protests to fight for racial equality and social justice (Davis et al., 2018). These protests led to the desegregation of public spaces, which allowed all citizens to pursue leisure and recreation in the United States.

Today, approximately 30% of all Black and African American doctorate recipients in science and engineering disciplines were awarded an undergraduate degree from an HBCU (Upton & Tanenbaum, 2014). Black Ph.D.s, military officers, doctors, and federal judges consider HBCUs their home (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). HBCUs have expanded to provide professional schools in medicine, law, business, engineering, and other comprehensive educational pursuits that support the advancement of African American and non-Black students. As enrolment continues to rise, students choose to attend HBCUs for many reasons, including “the rich history, the Greek life, the homecoming festivities, the freedom to be unapologetically Black” (Davis et al., 2018, p. 4).

Celebrations of Freedom and Culture

An Evolution of Festivals

The earliest documented festivals that allowed freed and enslaved African Americans to attend included abolition festivals and freedom celebrations held from 1808 to 1915 (Kachun, 2006). While multiple celebrations acknowledging the experiences of African Americans occur in the United States, Juneteenth is the most widely known festival, which commemorates 19 June 1865, the date the last group of people enslaved in America found out they had been freed (Kachun, 2006; Lande, 2020). Examples of abolition festivals include the planning of July 5th anti-Independence Day ceremonies that provided educational knowledge and protested slavery since African Americans were excluded from the 4th of July and other American festivals (Kachun, 2006; Lande, 2020). Unlike abolition festivals, which were intentional events that sought to abolish slavery and gain human rights, freedom celebrations were planned as festivals to uplift African American identity while combating racism experienced during legal segregation of the 19th and 20th centuries (Kachun, 2006; Rezek, 2010).

The Homecoming Experience

The historical significance of HBCU homecomings dates to times of legal segregation when celebrations for Black culture and excellence were minimised. Sometimes, African Americans gathering in public settings was prohibited (Lande, 2020). Historically, HBCUs have provided African Americans with opportunities to engage in leisure through social gatherings and cultural celebrations without the fear of facing discrimination or harassment and, in some cases, death. While African Americans were limited to participation in social events that were planned and implemented by churches during times of legal segregation (Fletcher, 2015; Vickers & Graham, 2015), HBCUs create safe and inclusive spaces for students to engage in leisure by joining various student organisations, sports teams, and other interest groups without being subjected to oppressive and discriminatory behaviours. Attending HBCUs also provided African American students better chances of obtaining leadership positions within student organisations or being selected for the royal court, symbolising the leadership, academic excellence, and community service of HBCU homecoming ambassadors (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002). The rich experiences obtained by HBCU students have been documented throughout history in the form of storytelling (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

Evolution of Storytelling

Storytelling through Oral Histories

Storytelling has existed for as long as humans, and our understanding of the concept is strongly related to information shared through stories (Yılmaz & Cığerci,

2019). Humans have told stories in one way or another. From cave paintings to oral myths and songs, persuasive literature to photographs, radio to television, and media platforms to virtual reality, human beings have used stories to educate, entertain, and persuade. Storytelling has undergone significant evolution, adapting to changes in technology, cultural shifts, and new mediums of communication that increase how interactive and accessible the art form can be while still meeting the needs of humans (Yilmaz & Cigerci, 2019). This evolution has led to digital storytelling being acknowledged as a viable means for relating information between messenger and audience.

Black Americans have a rich and profound tradition of engaging in oral history and storytelling (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Throughout history, oral traditions have been a significant means of preserving and passing down cultural heritage, history, values, and experiences within Black communities (Hamlet, 2011). Enslaved Africans brought griots and oral traditions, which continued during slavery through narratives and spirituals (Banks-Wallace, 2002). The Great Migration spread these practices, and the Harlem Renaissance amplified Black voices through literature and art. Oral storytelling within families preserves heritage, while activists used stories during the Civil Rights Movement. Today, African Americans continue this tradition through spoken word, podcasts, and digital platforms, addressing contemporary issues and celebrating achievements (Lu & Steele, 2019; Miller, 2023). Digital storytelling is used in sales, advertising, and entertainment and is still a viable tool for teaching subjects in higher education (Manwani & Guruprasad, 2022). Intentionally incorporating the act of sharing stories in educational settings encourages students to engage in a reflective process where they can connect to the content and learning on a deeply personal level (Hamilton et al., 2019; Ivala et al., 2014) and produce something they can be proud of (Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007).

