

TO TWEET OUR OWN CAUSE:
A MIXED-METHODS STUDY OF THE ONLINE PHENOMENON “BLACK TWITTER”

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ABSTRACT

Meredith D. Clark: To Tweet Our Own Cause:
A mixed-methods study of the online phenomenon “Black Twitter”
(Under the direction of Rhonda Gibson)

As the numbers of African-Americans with Internet access, particularly via smartphone, have grown, so have digital artifacts that point to evidence of a narrowing digital divide between Blacks and Whites in America. As Nakamura (2007) observed, race has been made visible in online social discourse. This truth is made evident in news reporting on the emergence of so-called “Black Twitter.”

To date, mainstream news media texts describe Black Twitter from the perspective of the deficiency model of technology adoption among African-American users. Early media framing of the phenomenon has been met with open rebuke and disdain among Black Twitter users, who counter that “Black Twitter” is resonant of key themes of community, social movements and private/public conversation.

Using grounded-theory analysis of data triangulated from a content analysis of news media, discourse analysis of selected tweets, and semi-structured interviews with 36 unique Twitter users all collected between August 2010 and January 2014, this dissertation established a theoretical framework for exploring the multi-level community and network building process commonly referred to as “Black Twitter.” The findings from this research, which present a six-step process of engagement and community-building, challenge existing theories of media use and social identity, uses the participants own narratives to describe the

social construction of an identifiable, influential meta-network of communicators with the ability to impact news media coverage on Black American life.

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Amen.

(Ephesians 3:20-21)

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The night of Aug. 8, 2010, was probably like any other for most Twitter users. They sent hundreds of millions of messages, each no more than 140 characters, into cyberspace via the microblogging site. The popular ones were tweeted once, then re-tweeted again and again. Once critical mass was built around a word or phrase, these re-tweets emerged as “trends,” a semantic indicator of popular topics among the site’s (at the time) more than 140 million users around the world. That night, a cluster of users on the West Coast caught the attention of *Slate* Technology Writer Farad Manjoo with an odd hashtag:

#wordsthatleadtotrouble. From his initial observation, Manjoo traced the phrase’s use from a woman in South Africa to a user in Southern California. From there, the phrase was tweeted and re-tweeted by hundreds of U.S. users – most of them, if their avatars were any indication – were Black.

On Aug. 10, two days after #wordsthatleadtotrouble first appeared among the top U.S. Twitter trends, Manjoo published an article on Slate.com that questioned whether Twitter’s use among African-Americans reflected a “break between Blacks and non-Blacks on Twitter – that real-life segregation is being mirrored online” (Manjoo, 2009). The article expounded on another media critic’s recent post, “Late Night Black People Twitter,” in which writer Choire Sicha wondered aloud “what were Black people on Twitter talking about last night?” (Sicha, 2009). Although Manjoo diligently reported on the topic, and queried scholars and pop-culture critics alike to learn more about African-Americans on Twitter, his

column was saddled with an unfortunate headline: “How Black People Use Twitter.” The phrase would soon be distilled down to “Black Twitter” and repeated by media outlets. In his article, Manjoo proposed an anecdotal analysis of the weak social ties and use patterns that enabled Blacks, particularly young Black teenagers, to dominate conversation on the information network. His observations are part of larger media and scholarly conversations about life online, particularly among African-Americans, who were late adopters in the settlement of the Web, and consequently, nearly absent from the discourse on Internet technology and cyberculture. The goal for this study is to identify and compare framing elements of mainstream and niche news media's coverage of Blacks'/African-Americans' Twitter use and the concept of Black Twitter from August 2010 to January 2014, and to compare the media depictions of the phenomenon with the lived experiences of its participants. The purpose of this study is to form an integrated picture of a small portion of the Black existence online from in-group and out-group perspectives through mixed-methods data collection and comprehensive data analysis of the online phenomena of Black Twitter. The literature for this study examines how Internet access among Blacks has been described in the news media, and how those portrayals, along with scholarly work on emerging cyberculture, have conceptualized the Black existence online.

The digital divide

In the late 1990s, while Whites indicated that they had Internet access, Blacks were more likely to indicate that they planned to acquire access (Hoffman & Novak, 2001). Whereas 40.8 million Whites used the web in 1997, only 5.2 million Blacks had ever logged on (Hoffman & Novak, 2001). This gap in Internet access among racial groups, particularly Blacks and Whites, is commonly called the “digital divide” (NTIA, 1998, p. xiii). Early

scholarly and news writings concerning minorities and Internet-based technology have positioned Blacks as being deficient of Internet access (NTIA, 1998, p. xiii). And as Selwyn (2004) noted, and Brock (2012) confirmed, research on digital technology use among different demographics still uses this language, and is predicated on the deficiency model; that is, that African-Americans have historically lacked access to the Internet.

In “Falling Through the Net,” a series of reports produced in the late 1990s by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications & Information Association, Black households were repeatedly positioned as having substantially less access to Internet technology than did White households (NTIA, 1998). The report was among the first authoritative documents to speak about the gap separating American information “haves” and “have nots” (NTIA, 1998, p. xiii). The report found that 26.2 percent of Whites and 9.2 percent of Blacks were among Americans using the Internet at home, at work, or in a third location (NTIA, 1998, p. 44). The report cited factors including age, income and education as contributing to the discrepancy in Internet access between groups (NTIA, 1998). The Pew Research Center has also documented trends in Internet use among Americans, and found that in 1995, only one in 10 American adults used the Internet each day (Smith & Brenner, 2012).

Narrowing the access gap. Pew has since reported that despite technological advances that allow individuals to access the Internet through a variety of means, including laptops, smartphones and other devices, digital differences still remained between Whites and minorities, particularly Blacks. The gap has been narrowed a bit by mobile technology. In 2011, one-third of all Americans reported that they owned a smartphone; the smartphone adoption rate is considerably higher among all African-Americans, at 44 percent (Smith &

Brenner, 2012). As of August 2011, 85 percent of Whites and 71 percent of Blacks in the United States used the Internet on a daily basis (Smith & Brenner, 2012). This figure represents the largest gain in Internet access among demographic comparisons – although age, income and education still pose large deficiencies among users. Smartphone adoption rates have contributed to the growing presence of African-American Internet users. Sixty-four percent of Blacks, as compared to 53 percent of Whites, reported that they own a smartphone in May 2013 (Rainie, Smith & Duggan, 2013). This may account for high rates of Twitter adoption among African-Americans who use the Internet.

Newsworthiness of late adopters. African-American Twitter users have emerged as a subset of interest for two reasons – (1) their representation on Twitter has eclipsed that of White U.S. users; (2) because of their representation, they possess a unique ability to dramatically influence Twitter trends. An oft-cited 2010 report from the Pew Center for the Internet & American Life Project found that 8 percent of Americans who were online used Twitter (Smith & Rainie, 2010). When organized by race, 5 percent of White, non-Hispanic Internet users said they used Twitter, as compared to 13 percent of Blacks and 18 percent of Hispanics (Smith & Rainie, 2010). By 2012, 20 percent of Blacks who used the Internet used Twitter, whereas 11 percent of White Internet users also used Twitter (Smith & Brenner, 2012). The history of African-Americans and Internet use, juxtaposed with the surge of their representation on Twitter, were two elements that fit the need for stories on the phenomena of African-American driven Twitter trends.

Making the News

African-Americans' use of Twitter is a topic that satisfies some of the eight news values of the U.S. news media (Yopp, McAdams & Thornburg, 2010). These values include

unusualness: “What were Black people talking about on Twitter last night?” (Sicha, 2009); conflict: “Does this suggest...that real-life segregation is being mirrored online?” (Manjoo, 2010), and impact: researcher Brandon Meeder, who was quoted in Manjoo’s article, observed how high levels of adoption among Black Twitter users affects their ability to create a conversational groundswell (Manjoo, 2010). Manjoo (2010) points to statistics from the Pew Research Center for the Internet and American Life documentation of the overrepresentation of minorities among on Twitter (Smith, 2011; Smith & Brenner, 2012). Subsequent news stories have also reported on the number of Black users of Twitter, focusing on their ability to create unique trending topics through the use of hashtags that do not echo the top news stories of the day (Fontaine, 2011; theroot.com, nda).

As a news worker, Manjoo was able to link his observations to empirical data about Blacks and social media, creating a timely piece about African-American Twitter users. His work met the publication needs of his employer, Slate, and the consumption demands of the online magazine’s audience (Edison, 2010). However, it was inadequate in its description of the phenomenon – Manjoo never spoke directly to anyone involved in the Twitter trends he observed, and thus failed to include a first-person account of the events.

However, Manjoo’s work fit the standards of media-content production as they were previously explained in Shoemaker and Reese’s 1997 seminal work on the media content-production process. For the readers who follow Slate’s technology blog, this information had to be relevant and digestible in terms of explaining a novel use of social media in ways that the target audience would understand. He relied on key phrases, imagery and stereotypes to produce the story, and in doing so fulfilled the media routines of selection and salience, or meaning-making, involved in creating and promoting the news (Entman, 1993). Manjoo, and

Sicha before him, did not merely observe and report on an experience. In keeping with journalism traditions, they considered their audience and available resources, observed a phenomenon, gathered information from various sources and recast the phenomenon as news.

The hashtags that first piqued the interest of Sichra and Manjoo have spun off a number of observations about the factors at work in so-called Black Twitter. The online community has inspired News One, a Black-oriented broadcasting company, to create a timeline charting its growth and recognition (Fontaine, 2011). TheRoot.com, a web site extension of the *Washington Post* geared toward African-American interests, has curated online chats, news stories and celebrity Twitter watch lists based on the phenomenon. The fact that African-Americans use of Twitter is newsworthy presents a problem for research: These stories perpetuate the process of framing minority Internet users as outcasts in this dimension of Web 2.0 (boyd 2011; Hughey, 2008). On their own, these news stories lack depth about the culturally specific conversations among users in this online space.

Defining the Space

Conceptually, Twitter is the nexus of several communication tools and strategies that help construct the community and conversation formed by its users. Using Marcus's (1995) perspective on nebulous research sites, it can be considered a situated site within the context of Internet communication at large. The conceptual definition of Twitter as a platform varies a bit from study to study depending on the field and aims of the research. Warwick and boyd's (2010) study focused on the intimate friendships and entertainment values of messages sent via the technology; Tufekci et al.'s (2012) work honed in on activist uses of Twitter as a tool to enact and organize political resistance.

Twitter is based on the concept of weblogging, or blogging, a process of posting and editing content on the World Wide Web. The microblogging site, which limits messages to 140 characters each, fits boyd and Ellison's definition of a social-networking site (SNS):

[W]eb-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (2008, p. 211).

Twitter users can create a profile, which displays their list of followers and the accounts they follow. The basic search functions allow users (and visitors) to view each user's list of connections unless the user's account is private or locked. As an online space in Web 2.0, Twitter is a public sphere that encourages discourse and debate (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008; Donath & boyd, 2004; Westling, 2007). Messages are posted to Twitter via Internet-enabled computer devices, including mobile devices such as smartphones.

Use. Following another account on Twitter allows a user to monitor specific user messages, although the process of following a user does not have to be reciprocated. Gruzdt et al. (2011) refer to accounts that are followed as "sources"; their tweet content is directly broadcast to the accounts that follow them. For example, President Barack Obama (@barackobama) has some 26.6 million followers who receive his updates about policy and events. However, unless someone tweets "at" him using his handle in part of the message, the tweet does not show up in the president's account feed. The @barackobama account subscribes to messages from only 666,645 *sources*, including the White House's Spanish-language Twitter account (@lacasablanca) and first lady Michelle Obama (@FLOTUS). Tweets from users, including the ones that mention @barackobama, are the only ones (aside

from the messages generated by the @barackobama account,) that show up in his feed.

How hashtags connect users. Twitter has the ability to connect people who may or may not have an online relationship through the asynchronous conversations formed via tweets (Murthy, 2013). Anyone with Internet access can at least watch and track these conversations, either by searching through Twitter feeds (a running post of tweets), or by searching for a specific hashtagged phrase. A hashtag, which may be connected to a single word or phrase, groups tweets, allowing users to use a keyword-search style approach to finding tweets about a specific topic (Small, 2011).

In the case of Manjoo's late-night observation of Twitter use among Blacks, Brenden Meeder, a Ph.D. student at Carnegie Mellon who researches the spread of trends via social networking, explained how of "Blacktags," hashtags associated with so-called "Black Twitter" became so popular (Manjoo, 2010, nda). Meeder told Manjoo that close offline relationships and a certain density contribute to the trending ability of so-called Blacktags: "If you have 50 of these people talking about (a Blacktag), think about the number of outsiders who follow at least one of those 50—it's pretty high at that point. So you can actually get a pretty big network effect by having high density" (Manjoo, 2010). Twitter-based conversations about events in the physical world, including a guerilla attack on a hotel in Mumbai, the Arab Spring, and Canadian politics, all of which used hash-tagged phrases to organize conversations, have been of the subject of several research studies after the online conversations piqued the news media's interest (Murthy, 2013; Small, 2011; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). The crossover from online reality to media observation is of particular interest in comparing media and user perceptions about Twitter and related phenomena. The hashtag is common to both scholarship and news reports about Twitter use among

identifiable groups of users.

Hashtags as a point of entry. The initial wave of scholarly inquiry into African-Americans' Twitter use centered around the use of the hashtag and African-American Vernacular English to express a degree of commonality (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013). Yet previous studies on so-called Black Twitter lack perspective on media reports of minority use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology and explanation of the phenomenon of "Black Twitter" from the perspective of its contributors. The proposed study presents an approach that addresses both the news media's representation of Blacks on Twitter and includes narratives from the users' experience. The study will apply both inductive and deductive logic to compensate for flaws that arise from using each individual approach alone (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Quantitative research on news media about Black Twitter was used to potentially identify the emphasis frames used to explain this CMC experience. Qualitative inquiry undertaken with Twitter users will supply authentic narratives that are essential to contextualize the phenomenon at work: Who is "Black Twitter"? What is it? How do factors of social identity and sense of community shape its shifting boundaries? These theoretical frameworks allow me to use a mixed-methods approach to link the in-group and out-group perspectives of Black Twitter users as they exist in the media and in the users' experiences.

