

WIDE ANGLE

The Black BYU Students Asking the Questions White People Don't Want to Answer

TikTok's favorite new provocateurs are more than a college campus sensation.

BY RACHELLE HAMPTON AND MADISON MALONE KIRCHER APRIL 23, 2022 • 10:00 AM



Photo illustration by Slate.

The most popular TikTok on the Black Menaces page starts like this: Nate Byrd, a Black student at Brigham Young University, holds a microphone up to the face of one of his fellow students and asks him if he supports gay marriage. Over the course of the 44-second video

Byrd and the rest of the group known as the Black Menaces interrogate white students and faculty about their views on marriage equality. Answers range from a simple “yes,” to an equally simple “no,” to obfuscation worthy of a courtroom.

The video, which has over 18 million views, is one of many man-on-the-street type interviews that the Black Menaces have conducted over the past two months. Thanks to their willingness to confront other young members of the Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints about their biases and beliefs, this group of Black BYU students have seen their content launched into the public discourse.

On last Saturday's episode of *In Case You Missed It*, hosts Rachelle Hampton and Madison Malone Kircher spoke with two members of the Black Menaces about their newfound fame and what it's like to be a Black student on BYU's campus, and what they hope their videos will achieve.

This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.

Rachelle Hampton: What are the Black Menaces?

Rachel Weaver: We are a group of black students at Brigham Young University, and we are friends. We met through the Black Student Union on campus.

Nate Byrd: The TikTok account came in response to some comments that were made by a faculty member here on campus. ... Brad Wilcox is the name of the faculty member. He's a leader in the church. He made some comments that were racist, sexist, and xenophobic. So I took the part that was racist, and we said, “We got to do something about this.” And we decided to make a reaction video.

Sebastian [Stewart-Johnson] is the one who actually created the account. We were all joking about it, but he actually made it happen.

Hampton: What does a typical Black Menace TikTok video look like?

Byrd: What we do is we come up with a question, usually regarding a social issue or a political issue, and we'll ask BYU students what their thoughts are on that issue.

Weaver: Most of the questions have to do with black people or other BIPOC communities, queer students, or really any issue that we feel is addressing a marginalized group on BYU campus. Or [they're about] something that is more taboo in Utah or the culture of the Church of Jesus Christ.

Madison Malone Kircher: How does it feel when you walk up to a student and put that microphone in their face? What's going through your head?

Byrd: I feel more powerful. BYU is often a very draining place for marginalized groups. Usually when I'm on campus, I want to leave as quickly as possible. But when I'm with other people who are like me, it feels that much better. When I'm walking with the other Black Menace and we're just prowling, looking for someone to talk to, it's actually a lot of fun. When we're able to ask somebody a question and watch their reaction as the gears start turning, it's pretty satisfying.

A lot of the students that we talk to, they have the privilege to never have to think about these things. These are issues that we have to think about or deal with on a daily basis, so being able to kickstart that process in them is pretty wonderful.

Weaver: Sometimes it's a little scary, at least for me as a Black woman, especially approaching white men. It can be a little intimidating when asking racially charged questions. I don't know what they're going to say, and I don't know how bold they will be.

Hampton: What is it like to hear answers from your peers that essentially boil down to these things?

not believing that certain marginalized groups deserve to be treated equally?

Byrd: The thing with BYU is we already know how people think because a lot of us, we've here for a long time. This is just the first time that it's ever been caught in 4K, so to speak. think we're more surprised when we get answers that are supportive or affirmative, because when we ask people these questions, we expect to get wild answers.

Malone Kircher: There's a common refrain amongst students who answer you. They tell you "Oh, I can't speak to that," or "I need to do more research." Do you think they're actually doing research or do you think that's just cover for, "I don't want to tell you how I feel, because I know it's wrong"?

Weaver: I don't think they're actually going to learn about [these issues,] because they've never researched it up to this point in their life, because it hasn't affected them. And after you ask them the question, it's not going to affect them again, probably. And so I genuinely do believe a lot of them are researching. I think some of them might be thinking deeper after videos go viral, maybe, and they see themselves.



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Malone Kircher: I'm assuming that everyone you film consents to being filmed prior to being on camera. Do you often get rebuffed? Do you walk up to students and they say, "Absolutely not?"

Byrd: I'd say it's probably about 70/30, 80/20 [percent]. Most people will say yes, but every time we ask, we'll always get one or two nos. For the most part, people don't rebuff us. But when they do, they're not comfortable being on camera, or they don't want to be filmed.

