

Living in Japan While Black: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Black Experience in Japan during the Inception of the Black Lives Matter Movement

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Abstract

Japan is a place that values collectivism and harmony; individuals who appear to be different can face challenges. Black individuals experience various challenges in society, including racial discrimination, systematic human rights violations, generational trauma, specifically Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, racial trauma, historical trauma, and inequities in social determinants of health (SDOH) impacting various aspects of their lives. In this study, we used interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine the lived experiences of five self-identified Black participants who have lived in Japan during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement in 2020, a time when race relations were at the forefront globally. Through this study, we attempted to reveal the impact of the BLM movement and how their racial identities are impacted by living in Japan. Some studies have examined the experiences of Black people in Japan, but there have been significant limitations in exploring this experience empirically and within the scope of the intersectionality theoretical framework. Our findings revealed three main themes and several sub-themes, which are discussed, including implications. This study and its results can lead to wider discussion among social justice advocates, including counselors and other mental health professionals, and stimulate the discussion in the community outside of Black individuals.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, Japan, Black Individuals, Counseling, Black diaspora, Social Justice

Introduction

To escape toxic climates, individuals with intersecting marginalized identities move to other countries (Miller et al., 2019), including Japan, where exposure to international issues and diversity is limited (Haye-Matsui, 2025). The increasing demand for foreign skilled labor has been due to the diversifying migrant population in Japan (Hof, 2025). Though Japan is known for having restrictive immigration policies, highly skilled foreign talent, particularly White Westerners, was granted entry at a much faster rate in the late twentieth century. Additionally, the rise in hegemonic hate crimes and sociopolitical tensions that have been directed at historically marginalized communities has contributed to the migrant landscape in Japan (Miller et al., 2019). However, the lack of official data on existing racial diversity, along with limited empirical research, presents significant challenges in understanding the unique experiences of communities of Black residents in Japan (Haye-Matsui, 2025).

Few studies have examined the experience of Black people living in Japan (Haye-Matsui, 2025; Russell, 2023). Although we appreciate their comprehensive studies to spotlight this

population, a limited amount has examined the impact of intersectional factors such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status. For example, Haye-Matsui (2025)'s study examined the lived experiences of Black English teachers living in Japan, but the study did not examine the impact of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on their experiences. On the other hand, Russell (2023) discussed the impact of the BLM movement within Japanese society, but this well-developed, conceptualized study did not empirically examine the experience of the Black residents in Japan. There are a few other studies covering this population (Toliver, 2023), but there have been limited studies available both within Japan and outside of Japan.

This study aims to fill this gap by examining the lived experiences of Black people living in Japan during a time period that centers the Black identity during the rise of the BLM movement, especially we extended to incorporate the intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989) demonstrating how Black individuals are navigating within a non-Western racial hierarchy where that is tied to a national identity to lead to a social categorization system (Davison & Ito, 2021). The initial focus of this study is to understand the general experience of Black residents living in Japan and the impact of the BLM movement on their experiences.

Literature Review

Black Diaspora Movement

The Black diaspora is known to be rooted in two major factors: the desire to have preferable economic and educational opportunities, and the forced relocation due to slavery and other inhumane acts due to war, colonization, and other events (Falola, 2024). Both factors can be reinforced by racial discrimination and oppression due to colonization. Colonial history has constructed and maintained an oppressive system fueled by racial categorization and hierarchy (Pillay, 2022). Even though the modern racial categorization does not have a long history (DeGruy, 2005), the impact has spread worldwide and continues to impact Black individuals. The racial categorization is deeply rooted in humans' defense mechanism of categorization for self-preservation, as well as the desire to maintain one's wealth and benefits over others (Oldmeadow et al., 2003). The Black diaspora, therefore, occurs due to Black individuals being forced to move, regardless of whether due to the inhumane events or individuals' desire for more opportunities because of the oppressive social system. There are various reasons for relocation, but some Black individuals have moved to Japan as part of the Black diaspora movement (Haye-Matsui, 2025).

Socio-historical Context of the Black Lives Matter Movement

The long-lasting racial discrimination and categorization finally erupted as a form of the BLM movement after so many deaths among the Black and Brown people. Even though the BLM movement started in the United States, the movement revealed the reality of racial discrimination worldwide. The BLM movement, being historically placed among the early abolitionist movements, aimed at ending segregation and discrimination for Black people in the United States, while promoting racial pride. In July 2013, upon hearing of Zimmerman's acquittal for the killing of Travon Martin in 2012, a 12-year old African American male, three Black women activists Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullors, and Opal Tometi, two of whom identify as queer, spearheaded *#BlackLivesMatter* as a way to mobilize citizens in the long fight against racially profiling of Black males across all ages. Thus, the BLM movement is described as "an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of the contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression". The movement gained momentum nationally and globally following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of a White police officer in Minneapolis. His public and brutal killing corroborated

the pervasive nature of systemic racism in the U.S., while this heightened visibility of anti-Blackness became more salient nationally and globally.