They offer a comparison of how Black Twitter has been conceptualized by the media, and an opportunity to complement those findings with the perspectives of those who know it intimately – the users themselves.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Quan-Haase and Taylor's (2010) exploration of the gratifications sought by college students who used social networking sites limits the definition of Twitter that was used for the purpose this research. In light of the desires sought and satisfied through its use, Twitter is conceptualized as a social-networking platform through which users with diverse interests form online relationships to share information, exchange personal views, socialize, entertain and be entertained by other users. Murthy (2013) briefly addresses Twitter interactions as areas of research interest, particularly the digital divide of racial, cultural and socio-economic factors and how it is made manifest online via Twitter use.

Problems with Black representation in cyberculture

At the dawn of the Internet Age, the lack of Black voices in media production and media research has been particularly damaging to efforts to reshape existing ideologies about race. The absence of adequate representation of different races in media scholarship is of issue because, as Hall (2003) writes, in modern societies, media are key in shaping ideologies:

Institutions like the media are central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production... [T]hey produce...representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works and as it is said and shown to work (pp. 89, 93).

Hall explains that media, as part of their ideological labor, construct for us “a definition of what race is, meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be” (Hall, 2003, pp. 91, 93). Hall’s work on race-based emphasis

frames uncovers several tropes – Blacks as the entertaining clown and Blacks as lazy or impervious to work – that are historic frames of Black existence (Hall, 2003). Hall explains that the “clown” or “entertainer,” is rooted in depictions of Black minstrel figures, and captures the “innate” humor of the entertainer as he or she puts on a show (Hall, 2003, pp. 92-93). “These *particular* versions may have faded. But their *traces* are still to be observed, reworked in many of the modern and up-dated images. And though they may appear to carry a different meaning, they are often still constructed on a very ancient grammar” (Hall, 2003, p. 93).

This explains how, even with decades of research to counter prejudicial observations, a news writer might still revert to a dominant-culture worldview to describe his observations of a minority culture. Sicha’s article about observing “late night Black people Twitter” uses language indicative of the author’s beliefs about the differences between how Blacks and Whites use the social-networking site, which supports Nakamura’s (2007) assertion that African-Americans are troped as outsiders to digital economies and systems of representation. This problem extends the negative media framing of Blacks, once limited to print and television portrayals, into conversations about life online.

Framing in media content

Goffman (1986) explains that individuals frame everyday situations as a means to negotiate, handle and understand social practices. Frames are organizational schemata that are shared and consistent over time; they work symbolically to provide structure in the social world (Reese, 2001). Within media content, frames exist as stereotypes, images, and the absence or presence of keywords used to select some perceived reality and make it more salient in the minds of communicators and information consumers (Entman, 1993). Where

minorities are concerned, framing unfolds in a four-stage process: they are first ignored in the texts, then ridiculed, then policed or regulated before finally earning respect (Clark, 1972).

How Blacks are framed in media content. Entman and Rojecki, writing on the images of Blacks in the mind of White media consumers, describe how information about African-Americans is encoded and applied to create emphasis frames that cast Blacks and their actions as deviating from the norm: “People use mental shortcuts (such as stereotypes) to interpret communications, even as mediated communication influences the development and use of the short cut,” (2000, p. 14). This is troubling when Blacks are absent from discussions about their portrayals in the media, as there is little to mitigate these frames from being generated and perpetuated in the content-production process.

Hall links the formation of negative, race-based frames to the different media where ideologies are produced, reproduced and transformed. “Institutions like the media are peculiarly central to the matter since they are, by definition, part of the dominant means of ideological production” (Hall, 2003, pp. 89). Earlier work on the influences *on* and influences *of* media content speaks presciently of this notion: “Although media portrayals may reflect power relations as they exist, they may also ensure that no other types of relations are possible” (Shoemaker & Reese, 1997, p. 57).

In other words, the existing media portrayals of Blacks as different potentially rule out any counter narrative in which Blacks have agency and power in the use and production of media. Shoemaker & Reese (1997) further assert that public ideologies, including concepts of power dynamics, are both a function of culture and a reflection of it: Media content takes elements of culture, magnifies them, frames them, and feeds them back to the audience. This creates a perpetual cycle of frame-building among media creators and consumers. The

resulting emphasis frames are created through the convergence of external influences at work in the content-creation process.

Numerous studies, ranging from Goffman's work in the 1970s, to more recent inquiries including Abraham & Appiah's work on the role of visual imagery in priming racial stereotypes (2006); Mercurio & Filak's research on the differences between Black and White college quarterbacks seeking to enter the NFL draft (2010); Angelini, Billings, MacArthur, Bissell & Smith's study on the racialized depictions of athletes competing in the 2012 London Olympic games (2014) and Ash & Schmierbach's work on disadvantage framing around Blacks and Latinos (2013), discuss the tendency of news media to pit Blacks at a racially based disadvantage, in several everyday situations. Whether the Black actors are competing with others for a tangible prize, or simply find themselves as part of the nightly news coverage, these studies pointed to the same conclusion — that Blacks are often described at some type of disadvantage — mentally, financially or as an undesirable group in modern society.

Theoretical and methodological approaches for studies on framing. A content analysis of news media is appropriate for examining how news writers describe “Black Twitter” and Blacks' use of Twitter. Krippendorff (1980) defined content analysis as a research technique with enough rigor to make replicable and valid inferences from data to their context. It is a systematic, objective and quantitative method that limits the influence of research bias and provides accurate representation of a sample of messages (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). As Krippendorff (1980) wrote, content analysis moves beyond conventional notions of content, and is linked to conceptions of symbolic phenomenon. Here, content analysis is applied to provide a rigorous method in searching for messages within the

selected content (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). The analysis is applied to identify the use of emphasis frames through language abstractions that may be used to describe African-Americans and their use of this Internet-based technology from an out-group standpoint.

For researchers who study computer-mediated communication, particularly the CMC patterns of African-American Internet users, the use of emphasis frames in news media present a problem that is ripe for research. The in-group and out-group perceptions about African-Americans' collective social identity, as described by the media, oversimplify complex constructions of race, culture and community among African-American Twitter users, and are worthy of exploration using appropriate qualitative methods. These stories often report on "Blacks" or "the Black community," and sometimes, as in the case of Manjoo's (2010) piece, attempt to identify connections based on common language and experience. However, they lack a rigorous examination of how thousands of individuals from different socioeconomic, geographical, gender and interest groups, to name a few, link their experiences to form a complex yet unified social identity. This process is best explored through the theoretical framework of social identity.

Social identity formation

Tajfel and Turner (1986) introduced the concept of social identity based on the assumption that social identity is formed through group memberships. Individuals within these groups focus on their positive attributes in comparison to the negative attributes of other groups (Gorham, 2006). Some differences, as Tajfel (1981) pointed out, using the distinction of race between Blacks and Whites, are easily observed. Others, particularly those that are socially constructed, require study of the groups and their in-group and out-group culture, including language and behaviors, in order to be made salient. Tajfel (1981) writes

that intergroup behavior, a key tenet of social identity formation, requires three things in order to be studied: First, the researcher must know something about the ways in which groups are formed within a particular social system. Second, the psychological effects of the group's constructions must be understood. Third, the researcher must understand how the constructions and their effects depend on and relate to forms of social reality. This final criterion provides a rejoinder for application of additional theory to explore the use of communication as a means of promoting a group's social identity.

Social maintenance strategies. Working from the assumption that “ethnicity is culturally influenced long before it is reconstructed in the digital world,” (Padilla-Miller, 2008, p. 7), print and broadcast media portrayals have historically categorized Blacks as an out-group, and web-based/web-published news media has done the same (Gorham, 2006; Dixon, 2008). Nevertheless, through the use of identity-maintenance strategies, Blacks' collective identity has thrived in spite of media negative framing both in print and online (Squires, 2002). Brown (2000) has explored how Blacks in America use socially creative ways to reconstruct or redefine themselves in comparison to the dominant in-group, as one means of preserving cohesion among members. This was true for Blacks in the golden ages of print and broadcast media (Dixon, 2008); it is true of Blacks in the Internet Age (Byrne, 2008). Observation of how Blacks who use Twitter promote a positive in-group social identity is best examined through the theoretical constructs of imagined community and sense of community.

Imagined community

Anderson (2006) introduced the concept of an imagined community, centering it around the use of language and the transfer of information as mechanisms to unite otherwise

diverse individual interests. To construct community in a region characterized by diverse economic, political and nationalist interests, language was key for forming cohesive groups; it was a tool of self-selection and inclusion. The use of language, particularly among official leadership groups, was used for “inner convenience” – not to exert power over another group (1983, p. 42). Anderson’s (2006) notion of language as a building block in the social construction of communities is rooted in Berger & Luckman’s (1966) explanation of how language, through its systematic, symbolic process of meaning-making among individuals, is a tool central to the construction of a shared reality.

Anderson (2006) cited capitalism, print technology and collapsing languages as factors that contributed to the construction of imagined communities. These three factors can similarly be seen at work in the construction of online communities formed via Twitter: it exists as a social-media tool competing for use in the market; its success is predicated on the consumption of market goods including smartphones, computers and Internet access. The tech itself, as well as the information exchanged – electronically, instead of via print – provides a certain information currency that is exchanged among groups. Finally, the use of language for convenience, whether noted through the use of hashtags or culturally resonant phrases, can be seen as contributing to the construction of an online community that expands beyond the boundaries of the nation-states chronicled in Anderson’s work.

Information, technology and language have combined to influence the development of new, imagined communities, which modern members join through the use of Internet-based technology, such as laptops and smartphones. As they participate in the process of information exchange and publication, Black Twitter users, like news workers, shape a social world through interpersonal exchanges about what is important, and to an extent,

“newsworthy,” a process Tuchman (1978) described in her ethnography about the culture of news workers. Everyday exchanges, much like the sending and receiving of tweets, re-tweets and direct messaging among reciprocal followers on Twitter allows users to “shape consciousness and produce norms including attitudes that define aspects of social life which are either of interest or importance to citizens” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 182). Though dated, the concept of an imagined community remains an ideal theoretical lens for exploring the formation and identification of the online community forged by Black Twitter’s participants. In light of Anderson’s assumptions about language as a connector that contributes to the construction of social realities and imagined communities, discourse analysis, which is concerned with “the processes whereby speakers methodically construct their worlds of meaning” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 73).

Framework for examining social realities. Discourse analysis is among the qualitative tools suitable for analyzing this process of online social reality construction, and complements the ethnographic interviewing approach used in Study 3. Both the interviews and the discourse analysis are used to explore what is actually written and said by and among participants in Black Twitter. Creswell (2007) defines this approach as a type of qualitative design in which narrative is understood as a text giving an account of an event or series of events that are chronologically connected. Brock (2012) and Florini (2013) both employed a level of discourse analysis in their earlier studies of Black Twitter. The former used a critical approach that interpreted the conversations through a racial lens; the latter focused on the semantic content, and the linguistic process of using culturally specific words, phrases, and transcribed orations in the online exchanges.

Per Creswell (2007), the procedures require a narrow focus gathering data that consist of participant stories and experiences, and ordering the meaning of those experiences. An analysis of tweets sent among interlinked Twitter users allows me to explore how Black Twitter users have drawn on shared experiences and contemporary media to engage in conversations that reinforce weak social ties among their participants. Although participants may never meet face-to-face, they use online conversation and shared resources (Internet memes, videos, blog links, etc.) to construct a social community unhindered by physical boundaries.

Sense of online community

Conceptually, sense of community is the perception of belonging and mutual commitment (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Sarason defines sense of community as “interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence ... [T]he feeling that one is part of a large dependable and stable structure” (Sarason, 1974, p. 157). The Sense of Community Scale, which measures the strength of the construct within a group, consists of needs fulfillment, group membership, influence and shared emotional connection (Peterson, Speer & McMillan, 2007). In an update, the authors suggest that the scale be tested among diverse populations (i.e., non-White, beyond the Midwestern United States). Additionally, early studies using the scale were also limited to a physically bound geographic area, a weakness that presents future researchers with an opportunity to apply the construct to a community that is linked by online connections rather than city blocks and ZIP codes. Mersey’s (2009) study of a virtual sense of community compared its strength among print and online newspaper readers, but still leaves room for the scale to be tested among a group that has no pre-existing tie.

Per Jones (1997), an online community is built around a virtual settlement that meets four conditions: it must be interactive, have more than two communicators, exist in a common-public-space where members can meet and interact, and its members must sustain membership over time. Several scholars, including Blanchard (2007), Erickson (2010), Gruzd et al. (2011) and Yardi & Boyd (2010), have explored the growing niche of online communities. These studies are united by sense of community, which, in the context of the Internet, becomes a sense of online community or sense of virtual community (Blanchard, 2007). Unlike brick-and-mortar communities, those shaped through the intersection of common ideals and shared ideas, or even communities united through printed word and the rise of literacy rates, a digital community is relatively unconstrained by the dimensions of time and space. The construction of such online communities has been a subject of qualitative inquiry for nearly 30 years.

Research of online communities

Turkle's "The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit" (1983) is the first key contribution to the literature on community building in cyberspace. Turkle is credited with creating the foundation for several subgenres explored in modern cyberculture studies – from gaming to cyberfiction to hacker culture. Trained as a humanist, she was among the first to take a more qualitative approach to cyberculture studies, bringing her background to her work in computer science at MIT in the 1970s and '80s (Turkle, 1983). However, her writings, which focused on the very earliest civilian exchanges and use of the Internet, were largely limited by the structure of Web 1.0, where users could only consume information, not contribute to it (Cormode & Krishnamurthy, 2008). Later works, including Rheingold's ethnography of the WELL community and an additional volume on online life authored by

Turkle, began to explore cyberculture in the realm of Web 2.0.

Rheingold's (1993) writings on his experience as a member of the WELL community brought together the divided sense of self – online and offline existence – that Turkle initially imagined through the creation and use of the personal computer.

Since the summer of 1985, for an average of two hours a day, seven days a week, I've been plugging my personal computer into my telephone and making contact with the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) – a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private electronic mail (e-mail). The idea of community accessible via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about email and computer conferences. I've become one of them. I care about these people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the future of the medium that enables us to assemble.

