

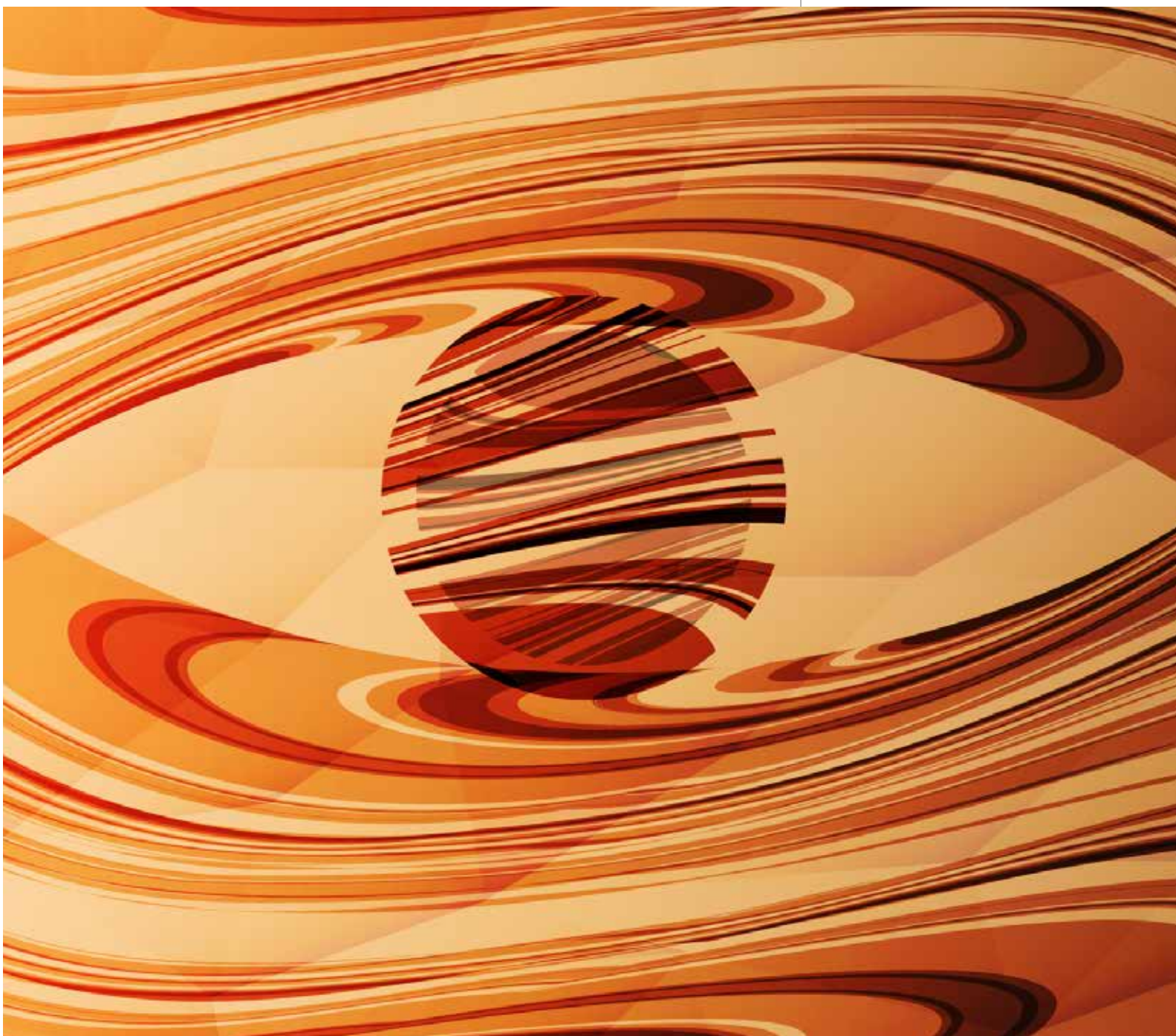
# EMERGE SMARTER

eBOOK INSIGHTS

## **MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE: THE MANY SHADES OF BLACK IDENTITY**

There is much diversity within the Black Community. They are not a monolithic group.