Storytelling as a Tool for Student Reflection in Higher Education

Reflection exercises prompt metacognition, teaching students to think about their work and how they communicate about their learning, thus enhancing the learner's experience. Digital storytelling has been used with higher education students in pre-service education (Dreyer, 2017; Ivala et al., 2013; Kocaman-Karoglu, 2016), study abroad (Hamilton et al., 2019), and landscaping, accounting, and sports development (Jenkins & Lonsdale, 2007). Studies have found that when students share with their peers to reflect on their work, they are more likely to have a dialogue where they question, critique, motivate, share feelings, and propose solutions to each other during the learning process (Hamilton et al., 2019; Kocaman-Karoglu, 2016; Manwani & Guruprasad, 2022). Kocaman-Karoglu (2016) also found that students felt optimistic about using digital storytelling in their coursework because it was fun and exciting, easy to use, practical, taught them how to be more organised, and gave them autonomy in expressing their thoughts.

Cultivating higher-order thinking skills in students before they enter the workforce has been a critical part of curricula, and incorporating storytelling as an

instructional strategy helps students concretise the knowledge they have acquired. Stories in experience, stories about experience, and stories for experience provide students with opportunities to expand critical thinking skills (Alterio & McDrury, 2003). For HBCU homecomings, students, alumni, and community members are brought together for one week to celebrate the institution. Intergenerational connections provide participants with an opportunity to socialise and share experiences. Storytelling about homecoming allows participants to note their experiences, and extending the research to include leisure and tourism will provide another context in which digital storytelling encourages self-expression, metacognition, and practical digital skill acquisition.

Digital Storytelling in Leisure and Tourism

According to Dionisio and Nisi (2021), today's travellers increasingly demand authentic, experientially oriented opportunities that include meaningful interactions. Digital media technology makes it possible for stories to be quickly created and shared widely (Dionisio & Nisi, 2021) and elements of a good digital story – authenticity (Mei et al., 2020), engagement and relatability (Borum Chattoo & Feldman, 2017), structure (Roque, 2022), experience (Hudak, 2019), and dynamic visuals and audio (Finkler & Leon, 2019) have been essential to the success of sharing information.

Storytelling allows leisure and tourism content creators and influencers to promote the identity of a destination or experience by sharing unique narratives that showcase the local culture, traditions, and people (Roque, 2022). Leveraging storytelling techniques to share diverse, memorable, interactive experiences across various social media platforms can generate compelling content that invites audience interaction and participation (Hudak, 2019; Mei et al., 2020). When people have memorable experiences, they are more likely to share their stories with others, creating a ripple effect that amplifies a brand's value, an event's prestige, or a location's reputation – and a visitor's connection and likelihood to return (Hudak, 2019; Jo et al., 2022). User-generated content has become a significant part of the marketing ecosystem, with influencers making a reported \$16.4 billion in 2022 (Geyser, 2023), with over 75% of brands including influencer marketing in their budgets (Geyser, 2023; Leung et al., 2022). This emphasises the importance of facilitating opportunities to develop storytelling skills on social media.

This study examines the HBCU homecoming experience through reflections and digital stories shared by students attending Florida A&M University (FAMU), an HBCU in the U.S. Southeast. To guide our research, we focused on several questions:

- RQ1:** What was the post-COVID-19 homecoming experience like for undergraduate leisure and tourism students at an HBCU in the U.S. Southeast?
- RQ2:** How did student reflections reveal the impact of digital storytelling on the ways participants engaged in the homecoming experience?