While the BLM movement has faced criticism and backlash, it has also gained support and influence internationally (Bremner, 2023; Pillay, 2022). In South Africa, the BLM movement raised critical questions about the value assigned to Black lives within the African discourse (Pillay, 2022). Asian countries experienced an increase in hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the BLM movement offered a space to discuss those issues. For example, in South Korea, the BLM movement became a catalyst for self-reflection on racial tensions and dialogue of Asian hateful sentiments in Western countries. Overall, the BLM movement has helped expose hierarchical structures rooted in historical colonialism, systemic, and social injustice. It has helped promote coalition building beyond differences, increased people's engagement in activism, and fostered social advocacy. It is important to note that the global influenced movement impacted each country differently due to the existing systematic hierarchy, the culture, and the representation of Black individuals (Bremner, 2023; Pillay, 2022).

Racial and Ethnic Hierarchy in Japan

Japan has a unique culture influenced by Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes harmony and traditions (Mizutani & Waalkes, 2024). Rooted in the concept of *tan itsu minzoku kokka* (単一民族国家), Japanese culture has been critiqued for its emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and normativity (Russell, 2023). Consequently, Japanese people might be apprehensive toward foreigners or anyone who might not look “Japanese,” regardless of nationality and cultural backgrounds. Some Japanese may view them as potential societal threats (Davison & Peng, 2021), which leads to increasing xenophobia and racism in Japanese society. For example, there have been public critiques and discussions of the Japanese business and shops putting up a sign, “Japanese only (日本人以外お断り)” in recent years. Some blamed the increased number of inbound foreign tourists in Japan and showed some understanding about their “need to maintain” the harmony of society and protect their business (Kuramoto, 2024). While others pointed out the embedded racial and ethnic discrimination in Japanese society (Arudou, 2016), these discriminatory acts not only target non-Japanese or immigrants, but also multiracial Japanese individuals who may not look Japanese physically (Davison & Peng, 2021). This Japanese “national identity” (Davison & Peng, 2021) is in place to maintain the Japanese society and culture rooted in the sense of homogeneity (Russell, 2023). This appears to resemble that of Western racial categorization theory (Arudou, 2016). However, it is important for us to proceed with a consideration of its unique culture and historical factors, as the Japanese social categorization system based on both ethnicity and race (Arudou, 2016; Davison & Peng, 2021; Hof, 2025).

Despite being a closed society, Japan has become one of the most popular destinations for international individuals due to the influence of pop culture (e.g., anime, manga, games, and J-pop) and a strong sense of community safety (Davison & Peng, 2021; Haye-Matsui, 2025). Additionally, the most recent strategic political movement, aimed at addressing the significant decline in the birth rate and the labor shortage in specific fields due to “super-ageing” (Miller et al., 2019), has contributed to the increase in the immigrant population. Data shows that there are approximately 3.1 million non-Japanese migrants, about 3% of the total population (Statista Research Department, 2023). Nonetheless, Japanese society continues to demonstrate significant resistance to the increasing number of non-Japanese residents due to intense xenophobic sentiments (Davison & Peng, 2021), reflected in the Japanese strict immigration policy, limiting incoming refugees, as well as the recent political shift in Japan to become more

nationalist. Despite these socially embedded categorization issues fueled by racial and ethnic discrimination, Japan was not exempt from being influenced by the BLM movement.

Black Lives Matter Movement in Japan

Following the killing of George Floyd, the BLM movement gained visibility in Japan, with protests occurring in major cities (Takahashi, 2020). Mixed-race public figures with Asian and Black backgrounds also drew attention to racial issues through subtle forms of activism (Russell, 2023). Despite the influence of Black pop culture on the Japanese music industry, concerns remain about racial misrepresentation and limited public awareness.

Despite efforts to address discrimination, police racial profiling persists in Japan (Russell, 2023). Limited access to informed and balanced reporting may be contributing to this issue. Domestic news is often hosted by celebrities or comedians who may lack training or have limited global exposure, making it difficult for them to address social issues fairly and broadly (Haye-Matsui, 2025; Russell, 2023). Japanese media may also censor its content, failing to label racialized incidents or racial profiling incidents as *jinshu-sabetsu* (人種差別, racial discrimination). These practices may reduce the perceived seriousness of racial profiling and contribute to its pervasiveness and the development of an oppressive system (Russell, 2023).