**C+R**  
RESEARCH



This eBook intends to add context around, and to encourage a celebration of, the diverse make-up of the Black community by providing an in-depth look at **Black Identity** through stories shared by members of the community. Our goal is to help our clients to emerge smarter about the different identities represented within the Black community and to provide guidance for marketers as they explore ways to authentically connect. Marketers can position themselves to reap the benefits of inclusive marketing efforts by implementing strategies showing that their brand is knowledgeable about this community's diversity.



## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF “BLACK-FIRST” + MORE THAN BLACK



It's not uncommon to feel confident in one's ability to discern that a person is Black by simply looking at skin color. This method of identification, however, may only provide a glimpse into a person's actual story. Seeing Black, first, is certainly important; but we encourage a consideration of more than only Black when you're thinking about the Black community and how individuals identify. Though there is a strong solidarity among the community, the community is not monolithic. To add context, we share this story from a person who was involved in an onboarding process for a new hire.

“

About a year ago, we hired a young woman whose unique name came across my desk. I immediately thought, 'Cool name! I wonder if she's African.' I didn't wonder if she was Black (that part was a given for me). I did have a burning question for her—'So, this is my first time meeting someone with your name. Do you know of its derivation?'

Her enlightening response: 'My first name means first come, but it also means the first twin to come and taste the world. I am first-born. In Nigerian culture, all twins from my tribe are named like this because of the meaning and tradition behind it. My last name means a person born into royalty.'

I inquired, 'How long have you been in the States?' To which, she replied, 'I was actually born in America. My parents were born in Nigeria, but are here also. They've been here for a number of years and have no plans to move back to Nigeria. They do, however, try to keep me educated about Nigerian customs.'

Hmmm...and then I ask her the question that researchers and marketers have been asking for years, 'So, do you identify as African-American, Black, or something else?'

Her response was very telling: 'Well, when I speak with native-born Africans, they don't feel that I am truly connected to the motherland because I don't really know their African traditions. When I talk to Black-Americans, they say I don't know or understand the historical struggle that Blacks have dealt with in America. So, I have adopted a philosophy of Black-First because when people look at me, that is the first thing that they see—that I am Black. Black-First allows me to embrace being both American and Nigerian.' ”



According to the U.S. Census, as of 2020, there are approximately 41 million Blacks living in America; and while some are descendants of slaves, there is a misconception that all Blacks identify as such. The Black immigrant population, for example, is projected to represent 16.5% of the Black U.S. population by the year 2060, according to [Pew Research](#), and about 5% of the Black population also identify as Hispanic. There are several other identities represented in the Black community; some, we will talk about a bit in this eBook.

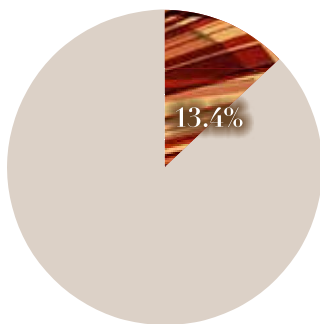


## HOW DO BLACK AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS PREFER TO BE IDENTIFIED

Black? African? African-American? Black-American? Which term is correct? It's that sensitive question that doesn't seem to have ONE right answer, and there's a somewhat complex reason as to why. Although identifiers like Black and African-American are familiar terms, the preferred identifier for some members of the Black community could be Biracial, or Afro-Latino, or another choice from an array of other identities. Let's start by taking a look at the group that our clients seem to focus on most often—Black/African-Americans.

### Black/African-American (Some of Whom Are Descendants of Slaves)

(A term used to define an American person with dark skin who comes from Africa or whose ancestors came from Africa)



According to population estimates by the U.S. Census, as of July of 2021, Black/African-Americans make up approximately 13.4% of the total US population. Typically, the identity most associated with the Black/African-American community includes those who are descendants of enslaved people, who were specifically enslaved in the United States of America. Blacks/African-Americans who identify as descendants of slaves stand in solidarity in the belief that slavery has had a chronic, negative impact on their lives. They feel that systemic racism exists even today in America, which makes it increasingly challenging to forgive and move completely past that awful time in history.