Weaver: Sometimes we can tell that someone does not want to be filmed. They don't want to answer their question or they're very apprehensive, but they say yes anyway. And we're like, "You can say no. We don't have to film you." But it takes us saying it once or twice, sometimes three times, for them to actually be like, "Oh, I can walk away."

Malone Kircher: In a lot of the videos I've watched, your peers will invoke doctrine from the church as to why they stand by their beliefs. Are you two members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints?

Weaver: We both are.

Malone Kircher: How does that feel?

Byrd: You have to do a lot of doctrinal gymnastics to pick out the parts that are good and

behind the parts that are flat-out wrong. There's a lot of good things about the church, like there's good things in every church. But there's also a lot of racism, there's a lot of homophobia, there's a lot of sexism, xenophobia, and it's unfortunate. It's difficult navigating that, especially while being a Black member of the church. ... You have to deal with navigating the church, then also being a member of the church and a Black person among Black people who don't understand that perspective.

Weaver: [Whether you're a] member of the church or not, I refuse to use doctrine as a reason to defend bigotry.

Malone Kircher: What has the administrative response been like to the Black Menaces?

Byrd: We actually haven't gotten any response from the university so far. They've been very silent, so we don't know what the official stance is. I mean, I know that they know who we are.

Hampton: Is it surprising that you haven't heard from the administration?

Weaver: Honestly, yes and no. Yes in the sense [that] BYU and the church that our school is sponsored by does not like to be painted in a negative light on the internet, on social media, or in news articles. Normally they try to control the narrative. But also it's not surprising, because they have no idea what to do. I know the lawyers are squirming every day trying to figure out what they can do to stop us.

Malone Kircher: What is your biggest hit thus far?

Weaver: Our first video, asking people if they support gay marriage. That video skyrocketed us in a way that we did not even anticipate.

Hampton: What do you hope the impact of these videos is?

Weaver: Our church and BYU very rarely make changes unless there's pressure from the outside. Then they're like, "Well, we have no choice." We've been putting in the work for years. We've been trying to do things for such a long time, and nothing has come of it. This feels like we're on the cusp of adding the right amount of pressure to get some real policy change at BYU, to help BIPOC students be more comfortable, to have more resources, and also to help queer students in terms of [even being allowed] to hold hands on campus.

Malone Kircher: One of your videos is not a Q-and-A style, but it's the Menaces disavowing hate speech and cyber-bullying and racism of any kind. What do you say to people who claim that you're perpetrating the very things that the Black Menaces are fighting against?

Byrd: I feel like a lot of people, especially members of the church, they're very caught up in perfectionism that our church culture has. ... So when anything is seen as less perfect, that's a threat.

For us to be showing that, "Hey, BYU is not as you think it is. Your experience is different than ours," I think a lot of people take issue with that.

Weaver: We don't encourage dragging of the people in our videos, because these are still people. Although what they think might not be correct and might be problematic, they still change and grow, and I hope they do. If they get a little beat up right now on the internet, that'll help them to shape up and try again next week.

But I think we need to give people the opportunity to change and grow with more knowledge because a lot of people in our community grew up very sheltered and were not exposed to certain things. ... Sometimes this might have been the first time someone has asked them a question, and this is the first time they're formulating a response. We're trying to show the reality of what people think, not necessarily condemn people.

Malone Kircher: On a lighter note, do you guys feel like campus celebrities at this point?

Weaver: Yes. It's a little much, if I'm going to be honest. Before Black Menaces, people would stare at us. We're 0.4% of the population, and I do have awesome hair, if I do say so myself. But no one ever knew if people were staring at me because I'm black, [or] because of my hair. But now we get more stares, and I think it's because of Black Menaces. When I'm out, even not on campus, in Utah County, in Salt Lake, people go, "Are you from Black Menaces?"

Byrd: Pretty much every day somebody will recognize us and some people are fine with it and other people will stare at you and make it weird. It takes some getting used to, for sure.

Hampton: What's your favorite reaction you've gotten so far?

Weaver: When we filmed the "would you date someone who was a bisexual" video, we met a gay student through there and someone else who was bisexual. So that was really fun, because we chatted with them for 30 minutes afterward and made a new friend. I love when we meet really cool people through doing our videos.

Byrd: My favorite one is one of our very first videos, where we went around and asked other members of the Black Student Union, “Hey, what’s your favorite thing about BYU?” And the response from pretty much all of them was, “Oh the black people,” us, the BSU. That really one of the best parts about being here is the community that we’ve been able to build together.

Weaver: It’s my family at this point. 🍷

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