Intersectionality Framework

Given Japan's ethno-nationalism with Japanese "national identity," examining the intersection of race, gender, nationalism, and socioeconomic status is essential to understanding the experiences of Black people living in Japan during the BLM movement. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) highlights how overlapping social identities influence experiences of inequality within social and political contexts. Therefore, using intersectionality, this study examines how race, nationality, and gender intersect to shape Black individuals' experiences within Japan's ethnically structured hierarchy. Haye-Matsui (2025) has applied the intersectionality framework to examine racial hierarchies, White privilege, and systems of dominance, including different treatment based on race, gender, and nationality in Japan.

As reported by a study by Haye-Matsui (2025), women in Japan reported heightened discrimination based on their marginalized intersectionality. One participant noted how Black women are viewed as 'Kowai' (怖い; scary). Other participants noted receiving differential treatments from their White counterparts, indicating a racial hierarchy, whereas White Westerners were placed at the top. Yet other participants noted a nationality-based hierarchy among Black foreigners, whereas Black Americans were placed at the top and Black Africans were placed at the bottom. In addition, being native English-speaking vs. non-native English-speaking foreigners intersected negatively. Nonetheless, others reported the opposite, where they felt that they experienced less overt racism than they had in their home country. Based on these studies and social events, we propose these two research questions: "How was the Black Lives Matter movement in Japan?" and "What is it like to live in Japan as a Black person?"

Methods

We chose Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for its focus on phenomenology, ideography, and hermeneutics to explore how participants make sense of their personal and social world Smith & Osborn (2008). IPA navigates three frameworks to understand individuals. Phenomenology recognizes the importance of reflecting on one's experiences to make sense of them; ideography focuses on differences in participants' experiences; and hermeneutics emphasizes the importance of interpretation by both the researcher and the participant within their sociocultural context. These elements are essential for understanding and acknowledging the complex intersectionality experienced by Black individuals living in

Japan, especially as their experiences are shaped not only by race but also by gender, nationality, and other factors (Miller et al., 2019).

The Research Team

The research team included three researchers of various sociocultural backgrounds. The first author identifies as a Japanese Asian, able-bodied, cis-female, tenure-track Assistant Professor, and licensed professional counselor (LPC) and Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor (LCPC) with counseling experience working with diverse communities and teaching multicultural counseling for Counselors in Training (CIT). The second author identifies as a first-generation Haitian American immigrant and Black cis-female. She is an LPC and tenure-track Assistant Professor with expertise in racial trauma, multicultural and social justice issues, and trauma-informed practices. The third author identifies as an African American, cis-male, Provisionally Licensed Professional Counselor (PLPC) with experience in counseling, primarily working with teenagers and young adults, as well as with diverse communities in individual and group settings. Only the first and second authors were involved in the data analysis process. The third author contributed to participant recruitment and to the writing and revision of the manuscript.

Procedure and Data Collection

Our study's participant criteria included: (1) being at least 18 years old; (2) self-identifying as a Black individual who had lived in Japan for at least a year, including June 2020, when the BLM movement arose globally, including Japan; and (3) being fluent in English. We used purposeful, snowball, and convenience sampling to recruit participants. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at all affiliated institutions, we identified and contacted several social media platforms led by self-identified Black and non-Japanese individuals living in Japan. Additionally, we contacted self-identified Black influencers in Japan and our acquaintances who might be qualified to participate in this study. We used the demographic survey as a screening tool to assess participants' eligibility. Once we identified potential participants, the first and second authors scheduled interviews with those who met the study's criteria. We conducted semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately 30-60 minutes, to collect data using a set of six interview questions: (1) Tell us about your experience living in Japan as a Black/African American person; (2) Which of your identities, if any, influence your experience as a Black/African American person living in Japan; (3) Tell us about the existing Black/African American community in Japan; (4) In what way have you been involved in those communities; (5) What could strengthen the Black experience in Japan; and (6) Is there anything else you would like to add to this topic? During the interview, we asked follow-up questions as needed for clarification. All interviews were recorded via Zoom for data analysis. We recruited five participants for the study. The average age of the five participants was 38, with ages ranging from 27 to 55. Participants reported their nationalities and ethnicities as follows: American ($n=2$), Belizean American ($n=1$), Canadian ($n=1$), and Nigerian ($n=1$). Four participants self-identified as male, and one identified as female. The average length of residency in Japan among participants was 8.3 years (8 years and 3 months), ranging from 2.1 to 25.3 years.