(Rheingold, 1993, p. xv)

Rheingold's "The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier," is a seminal work that explores the creation of online communities. The work was preceded by Reid's (1991) student thesis on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) as a postmodern phenomenon; communication among WELL members was facilitated by this technology. "The Virtual Community" presents rich qualitative insights that are key to the proposed study. Primarily, this work is one of the key texts that illustrates Baym's assertion that good Internet research does not believe in cyberspace as a distinct place that stands in contrast to the physical world, but instead recognizes how offline contexts characterize online situations and experiences, and vice versa (Baym, 2006).

Rheingold uses his experience as a long-standing member of the WELL to document online community formation as it unfolded in the late '80s and early '90s amid a group of early adopters of Internet technology. Interestingly, his first words about the WELL community offer prescient, nearly parallel descriptions of Twitter, a technology some 30

years in the making. Like the WELL, Twitter is a place where public conversations (Tweets) and private messages (Direct Messages; DMs) are exchanged. The passion that Rheingold speaks of when he relays tales of talking back to the screen, setting real-life meetings with his online friends and caring for the people he's met through his computer have all been re-imagined in the Twittersphere. Tweets provoke laughter and conversation in real life, users organize tweet-ups where they meet with their online followers, and communities are formed through cultural practices including the use of hashtags, key phrases and other symbolic communication. As with Rheingold's membership in several online communities – from a parenting collective to several fantasy role-playing groups – Twitter users also connect with individuals with similar interests.

Rheingold speaks at length about how the WELL members built their community through the exchange of personal and topical information to online chats to get-togethers held in real life (IRL). He engaged in “a rambling real-time dialogue among people whose bodies were scattered across three continents, a global bull session that seems to blend wit and sophomore locker-room talk” (Rheingold, 1993, p. xviii). He attests “the WELL felt like an actual community to me from the very start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world” (p. xviii) and speaks of sharing the intimate details of his life with community members, and knowing theirs (Rheingold, 1993).

Rheingold's writings about the WELL answer questions of computer-enabled relationships that Turkle posed in a later work. In “Life on the Screen,” the author asks, “What will computer-mediated communication do to our commitment to other people?” (1995, p. 83). The question opens the door to cyberculture studies that focus on relationship-building and a sense of community. Works on the Whole Earth Network (Turner, 2006);

online connectivity among LGBTQ activists and youth (Gray 2009); virtual reality and humanity (Boellestorff, 2008); youth, race and social networks (boyd, 2011); and feminist communities online (Wazny, 2010) are key studies that address this question. However, each of the aforementioned studies was undertaken by a member of the community under study, or a person who self-identified as having a background similar to the communities each researcher chose to study. This section of the literature is deficient of a similarly rich account of the Black experience online.

Semi-structured interviews, which several of the aforementioned studies used as a means of data collection, are designed to elicit stories of personal experience, and rely on ethnographic naturalism to obtain authentic accounts of subjective lived experiences (Schwandt, 2007). As an African-American Twitter user, I used these interviews to generate rich data that are produced through empathetic relationships with the participants as peers (Schwandt, 2007). Situating myself in the field of exploration, I bring relevant knowledge of Twitter use and interactions and Black history and culture that contribute to the creation of a sense of familiarity with my interview subjects.

Studies of Black Online Communities

Banks' (2005) analysis of how members use Black orality (spoken African-American Vernacular English) in their written communication on BlackPlanet, a Black-oriented website, is one of the earliest works on Black community-building online. Banks (2005) describes how BlackPlanet users drew upon African-American Vernacular English in their online exchanges, encapsulating the qualities of the spoken word in written form. Byrne argues that Banks' findings are important "because they show how participants can use these traditional communication patterns as markers of cultural and racial authenticity" (Byrne,

2008, pp. 320-321). Florini (2013) explored this notion online by observing interactions among African-American Twitter users who use AAVE in their communications, and inscribed meaning to their exchanges. Her study consisted of following a stream of exchanges between two or more Black Twitter participants that use a common theme or hashtag that was identified as a signifier in African-American culture (Florini, 2013). The use of this linguistic device, particularly in the absence of corporeal reality, she wrote, is key to coding observations of Black Twitter. By coding hashtags and signifiers in the tweet-based data, she realized that Blackness is a practice as much as it is an existence – it is something that Black users *do* (Florini, 2013). Florini gathered and analyzed these hashtagged conversations through a method similar to “restorying,” the process of reorganizing stories into a general framework (Creswell, 2007, p. 56). Through this process, the researcher provides a causal link among the key elements of the story, contributing to the emergence of the narratives’ themes.

Hashtags in cyberculture studies. Florini noted that the use of hashtags, coupled with AAVE and signifying were employed as a tool for social critique. In one case, users created hashtags such as “#BlackNerdsUnite” in their discussions of mainstream constructions of Blackness (Florini, 2013, p. 5). A second social critique hashtag noted in the study was “#NextOnNightline,” which signaled the intersection of race and gender as experienced by African-American women, and was used to convey the participants’ frustration with the choice of panelists on a show about Black women (Florini, 2013, p. 6). The hashtag was used in a conversation that reflects the practice of social viewing, the process of discussing simulcast events via social media as they play out in real time (Wohn & Na, 2011). “Although television viewers aren’t communicating directly with each other while

they are viewing, the use of hashtags and re-tweets suggests that although users aren't directly interacting with specific individuals, they want to be part of a larger group" (Wohn & Na, 2011, npa).

The use of hashtags as a point of entry is relevant to my experience as a Twitter researcher studying the discourse that contributes to the social construction of an online community. Per Lindlof and Taylor (2011), discourse analysis is an appropriate tool for examining social construction of a reality to understand how symbols, language, discourse and media operate in the meaning-making process. Communication, the scholars argue, "is *the* activity by which humans *constitute* their social world as a 'real' phenomenon – that is, one conducive to shared understanding and coordinated interaction" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, pp. 45-46; Bartesaghi & Castor, 2008). Discourse analysis of web-published content provides clues on inner workings of online life, particularly within online groups in which members create a sense of community and feeling of belonging through the assistance of computer-mediated technology (Gotved, 2006).

In contrast with the popular literature surrounding the phenomenon of so-called Black Twitter, there is very little scholarship about the lived experiences behind Black Twitter's online conversations. Brock used critical technoculture discourse analysis (CTDA) to analyze the online conversations of Twitter users. He explains:

CTDA applies critical race and technoculture theories to IT artifacts and accompanying online conversations to analyze technology's cultural and discursive construction. My data are the Twitter interface—particularly the platform's reach and discourse conventions— analyzed alongside selected online commentary discussing the Black Twitter phenomenon (2012, p. 530).

This approach is oriented from the perspective of the tool's interface and other physical conventions that affect discourse, such as the use of a mention (@SpecificUser) to

speak directly to another user, or the use of the re-tweet feature to broadcast a particular tweet back to a user's own audience. It lacks the "thick description" that a more immersive method, such as ethnography, can evoke through close interaction and interrogation of a culture or phenomenon's participants (Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

Framework for examining online communities. Ethnographic methods are useful to complement the analysis of language and its use in studies about Black life online. Hughey (2008) used his own experience as an existing member of an online group for members of Black Greek-letter organizations as his point of entrée into the field. From there, he spent 14 months observing interactions, and conducting interviews and analyzing user-created content to learn about members' online experiences interacting with other participants in the group (Hughey, 2008). Working through a grounded-theory approach to developing theoretical questions about the site and the activity therein, Hughey used institutional ethnography to question how dominant ideologies were interwoven with members' online activities (2008, p. 537). His primary findings focused on how the online activities of members of Black Greek-letter organizations were used "to coalesce their subculture in a fracturing and more complex world, and as a medium for already established social and cultural patterns" (Hughey, 2008, p. 538). The analytical approach used to reach this conclusion is issue-focused, "describ[ing] what has been learned from all respondents about people in their situation" (Weiss, 1994, p. 153). The author challenges researchers who investigate race in cyberspace to critically examine "how an identity so closely tied to what Fanon called the 'politics of the skin' is deployed and received in an environment structured by its non-corporality" (Hughey, 2008 p. 529). The unifying issue in Hughey's study is the shared experience of members of Black Greek-letter organizations, despite each subgroup's differences.

The fractured culture that Hughey speaks of is actively at work in the ‘field’ of Twitter and among its Black users. The same cultural production factors that influenced conversation in Hughey’s study, including demographic factors of geographic location, age, education and gender, influence the perspective of Black Twitter’s participants, and the content of their discussions. One of the study’s findings, that an online space is used by Black participants as a medium for information-sharing and “the recuperation of symbols and rituals outside of traditional face-to-face venues,” links the existing work with the proposed study (Hughey, 2008, pp. 538-539). Whereas Hughey’s participants used their community space to communicate through the shared knowledge and collective meaning associated with Black Greek-letter organizations, participants in the Black Twitter phenomenon use the online space to create conversation through the repetition and manipulation of culturally significant phrases, images and wordplay that are unique to the offline African-American experience.

As in the early years of cyberculture studies, Gray’s (2005) point about online interactions being structured by different social classes, educational levels, genders and regions continues to remain relevant to this Internet-based translation of Black cultural practice. The data analysis of the proposed study may make this clear if it uses an issue-focused report based on concrete material (Weiss, 1994). While the proposed study rests on the assertion that the participants are unified by their cultural and racial identity as Black Twitter users based in the United States, it used issue-focused analysis to process the interview data (Weiss, 1994).

Issued-focused analysis of the data complemented by excerpts from interview data allows for emergent patterns in the material to be organized to tell a story (Weiss, 1994). For

instance, Weiss writes about historical data being interwoven with interview data to describe an event from the perspective of people experiencing it. The model he uses describes how a writer can use two data sets – one historical, one personal, to provide a “you are there” sense for the reader, placing them within the lived experiences of the community under study as key events unfold (Weiss, 1994, p. 167).

Ethnography of African-American Culture Online

In addition to analyzing textual discourse among African-Americans for greater understanding of how their online community is built via language and conversation, immersion in the African-American cultural experience is necessary and relevant for quality work on Black cyberculture. DuGay et al.’s (1997) anthology on culture, media and identities shifts the traditional approach to anthropological studies from those situated in a field to a practice of observing processes and their linked outcomes. Although the Internet-based networks pose challenges for researchers who might typically find themselves in a physical field such as a Black neighborhood, school or church, there is a precedent for using one’s own perspective in working with online communities (Rheingold, 1993; Gruzd et al., 2011). Additionally, the nature of cyberculture research, in which there is no static setting, allows scholars to focus on processes instead of a particular setting (Kozinets, 2010).

Previous research has indicated that ethnography has been a reliable tool for exploring various dimensions of Black culture, especially those where, to paraphrase one Black anthropologist and literary figure: “the Negro, in spite of his open-face laughter... is particularly evasive” (Hurston, 1935, p. 18). In his study on the cultural conversation of Black Twitter, Brock (2012) also referred to Hurston’s observations about researchers outside the community trying to make sense of the Black existence. Both scholars, as well as

several researchers who espouse ethnography as the best tool for building rich narratives on social existence, prescribe an immersive approach to this type of cultural study. Ethnographic interviews allow the researcher to inquire about the practices that shape a phenomenon (Wolcott, 2009). As an African-American researcher, I bring to these interviews an ability to ask particular questions about the Black experience online and obtain certain answers that a non-minority might not think to ask or have offered (Baca Zinn, 2001). As part of a mixed-methods study that uses ethnographic interviews, the data collection among participants begins with the researcher, and in this case, my accounts: @meredithclark and @La_Redactrice. I have used Twitter since 2007. @La_Redactrice was initially created as a tool to connect with newspaper audiences where I worked; it has since become a private account that I use mostly for entertainment purposes. @meredithclark is the main account I've used for this research, including contacting research participants throughout the United States.

Black social scientists have used ethnography to explore African-American communities in geographically bound areas ranging from the inner city to the backwoods of Florida (DuBois, 1899; Drake and Cayton, 1945; Gregory, 1998; Hurston, 1935; Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Jackson, 2001), as well as in technological expanses, (Hughey, 2008). Researchers outside the member group have also used this method to observe Black community building through shared space and place, collective memory and conversation (Hannerz, 1969; Stack, 1974).

The use of ethnography in digital spaces is a relatively novel practice (Kozinets, 2010). Still, it is a useful tool in defining the “where” of Black Twitter in order to identify the participants and sample of tweets used in the discourse analysis and ethnographic interviews,

as a researcher must be able to illustrate the boundaries of the community, and help a reader discern which online artifacts fit within the limitations and delimitations of the study (Luker, 2008). Through my experience as an African-American Twitter user, I was able to specify which cases should be used based on time, date, online space, hashtags and related identifiers, which would allow another researcher to “go there and see for [themselves] what fascinates [me].” (Luker, 2008, p. 137).

Statement of positionality. I have several advantages as I conduct this research, including the ability to fully immerse myself in the field as a participant observer. Insider status as an African-American Twitter user has both advantages and disadvantages. Information from the other two studies was included in development of the interview guide in order to prevent an overly positive characterization of the interviewee’s participation and negligence concerning keen observation of the ordinary (Chavez, 2008). As an African-American journalist who uses Twitter daily and has observed the interactions of other users, I can be described as an indigenous-insider researcher, one who has been socialized within the community under study (Banks, 1998). My experiences with media coverage and Twitter “motivated my project” (Luker, 2008, p. 137). As an indigenous-insider, I was curious why the media was so fascinated with Blacks’ use of a communication technology, and sought to address a void in the cyberculture literature.

Although there is detailed literature that uses old media theoretical frameworks and theories including uses and gratifications (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974), actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) and sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) to explain the construction and function of social networks, there remains a gap in the literature about how

ethnic and racial communities use social networks to connect, satisfy individual needs and reinforce normative community practices.

The grounded theory approach is more useful in making sense of data gathered through participant observation; we “observe in order to build theory” (Luker, 2008, p. 159). Grounded theory consists of using immersive data collection and analytic procedures to develop theory (Charmaz, 1995). Using individual cases, the researcher develops conceptual categories, moving toward the formation of more concrete concepts to identify relationships within the data. The open coding undertaken at this stage of the analysis is an attempt to “saturate” the categories – a search for instances that support the phenomenon of interest until additional information obtained (through interviewing) does not yield provide additional insight into the category (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). The analysis is then built by relating these concepts to the world that is being studied (Charmaz, 1995). This approach allows a researcher to document practices – the observable moments when belief and action collide (Luker, 2008). It also allows a researcher to generate, rather than that test theory (Luker, 2008). Both of these actions are critical in the development of new media theory building around 21st-century technological practices.