Research Methods

A convenient sample of undergraduate students between 18 and 25 years old enrolled in a tourism course in the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation (HPER) at FAMU were recruited to participate in the study. Located in Tallahassee, Florida, United States, FAMU was recently ranked 91 among all public universities and has held the rank of the number one public HBCU in the United States for the past five years (U.S. News & World Report, 2023). Founded in 1887, FAMU remains one of the top producers of baccalaureate degrees awarded to African Americans. Compared with other universities in the Florida State University System, a significant number of Ph.D. earners also graduate from FAMU. Students who attend FAMU can participate in a wide range of activities, including over 100 student organisations, collegiate sports, and campus recreation opportunities.

Most students enrolled in the tourism course ($n = 28$) identified as African and Black American ($n = 25$). Half the students ($n = 14$) also indicated transferring from another higher education institution to FAMU. They indicated that the 2022 homecoming was their first HBCU homecoming experience due to the cancellation of the event for COVID-19 during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years. The university's theme for the 2022 homecoming celebration was "The Experience." Before completing the study, students were informed of tourism marketing and motivation for travel theories six weeks before homecoming. Two weeks before the "FAMU Homecoming Experience," a co-author provided a guest lecture on storytelling and the use of digital storytelling as a medium to inform and market leisure and tourism experiences for community festivals and celebrations related to attending the homecoming celebration. Students were asked to use storytelling to create a social media marketing strategy centred around their homecoming experience, share their stories with their respective audiences in a digital format, present the artefacts they created to other participants in the study, and submit a written reflection about their experience. The reflection prompt was analysed for the current chapter to understand the historical and cultural representations that influenced their connection to the institution and how they told digital stories to reflect those experiences.

To analyse the digital storytelling artefacts and reflections submitted for the study, thematic analysis was used to identify the major themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is an appropriate data analysis method for exploring the different themes related to qualitative data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The co-authors systematically conducted data coding to include coding subthemes of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Several themes emerged while reviewing the data for the homecoming experience.

Before implementing the study, approval was granted by Florida A&M University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). To address concerns about coercion, the co-author, who was not the course instructor, conducted the informed consent process with study participants.

Findings and Discussion

Several themes emerged in the analysis of the current study related to digital storytelling on the HBCU homecoming experience related to embracing history, tradition, and pride in the institution, fostering connections, and experiencing individual reflection and growth. Within each theme, several subthemes emerged, including previous and shared experiences at HBCU homecomings and related knowledge.

Embracing History, Tradition, and Pride in the Institution

Celebrating the achievements of alumni and students emphasises the cultural and social significance of the HBCU homecoming experience (Allen, 2020). Cultural legacies that foster a deep connection to the university are essential to learning about the past through intergenerational connections.

Learning and Gaining an Appreciation for the Institution

Successful Black professionals, leaders, influencers, and alumni offer mentorship, career advice, and networking opportunities through weekly formal and informal events. These events include alumni and professional panels, career fairs, scholarship fundraisers, and networking opportunities to connect students with successful Black professionals. Lifelong connections are established as these events provide students with additional academic and professional development support.

Several students mentioned participating in homecoming and consciously sharing their experiences resulted in a “deeper love for FAMU.” They noted that homecoming participants included Rattlers past and present, the extended Tallahassee community, and guests from various locations. Homecoming is an experience the community loves and is loyal to support. Another student described:

I really enjoyed the people and just the love from the community and how much people down here love the Rattlers... people came up to me telling me they were “happy to see me” and “nice to meet you,” I know I had a purpose to be here.