Data Analysis

Using IPA as an analytical method allowed us to reflect on our own biases and prejudices around the topic (Miller et al., 2019). We first wrote our reflective statement, including our prior experiences and knowledge related to the research topic. After reflecting on our own experiences, we transcribed the interviews and analyzed each participant's interview data, identifying recurring themes. We followed the suggested steps by Smith & Osborn (2008) analyzing the transcripts line by line and making explanatory notes throughout, highlighting

sentences or expressions that stood out. We made notes on the two areas: linguistic content and conceptual content. In the linguistic content, we focused on the statements made, including the words participants used and how these sentences were formed during the interview. In the context of the text, we sought to understand the shared meaning and reflected on our reactions as readers. After developing themes throughout the manuscript, we merged prominent and similar themes that captured the shared stories across all participants and developed sub-themes. This process occurred over multiple meetings. To establish rigor and objectivity, and after the merged themes were revised, we recruited an external reviewer who had lived in Japan for five years and self-identified as Black. We provided the external reviewer only with the generated themes and sub-themes without any identifiable information about the participants. We asked the external reviewer to revise the emerging themes by reflecting on their own experience living in Japan as a Black person to determine the accuracy of the information. We reviewed the reviewer's feedback and finalized the themes accordingly

Results and Discussion

Four main themes emerged from the data, each with two to three sub-themes. The first generated main theme identified is identity negotiation ($n=5$), which had two sub-themes: a) being Black in Japan, and b) culture shock. The second identified main theme is cultural challenges and strengths in Japanese society ($n=5$), which had three sub-themes: a) racial and ethnic Discrimination, b) social hierarchy, and c) cultural strength in Japan. The third main theme that emerged from our data is counterspace for self-preservation ($n=4$), which included two sub-themes: a) self-focused, and b) flexible perspectives. Lastly, the fourth main theme is Black Lives Matter movement in Japan ($n=4$) with three sub-themes: a) Black Lives Matter in Japan, b) Black diaspora in Japan, and c) installation of hope.

Identity Negotiation

All participants ($n = 5$) discussed how they negotiated aspects of their identities as Black individuals. Participants discussed both the positive and negative experiences they have had because of their complex intersectional identities, including race, skin tone or color, nationality, gender, and occupation. Their narratives captured feelings of mental taxation, including a sense of isolation, lack of belonging, and mental health struggles. Under this main theme, we have two subthemes: a) being Black in Japan, and b) culture shock.

Being Black in Japan

Participants discussed their unique experiences of being viewed primarily as a foreigner, often referred to as “*gaikokujin* (外国人)” by Japanese individuals, rather than their racial or ethnic identity as a Black person. One participant stated:

“I heard more gaikokujin (a foreigner); America-jin (an American). And then, to be honest, I was the one who used Kokujin (a Black person) a lot to describe myself. I was the one using that, but I felt like a lot of Japanese people just saw me as a blanket term, a foreigner.”

These sorts of interactions were unsettling for the participants, as many of the participants valued and took pride in their Black identity with their unique ethnic and cultural background, rather than the general identity categorization of “Black person.” For example, one participant said:

“I do identify as an American Black person. I can say more that I am an African American, and that's fine too. You know, when I have to fill out paperwork or something, but I just say I'm a Black person. My background, I do not have any family alive today that has a strong tie to Africa, so I was born and raised in America as a Black American.”

This participant often felt unseen because their identity as an “American Black person” was often dismissed or made invisible by Japanese individuals who were not familiar with their culture and historical context. Another participant shared her experience as a Black woman in Japan:

“My experience ranged from having people completely fascinated by me, my skin color, my hair, and, you know, I'm a black woman. So, my hair changed every six to eight weeks. So the people asked, “What's going on with your hair? This is really cool. How are you doing this one day? It's short. The next day, you come after the weekend; it's long.” So there was a lot of curiosity, a lot of fascination, a bit of celebrity status.”

While all participants talked about some of the positive experiences they have had in Japan, they also mentioned some mental health-related challenges, indicating depression and loneliness. One participant mentioned:

“I find when I talk to a lot of Black people who live in Japan and have left there, we kind of, there's a bit of bitterness in our experience of it.”

It is important to note that this participant also returned to his home country after several years living in Japan.

Culture Shock

It is essential to mention that many of the participants experienced culture shock, which can be described as isolation and depression that one experiences because of navigating a culture different from their own. Participants reported not feeling prepared for this cultural shock and blamed themselves. One participant was shocked by how Japanese people navigate life, including how business was run:

“...Because you think, we're in 2023, how can they be so backward? So, there's frustration there. But also, with myself. The bitterness of why you did this. Was this really the right decision? I thought I was prepared enough, but I really wasn't.”