“ People in the African-American community have a shared understanding of the systemic oppression that caused so much pain and inequality which has led us all to have an appreciation for our ancestors' resilience and cultural traditions that make us who we are. We

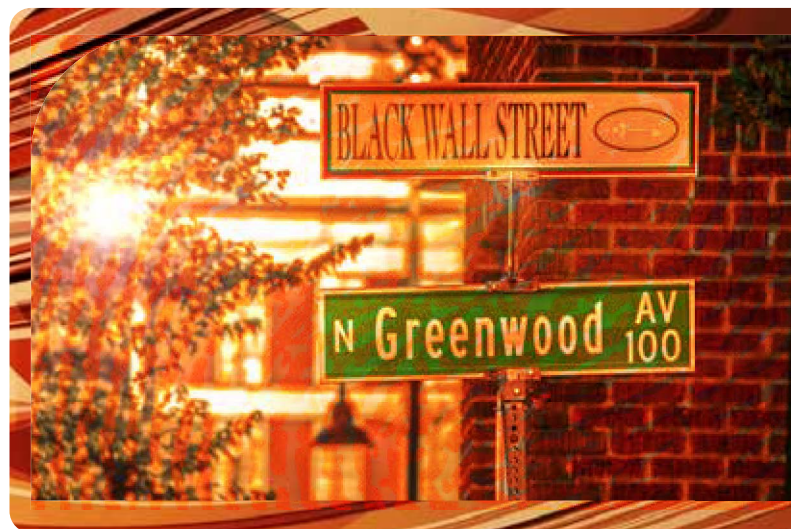
are mindful and navigate life with caution to purposely present ourselves to avoid stereotypes. Collectively, Blacks/African-Americans possess great resilience due to the physical and mental stresses we have endured from centuries of economic disadvantages.”



Research conducted by a team of Harvard scholars confirms high amounts of allostatic load for Blacks/African-Americans. Despite this load, accompanied, for some, by painful memories of slavery, there is a shared feeling of pride in the strength and resilience that their ancestors showed as they moved through history. Many who have been victims of chronic racism and/or especially those who identify as descendants of slaves, accept this strength and resilience as part of their own DNA; and these traits are the ingredients that make for the perfect coping mechanism when dealing with discrimination and racism today. Their story has very palpable and heartfelt roots.

It's important to repeat, here, an earlier statement: The Black/African-American community is not a monolithic group. The Black/African-American experience varies greatly from person-to-person and from subgroup-to-subgroup and is largely dependent on what region they originally migrated from as well as where they currently reside. Not all Blacks/African-Americans connect to their African roots which may be the result of numerous factors including, but not limited to, a loss of the historical significance of Africa that may have resulted from how slaves were traded in various regions of the world, not just the U.S. This disconnect can also be due to the total assimilation into the various cultures in which they've found themselves immersed—an assimilation which has strengthened over time resulting in the establishment of new, or different, norms and cultural traditions that pass from generation-to-generation.

For marketers who want to genuinely connect with this cohort, an opportunity to do so exists in being sincere with acknowledging and empathizing with the community about a painful time in history, exacerbated atop ongoing racism and marginalization. The goal, however, should focus on the strength and resilience that lives in their DNA, passed to them from their ancestors. Also celebrate their resourcefulness in having created new traditions and customs to connect with the Black/African-American community at-large with celebrations like Kwanzaa which began only in 1966, and Juneteenth which became recognized as a federal holiday in 2021. This group shares in a hopeful “We-Will-Overcome-Adversity” attitude. Brands should embrace this group's tenacity and resourcefulness in their efforts to authentically connect with them.



## MULTICULTURALISM AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY

In 2000, the U.S. Census added the Some Other Race (SOR) selection to its survey, and people were no longer forced to self-identify with one specific race. Consequently, the agency witnessed a significant increase in the number of people who were selecting SOR in response to the question about race and ethnicity. This resulted in the agency deciding to conduct research to improve its [data on race and ethnicity](#). The most recent census data revealed a [diversity index](#) for the U.S. of 61.1%. Through the years, individuals are becoming more and more comfortable with embracing each part of their DNA. Let's take a look at a few other identities applicable to the Black community.