To be clear, the socially constructed existence of Black Twitter, which is the focus of this research, is assumed to be largely unintentional on behalf of both its participants and its observers. It is the product of three strategies of social construction: In the news media, Black Twitter was initially constructed in articles about the Black existence online that were written from the standpoint of the digital divide. Black Twitter’s construction as an online community centers on cultural conversation, and recognizes the use of the Internet-based medium as a space where language and topic discussion create a phenomenon that draws on

common language and shared meaning (Brock, 2012). Finally, the existence of Black Twitter is also defined by the individual experiences of its participants. This latter description focuses on the intimate narratives of Black Twitter participants as they describe their use of Twitter's technology and their interactions with one another, and as they integrate both as part of their everyday lives.

Research questions

Culture and community are two concepts large enough to encompass the interactions and relationships that are built through the communication of interlinked Black Twitter users who create an ever-evolving social reality all their own. But neither goes far enough in describing the dynamics of the interaction that cause mainstream media to comment and lead perfect strangers to organize regular meetings in the physical world for no other purpose than to see one another in real life.

Black Twitter, as it has been dubbed by some of its participants, has an ever-shifting definition, which is currently being discussed by members of its community. It can be described as a phenomenon – the creation of Twitter trends through conversation, the collective experience of watching a televised event, or participating in an online chat. It can also be described as a community – a structure that Twitter users feel they are a part of, and willingly participate in as a form of maintaining membership. It has been defined as a medium for cultural conversation – a tool through which anyone (regardless of race or identity) who understands the historic roots of the slavery and Jim Crow narratives, Black entertainment and folklore and contemporary cultural practices can participate in order to exchange ideas, develop opinion leadership on a topic, or simply learn more.

This dissertation is presented with the aim for developing an exploratory study of what Black Twitter *is* through building on existent communication and social theories and applying them in the new media landscape. Quantitative exploration of mainstream and niche media publications about Black Twitter, combined with qualitative data about the phenomenon in action, are applied in pursuit of developing a comparative, complementary analysis about the practices that have created this phenomenon.

Qualitative research, in particular, often grows out of the demonstration of a particular phenomenon. In matters of ethnographic research, the questions under study often emerge as the researcher is immersed in the field and learns more about the community through performing fieldwork. Thus, with the exceptions of research questions one through four, which reflect the goals of the content analysis, the research questions for this study were posed merely as a point of entry; additional information that shaped the study's findings emerged during the data collection and analysis.

RQ1: How did the U.S. news media use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “the digital divide” in its coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?

RQ2: How did the U.S. news media use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as sense of community, in its coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?

RQ3: How did niche newspapers in the U.S. use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “the digital divide” in its coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?

RQ4: How did niche newspapers in the U.S. news use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as sense of community, in its coverage of Blacks' use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?

RQ5: What does the discourse of a linked network of Twitter users tell us about African-American representation in this web sphere?

RQ6: How do African-Americans who use Twitter conceptualize their interactions with other Blacks within this web sphere?

RQ7: Which Twitter-based texts are, according to key consultants (research participants), indicative of a sense of community among African-American Twitter users?

RQ8: What are some of the key themes emerging from Twitter-based conversations among Black users that have contributed to trending topics?

RQ9: How do trending topics linked to Black culture reflect the employment of identity-maintenance strategies among African-American Twitter users?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This chapter discusses the methods that were used to explore how African-Americans' Twitter use has been portrayed by the media, and compares that portrayal with the lived experiences of African-American Twitter users. The study relied upon triangulation, a process of verification using numerous data sources and data points, to support validity of my findings (Schwandt, 2007). The data sources used for this study included news media articles and related texts, as well as tweets, interview data and my own observations.

The methods chosen – content analysis, discourse analysis and ethnographic interviews – complemented one another. The content analysis in particular served as a point of comparison for the qualitative data; its rigor was chosen to provide perspective to the exploratory nature of the qualitative studies, which generated data that did not have a clearly defined purpose until the end (Luker, 2008). The task, particularly in the latter two studies, was to define the elements of the categories in the data, then to define the categories in the data, and finally, to see how those categories fit into a larger social-science conversation (Luker, 2008). Where the content analysis was designed to deal with concrete categories of media and messaging, the discourse analysis and interviews allowed for a relatively novel phenomenon – social interaction via Twitter – to be defined through the generation of themes and theory as they emerged from the data.

The three-pronged approach was taken to examine who said what to whom, and in what medium (Laswell, 1948). In this case, the focus of the study was the African-American

user existence on Twitter, and from it, the creation of “Black Twitter” (Wu, Hoffman, Mason & Watts, 2011). Data collection occurred semi-sequentially – themes that emerged from the content analysis and the discourse analysis were used to iteratively inform the interview guides (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). These themes were also used to organize the final reporting of the data. The data collection process was nested – tweets from the Twitter users who participated in the interview portion were collected and organized into narrative forms – a process Creswell refers as to “re-storying” – to create texts for the textual analysis (2007, p. 56). That, too, was an iterative process: Given my participant-observer status as a researcher in the field, I reached out to individuals with whom I had a follower relationship and asked them to participate in the interviews. I also collected tweets of interest to the emergent themes as I engaged with other users on Twitter.

Each step of the study was designed to yield a small sample of cases for inclusion in the overall analysis. The stratified, purposive sample of texts in the content analysis was undertaken to yield a sample of 100 cases by which information was transferred to inform the exploration of other data in the study (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). This approach to sampling allowed me to focus on the depth of information created by the cases, and was used to address specific questions that arose as I conducted the research (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). The nature of purposive sampling allowed me to select the cases that I could best learn from for the analysis (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Taken together, the cases from Study 1, a content analysis of news media items that refer to Twitter use among Black Americans; Study 2, a discourse analysis of tweet-based texts from selected conversations, and Study 3, semi-structured interviews with consultants, presented a rich set of triangulated data for the final analysis.

This chapter is organized into sections that describe the content analysis of selected

media items including news articles, columns, blog entries and broadcasts; the discourse analysis of selected tweets, which were organized into story form; and the analysis of data from semi-structured interviews used to obtain participant narratives as part of the mixed-methods study's design. This chapter concludes with discussions of the limitations and delimitations associated with the data collection and analysis.

Study 1: Content Analysis

Sampling. Study 1 was concerned with the media content that builds emphasis frames around new media subjects, particularly the popularity of Twitter among African-Americans. Strategically selected units of analysis were critical for this study's aim of describing the news media's characterization of Black Twitter. The content analysis began with a sample of news media published between 2010, when Manjoo's article was published, and January 2014. Keyword searches using the Boolean operators "Black Twitter," "#BlackTwitter," and "Black AND Twitter" of four electronic databases: America's News, Lexis Nexis News, Alt-Press Watch and Ethnic News Watch, were used to find results.

The first search, consisting of newspapers in the Lexis Nexis News database, was initially limited to the top 10 U.S. newspapers ranked according to daily print and digital circulation by the Alliance for Audited Media (Lulofs, 2013). As of March 2013, these newspapers, listed in order of print circulation size beginning with the largest circulation, include: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Daily News*, *Newsday* and *The Denver Post*. The newspapers, listed in order of digital circulation size beginning with the largest circulation include: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*,

USA Today, The New York Post, The Denver Post, The Los Angeles Times, The Newark Star-Ledger, The New York Daily News and. Lexis Nexis categorized the sources found in the search as blogs, news transcripts (from broadcasts), newspapers, news wires, press releases and web publications.

An additional search, using the same Boolean operators and time frame, was conducted via ProQuest using the Ethnic PressWatch and *Wall Street Journal* databases, and included at least one Black newspaper from each of the U.S. cities among those with the highest Black population (Rastogi, Johnson, Hoeffel & Drewery, 2011). The cities include New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston, Philadelphia, Dallas, Detroit, Memphis, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The papers, which were selected based on their geographical location according to the National Newspaper Publishers Association membership list, included: *The Los Angeles Sentinel, The New Amsterdam News, The Philadelphia Tribune, The Michigan Chronicle, The Tri-State Defender, The Houston Sun, The Dallas Post Tribune, The Chicago Defender and The Afro-American* (National Newspaper Publishers Association, 2013).

Using these search strings, I searched two databases for stories that discussed Blacks' use of Twitter that were published between August 2010 and December 2013. Because of the lack of materials I found in my initial searches, I collapsed the results of my search in the Lexis-Nexis database and the America's News database. Initially, the search was designed to retrieve articles from mainstream publications in the former database, and niche publications in the latter. However, the scarcity of articles retrieved from the mainstream papers and publications chosen for this research led me to add the categories of news wires, web blogs and web publications to the search in Lexis Nexis. This resulted in the incidental retrieval of

niche publications, which prompted me to simply fold the results of my niche-specific search of newspapers in the America's News database into the general sample. It should also be noted that the Lexis Nexis interface and some of its search functions were updated between the time of my proposal defense and the final search for materials.

Once the computerized searches were completed, I manually reviewed the media retrieved to ensure that each item discusses Twitter use among African-Americans, and does not simply contain the words "Black" and Twitter" in order to exclude irrelevant materials. For instance, a preliminary search of the databases, conducted in December 2012, retrieved 53 texts appropriate for use in the analysis. At least four texts that fit the delimitations placed by the use of the Boolean operators "Black" and "Twitter" retrieved stories about country music singer Clint Black and Twitter, and were not appropriate to be included in the sample. In order for a text to be included in the final sample, I had to affirmatively answer whether the item contains a sentence or paragraph that explicitly mentions Blacks or African-Americans' use of Twitter. This proved troublesome, as news items gathered in the specified time frame did not use the phrase "Black Twitter," and very few of the items collected directly referenced Blacks' use of Twitter.

Once the sample was finalized, I coded the data with the assistance of one additional coder. My assisting coder holds a doctorate in community psychology, and is familiar with content analysis methodology; we both have previous experience and exposure to literature and theory concerning racial stereotypes and framing. A pilot test of reliability using the codebook was used to test 10 percent of the sample. Following Dixon's (2008) coding procedures for analyzing online news media about African-Americans, the results of this test, with discussion and feedback from both coders, was used to make revisions to the codebook

as necessary. Based on the discrepancy between the anticipated findings and the content in the retrieved materials, the codebook was updated to limit the coding focus to the theoretical concepts of in-group and out-group social identity, sense of community and the digital divide as framing elements in each text.

Measures. A content analysis protocol, which was used to analyze news media texts about the media's depiction of Black Twitter users, has been developed for this study. Each coder initially coded 10 percent of the sample, a process that was repeated seven times in order to obtain intercoder reliability. Each individual item (i.e., news article, blog, opinion column, etc.) was a unit of analysis. The coder first read the text, including the headline and any display copy (headlines, cutlines, captions, graphic elements) and then used the codebook provided to code categorical variables including the author's name, date of publication, publication type, document type, headline, byline, author name, author's race and gender, and the date the item was coded.

For the final dimension of the content analysis, the coders manually coded each paragraph of the finalized sample for the presence of keywords and phrases used to frame how Blacks use Twitter. We noted the presence of these frames in remarks made on the news items, creating a set of qualitative codes that were referred to in the development of the findings from all three studies. The framing elements that we searched for included:

- References to the digital divide, characterized by the number of Blacks using the Internet and the number of Blacks using Twitter.
- Comparison of Twitter use among Blacks and other races.
- Definition of "Black Twitter"
- Implicit and explicit references to "Black Twitter"

- Implicit and explicit references to “sense of community”
- Framing Blacks’/African-Americans’ use of Twitter as different than Twitter use among Whites.
- The presence of race-specific hashtags

Reliability. Reliability was obtained in an emergent manner such that during codebook pilot testing, training and study testing, several meetings were held to discuss coding, and major alterations to some indicators were made until the coding procedures were clear to both me and my external coder, while still holding true to conceptual definitions (Dixon, 2008). For example, 10 percent of the overall sample was initially coded by both coders. Reliability for 21 key measures, including presence of framing language, use of the term “Black Twitter,” and the use of race-specific hashtags, was calculated between 70 and 100 percent simple agreement; each accepted measure had a Krippendorff’s Alpha of .70 or more (variables with 100 percent agreement had undefined alphas). Using ReCal 2, an online reliability calculator designed for use with two coders (Freelon, 2013), the following reliability measures were calculated:

Variable 1: Source type. 90 percent agreement. ($\alpha = .84$)

Variable 2: Text author/speaker. 80 percent agreement. ($\alpha = .70$)

Variable 3: Publication type. 90 percent agreement. ($\alpha = .85$)

Variable 4: Explicit reference to the “digital divide.” 100 percent agreement

Variable 5: Implicit reference to the “digital divide.” 100 percent agreement

Variable 6: Description of number of Blacks on Twitter. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 7: Description of Twitter use among other racial or ethnic groups. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 8: Explicit use of “Black Twitter” in the headline. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 9: Explicit use of “Black Twitter” in the subhead. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 10: Implicit reference to “Black Twitter” in the headline. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 11: Implicit reference to “Black Twitter” in the subhead. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 12: Explicit reference to sense of community in quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 13: Implicit reference to sense of community in quoted material. 90 percent agreement.

Variable 14: Explicit reference to sense of community in non-quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 15: Implicit reference to sense of community in non-quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 16: Definition of Black Twitter in quoted material. 90 percent agreement.

Variable 17: Definition of Black Twitter in non-quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 18: Use of Black-specific hashtag in quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 19: Use of Black-specific hashtag in non-quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 20: Use of non-Black-specific hashtag in quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Variable 21: Use of non-Black-specific hashtag in non-quoted material. 100 percent agreement.

Study 2: Discourse analysis

Sampling. The discourse analysis focused on the semantic content of tweets as they formed a cohesive narrative, whether united by time or theme. Brock (2012) and Florini (2013) provided the foundation for this approach – each used discourse analysis in their readings of tweet-based conversations among Black Twitter participants. However, my approach to the research integrated interview data (Study 3), which provided the participants an opportunity to more richly describe and contextualize their lived experiences. Allowing interview participants to contextualize some of their online interactions via Twitter meant the data collected were not merely read and analyzed from my point of view, but were co-interpreted with the authority of the participant (Lassiter, 2005).