Students also discussed how the storytelling aspect of the project has helped them learn more about FAMU, “not only the tradition,” as one student said, “but the experiences that I previously did not know from the different alum.” For some students, attending homecoming and sharing the experience with others reaffirmed their appreciation for attending the institution and being connected to a rich history. Several students got to enjoy some part of homecoming with their families. One student remarked:

After this project, I feel truly blessed and grateful to go to FAMU, not just because I am a Legacy [current student whose family member(s) attended the

same institution], but also because of the many different things I have learned and obtained as a student here at FAMU.

HBCU Homecoming attendees are from all walks of life, including young and old participants, with backgrounds in various areas. Students gained a lot from their interactions with “FAMUly” across generations and enjoyed learning about how the university’s culture has changed and remained the same.

Sharing Cultural Traditions across Generations

Students described appreciating the experience of seeing the local community, current students, and alumni come together to celebrate the school. The support received by various partners and stakeholders contributes to the deep sense of collective ownership and pride of HBCU homecoming that is distinctly different from HWIs (McCarthy et al., 2012). The achievements of alumni, faculty, and current students are also showcased to celebrate the traditions and heritage of the institution with the community and prospective students. A student shared, “Homecoming is an event that attracts all students, alumni, and the local community to come together and honor our school.” The emphasis on cultural traditions that promoted shared experiences between current students and alumni was described. Whether listening to different types of music or eating foods from different cultures, FAMU’s homecoming experience provides a “culture that is vibrant and prideful, bringing together a sense of unity” among current students, alumni, and community members. Preserving and continuing unique customs, such as band performances, gospel choir concerts, step shows, homecoming convocations and coronations, and tailgating festivities, create a sense of nostalgia and connection to the past (Cooper et al., 2014; Green, 2016). For another student, who was also a legacy, it was important to keep the familial traditions alive like attending convocation with their family because it was an integral part of their experience each year and had been since childhood. A first-generation student introduced her younger sister to the homecoming morning prayer and “Set Friday” because she enjoyed both activities and wanted to share with her sister. Extensive community engagement and support drive local businesses, organisations, and alumni to participate in homecoming events actively.

Participants described not knowing the significance of homecoming until experiencing the event themselves. A participant shared, “Homecoming showed me how support for our university extends further than just our current students and faculty. I was unaware how much support comes from our alumni and how strong the traditions were that our university holds.” Students also described gaining a deeper understanding of the importance of the university, along with traditions that were passed down since the establishment of the university. As current and former students socialise and share the homecoming experience, current students made connections between the importance of the historical and cultural representation of FAMU homecoming and expressions of African American culture.

Fostering Connections

Increased Feelings of Connectedness through Personal Interactions

When considering the historical and cultural significance of the HBCU homecoming experience, students described increased feelings of connectedness after experiencing the week-long events. One student reflected, “I learned it’s not only such a big cultural thing, it’s so much more than that.” Even after one week, students indicated that their connection to the university was strengthened. A student said, “The memories and connections that I made in just this week alone have really boosted my FAMU college experience. The way the community and alumni support the university is amazing.” Unlike homecoming events planned at HWIs, where buy-in from faculty and staff may be limited at times (Davis et al., 2018), stakeholders involved with planning the HBCU homecoming experience include students and alumni and faculty and staff. Students also emphasised the opportunity to meet people from all over the world who travel to FAMU homecoming to participate in the scheduled events as an important aspect of the experience. Listening to inspirational stories from alumni motivated students to continue moving forward with school. A student said, “The alumni came back to share their stories with us and the accomplishments they had achieved. They came with their pride and shared with us their own story.”

Participants often mentioned interactions with new connections and described how shared interests were strengthened with alumni of related organisations. A student shared, “We were able to learn from one another and relate on the same types of events that we had experienced at school.” The opportunity to fellowship with others attending the event and build networks was an oft-mentioned highlight for student experiences. Another student illustrated these interactions: “I met many people who can help me down the road in life.” Consciously thinking about how to tell their digital stories allowed students to strengthen their connection to the institution, especially among transfer students. These connections were emphasised when comparing the experiences of attending HWIs. A student described:

While alumni still come back and celebrate, the interactions between alumni at an HBCU is what I love to see. There was definitely a feeling of comfort and a true homecoming that has been great for decades and will be decades to come.