### Biracial

(A word that defines individuals who have parents of two different races)

“ I am biracial, and I identify as Black. My mother's side of the family is White, and my father's side is Afro-Caribbean. 'What is blackness?' was a question that lingered around for most of my childhood. It can be confusing to place yourself within a mosaic of Black cultures. I grew up in Florida with many

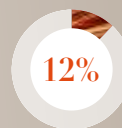
Black-Caribbean, Afro-Latino and Black-American classmates. Although my closest family members are White, my experiences closely mirrored the experiences of my Black female friends. I think through these relationships, I found myself. ”

We are in an era of new and overlapping identities; many of these being Black identities. The [2020 Census](#) revealed that 5.8 million people identified as Black in combination with another race. Black-Indian and Black-White adults are the most prevalent groups of Black biracial adults (12% and 11%, respectively). [Pew Research](#) reported that 69% of multiracial adults with Black ancestry

say most people would view them as Black, and they report having an experience closely aligned with the Black community. It is, therefore, not surprising that although Black multiracial or biracial individuals embrace each part of their DNA, they join in the communal pride that Blacks feel when members of the Black community make historically significant contributions to society.



**5.8 million** people identified as Black in combination with another race in 2020



Black-Indian Adults



Black-White Adults



Historical figures like [Frederick Douglass](#) and [Booker T. Washington](#) were biracial. Notable political Black figures, [Kamala Harris](#) and [Barack Obama](#), come from multiracial backgrounds. Other well-known, modern day, Black figures, [Alicia Keys](#) and [Lenny Kravitz](#) are of mixed race as well. Their place in Black history is valid and strong. Black biracial people have always been part of Black American culture, dating back to the early 20th century with the [‘one drop rule’](#), a bizarre rule that only applied to Blacks. The rule, which originated in the South, stated that any person with even one Black ancestor is Black, despite any other ethnicities that may also be part of their DNA. A fast forward to current times places the prevalence of multiculturalism in clear perspective with [the 2020 Census report](#) showing an increase in those who identify as multiracial from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020.

To effectively connect with those in the Black community who identify as biracial, it’s important to acknowledge them as a member of each ethnic group to which they belong, being careful to show equal importance and respect for each ethnicity. In advertising, this is an opportunity to connect with this cohort by showing a mix of ethnic groups engaging with one another, where not only are the participants comfortable in each other’s company, but they “get,” or understand, one another. They’re cut from the same cloth so to speak—an “ethnic ambidexterity” of sorts.

We now turn our focus to perhaps the fastest growing group that is part of the Black identity—Immigrants.

## Immigrant

(A word used to define a person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country)

“ The term African-American was something that just never really came up in my house, it was a distant word to me. Coming from a home of immigrant, Nigerian parents, that culture was all I knew, but at the same time being born in America, I couldn’t only identify myself by one group. ”





Black immigrants migrate from a variety of different places across the globe, but there is a misconception that all Black immigrants coming to America are from Africa. Although Africa is responsible for the fastest Black immigrant growth, the Caribbean is the largest origin region. According to [Pew Research](#), together, the two regions accounted for 88% of all Black foreign-born people in 2019; Jamaica and Haiti lead as countries of origin. When it comes to selecting “descriptors” that show how they identify, most choose between African, Black, or African-American. However, for the individual, intuitively, it’s not that simple.

Assuming that all Black immigrants can be grouped into one category can devalue their own traditions, customs, and experiences within their countries of origin and come off as offensive.

First-generation Americans might struggle with their identity more than others because they usually find themselves somewhere in the middle. They might identify themselves evenly in both cultures or may slightly sway more to either side. Some like to be identified by specific origins, for example, Jamaican, Dominican, Cameroonian, Ghanaian, or Nigerian-American for those who are first-generation born in America. Conclusively, most may identify as Black when choosing between Black and African-American because Black people are considered to live everywhere, and the term includes all backgrounds and cultures within this community. Conversely, the term, “African-American,” is a culture specific to Black people who are descendants of Africans but who are native to America. The term, African-American, itself, was first used in the 1800s, though it was [popularized in America by Reverend Jesse Jackson](#) in the 1980s during his presidential run. This term is often perceived as the politically correct term that is socially acceptable to be used in spaces outside of the Black community. It does not, however, capture the way that all Black people identify.