Working from the nexus of my accounts, @meredithclark and @La_Redactrice, a strategically selected sample of tweets was gathered for the analysis. The sample consisted of tweets that contained references to topics, themes, events or hashtags mentioned by the interview participants in Study 3. As an example, after hearing from several participants about Black Twitter users' reactions to allegations of celebrity chef Paula Deen's racism and bigotry, I searched for tweets related to the hashtag mentioned, #PaulasBestDishes, and used Storify, a web-based social media storytelling tool, to create a chronologically ordered narrative that re-created the online conversations for the purpose of memo-making. In the same fashion that Florini's 2013 study used hashtags to organize a narrative about Black women's objections to particular panelists on an episode of Nightline, I used tweets to create

each of the Storify documents related to the three episodes shared a common hashtag related to the respective conversation's theme, topic and/or event(s).

Using Twitter's API interface and a tool for creating Tweet-based datasets (such as Topsy) tweets were collected around three central topics, themes and events that were repeatedly mentioned in the interview narratives. These included #PaulasBestDishes (and relatedly, #PaulaDeenTVshows), Juror B37 and #Juror B37, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. Where specialized terminology was used, including AAVE and/or cultural jargon, the narratives were annotated with explanatory references. Each of the Twitter-based narratives used in Study 2 contained at least 10 tweets. These narratives listed tweets by up to 10 unique Twitter users, as they were compiled based on content and relevance to the topic, not diverse user selection.

Data analysis. The interactions and conversations of the users were subjected to narrative analysis to highlight key themes in the discourse among the users (Creswell, 2007). Key themes in the daily interactions were memoed for comparison to preliminary findings in subsequent stages of the research. Following Creswell's (2007) prescribed research approach, once the files were created and organized and annotated to create "a story or objective set of experiences... in a chronology," I classified the data, using data from the interviews to finalize the categories of each story (p. 156).

I made a list of repetitive themes that emerged from the Twitter-based narratives, and used corroborating statements from other documents (tweets not included in the Storify documents, additional interviews, media sources) to generate categories about how others experienced the topic, theme or event. I took the significant statements and grouped them into larger units of information, called "meaning units," and wrote a description of "what"

the participants in the study experienced (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). The description is reliant on verbatim examples taken from the selected tweets and the interview data.

I wrote “structural descriptions” of how each experience unfolded, noting the setting and context in which the phenomenon took place (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). For each text, one composite description, hereafter referred to as an “episode,” was verified with at least one interview participant for language authenticity and fidelity to the voices and perspectives of the participants, as is the tradition of reflexive ethnography (Lassiter, 2005). This process, while detailed for Study 2, was used as the analytic procedure for both Studies 2 and 3. Grounded theory, which was used to further develop the meaning units, is detailed in the methods description for Study 3.

Through open coding, the themes mentioned by the interview respondents were used in conjunction with the Storify documents to interpret the larger meaning of each story, and the final narrative episode is presented in Chapter 5 of this dissertation. The episodes are “focus[ed] on the processes, theories and unique and general features” of the online interactions (p. 157). Each episode includes a description of my own personal experiences with the phenomenon being discussed, which I have included in an attempt to disclose my positionality on the topic (Creswell, 2007).

Study 3: Ethnographic, Semi-structured Interviews

The third study in this dissertation consisted of semi-structured interviews that were used to capture the firsthand experience of Black Twitter participants. My interview guide consisted of six sections of questions: social media use (general use of social media applications including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.), practices in Twitter use, including

use of hashtags and participation in hashtagged conversations, the individual's Twitter network composition, and his or her knowledge and perception of Black Twitter.

Participants. The interview participants were chosen via snowball sampling, using my follower/source connections on Twitter to extend invitations to potential participants. Drawing on the example of convenience sampling used in a key study on Twitter as an imagined community (and as a site where several interlinked “personal communities” might exist), my two accounts were used as points of origin for the sampling strategy (Gruzd et. al, 2011, p. 1296). Requests for participants were tweeted from my accounts, @meredithclark and @La_Redactrice. The tweeted requests contained a link that Twitter users clicked on to find the consent form for the study. Once potential participants electronically signed and submitted the consent form to me, I signed it and contacted them via email or Twitter to schedule an interview to be conducted in-person or via phone, Skype or Google Hangout, per their preference. Each interview made use of the interview map to guide the discussion, although additional questions related to the research questions were posed to the participant as interesting bits of follow-up information emerged. My goal was to interview at least 20 unique Twitter users for this study; ultimately, I interviewed 36. Unlike a strict netnography approach (Kozinets, 2010), my in-person, telephone, Google Hangout and Skype-based conversations allowed me to hear inflection and emphasis in the voices of my participants, and in some cases, even to see the expressions on their faces. These intangible indicators of sentiment were noted as part of the interview transcripts and field notes. The move to offline conversation contributed to the richness of the descriptions captured in the data analysis and final report. The offline interviews also pose a strength: they gave me greater ability – to an extent – to confirm the participants’ online identities, mitigating most opportunities for

participants to pose as racial tourists exploring another identity (Nakamura, 2007).

Data analysis. Once each interview was complete, it was annotated with relevant field notes, including information on where to find physical and online artifacts that the consultant referred to during our conversation. The interview annotations also included additional questions that I would later review within the existing data sets from the content analysis or the discourse analysis. Additional annotations included explanation of cultural references, such as citations for literature that decodes AAVE words and phrases. I memoed each interview transcript for emergent key themes – the ideas, references and revelations that several participants independently referred to during the course of their interviews. These themes were compiled in order to further build categories used both as part an iterative component for the tweets collected in the discourse analysis, and to produce key findings in addressing the research questions about user perspective on Black Twitter. Any necessary follow-up took place through email interactions and phone calls. However, most of the subsequent interactions following the consultant interviews consisted of ongoing Twitter-based conversations.

Further interaction with and observation of my consultants on Twitter presented iterative moments between data collected via studies 2 and 3, and contributed to the process of creating the textual and structural descriptions detailed in the data analysis section of Study 2. This stage in the grounded-theory analysis required me to search for conditions that influenced the phenomenon of Black Twitter’s social construction and activity. The information from this step in the coding process was “organized into a figure, a coding paradigm, that presents a theoretical model of the process under study,” which Creswell describes as the way “theory is built or generated” (2007, p. 161). In my case, it led to the

creation of a six-step process I refer to as being Black Twitter. The final step of building theory based on the interview data consisted of selective coding, in which I developed additional questions that are lined to the statements in the coding paradigm (Creswell, 2007). These questions and statements serve as my final suggestions for additional research. Developing a full model or typology of this phenomenon of community-building through communication will require additional inquiry.

Having completed other qualitative research, I realized that the most accurate “truth” in my study came through a process of interviewing and re-interviewing my consultants, and using observation, documents and direct quotes to create a robust work. This grounded-theory approach to meaning-making from diverse qualitative data was essential to my exploratory study of a newly formed and ever-changing online community.

The preliminary categories of analysis used in the second study, including listening, holding conversation, sharing information and ideas and revealing one’s self, were applied as initial categories for questions that shaped the interview guide. Sub-functions of these categories included topic-monitoring, re-tweeting as a means of facilitating conversation; spreading messages via links, pictures and other media and using icons; and using one’s Twitter biography and the service’s interface background to craft an identity. By inscribing the tweets with meaning through these two coding schemas, themes began to emerge from the data, allowing me to make connections between the online discourse and the interview data.

The grounded-theory procedures of the third study included screening the interview transcripts for repetitive mentions of themes, events or topics that related to the research questions, then categorizing those findings. One example of a repetitive theme in the tweet-

based and interview data was the existence of racism in the workplace. A key symbol in this theme was the hashtag #PaulasBestDishes, which served as a signifier that tied together Paula Deen's legal troubles and the creative use of insult in re-naming some dishes using language that is derogatory or revealing of historically stereotypical insults directed toward Blacks. When a research participant mentioned this discussion, either directly, through the mention of the hashtag, or indirectly, that information was included in the category of racism in the workplace, and used in both the discourse and grounded-theory analyses of that particular theme. Ultimately, I used the discourse and grounded-theory analyses to produce episodes, or issue-focused reports at the level of concrete material (Weiss, 1994). Using excerpts from the media found in the content analysis and the tweets collected in the discourse analysis, I created three final documents that integrate the re-telling of the lived experiences of Black Twitter users as they unfolded online.

Delimitations

This study was limited to the exploration of U.S. media and the narratives of U.S.-based Twitter users. At the time of data collection, Twitter boasted more than 288 million active users around the world. Limiting the study to the U.S. still offered a robust data set that reflected the portrayals and behaviors of a community of individuals who are among Twitter's 27 million U.S. users. Additionally, based on earlier studies of Twitter communities, and the ethnographic practice of researcher immersion, this study relied upon my Twitter accounts as points of origin for identifying potential participants in the interview-based research. It is particularly relevant to note that my position as an African-American woman and Twitter user was of some advantage because of the lenses through which I view social reality (Baca Zinn, 2001, p. 209). Although the focus of this research and its relevant

literature centers on the experience of African-American Twitter users, I did not initially use Blackness as a criteria for inclusion in the study. However, with only one non-Black individual agreeing to participate in the research, I found it best to eliminate the outlying case and rely solely on the narratives of Black users of Twitter.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the constraints on data collection. Users send 400 million tweets per day (Tsukayama, 2013). It is impossible to capture and analyze a data set of this scale, and I was limited to a smaller, more manageable data set. The time period in which the data, including the news media selections, is bound between 2010, when Manjoo's article about Black Twitter users was published, to March 2014, which allowed for maximum inclusion of news media. The interview data was limited by the structure of relationships on Twitter and the self-selection of participants who volunteered to share their experience. Convenience sampling, which was used as part of the sampling strategy for the interview study, does not offer data that can be generalized because of its non-random selection of participants (Creswell, 2007). However, the insights from the consultants in this research helped create a provocative and insightful narrative about the online phenomenon of being Black Twitter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings from the three studies are presented here to address research questions concerning the form, structure and function of the online phenomenon known as Black Twitter from two perspectives: its portrayal in the mass media and the lived experiences of its participants. This chapter opens with a brief overview of the data collected in each study, beginning with Study 1, where RQs 1-4 are addressed.

In keeping with Chapter 3, these findings reflect “iterative moments” in the analysis of data collected in Study 2 and Study 3. Using selected tweets and interview data, this chapter presents information in a form that combines the data from both studies to present a complementary picture of the phenomenon. The research questions are not presented in the order that they were proposed, but in the order determined by the study’s findings. This chapter first presents a picture of the social ties that form Black Twitter’s structure, then offers rich description of the participants’ experiences and personal narratives to detail a six-stage process of “being Black Twitter,” and culminates with brief acknowledgement of three examples of the phenomena, which are discussed in further detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4 opens with a cursory review of the theoretical framework used to build sensitizing concepts for the grounded theory that emerged from the discourse analysis (Study 2) and the interview data (Study 3). Using data from Study 2 and Study 3, this chapter will address RQ 5 and RQ 6, presenting findings about Black Twitter’s formation as an amorphous meta network comprised of small personal communities connected via thematic

nodes. RQ 8, which touches on the discourse themes that are of importance to the participants, will also be addressed in this section.

Also drawing on iterative analysis of data from Study 2 and Study 3, the chapter then describes how these users interact to create Black-centric digital activism that defines, elevates, and protects the outgroup's social identity. This information addresses RQ 7 and RQ 9, which are respectively concerned with the episodes of online interaction that were significant to the consultants as examples of what Black Twitter "looks like," and the demonstration of identity-maintenance strategies undertaken by Black Twitter participants online. The chapter closes with a brief description of the significance of three occurrences of the activism phenomena. Occasionally, I will draw connections where findings organized in one section of the chapter are applicable to other RQs.

Findings from Study 1

Study 1 how the news media covered Blacks' use of Twitter between August 2010 and December 2013, searching for words and phrases that framed its use as a function of community. The keywords for the search: "Black," "Black Twitter" and "Twitter" brought back an array of texts, but few that spoke directly to the phenomenon under study. Instead, the stories, blogs, blurbs and web publications that comprised the final sample lacked the desired scope of content sought for analysis of Black Twitter as a phenomenon. Many of the texts retrieved in the sample merely mention Blacks or African-Americans, and make an unrelated reference to Twitter, usually including it as part of the author's contact information. Therefore, the findings from Study 1 are useful only for their descriptive data and are not sufficient to fully address the first four research questions identified as a part of the overall study, which were designed to identify the presence of framing language around ethnic

communities and their Twitter use.

In all, a sample of 100 news items ($N = 100$), including newspaper articles, magazine articles, web blogs, web publications, blurbs, news wires and press releases were coded for the study. Six responses were eliminated from the final analysis because of incomplete data. Of the 94 documents analyzed, 37 were categorized as “other,” 29 were web blogs, 25 were newspaper articles, two were press releases and one was a web publication. The 37 “other” items consisted of four magazine articles and 33 newswire items. Forty-seven of the items, approximately 50 percent of the sample, were coded as news. The second-largest category, “other,” accounted for 17 percent of the sample, and included 14 press releases, one interview and one obituary. Sixty-five of the items (69 percent) were coded as “mainstream,” written for general audience. Twenty-seven (29 percent) were coded as “niche,” or written for a specific audience. The intended audience for two of the items could not be determined. Of the items coded as “niche,” 13 were coded as intended for a Black or African-American audience. Ten were coded as intended for a political audience (seven for conservative, pro-life and/or Republican; three for political liberals). National Black MBA members, sports fanatics, the LGBT community and “unspecified” were each cited one time among the remaining niche articles.

Absence of explicit “digital divide” framing language. The content analysis was designed to retrieve materials that used the phrase “Black Twitter,” which I found was actually not embraced by the news media at the time of the study. Instead, I found mentions of Blacks, and the use of Twitter, but most often, the mention of Twitter in a reporter’s contact line or information. The research questions for Study 1 were as follows:

RQ1: How did the U.S. news media use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “the digital divide” in their coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010, when Manjoo’s article was published in *Slate*, and January 2014?