Similarly, another participant was surprised by different work styles and expectations in Japan, despite having prepared in advance. “I was working there, so I was embedded in the culture, the work culture, which was also a bit of a shock. As much as I prepared myself beforehand, experiencing it was quite different.”

However, many participants reported an improved experience as they became more familiar with the culture and language. For example, one participant spoke about how his expertise improved as he became more fluent in the language:

“Truthfully, the number of negative interactions that I've experienced has gone down as my ability to understand and read Japanese has increased. Because a lot of the issues that maybe I had, a lot of the bad experiences I had when I first arrived, many of them are just around communication problems.”

Cultural Challenges and Strengths in Japanese Society

All participants ($n = 5$) had unique ways of describing Japanese culture and society as they reflected on their experiences of living in Japan. They also mentioned the impact on their mental health. One thing that kept emerging from the participants was their perception of the cultural differences in Japanese society. The two sub-themes, under this central theme, are racial and ethnic discrimination and social hierarchy.

Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

Participants experienced various forms of discrimination and stereotypes related to their intersectional identities, particularly their race, gender, and nationality. Some of their experiences were caused mainly by Japanese xenophobic attitudes toward non-Japanese individuals. The following is an excerpt of a participant explaining how his intersected racial appearance, linguistic ability, and gender can be seen in Japan.

It's a society that is still very much closer to traditional gender norms and gender roles. People like a patriarchy. So, being a man definitely puts you in a different light. If you're educated, if you're a man, if there were a black woman with me, people would come to talk to me. Like, all the men and all the people who are important, they're gonna come to talk to me first, especially if I had the command of Japanese. It is important to note that while many participants discussed how Japanese people often focused on their status as foreigners, they did not underestimate the impact of the unkind and unfriendly affronts directed at their racial and national identities, as one participant said:

"There was discrimination, definitely racism, and xenophobia as a whole, which I think is what's interesting about Japan beyond the skin color. It's really the foreigner status that they have issues with. So, if you are a foreigner, but you're white, you'll get better treatment than if you are a foreigner, and you're black, and you're a woman. Because then you're like three strikes in one."

Social Hierarchy

Several participants shared the hierarchical social structure, as well as the discrimination, that exists within Japanese culture. Furthermore, they shared the extent to which individuals' nationality and ethnicity influence their social position within this hierarchy and the impact on their overall experience in Japan. For example, one participant discussed how Japanese people may perceive others differently based on their gender and occupation.

My friend was from Ghana, but she grew up in Japan. So, she'll be different from my experience. When you're an African, you're perceived a lot differently. I think you're perceived as a little bit lower class. But like I said, if you have good Japanese skills, then the Japanese people will have a little bit more respect for you. Also, your occupation in Japan is super-duper important. One of the first things that people, especially if you're a man, ask you is, "What job?" and if you say you're a teacher, they go, "Okay, wow, that's awesome." But if you say, "I just don't have a job right now." Or like, "I'm just out on the streets," or "I work at a club," and there might be a little bit of stigma attached.

These expectations and prejudices stem from Japan's unique social structure that emphasizes a sense of a homogeneous community despite increasing diversity. The lack of exposure to diverse cultural values can perpetuate stigmas and discrimination. As one participant explained: "I think a lot of people here have issues with people, including Japanese people, who are different than the ideal normal kind of what is considered to be the group's like a 'normal.'"

Counterspace for Self-Preservation

Participants ($n = 5$) talked about the importance of developing strategies for coping with the mental health-related struggles that stemmed from culture shock and discrimination related to their racial and ethnic identities in Japan. The participants felt the need to preserve their cultural identity, values, and overall well-being. Participants reported using various coping strategies unique to their needs to help deal with daily stressors and challenges to their mental health. The overall themes identified from participants' coping strategies were self-focused and flexible perspectives.

Self-Focused

Participants took pride in using self-preservation strategies to manage the acculturative stress they faced as Black people living in Japan. Some of these strategies included engaging in self-care, such as attending to their personal goals, successes, and accomplishments. One participant, who had lived in Japan the longest among the participants, noted the importance of attending to his professional and intellectual achievements as a means of self-preservation while living there. He commented:

"[...] myself is now a history because I have been myself for this long period. At this time, we just want to be part of society to see if anything with 40 years of experience. With 40 years of experience, we definitely will have to tell stories and even chip in some that people would benefit from."