Another student shared:

I even had a chance to get a viral post on a couple of FAMU’s own Instagram pages. This made it feel like such a memorable time for me. It showed me just how great our cultural and historical representation is. As a student, being part of these events, especially as an African American student, I was able to see how everything is shown and run as a predominantly African American community.

Increased Feelings of Connectedness through Social Media Platforms

After creating the digital story for a social media platform, students discussed experiencing enjoyment in interacting with the audience during homecoming week. While most students described feelings of connectedness when experiencing the HBCU homecoming experience with others in person, increased social relationships among current students, alumni, and community members also occurred on social media platforms. Participants considered how they could see the impact of strengthening human connections with viewers through engagement as comments and likes. Students enjoyed receiving feedback from peers in person and on social media platforms. A participant shared, “I was very excited about how my audience would be able to react to the different events that I went to and how I enjoyed them.” Another student shared, “I had a lot of interactions with viewers and felt like I made a great impact on my audience.” Students indicated that posts about the experience increased interactions with new people through likes and comments.

Students also described storytelling as a means to allow viewers to escape from their everyday lives. A student described using storytelling as an opportunity in this way, “people who are so caught up in what they have going on and need a break from the real world to free their minds, even for a second.” Although some students described providing their stories’ viewers with an opportunity to escape the challenges of their everyday lives, others described being conscious of shared posts related to the homecoming experience for people interested in attending FAMU.

Whereas most participants felt that digital stories added to their overall homecoming experience, some lamented that it eliminated a part of the essence of relating to others and telling about what they saw and did. One student felt that engagement on social media diminished the power of storytelling. In his reflection, he said that digital stories lose some of “that mystical wow factor compared to word-to-mouth storytelling regarding cultural and historical representations. Hearing a story about your cultural history through family members compared to seeing an article online doesn’t hold the same value.”

Experiencing Individual Reflection and Growth***Embracing New Experiences***

After completing the storytelling assignment, students reflected on growth and development in physical, mental, and emotional ways. Several students remarked that creating digital stories about their homecoming experiences forced them to step out of their comfort zones, experience different atmospheres, and explore. As one student remarked, they had to “get out my introverted ways, to go out, be creative and take more pictures and to enjoy everything that a FAMU homecoming has to offer.” Among students who attended previous FAMU homecomings, digital storytelling helped them to gain a new perspective on the experience due to the conscious decision-making that went into sharing their experience using digital

stories. More specifically, students described making conscious decisions to attend different events on campus and how the story would be told.

Completing the assignment also encouraged students to attend various programs beyond the parties and games associated with homecoming to create lasting memories and gather engaging content for their stories. A student described:

One of the many beauties of coming home is the memories that come along with it, whether they are good or bad, there is a positive in the experience. Memories that provide ways for individuals to connect and be filled with laughter or cause an individual to take a pause and bask in the moment of how far they have come in life.

The reflections mentioned feeling happiness as a part of their growth. A student shared, “It really struck my attention seeing how happy I was in all those pictures that I was included.”

Homecoming within Popular Culture

HBCU homecomings are rooted in African American experiences with a distinct cultural significance and a long history of traditions that unite the Black community through cultural expressions, music, and art. In 2008, the major motion picture *Drumline* showcased the elaborate formations and distinct dance routines that prioritise entertainment and crowd engagement (Hadley, 2018). In 2019, Beyonce’s documentary *Homecoming* provided a visual homage to HBCU culture and traditions (Hadley, 2018). *Homecoming* provided positive images of Black culture that emphasised the world-renowned HBCU marching band traditions that incorporate their unique marching style and showmanship during performances (Hadley, 2018). The vibrant showmanship, musicianship, and dynamic performances have resulted in HBCU marching band performances at Paris Fashion Week (WTXL Staff, 2022), mainstream athletic competitions, and with major artists, such as Prince (Hatter, 2016).