Among the articles sampled, only one, a mainstream news article taken from a news wire, actively discussed the concept of the digital divide. Based on a study undertaken at the University of California-Berkeley, the article, published in 2012, discussed the blogging habits of African-Americans as compared to Whites. The only explicit mention of the term “digital divide” came from quotes taken from a researcher who discussed some of the differences between Blacks and Whites and their creation and consumption of online content. This article was the single source of data collected about quoted and non-quoted, implicit and explicit mentions of the digital divide. Taken as such, it appears that the media relied on expert opinion to discuss the digital divide, shying away from the term’s use by the author himself or herself. There was no mention of the “digital divide,” either implicitly or explicitly, in the niche news stories. This addresses RQ3, which asked how niche newspapers in the U.S. used in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “the digital divide” in their coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014? Apparently journalists did not use these frames.

Acknowledgment of “sense of community” framing language. As with my treatment of RQs 1 and 3, which pose identical conceptual questions for the two sets of data, I’ll combine the responses for RQ2 (How did the U.S. news media use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “sense of community,” in their coverage of Blacks use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?) and RQ4 (How did niche newspapers in

the U.S. news use in-group and out-group framing, conceptualized as “sense of community,” in their coverage of Blacks’ use of Twitter between August 2010 and January 2014?).

Sense of community, particularly implicit references to the concept, occurred with slightly more frequency, but not by much. Five articles, all from mainstream outlets, made implicit or explicit reference to the concept, using terms such as “Blacks” or “African-Americans” to refer to large numbers of individuals with common racial identity who use Twitter. The collective nouns “Blacks” and “African-Americans” were used in five items from the sample (6 percent). Similar terms, adjusted for other races including Whites, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans were not found in the content. Three mentions of the word “Hispanics” were located in the sample (3 percent). Certainly, expanding the search parameters to include Black and/or other racial groups’ *Internet* use rather than Twitter use would have greatly expanded the number of articles that met the criteria for RQ2 and RQ4.

However, several of the articles yielded some language worth noting, including information that indicated individual Twitter users’ accounts and content were being surveilled, that the news media are aware of Blacks’ strategic use of Twitter to draw attention to causes of concern within physical Black communities, and that there is overlap between Black communities and culture in the physical world and the online realm. In January 2014, for example, social media users drew attention to the shooting death of Renisha McBride, a Black woman in Detroit, MI, who was shot dead by a White homeowner while seeking help after an accident (Adams, 2013). One article, published by the Baltimore Afro-American, references Twitter in gauging public reaction to the news: “There is now a Justice for

Renisha McBride Facebook page and Twitter followers have posted several tweets about the death of the innocent teen” (Adams, 2013). These tweets were used as primary source material alongside quotes from the victims family to frame the reactions of outrage and indignation. An additional mention of Twitter use that crossed the online-offline divide and was later attributed to “Black Twitter” involved CNN host Don Lemon, who was “demonized on social media for a Nov. 5 commentary that seemed supportive of New York’s racially discriminatory ‘stop-and-frisk’ policy” (Baltimore Afro-American, 2013).

“On Twitter, the CNN anchor earned his own hashtag. #DonLemon on...” the article states, giving a few examples of tweeted reaction around Lemon’s commentary which initially aired on the Tom Joyner Morning Show, a radio program with Black co-hosts that focuses on issues of interest to the Black community (Baltimore Afro-American, 2013). The example from this article, coupled with my own observations of the tweets that were sent in response to more than one of Lemon’s prognostications on the ills of Black culture in the United States, are confirmation of several stages of the Black Twitter network’s activity. Users who as self-selected as defenders of positive Black identity used the hashtag to participate in the linked discussion and found affirmation via their re-tweets of one another’s messages. One example: “#DonLemon on Don Lemon: Would you rather be acceptable to Whites and get paid to hate yourself or be liked by the colored and get nothing?” (Baltimore Afro-American, 2013). Their efforts were vindicated by Lemon’s public reply, addressing the social-media criticism via Richard Prince’s Journal-isms, a column written by a Black editor that focuses on diversity issues in the media. By choosing to acknowledge the criticism, and doing so within a second Black-specific medium, Lemon confirms that Black Twitter’s activity has been noted and garners a response in the physical world.

Other notes about how Blacks use Twitter include “holding a vigil” to honor a Radio One host killed in a car accident (Afro-American Red Star, 2013); a Black priest’s outreach to his congregation and the local community via Twitter (Afro-American 5 Star, 2013); young Hollywood’s expression of grief after the suicide of young Black actor Lee Thompson Young (Afro-American Red Star, 2013) and Black celebrity boycotts of the state of Florida following the not-guilty verdict in the George Zimmerman trial (Afro-American Red Star, 2013). Interestingly, although 17 niche papers were selected for the content search, only three — the Afro-American Red Star, the Afro-American 5 Star, and the Baltimore African-American — returned results that included two or more of the keywords in the search. This may reflect the density of African-Americans in the Washington, D.C. metro area (and the papers’ likely readership), which as of the 2010 Census, stood at 314,352, the 9th-largest metropolitan-area concentration of Blacks in the United States.

Early indication of a thematic node. One of the articles that uses implicit references to Black sense of community discusses social media’s role in promoting “Scandal,” an ABC television show starring Black actress Kerry Washington. Twenty-six of my consultants mentioned Scandal as a television event they live-tweet around on a regular (weekly) basis, a process of community-building that is discussed later in this chapter. The information is conveyed by the author and cites the Pew Research Center “African-Americans out-tweet Whites by 26 percent,” (Wellington, 2013). The article’s author goes on to discuss how Twitter chatter, particularly among African-American women who watch the show, has contributed to a culture around the show, its lead character, and the reflections of self that Black women see when they watch and interact with one another around the show (Wellington, 2013). All of these actions and sentiments are described via parts of the process

of the Black Twitter network's activation and engagement. This includes self-selecting as part of a specific community of viewers, choosing to interact with others around a given theme — in this case, interest in the television show — and the confirmation that the network, mainstream media and research entities have taken note about how and when Blacks, particularly Black women, tweet about a particular show. This mention is of note because it attests to an observation of Black Twitter users participation in tweeting around a thematic node, a concept to be discussed later in this chapter.

Findings from Study 2 and Study 3

In Study 3, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 participants between August 2013 and December 2013. Upon being engaged via Twitter, potential participants electronically signed and submitted an IRB-approved consent form agreeing to participate in the research and to have the data collected used in this dissertation, as well as other academic writings and related presentations/publications. With the exception of one interview that was conducted in person, and two interviews that were conducted via Skype, all of the interviews were conducted via telephone, per each participant's choice. I elected not to tweet interviews for the same reason that I chose such a small sample: with so many people and so many perspectives, it would be easy for the conversations to get derailed.

On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour and 17 minutes. The shortest interview was 35 minutes; the longest was two hours and 11 minutes. The interviews were transcribed as they were being conducted. The interview transcripts were reviewed from October through January for memoing.

Identification of key consultants. Interview data from 10 key participants were used to define the major emergent data categories: @feministajones, @IAmTiffJones,

@Karnythia, @MoreAndAgain, @RLM_3, @Starr_Dreamer, @April_Davis,
@TalibHudson, @BlackAmazon, @GraceIsHuman.

@feministajones - Lives in the Bronx, New York. She is a social worker by profession and a writer for media outlets including BlogHer and Ebony by trade. She has an established online presence, including a website where she publishes installments of her erotic novel, "Push the Button," and posts sex-positive education videos. She has appeared on television shows including Dr. Oz, and has been interviewed extensively about feminism among women of color and online activism. Prior to our interview, I followed her, but she did not follow me.

@IAmTiffJones - Lives in Greensboro, N.C. She is a diabetes education spokeswoman and a former newspaper reporter. We have been friends since 2007, when we met during the National Council of Editorial Writers Minority Writers' Seminar in Nashville, Tenn. Prior to our interview, we had a reciprocal follower relationship.

@Karnythia - Lives somewhere in the Midwest. She is a domestic violence survivor, hence the lack of specificity about her whereabouts. She was one of two parties involved in the original conversation about Hugo Schwyer from which the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag emerged. She is a writer and educator. Prior our interview, I followed her, but she did not follow me.

@MoreAndAgain - Genie Lauren is a writer in New York City. She is the woman behind the #JurorB37 trend's focus on advancing a petition to get the juror's book deal dropped. Since the hashtag trended and ultimately resulted in the cancellation of the book deal, Lauren has appeared on television news shows on CNN and MSNBC. Prior to our interview, I followed her, but she did not follow me.

@RLM_3 is a sociology master's degree student at the University of Chicago and self-identifies as a gay Black man. He was the subject of what he describes as an online "dragging" on Twitter (public berating because of a perceived slight to another user), and expressed a good deal of hesitation about participating in the interview. His Twitter involvement grew out of self-led coverage of the George Zimmerman trial. We did not follow one another prior to our interview.

@Starr_Dreamer is a sociology Ph.D. candidate at UNC-Chapel Hill. We have been friends for three years, after I took over for her as program committee chair for our university's Black Graduate and Professional Student Association. We had a reciprocal follower relationship prior to our interview.

@April_Davis is a Harlem-based blogger. She runs the online site AroundHarlem.com She is part of a group of Black tech enthusiasts whom she claims initially talked about creating "Black Twitter" in the early stages of the technology's existence. She reached out to me repeatedly during the recruitment period for this research, but maintained she would not have time to participate in a interview. We developed a reciprocal follower relationship in between the time of our first contact and our interview.

@TalibHudson is a graduate student in New York City. He heard about the study via RTs. We did not have a follower relationship prior to our interview.

@BlackAmazon is a writer and graduate student, and the other half of the conversation behind the origination of the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag. She has contributed pieces for The Guardian and the online magazine Slate. I followed her prior to our interview, she did not follow me.

@GraceIsHuman self-identifies as a Black feminist. Raised in a fundamentalist

Christian home, she used to blog about how her faith has evolved over the years. She is a graduate student in the Midwest. Prior to our interview, we did not have a follower relationship.

The selection of these consultants was used in part to determine which tweets would be selected for use in Study 2, based on the repetition of their comments about specific online interactions and episodes. While some tweets from Study 2 were selected prior to collection of interview data, the second selection process was informed through the use of these participants' narratives, which served as the baseline for developing the key coding categories for the grounded theory analysis of the Black Twitter phenomenon.

Identification of key categories. The major emergent categories were developed based on the repetition of practices and concepts mentioned in the key consultants' responses. Comments from the remaining participants are used to give greater context to the emergent categories of Black Twitter's form, its connections and its collective activity. The interview data were also used to guide the selection of tweets incorporated from Study 2, the discourse analysis, which are woven into this chapter and the final chapter.

The interview guide was used to lead the conversations, though the easy nature of most calls allowed us to go off-script. Consultants freely discussed topics involving their family and personal lives, including everything from their struggles with weight to dating and divorce. Rarely was there a request to go "off the record," but on the occasion that a consultant indicated he or she was uncomfortable disclosing information that could be quoted, I agreed to use those comments only to contextualize concepts and themes that emerged from the data. The participant responses were organized first in memos, which were used to develop categories for exploration and to build theory about the structure, form and

function of Black Twitter as an online phenomenon. While the findings contribute to the advancement of digital media use among people of color, the theory developed through this dissertation uses existing frameworks of sense of community and social identity as a means of locating and identifying key sensitizing concepts in the data.

Theoretical frameworks for exploration

Being a part of Black Twitter is more than being Black, having a Twitter account, and using it to interact with other Black users. As a phenomenon, Black Twitter is often purposefully active — made up of the ongoing, everyday cultural conversations of hundreds of thousands of networked users (Brock, 2013). Based on the interview data that follow, including the emergent categories and codes recorded through analysis of the participants' interviews, Twitter data, and selected news media (articles, blogs, etc.), I began my analysis with a dual lens: culture and community. The culture of Blacks in America is integral to unpacking the connectedness, the wordplay and the motivations of the phenomenon's participants. Black Twitter *is* an online community, as my consultants told me. It may be fractured, stratified and temporal — but, theoretically speaking, it is a community. As with Brock's (2013, p. 533) observation that "Black Twitter does not represent the entirety of the Black online presence," this study does not purport to describe the entirety of Black Twitter's online presence, only a portion of it as experienced through the consultants' narratives and my own observations.

To meet the criteria of the sense of community scale outlined by Peterson (2008), Black Twitter must fulfill four dimensions: individuals must have a sense of belonging to the larger community (group membership); there must be a perception that the member's needs will be fulfilled by the community; the individual must believe he or she matters and/or has

some influence within the community, and there must be an emotional connection with others in the community. After operating as an “outsider observer,” an occasional participant-observer, but often “an observant participant” (Hughey, 2010), I decided to examine the factors that contributed to my consultants’ sense of community by starting with the beginning — their various motivations for using Twitter.

With the exception of two individuals with whom I was previously acquainted in real life, each of the consultants was a relative stranger to me prior to our interview. Our connections began with asymmetrical follower relationships: I followed several potential consultants before they followed me. Others followed me upon hearing about my research via Twitter (links RT’d into their timelines and word-of-mouth).

Aside from access to Internet technology, the lowest barrier to entry in this online community is the shared experience of being Black in America. I use “Black” throughout the remainder of this work with a distinct purpose. First, the term itself is more encompassing than the term African-American, which has overlapping definitions of either American-born individuals who are the descendants of African ancestors brought to the United States via the Middle Passage from the 17th century to the late 19th century, or being the child of African immigrants who came to the country of their own volition from the mid-to-late 20th century to the present. The term “African-American” would preclude data collected from several of the participants, including those who are first-generation American citizens with parents who immigrated from the Caribbean and/or Latin American countries.

On the whole, the consultants and actors whose communicative acts I analyze in this work are African-American or Black. Though the terms are occasionally used interchangeably throughout this work, the latter is the preferred term I choose for this work

because it is a descriptor of the phenotypical characteristics that observers see when interacting with Black Twitter participants who use pictures of themselves in their avatars. These are the representations of Blackness that Sicha (2009) and Manjoo (2010) referred to when they discussed the conversations they witnessed via Twitter. Additionally, the term “Black” (with a capital B) is best aligned with a positive self-identification as a person of African descent (Collins, 1990). A performance of positive Black social and self-identity is at the foundation of Black Twitter’s structure. It is the key concept in understanding how Black Twitter works. Whether the consultant self-selected as part of Black Twitter or not, the shared existence of the Black experience in America is the defining boundary of the phenomenon’s participants. These individuals are linked together first in small personal communities, then in larger nodes of thematic interest, and finally as a meta-network of communicators. Existing theories of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckman, 1963), social identity and social identity maintenance (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as well as sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1983; Blanchard, 2007) provide the foundation for this examination of the boundaries, activities and bonds of Black Twitter as a digital community online.