For the Immigrant cohort, connect with them authentically by highlighting the positive, rich, and colorful influences that their non-American culture has on the American experience. [Forbes](#), for example, cites how the food landscape of America has been enhanced with the addition of Jamaican and African cuisine. Look into other ways that their immigrant backgrounds have added value or otherwise been relevant to enhancing American culture.





Another group who identifies with the Black community are Afro-Latinos. According to the [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#), 54% of Black immigrants came to the U.S. from Latin America. [Pew Research](#) reports that there are 2.4 million people in the U.S. who identify as both Black and Hispanic; one-quarter of Latinos in the U.S. identify as Afro-Latino. Let's look at how this story shapes out by reviewing some information shared in an observational study by Juan A. Godoy Peñas of Harvard University, [Are You Black or Latino? Being Afro-Latino in the U.S.](#) Peñas marks three relevant years of the U.S.

Census—1980, 1990, and 2000. During this time, he speaks of three racial groups, but our focus is on the progression that encompasses two of them: in 1980, **(1) 'Hispanic Hispanics'**, who didn't identify as White, Black or Asian and who were forced to identify as Hispanic; and in 2000 **(2) 'Black Hispanics'**, who were comprised of mostly Dominicans and Puerto Ricans, with some Mexicans. The latter group accounted for nearly one million permanent residents in the U.S.

### Afro-Latino, Black-Hispanic, or Afro-Hispanic (Terms used to refer to a Black Latino with African ancestry)



“Identifying as Afro-Latino is identifying yourself with community, a family. We're all different in demography but at the same time we are all so alike. We can go into a room and not know anyone at first and in 10 minutes you have created yourself a family. Black Latinos are known to be touchy, loud, grounded in family, beautiful, diverse, a spectrum of skin color and culture. I think there are so many misconceptions within our group of people, some being that we should look a particular way or that we are less educated or that we are a defined group in the Latino/a community. The word Afro-Latino is not something that people really talk about, it is a concept that is very gate kept and/or taboo.

When someone identifies as Afro-Latino, they are acknowledging their roots, embracing two cultures, African and Latino backgrounds. People who identify themselves as Afro-Latino are proud. Something I wish people would know about Afro-Latinos is that we don't only fall in the category of brown and black skin. Many of our physical features are African, but it's not only our skin. It's also our hair and our bodies. Afro-Latinos are beautiful and come from different parts of the world: Cuba, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Panama, Argentina, Honduras, and the list goes on. ”

Afro-Latinos look for acknowledgment of the contributions they've made to American culture, with focus on the coexistence of both their Latino and Black influence. For instance, they are [trailblazers](#) in the entertainment industry, with stars like Mariah Carey, Cardi B, Rosie Perez, Miguel, and Maxwell all identifying as Afro-Latino. And,

though the talents that Afro-Latinos possess reach much farther than the entertainment industry, the footprint they've left on the industry cannot be denied. The term Afro-Latino helps to describe a complex group, and this term allows members to connect with both parts of their identity.

The not-too-subtle push for mutual respect for people of all backgrounds began with Millennials, but as Gen Z begins to make its mark on the world, especially as it relates to matters of diversity and inclusivity, we see a progressive trend toward acceptance of different cultures. Where there may have once been some level of discomfort in embracing every ounce of one's DNA, that discomfort has dissipated much, and we expect it to continue to do so. There are some very different faces that make up the [Afro-Latino identity and some intriguing stories to share](#), all contributing to the rich culture and diverse collective of BOTH the Latino and Black identities.

Acceptance and inclusivity have been two major motivators for the Black community. There is another cohort that has been down in the trenches as well with this fight—a traditionally marginalized community whose voices become more and more amplified as generations continue—the LGBTQ+ community. [USA Today](#) reports that 5.6% of U.S. adults identify as LGBTQ+. This eBook, however, is about Black Identity. We feel it's important to point out here how different the Black LGBTQ+ community's experiences are vs. the LGBTQ+ community at-large.