Another participant also emphasized the importance of focusing on professional development to achieve self-preservation.

"When I lived there, I was more focused on myself and trying to advance my own career and my own education. So, work and study to improve my own Japanese and things like that. I focused on myself versus trying to start a different community."

Interestingly, none of the participants emphasized the use of affinity groups, groups of people with shared identities, focusing generally on providing support and building connections, as a coping strategy toward self-preservation. This may be due to the limited sample size, the geographic location and accessibility, and the small number of black residents in Japan.

"When I was over there, I could not find a specific community. I knew where it was. It was definitely in Tokyo. There was an online presence, and different events were being set up now and then for Black people to come together, share ideas, and get to know each other. I didn't have a chance to experience those because of environmental factors (location)."

Flexible Perspectives

Another essential coping strategy reported by participants was the need to maintain a flexible perspective to handle microaggressions. One participant who worked as an English teacher at a middle school recalled a Japanese boy's microaggressive comments about the American Black culture. Nonetheless, the participant recalled "making excuses" for the child's behavior to mitigate its impact: "...because I know he was still learning, and you know he wanted to emulate kind of what he saw in the movies." Similarly, another participant discussed rationalizing his negative experience due to language barriers or "communication problem" as he called it.

Black Lives Matter Movement in Japan

All participants resided in Japan during the BLM movement. Among the five participants, three participants directly talked about their experience and reflection about the BLM movement in Japan, with one participant mentioning racially motivated incidents leading to the BLM movement. Based on their sharing, three sub-themes emerged: Black Lives Matter movement in Japan, Black diaspora in Japan, and installation of hope.

Black Lives Matter in Japan

Almost all participants ($n = 4$) shared their involvement or acknowledgements of the BLM movement in Japan during the interview with a mix of excitement and disappointment. A few ($n = 2$) also shared their insights on how the BLM movements were different compared to other countries. A person stated his effort to take part in the community as the rise of the BLM movement in Japan; however, due to the uncontrollable factors, including the pandemic of Covid-19 and the intense heat in the Japanese summer, he and other members were unsure how to bring it to action. He also mentioned the geographic disconnection with the group:

“There was a bigger community online, and I wanted to be a part of it. It was called the Black Lives Matter Tokyo. I don’t live in Tokyo, so I had to go out of my way to participate. And so, I (became) more to just watch (the movement) from behind the scenes, and kind of just shared information from my own social media accounts.”

On the other hand, another participant who joined the BLM event, compared his experience with a similar social justice event in the United States.

“I was completely impressed by how orderly the protests were in Japan. Because I feel like in America, my impression is that the police are there to kind of push against the protesters, to prevent the protesters from doing things to protect everyone else from the protesters. But here (in Japan), I feel like my experience, or my perception, was that the police were there to make sure that we could march safely on the street, like they were stopping the traffic for us. [...] I don’t know how to explain it, but I expected kind of like oppression, and I got like law enforcement facilitating this protest, which is unexpected for me.”

Black Diaspora in Japan

Even though there are limited Black individuals in Japan, but the Black diaspora can still be significantly present in Japan, as one participant reflected on this as:

“There are so few of us first, and then, we may be from different countries, the UK, America, Australia...It’s just Black people everywhere.”

Two participants directly mentioned that their reason for remaining in Japan was due to the increased racial violence in the U.S. As one participant stated,

“Most African Americans that I would speak to, they were sick of the racism. It was the rise of Trump, at least when I was there (in Japan), I don’t know beforehand, but it was the rise of Trump racism, George Floyd, all these reasons they wanted to leave, you know, the U.S.”

Moreover, participants mentioned their ethnic connection over the racial connection with other black individuals in Japan, including during the BLM movement. For example, a person reflected on his time in Japan during the BLM movement.

“To be honest, while there were other black people over there (in Japan), it’s also hard to build a deep connection with them, because of the cultural differences, eventually. It’s hard to build a connection from that point. And if you can’t build a connection, then it’s hard to build a community. So, I kind of think that’s the problem. I don’t know where to go from there.”

Similarly, another participant talked about his reflection on the BLM movement.

“We talk about Black Lives Matter. Black Lives Matter, that’s a profile. I see even though I try to see if it is possible to portray, you know, to protect my ethnicity or my origin, depending on the language that you use.”

Installation of hope

Even though many of the participants did not have the opportunity to engage physically in activism in support of the BLM movement, they hope for positive change for themselves and future generations. One participant shared his excitement to see how the movement inspired the non-Black community in Japan.

"I was really surprised because there were a lot of Japanese people and a lot of foreigners who were not Black. So, like most of the people who are even there were not black."