Black Twitter and Communal Social Identity

RQ 5 is concerned with how the discourse of a linked network of Twitter users informs understanding of African-American representation on Twitter. By “representation,” I refer to not only the numbers of Blacks on Twitter, but also their ability to create an identity according to Hall’s systems of representation (1997, p. 17). Both systems are at work in the crafting of Black Twitter as an identity. First, in order to form collective identity via a shared system of mental representation, a common connotation of “Blackness” must be at work

among the individuals who self-identify as part of Black Twitter. “Blackness” is an identifier fraught with both positive and negative connotation. It is an online signal tied not only to the Black body, but also to its lived experience in the United States (Nakamura, 2010).

Among those who identify as a part of the phenomenon, “Black Twitter” has been transcoded – redefined by the outgroup, turning a negative descriptor into a positive one (Hall, 1997). The term now introduces a digital dimension of cultural richness that is inextricably tied to the legacy of the lived Black experience in the United States. Into Black Twitter comes our personal experiences with a shared historical legacy of marginalization, systemic and often subtle racism, and paradoxically, a denial of opportunity to interact with the dominant culture as individual actors uncharacterized by media stereotypes of Black people and Black culture.

The diversity of Black experience is among the concerns that Black Twitter’s participants bring to their individual and collective formation of a social identity as actors participating in a cultural phenomenon in the websphere. This struggle to create and maintain a cohesive, yet intricate social identity was made evident during the interviews as I asked questions to sift out which topics of conversation are representative of Black Twitter’s interests. As one respondent said, “it’s a loaded question, because Black Twitter is a combination of all these Black people. To say ‘what is important to Black Twitter’ is to say we’re one-dimensional” (@IAMTiffJones, 2013).

Black users’ interactions reveal the existence of a network of actors who, as Hall explained in his theory of social representation, contest their characterization from within the structure (1997, p. 274). As Nakamura (2007) has deftly explained, the Internet is indeed a raced place. Where the digital divide existed in the early portion of the Internet era, White

“settlers” were able to extend media depictions of Blackness into cyberspace before a significant number of Black users were there or interacting with the dominate group. However, through their common offline experiences and online connectivity, Black Twitter participants access a shared conceptual map and a shared language that Hall explains are necessary for forming a system of representation (1997, p. 17-19). Using these tools, they communicate and collaborate to create an online representation of Blackness through a series of communicative acts to create a phenomenon that values positive Black self-identity. The “Black” label is transcoded by the traditional out group (Black actors) and affixed to Twitter as a means of identifying an ingroup of individuals who have the cultural, technological and linguistic savvy to connect with others like them and elevate their collective status. Unlike individual blogs, private chat rooms or message boards that were created with the Black perspective in mind, Black Twitter users do this work within the websphere with their tweets, notably those that are attuned to issues of cultural significance and/or use hashtags to advance discussion. @sherial, commenting on the work that is done to shape Black representation via Twitter, calls this “remarkable.”

“For a place that wasn’t designed for young Black people to be engaged, to see how they’ve kind of taken over, when they weren’t involved in development. To turn it into this kind of space in such short time, that’s amazing” (@sherial, 2013).

Building Online Personal Communities via Existing Ties. As I began to make contact via Twitter with different individuals who expressed interest in this research, I picked up on what would be some of the core concepts of my research: how my existence as a single, Black, college-educated woman meant that the initial respondents were, by and large, single, Black, college educated women. While the information about the studies was re-

tweeted by individuals who did not fit all of those descriptors, many of those who re-tweeted my call for participants had a least one demographic or psychographic factor in common with me.

The prompts “when did you first join Twitter?” and “walk me through your daily Twitter use” were designed to elicit responses about seeking and maintaining membership among other users on Twitter. Among my consultants, the first commonality to emerge during the interviews was their impetus for joining Twitter. Only four mentioned that they joined the service because of someone or something other than “friends,” and each of those four self-identified as early adopters of multiple digital communication technologies. In most cases, though, participants initially joined Twitter because their friends were there. These friends were often identified as members of a pre-formed community or shared common social status – they were fellow bloggers, college graduates, and/or neighbors in the sense of geographical proximity. Even outside of those differences, when consultants mentioned why they started using Twitter and discussed their daily use of the service, the people that they referred to in their everyday interactions were united by a single common factor – Blackness.

Several were, like me, graduates of Historically Black Colleges or Universities. A few were members of Divine Nine sororities or fraternities, another social tie that contributed to a more intimate conversation and a sense of cultural fluency. These ties were my first indication of how Gruzd et al.’s (2010) notion of personal online communities is at work at the foundation of Black Twitter. From the very creation of their Twitter accounts to the cultivation of their daily Twitter use habits, my consultants by and large identify as Black actors in the physical world choosing to negotiate the digital space as raced individuals. To address RQ 6, which asks how African-Americans who use Twitter conceptualize their

interactions with one another, this self-identification as raced, imbued with the meaning of being Black in the physical world, characterizes every level of connection built through Black Twitter participants' use, beginning with their decision to join the social media network and use its technology to communicate on a deeper level with select others.

As they reflected on their experiences using Twitter, my consultants were easily able to describe the conditions that contributed to them joining the service. Offline connections were often mirrored in their decision on whom to follow, an asymmetrical process that is the first step of creating online personal communities, the building blocks which form Black Twitter's meta-network. The data from these interviews in themselves is a reflection of how personal communities interlink to form Black Twitter's larger network. Each individual who participated in this research was recruited via Twitter. Unless he or she was specifically searching for my call for participants — and no one said they were — they became part of the research via personal connections with other users, ranging from ties as simple as an asymmetrical follower relationship to a mirrored online/offline tie to another user.

Ultimately, we connected with “our kind of people” (Graham, 1999, p. 7). On Twitter, they are the same ones we'd interact with or aspire to have as friends. Journalist and historian Lawrence Otis Graham used the phrase to describe middle-class Blacks who congregated around social organizations such as Black Greek-letter organizations (the Divine Nine), youth clubs including Jack and Jill, high-society groups including The Boulé (for men) and The Links (for women). Membership in these groups was exclusive to those who had the education, financial means and social standing to gain an invitation and take part. However, it was also an inclusive existence, as it gave middle-class Blacks in America an opportunity to nourish common bonds with “our kind,” who were excluded from similarly organized

White social groups. The middle-class, college-educated, construction of certain Blacks as “our kind of people” is also reflected among my consultants. Their lives, in many respects, reflect my own. They are an extension of my personal community in real life, a concept that was not lost on any of the consultants.

Several of the respondents had pre-existing online community ties that influenced them to migrate to Twitter after leaving a blogging circle or another social media platform such as MySpace or Facebook. Those existing relationships play a significant role in shaping community on Twitter. The ties extend beyond existing personal history. Jokes between members aren’t just riffs on the day’s experience or their years using the service; they are a reflection of years of online and offline shared connections. One of these, the most knowledgeable and conversational consultant, was @FeministaJones:

I actually signed up for Twitter when my ex-husband moved out of the house. Friends were like you can go on and get your thoughts out in 140 characters. I’d been on Facebook since it was only open to people who’d been on Ivy League campuses. I was fascinated by the idea of watching favorite celebrities tweet real-time. I didn’t start tweeting for six months. I followed friends. These are people I’d been connected to before we called social media “social media,” – Black Planet, etc. It became a chat atmosphere for us. Anything that cut down on long-distance bills. I started encountering interesting people, started attending events that people were posting. I’d go to events, meet people, follow them, it was a cycle. I became more active when I decided to start blogging (@feministajones, 2013).

The uses and gratifications theoretical framework posits that people use media, including digital media, for a variety of needs — to seek information, to share information, to escape, and to connect with others (Blumler, 1979; Ruggiero, 2000). Chen’s (2011) survey of 427 Twitter users found that those who sought Twitter more actively were more likely to gratify a need to connect with others, a theme @feministajones touches on when she describes re-connecting with friends from her pre-existing online communities. Implicit in

her opening statement “I signed up for Twitter when my ex-husband moved out of the house,” is an acknowledgment of a loss of one intimate connection. While experiencing one loss, she mined and revitalized several existing connections, going so far as to meet with her online conversation partners in real-life situations.

@feministajones’ description of how her early Twitter use started, grew and then expanded to include more than 12,000 followers and 300,000 tweets, opens the first category of joining, or self-selection, as a basis for understanding Black Twitter as a networked community because it is both an exceptional and an exemplary of the phenomenon.

@feministajones would now be categorized as an “evangelist,” defined by Cha et al. (2012) as an opinion leader, and more specifically, a member of the Twittersphere’s cultural elite.

The emergence of this category ultimately contributed to the development of personal communities as a theoretical building block to explain how existing network connections serve as the impetus to join Twitter and allow users to talk about difficult life circumstances.

Development of an interconnectedness between the user’s online and offline lives via personal communities was common to other Black Twitter participants’ stories of joining:

I joined during the summer time. I joined because some of my coworkers... were on there. And I started following them, and then I met you and you were on, so I started following you. It was an outlet for me because my parents, grandparents were on FB and they were all in your business. I was also going through a relationship downturn and I needed an outlet to talk about that. (@Starr_Dreamer, 2013)

I started using Twitter in December 2008, a friend of mine (laughs). It’s funny because his name is @reviszion. We’ve been friends for over 10 years about. He was telling me about this great thing, and I joined and was like “what is this?” What’s the point? The first people I followed were all friends of him. Right away it was a very small circle of people, maybe 5 or 6. I’d have conversations with them, good morning, etc. Early on I thought, OK, this is fun, but I’m over it. (@MoreAndAgain, 2013)

The first time I got on Twitter, somebody on MySpace was like “hey... you should join Twitter.” I had about 5K MySpace users, and there was this one girl would talk... you know, we would build community. She said, you should come. She was recruiting Black people to come to Twitter. Back then, it was boring. (@April_Davis, 2013)

@Starr_Dreamer, @MoreAndAgain and @April_Davis, are 30- and 40-something, college-educated Black women. Like me, the latter two are professional writers. When @Starr_Dreamer mentions “then I met you and you were on, so I started following you,” she’s referring to our offline connection as female Ph.D. students of color at UNC-CH. Although all three users had an existing personal connection with someone who was already on Twitter, each would model a different key motivation for actually using the service after she joined.

Fulfillment of Relationship Needs Builds Strong Connections. Like @feministajones’ case, and at least two other consultants, @Starr_Dreamer noted that her Twitter use picked up as she was going through “a relationship downturn” — specifically, a divorce. Twitter offered her a public platform in a relatively private space. She spoke about her experiences and feelings throughout the process openly — tweeting them to, as the service’s terms of use say — “the entire world” (Twitter Terms of Service, 2014). However, the microblogging service afforded her relative privacy as opposed to Facebook, where her parents, siblings and grandparents have accounts. The highly personal explanation of an upswing in Twitter use among consultants experiencing a divorce, moving to a new city, or feeling alienated because of their beliefs, which will be discussed later in this chapter, supports Chen’s (2011) empirical findings that Twitter users who are seeking connectedness tend to tweet more frequently.

Now, @Starr_Dreamer says, she uses Twitter for the ability to speak about her experiences, but also to connect with other Black academics.

“If you’re Black and in a Ph.D. program, you’re going to get followed by me. I didn’t start out on Twitter thinking this is what I’m going to use it for” (@Starr_Dreamer, 2013).

She categorizes her personal community within Black Twitter by starting with whom she knows in real life and branching out from there.

“Those are my core people,” she says, ticking off a list of names that we hold in common – they live in our city. “They’re the ones I interact with the most, both online and in real life... and even then, our friendships have gotten stronger because we talk a lot online. A lot of times we’ll watch the same TV shows together.” She mentions that the people that she’s connected with via Twitter are the ones “I’d be friends with in real life” (@Starr_Dreamer, 2013).

While @MoreAndAgain came to Twitter at the prompting of a friend and initially found it “boring,” she similarly came to find utility in the service, particularly when connecting with other Black writers in her city.

Twitter has made my world really small. Usually people in the music industry or writers. I went to LaGuardia, a performing arts high school in New York. I grew up around singers and musicians, etc. I find that people I follow know that they know somebody I went to high school with. Apparently if you’re writer in New York, the world is really small. One of my BFFs in high school is a writer, and she put me on to Gene Demby (@ThePBG). And now she writes for him (@MoreAndAgain, 2013).

@April_Davis also migrated to Twitter from another social network, MySpace, where she’d been connecting with others through her branded blog, AroundHarlem.com. She, too, had a key motivation for using the site that was common to the consultants’ overall experiences: “I joined Twitter for business purposes, looking for Black people. I gathered

information. I knew Black people were on there before Twitter knew based on the interaction I was getting” (@April_Davis, 2013).

“Most of the people that I follow that I’d consider a friend I know in real life, have a mutual friend either on Twitter or in real-life. There are people on Twitter who I met there and consider a friend,” one consultant told me (@MyraMonkhouse, 2013). “We’re all Black for one. The age range varies. One is 25, some are early 30s, we’re all out of college. Most of us have at least attended college, not all graduates, different professional things. We’re all from Memphis, we’re Black, between 25-34.”

@MyraMonkhouse described using Twitter to connect daily with friends in her town (Memphis) and throughout the nation, in cities including Washington, D.C., and Houston, Texas. She echoed @StarrDreamer’s admission of seeking to connect with other Black individuals like herself. She pointedly stated that while she would talk to her Black Twitter friends in real, daily life (offline interactions), she likely would not do the same with her White friends, or people with whom she’s connected to through her work in journalism. In this way, Twitter becomes a space for connection along racial lines, even when the participants are separated by time and distance.

“The Black people I interact with on Twitter are people I’d talk to every day or every other day in real life. The White people I interact with ... sporadic. I might follow them, but I’d never tweet them. The people that I follow on the professional side, I might not talk to them as often.” (@MyraMonkhouse, 2013) Myra’s normal Twitter crew is made up of her kind of people – Black, many from Memphis, college-educated. They have various familial ties, some are married, some have children. She describes interacting with people on Twitter much in the way one would interact with “our kind of people” offline.