For some students and alumni, attending athletic competitions is more about watching the band than the game while socialising with others in the community. More specifically, the “5th Quarter” battle of the bands is often the highlight of an HBCU football game (Reid, 2020). This continuation of the halftime show features the marching bands from each school playing different songs while spectators watch from the field and stands. Footage of these battles is posted in online forums, YouTube channels, and social media for the band community to watch and discuss in the days after the actual game. While HBCU marching bands have emerged in mainstream consciousness as a cultural phenomenon that provided an opportunity for African American students to showcase their talent and excellence through high-energy performances, the legacy of HBCU homecomings extends beyond the marching band and football game. HBCU homecoming traditions and rituals are passed down through generations, including Black Greek Letter Organisation (BGLO) step shows and other events committed to scholarship and activism in the community (Arroyo & Gasman, 2014).

Storytelling as a Catalyst for Joy Post-COVID-19

Due to COVID-19, homecomings were postponed or cancelled during the 2020–21 and 2021–22 academic years. In addition to cancelling in-person homecoming activities, courses were offered remotely. For some HBCUs, the surrounding community reported the highest rates of COVID-19 despite access to testing and vaccination sites (Ford et al., 2021; Guy-Sheftall & Jackson, 2021). Despite the increased cases and classes offered remotely, enrolment at HBCUs increased. The current chapter focuses on the HBCU Homecoming experiences as the first major event after returning to “normal” operations.

Although the HBCU homecoming experience provided opportunities for students to strengthen interpersonal and sociocultural connections, participants described it as a means to escape COVID-19. For most students, the 2022 FAMU homecoming was the first large-scale event attended since COVID-19. A student described, “For the first time since COVID, homecoming felt like homecoming in the sense of everyone being out and enjoying themselves without the fear of COVID lingering on everyone’s mind.”

The need to appreciate loved ones and social support networks resulted from attending homecoming because of COVID-19. Another student shared,

The homecoming wasn’t just a regular homecoming, it was a start-up from the past one due to COVID-19. I know people needed this due to bad times with family and friends not being able to work and enjoy themselves. People from all over the area were able to come out and enjoy themselves as people.

As students described throughout their reflections, the opportunity to visit with family and friends was long overdue. Another student shared,

The storytelling experience made me want to do more and participate in more events around campus. I realized just how amazing homecoming week is, and I was able to see why everyone was hyped for COVID-19 to end to experience the real FAMU homecoming.

Encouraging attendees to engage in digital storytelling about festival and event experiences may be a tool for event planners to understand better participant perceptions and how to draw more attendees from diverse areas. Intentionally engaging in digital storytelling about their homecoming experiences provided participants with a semi-structured plan for actively participating in a unique adventure and enhanced empowerment to share perceptions (Kocaman-Karoglu, 2016). By engaging in reflective dialogue, students were able to self-reflect, ask questions, critique, and share emotions related to their homecoming experience (Hamilton et al., 2019). Using digital storytelling techniques, participants can develop communication skills to articulate their understanding of the HBCU homecoming experience. Students were also given an opportunity to employ a modern method of continuing oral history and storytelling traditions of the past, preserving

their heritage, asserting their voices, advocating for change, and fostering a sense of unity and identity within their communities. These traditions remain essential elements of the rich tapestry of Black culture and history.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the sociocultural impact of the HBCU homecoming experience. Unlike homecoming events at HWIs, the legacy of these festival-like events extends beyond popular media. It provides historical and cultural significance to generations of Black and African Americans, including current students, alumni, and community members. Digital storytelling was used to give voice to the personal narratives and stories experienced by students during an HBCU homecoming experience in the U.S. Southeast.