Another participant shared a strong message on how the BLM movement should be linked to the actual benefits and bring hope for the future generation, beyond being used as propaganda.

You do not like it when there is no hope. When there is no hope. When people think I am an American, they treat me differently. That's one thing. Why, because if they think anything less, maybe they can have something confidence. If they talk about BLM, we are talking about our future children too, they matter. Because the children, if we abandon them, then they want to have this ethnicity and development, they can't erase.

A participant compared his experience from attending one of the BLM events to a similar event in the United States.

"I was completely impressed by how orderly the protests were in Japan. Because I feel like in America, my impression is that the police are there to kind of push against the protesters, to prevent the protesters from doing things to protect everyone else from the protesters, I guess. But here (in Japan) I feel like my experience, or my perception, was that the police were there to make sure that we can march safely in the street, like they were stopping the traffic for us. [...] I don't know how to explain it, but I expected kind of like oppression, and I got like law enforcement facilitating this protest, which is unexpected for me."

Discussion

Participants in this study shared their complex experiences of living in Japan during the BLM movement. Their intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989), including being immigrants *gaikokujin* (外国人; Davison & Peng, 2021), gender, and their occupational backgrounds, impacted their acculturation process in Japan. Consistent with previous studies, participants in the current study reported experiencing acculturative stress in Japan, particularly related to internal and external expectations to assimilate to homogeneous Japanese cultural norms (Haye-Matsui, 2023; Russell, 2023). However, this study provided us with new perspectives, especially showing how Black individuals reflected on their self-perceived identities in Japan. Moreover, since we focus on the impact of the BLM movement, this study revealed the uniquely shaped experiences among Black individuals in Japan. Similar to participants in Haye-Matsui's (2025) study, participants in our study experience what W.E.B. Du Bois referred to as double consciousness, the experience of shifting one's view of self in response to how one is perceived by others. Participants talked about their experience with some surprise that the Japanese society categorized them as part of a larger group of foreigners, or *gaikokujin* (外国人; Davison & Peng, 2021), which often does not involve their racial identities. This is understandable as the social categorization is more commonly used in Japan (Arudou, 2016; Hof, 2025). To most of the Japanese people, racial categorization is still new and may not be widely used upon encountering a Black individual in Japan (Davison & Peng, 2021). However, this particular social categorization mechanism potentially makes the individual feel their racial and ethnic identities are invisible or do not matter to others. They reported having the mixed experience of being invisible, but hypervisible due to their race, nationality, gender, and other intersectional identities. These findings also outlined the unique experiences of minoritized individuals, including Black residents, in Japanese society (Davison & Peng, 2021; Russell, 2023), mainly due to the collectivism and racial homogeneity within Japanese society (Mizutani & Waalkes, 2024).

These experiences also underscore underlying discrimination related to intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1989), especially during a global socio-political rupture marked by the resurgence of the BLM movement, where being Black and American carries various meanings (Russell, 2023). Despite the global visibility of the BLM movement, Black people living in Japan still felt a sense of disconnection to the movement due to limited representation of Black individuals and barriers to engagement, which may be due to the limited presence of Black people in Japan outside of the major cities such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto. Some participants expressed interest in actively participating in the BLM movement and having their voices heard. Also, this study revealed the different outcomes from the BLM movement between Japan and the United States. In the United States, even though it has faced many pushback and criticism from inside and outside of the black community, the movement still served as a source of unity (Kane et al., 2020) and drew attention to the daily injustice and violence that Black individuals experienced (Pillay, 2022). On the other hand, in Japan, the BLM may have sparked a discussion among the non-Black individuals to engage in the conversation about the racially motivated violence in the United States, but it may not have contributed to creating a community or unity for the Black people in Japan. Moreover, Black individuals in Japan can feel withdrawn and thus hesitate to participate in social activities due to past traumas and potential risks to their immigration status. Additionally, it is important to note that the BLM movement received global attention during the pandemic (Pillay, 2022). We cannot ignore how some Black people may not have felt comfortable with active involvement, as there was a growing social pressure in Japan to obey rules (e.g., maintain social distancing, wear masks, avoid crowds), given many of their socially vulnerable status as immigrants and racially marginalized in Japan. Lastly, it is important to note that many participants identified themselves with ethnic or national identities, beyond racial identities, underscoring how the Western racial categorization is not universal (Arudou, 2016; Hof, 2025). Evidently, a few of the participants compared their experiences of oppression in Japan to what they have experienced in their home countries. Similarly, in Haye-Matsui's (2025) study, some participants found relief in Japan, where they did not feel overtly discriminated against compared to their country of origin. Similarly, the participants in our study described Japan as a safer place than their home countries, yet simultaneously experienced racial marginalization and social exclusion. This shows the complex influence of intersectional identities among Black individuals in Japan, and how their experience may differ from that of other individuals with different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Implications