## LGBTQ+

(An acronym for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer community)



“Most Black gays and lesbians who are well adjusted (i.e., love themselves and have overcome years of negativity and abuse) are happy people who have learned to navigate the world they live in.

To identify as a member of the Black LGBTQ+ Community means to be your full self unapologetically. Despite all of the disadvantages you face, you find strength and power in being truly yourself. There is a family in this community that welcomes everyone with open arms. The Black LGBTQ+ Community takes care of each other through love, support, and resources. People who identify within this group are

proud, giving, loving, and fearless. This community takes care of each other and is made up of people who want better for everyone.

Some misconceptions are that people believe that someone can't connect with both the Black and the LGBTQ+ community because the Black community is homophobic/transphobic. We don't, however, have to choose between our Blackness and our other identities. The idea that the Black community is homophobic/transphobic is untrue. There are LGBTQ+ people in the Black community who create culture and history and there always will be.”

Members of this community express vastly different experiences and narratives about the intersection of being Black and LGBTQ+. It's at this intersection that some come face-to-face with the concept of “multiply marginalized” for the first time. “[Multiply marginalized](#)” is a term used to refer to populations that are marginalized in more than one way—in this case, due to being

both Black + LGBTQ+. The lived experiences of this community run the gamut of feeling part of a very receptive and loving community on one end of the spectrum to a community where traditional Black cultural beliefs and traditions, especially those that are religiously based, have fostered an environment that invites marginalization.

“ To identify as Black and LGBTQ is to accept and recognize my whole being. It is hard for many like me who were raised in the Black church to accept themselves when their orientation/sexuality has always been demonized. I did not choose to be Same Gender Loving, I am; I accepted that as I understood my attraction and understood how to navigate it in a dangerous world.

Many are conflicted and don't feel safe. It all depends on where they live and their support system. Many form gay extended families since they have been rejected by Black society and culture. In many places it's not safe to be 'out,' especially in the machismo world of Hip-Hop, Small towns, Black churches, and gangs.”

The Black community is known to be a culturally rich and resilient community. And, some of those who find themselves at the intersection of

being Black and LGBTQ+, despite many social challenges they may have encountered, emerge with a well-grounded and secure sense of self.

“ Being a part of both the Black and LGBTQ+ community is my superpower. Because I'm gay, I'm creative. Being a man gives me a masculine energy enabling me to be a provider and a protector, but I also have a feminine energy that allows me to be a nurturer as well. I'm so balanced.”

How should marketers connect with this cohort? Encourage their right to be authentic in who they are by placing the focus on their humanness. They're a community who seeks to have their lifestyle depicted in more ways than their sexual orientation. Who they choose to love does not define their entire life's story.



## IN SUMMARY

The Black Diaspora has resulted in a culture of a beautiful tapestry of inspiration from African roots and new traditions/rituals that were created by generations based on their cultural experiences in this country. The pride that comes with that connection can best be reflected by the meaning of the colors of the [Pan-African Flag](#)—Red, the bloodline with roots back to the ancestors; Black, the race of the people; and Green, the richness of the land. Yet, Africa, for many, is just part of

who they are—some feel more connected to the motherland than others; there is a desire to acknowledge the whole person (i.e., each part that makes up their DNA). It is for this reason that we've shed some light on some of these identities and encourage a consideration of Black and more than Black as you target the Black community in your marketing efforts.

Want to  
know more?

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Multicultural  
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## C+R'S POV:

It's impossible to singularly define the many faces, cultures and ethnicities that are represented in the Black Identity. The myriad backgrounds and different experiences contribute to this being a very diverse group. What they do all have in common, however, is a shared pride in being Black; but there is also pride in the other parts of their DNA.

As marketers, it is fine that you think "Black-First," but also consciously consider more than Black to be successfully diverse and inclusive. Be comfortable targeting the different groups that make up the Black Identity in your marketing efforts. Collectively, the Black community will appreciate an acknowledgment of this diversity and will welcome and embrace the celebration.



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