This study adds to the literature on HBCU homecoming experiences and the sociological study of African American culture as an ingrained aspect of the event. In addition, the chapter deepens the understanding of HBCU homecoming experiences as community events through the lenses of undergraduate leisure and tourism students' perceptions as told through digital marketing stories and reflections. When considering the goals of HBCUs, maintaining Black history and traditions is imperative to the community. HBCU events like homecoming are designed to be safe spaces that uplift individuals and allow them to celebrate their shared culture and heritage and express their authentic selves.

While the football game and marching band performances occur at institutions throughout the United States, the sociocultural connections fostered among individuals and communities that gather at HBCU homecomings cannot go unnoticed. Students were asked to reflect on questions related to the planning and implementation of a digital story related to their homecoming experiences. The importance of the HBCU homecoming goes beyond the game to provide an authentic experience to empower African American culture, sport, and recreation (Allen, 2020; Cavil, 2015; Cooper et al., 2014; Rogers, 2015). Findings from the study may assist community leaders, higher education administrators, and faculty members with planning and implementing inclusive celebrations to improve feelings of community and connectedness, especially when considering the diversity of community events.

The rich legacy of HBCUs is often highlighted during homecoming as a reminder of the struggle and adversity to access equal education and opportunities to socialise and gather in leisure settings without fear. Events are organised to honour the past and boost a collective sense of unity and belongingness among alumni and the current campus community (Davis et al., 2018). Students' comments indicated that interactions with other attendees impacted their homecoming experiences and inspired them to improve interpersonal relationships and strengthen bonds with the institution. Students also indicated that social media helped bring more awareness to the importance of the HBCU homecoming experience. This importance is demonstrated as most students had not attended FAMU's homecoming, let alone any homecoming experience at an HBCU prior to 2022.

Some had heard about the cultural experience from others and had based their perceptions about what to expect on that limited knowledge. For those who had attended previous homecomings at FAMU or other institutions, the experience was unique in how they were challenged to immerse themselves in telling others about their experiences.

HBCU homecomings are an occasion to honour and connect to the rich history of HBCUs, where the past and present often collide as alumni share experiences, wisdom, and advice with current students. These intergenerational connections may provide inspirational mentorship that reinforces the sense of community and fosters a spirit of paying it forward. The HBCU homecoming experience emphasises the historical and cultural context that emphasises community, family, and the reunion of generations through social and political movements (Cooper et al., 2014; Davis et al., 2018).

Recommendations for Future Research

Limited research is currently available related to the HBCU homecoming post-COVID-19. The current chapter focuses on FAMU Homecoming as one of the first major in-person social and cultural events after returning to “normal” operations. Future studies related to the use of digital storytelling and HBCU homecomings should include HBCUs throughout the United States. Incorporating additional students from multiple HBCUs will provide a comprehensive understanding of the HBCU homecoming experience. In addition, a longitudinal study should be considered to document the experience as students matriculate through college and return as alumni. More specifically, the experiences of family members who are also alumni should be documented to understand better the impact an HBCU homecoming may have on the community. The demand to use oral histories to provide documentation of historically significant events must be considered, especially among previously marginalised and oppressed communities. Furthermore, incorporating focus group interviews of content viewers may help to provide a more comprehensive view of festivals and events beyond actual attendees. By using focus group interviews, viewers and attendees may be able to elaborate on their own HBCU homecoming experiences to gain deeper insight into the importance of the festival-like event.

Limitations of the Study

The generalisability of the findings is limited to students who were enrolled in a tourism course at an HBCU and did not consider the perspectives of other students who attend the university. In addition, the sample is limited to students enrolled in a tourism course at a public HBCU in Florida and does not consider the perspectives of students who attend other public or private HBCUs. Therefore, the transferability of the findings from the current study to other HBCUs may be limited due to the context of selecting students enrolled in a tourism course, which may result

in a high degree of bias due to the use of convenience sampling to collect the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Furthermore, prior to conducting the study, experience or knowledge of using digital storytelling and social media was not obtained. Therefore, the use of digital storytelling and the level of social media use may have influenced perceptions attending and sharing about the HBCU homecoming experience.

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