Based on these findings, we call for counselors, counselor educators, and institutions to reflect on ways to improve the care and support for this population. We would like to invite a holistic and systematic advocacy approach, given the shared experience of participants, reflecting on their experiences impacted by society. Considering the limited resources for this population, counselors working with this population in Japan must exercise cultural humility and a social justice framework to effectively meet their needs, especially since it is not common to work with non-Japanese clients for many Japanese (Haye-Matsui, 2025). We recommend that counselors in Japan be aware of the complex social oppression related to race within and out of Japanese society, including post-traumatic slave syndrome (DeGruy, 2005) and its impact on the Black diaspora (Falola, 2024). Counselors need to be aware of the diverse experiences among Black individuals in Japan based on their nationality, gender, and engaged occupations as shared by the participants in this study (Crenshaw, 1989). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge their unique ethnic and group identity, including pride, rooted in their ancestors.

Counselors in Japan must also adhere to a trauma-informed approach to effectively address potential race-based or acculturative trauma that this population may have experienced during

their stay in Japan (Russell, 2023). It is also important to train counselors to be familiar with and increase their awareness of racial hierarchy and their privileges (Arudou, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989). They can offer accessible resources, such as culturally responsive telehealth counseling with a language translator in session, and group counseling to provide a sense of connection. We recommend adopting approaches that foster a sense of belonging for them, such as support counseling groups, community engagement, and advocacy groups, which are not limited by geographic locations. These arrangements may be beneficial alongside individual therapeutic work.

Although this research focused on the lived experiences of Black people in Japan, some participants had already left Japan by the time the data were collected. Their re-acculturation process to their home countries and societies can be significantly challenging and stressful, especially due to the prior pressure and effort required to assimilate into Japanese culture (Mizutani & Waalkes, 2024). Counselors working with Black individuals who have lived in Japan need to be aware of their complex intersectional identities, their experiences of being categorized as foreigners despite their strong Black identity, and their reports of having an overall positive experience living in Japan. Understanding these nuances can help counselors working with this population identify protective factors that can help mitigate potential negative experiences for Black people after returning to their country of origin.

At the institutional level, such as counseling programs, counseling clinics, and administration services, can reflect their commitment to engage in advocacy acts by addressing the unique positioning of Black individuals within Japan's ethnically homogeneous society. Many participants emphasized the importance of accessible resources for Black individuals living in Japan to help mitigate the impact of negative experiences. Similarly, several participants shared their struggles in developing a sense of community due to geographic isolation and the limited resources for Black people. It is important to note that one participant engaged in several advocacy works, including a community building for Black individuals in the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program, hosting an event for Black women in a region, and writing a book with resources for Black travelers in Japan. However, these resources and support are still limited and may not reach most Black individuals in Japan. Therefore, the institutions and members can consider how to advocate for this population with reflection on their own engagement in the Black community in general, including expanding learning opportunities in the unique racial and ethnic categorization in Japan (Haye-Matsui, 2025; Hof, 2025; Russell, 2023). Additionally, institutions can mitigate the impact of losing one's community by connecting clients to community resources, promoting connectedness within groups, and encouraging community engagement.

Limitations and Suggestions

This study has several limitations, including (1) the sample size and (2) the lack of social identity heterogeneity among participants. First, the sample size was limited to five participants, despite multiple recruitment methods used over an extended period to increase the number. The lack of participants could be attributed to the small existing Black community in Japan or to research bias within the Black community (Davison & Peng, 2021). Another limitation is the lack of diversity among the participants. Out of five participants, four identified as male. All of the participants identified as cisgender. Many also have experience teaching in Japan, except for one person a computer-related job. To understand the overall experience of self-identified Black individuals in Japan, we intentionally did not limit participants to a specific ethnicity, even though this may not reflect their unique challenges.

Considering the increasing globalization and the population of the Black diaspora, we must develop and implement supportive services to meet the needs of this socially marginalized

community. This study is one of the first empirical investigations to focus on the general experience of Black individuals in Japan (Russell, 2023) as well as the potential impact of the BLM movement in Japan. We hope this study will help and inspire future scholars and counselors to support this underrepresented population in Japan and other Asian countries, especially since this topic can widely face academic silence due to the potential backlash to voice the matter of this population (Pillay, 2022).

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