The practice of selecting whom to follow based on common real-world factors is one instance that can be analyzed to address the question of how Black Twitter users form bounded personal communities. The decision to follow another user is indicative of building a boundary. As @Starr_Dreamer mentioned that she would follow a person who is “Black and getting a Ph.D.,” she acknowledges that part of her personal community is bound by race and education. Similar follower relationships could be found among other consultants around specific themes. @BlackAmazon followed individuals who were interested in everything from feminism to makeup and food. “I follow people who interest me, people who do things I’m interested in ... food, makeup, journalism and communications, since that’s my goal of study.” (@BlackAmazon, 2013)

Use of “the banal” in reinforcing social ties. When asked about their daily Twitter use, many consultants mentioned logging on to the service first thing in the morning — often before getting out of bed. Passive engagement began with surveillance: scrolling through their own timelines to see what they’d missed overnight. National and global news updates were a theme, as were updates from individuals within each consultant’s personal communities.

What I found most interesting about my consultants’ quotidian Twitter habits was the practice of extending pleasantries to their timelines, similar to the way one might speak to others when walking into work each morning. “It’s rude to come into a space and not speak,” @PresidentialHB told me (2013). Apparently this is true even if the user appears to be speaking to no one at all. Morning greetings are usually tweeted without mentioning specific users. The “good morning” greeting is another indicator that users feel as though they are part of a structure of community from the moment they log on. Also common are midday

greetings and attempts to catch up, signified by a “what y’all talmbout?” [talking about] or “what’s good, good people?” And in the cases when the user has heard that something’s jumping off [gaining attention] on Twitter, they log on an immediately ask “what’d I miss?”

Each of these behaviors is part of the process of self-selecting as a user engaged with ties to both small communities and a larger network. The greetings are posted on the timelines of users within the individual’s personal communities, and undoubtedly they also see the same on their own. @Starr_Dreamer mentioned that she’ll sometimes reply to someone else’s greeting and start a conversation that way. @IAmTiffJones does the same, sparking interaction with members of her personal community as they talk about what they’re up against at work that day, plans they have for the weekend, or another event of personal significance, such as a date or upcoming social event.

This ongoing activity, described as the “banal,” the everyday minutiae of making online culture, is an insight about the affinity that users feel with one another (Murthy, 2013). Early public criticisms (and some reflected by my consultants) depicted Twitter as a place where ego-driven users tweet their every move, from what they’re wearing to what they’re eating for lunch. These practices contribute to a sense of intimate connectivity among users. By tweeting cordialities, messages about the progress of their day, and small details such as how they feel, how a meal is digesting, quips that can’t be made in polite company, the users foster a sense of “being there,” in the sense of a Geertz-esque approach to describing culture. For Twitter users who learned that it’s impolite to enter a room without speaking, the “good morning” greeting is a practice of cultural connectivity extended into the online world.

A section of the interview guide asked users to list people with whom they interact with on a regular basis, and to describe some of those interactions. Many respondents could

name no more than a dozen extemporaneously, but gave rich descriptions of conversations that illustrate the bonds they perceive with others in their personal communities.

We're some of the most random, informative, intelligent folks, my Twitter bunch. We'll tweet stuff like "Edy's ice cream has to have unicorn tears in it because its so good." Another time, there were 10 of us just going in about lima beans. We were talking about how we didn't understand why they exist. We have iBFFs (Internet Best friends). One of mine is a lawyer in Detroit. Her TL is always funny and intelligent... Her name is @SayitLikeThis. I met her through blogging. She's my official iBFF. Lives in Detroit, is a lawyer. She said we should meet up, her husband asked "you guys went to school together, right?" and she was afraid to tell him how we met. She admitted it, and he said "wow, this is like a real friendship."
(@ResidentShoeWh0re018, 2013)

To summarize, personal communities are comprised of reciprocal follower relationships on Twitter where the users share one or more IRL ties, even if they have never met. They may be members of the same fraternity or sorority, alumni of a common alma mater, or natives of a particular city. These individuals interact with one another on a regular basis. By my consultants' descriptions, these interactions take place daily or nearly every day. They are the groups in which participants in the phenomenon speak about their daily lives, the people they encounter in the physical world, and the situations they find themselves negotiating as raced people.

By having a common language influenced by the similar backgrounds and experiences reflected in the selection of members of personal communities, these small, egocentric groups develop comfort with sharing details of their lives, including practices and interests, that will ultimately allow them to thematically connect with their followers' followers, members of *other* personal communities which are otherwise disparate entities. The discourse of these users presents a framework for understanding how so many Black people, with diverse backgrounds and perspectives, form emotional bonds within a

community where they feel recognized, valued, heard and able to influence both conversation and outcomes through communication performances of 140 characters or fewer. The personal communities are where intimate and banal discourse begin, forging strong social ties around experiences and values that are often affirmed by interaction in the physical world or via other media (i.e., email, phone calls, sharing links to content). The discourse, and better still, participant reflections on their intimate discourse with just a few followers, helps identify two base components of Black Twitter's framework as an online community: 1) the foundation, daily communication practices that cement each participant's place within his or her own personal community, and 2) the larger group connections formed around specific interests, which are conveyed in the concept of thematic nodes.

The emergent category of online personal community development — Twitter use to connect first with individuals with whom the user has a common experience — helps inform the answer to RQ 5, what the discourse of a linked network of users tells us about African-American representation on Twitter. Within this category, I found that my consultants initial follower decisions, banal conversation and existing social ties contribute to the sense of community and shared social identity they develop for themselves via their online interactions. This first level of social identity that Black Twitter participants form for themselves hinges on Hall's (1997) system of mental representation, where actors share a conceptual map and access to common language. These actors are able to understand what the others mean when they use a particular signal, be it slang, a current event reference of significance to their personal community or a point of common cultural experience or history.

By using existing strong and weak social ties from the physical world, Black Twitter participants form connections online with other users who share their existing conceptual maps as they are shaped by real-world experiences and culture. Discussed via Twitter, knowledge obtained offline helps further cement the narratives that bind individuals within their personal communities. For users such as @Starr_Dreamer for example, it is the experience and language of pursuing a Ph.D. as a student of color (particularly at UNC) or as an HBCU graduate. For @April_Davis, it is the heritage of being *from* Harlem, and thus seeing it as both home and a site for a history steeped in Black excellence. For @PresidentialHB, who expressed few geographically based connections, the construction of personal communities is a matter of brotherly connectedness among Black college-educated men, perceived as an anomaly in their physical social world. Within personal communities, each user brings with himself or herself a language and small contribution of shared social identity as a Black user of this technology. Through their daily interactions, they strengthen existing social ties and begin to create new ones that overlap via factors of gender, education, socio-economic status, geographical location, etc. While personal communities definitely fit Dunbar's number of 150, the number of people with whom we are thought to be able to manage real relationships or friendships (1998), thematic nodes allow users to connect with other who share ideologies and interests as expressed in conversation, and to share those sentiments with otherwise untapped personal communities.

Emergence of Thematic Nodes

Individual members of small personal communities connect around common experiences to create thematic nodes of interaction among participants who may visit and interact with these centers less frequently than they do their personal communities. The

category of thematic nodes began to emerge when I asked participants about the common, repetitive conversation topics they thought were most important to so-called Black Twitter. Thematic nodes are not as stable as personal communities, where daily interactions reinforce reciprocal relationships. They are participatory in nature, and often linked to external phenomenon that is discussed publicly via Twitter. Some examples derived from conversations with my consultants, which superficially address RQ 8, the themes of interest to Black Twitter, include relationships (particularly among Black men and Black women); celebrity news and entertainment, physical health/weight loss/fitness, and social justice. More substantive themes are discussed in three episodes mentioned most often by the consultants.

These examples, however, are illustrative of the wide swaths of conversational topics covered in the nodes. By definition, the nodes are loosely formed, primarily through the participation of individuals who contribute to large discussions that often have several competing frames operating at once. United primarily by subject matter (not opinion), thematic nodes may use hashtags to centralize participants' activities. The nodes grow through the use of re-tweets, in which individual users serve as conduits between their personal communities and those of individuals they interact with around the theme. Thematic nodes are temporal in nature — a discussion that takes hours on one day may become an antiquated conversation by the next day Twitter-time.

Social viewing an example of a thematic node. The nodes are made more cohesive by the users' practices of tweeting around the themes time and again. As @ShareefJackson mentioned in his practice of checking in between dinner and sitting down to watch his favorite television shows each night, my consultants built social capital within their personal

communities and thematic nodes through ongoing interaction. Connectivity is seen among users who live-tweet their television-watching experiences. Members of their personal communities and other viewers in their thematic nodes know that a regular physical-world experience will happen at a certain time and on a certain day, and are prepared to interact around it. Williams (2013) calls this practice “social viewing.”

The most visible examples are tweeting around shows such as ABC’s *Scandal*, VH1’s *Love and Hip Hop*, and Bravo’s *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*. The first show, *Scandal*, has seized upon its online audience, using hashtags (#Scandal, #WhoIsQuinn, #WhatTheHuck) to connect with a network of up to 10.5 million viewers for its Season 3 premiere, a 71 percent gain in viewership from the Season 2 premiere (Lee, 2013). For instance, Season 3 of ABC’s *Scandal* was heavily promoted by the network on Twitter, with television ads that directly invited users to tweet the episode alongside cast members in real time (even across time zones). As a result, the experience was co-narrated and given live color commentary by millions of online participants, and is an example of interconnectivity within a thematic boundary. Several consultants, including @Starr_Dreamer, attested that they’ll “never be able to watch an awards show without Twitter again.” (@Starr_Dreamer, 2013). Some of my tweets from an episode on Dec. 12, 2013, were re-tweeted within my own personal community, and then re-tweeted across the thematic network surrounding #Scandal as social viewing artifacts. In one instance, one of my tweets about a conflict on the show was re-tweeted 16 times by others, only one of whom I have a Twitter (and, incidentally, IRL) relationship with - @newBlackman:

@meredithclark: “Shonda heard y’all fellas griping about Olitz, and she came for y’all. #Scandal REEEEEEEAAAAD, Daddy Pope!” (December 12, 2013).

The practices of tweeting around television shows and other live events are part of a set of communicative acts that contribute to a sense of larger group identity. Each show, for example, exists as the nucleus of a thematic node. Viewers who have multiple shows in common are an example of the tertiary set of connections that link individual nodes to form the larger, active network of Black Twitter. By checking in with their thematic nodes on a regular basis, users are arguably exposed to more information than they might be if they simply used the service for strict one-to-one interaction. The check-ins allow users to extend community ties, identify with other individuals and personal communities with shared interests or beliefs. Through a combination of surveillance and sharing, the users create a larger information network where thematic conversations of the day are born and grow.

Making second-level connections. Re-tweets and hashtags gain importance as cultural artifacts as they are shared again and again across personal communities, promoting higher-level interconnectivity, bringing together communicators who would otherwise remain unconnected. This process of sharing gives the information a “signal boost” in the Twittersphere, linking a few disparate personal communities via a handful of individual communicators. This practice was done for me dozens of times as I solicited participants for this study via Twitter. One example:

@meredithclark: “Btw, being black is not a requirement to participate in my research on #BlackTwitter. Just putting that out there...” (August 19, 2013).

The information re-tweeted by these different accounts is indicative of how re-tweets shape thematic nodes. Individuals who re-tweeted my message included @ChrisJVargo and @Starr_Dreamer, who were fellow Ph.D. students on my campus (the former user is in my department), and could be considered part of a UNC-centric node. Another user, @rugcernie, who is identified as “highly influential,” is thematic-node connection that was through our

common interests in race and public policy. We share asymmetrical connections with prominent, sometimes Twitter-verified users who also tweet along the subject lines of race and social justice, including Ebony magazine editor @JamilahLemieux, @FeministaJones and @macberry, a Canadian who takes interest in the social politics of race in the United States. @mediamum is a communications researcher from Australia who is now studying at the University of Colorado at Boulder. My tweet, re-tweeted by the aforementioned users, is a centralized link these related nodes, leading me to characterize this network as a cross-section of individuals interested primarily in communications as a discipline, and secondarily, race in communications. Similar nodes can be constructed by examining a tweet's re-tweet, the hashtag(s) it uses and interaction around a theme. When several of these themes connect among users and their personal communities, the meta-network begins to materialize.

Emergence of Black Twitter's Meta-Network

Twitter brings to light a rich existence of the Black experience by offering the entire world a glimpse at the ongoing social construction of a network of interlinked personal communities defined by their language, interest in common topics of conversation, and links forged through individual connections among personal communities and “high centers” around individuals with a large follow count (Gruzd et al., 2011, p. 1303). By moving these cultural conversations out of message boards, chat rooms and IMs, and into the firehose of Twitter feeds, Black sense of community online emerges as a social construction in which thousands of African-Americans have their own definitions and degrees of participation, and yet still create an identifiable, influential phenomenon. When I asked my consultants how they would describe Black Twitter to someone who didn't know what it was, their answers

were descriptive of an ever-shifting process of self-selection, identification, representation, participation, affirmation and re-affirmation among culturally centered Blacks online. Again, @feministajones, perhaps because of her high-centered connectivity to so many users, best described the details of the phenomenon, giving almost a brief soliloquy on it during our call.

Me: How do you describe Black Twitter?

@feministajones: Collective. If I were to put it into one word, I would think of collective. When I think of Black Twitter I think of a powerful force that can't be ignored. I think of a movement. It's funny – sidebar: I get really bothered when I see people minimize Black Twitter.

It's a collective of people from different walks of life, different part of the Black community, college students, doctors/lawyers, mothers, comedians, homeboys, so many representations of Black community around the country and around the world, represented by such a small group of individuals. They do represent a global diaspora.

It's a meeting place, if you will. When I was writing about Black Twitter and activism, I was really thinking about the mobility piece. Growth. I'm really focused on marginalized people and how they connect. The so-called "overrepresentation" of Black people.

People all log in. Whatever role you play, you log on and you bring all of that to *One place. One website*. You really are there in the same place. The re-tweet button really puts you in touch with people who may not know.

Everyone is dumping their conversations into this one pot. Everyone is bringing everything else. I feel like I'm in both – I'm in Black Twitter organically, and then I write about Black Twitter. I think my reactions ... I try not to react. I haven't read the articles about it because I'm not interested in what they have to say. I'm interested in what my people have to say. I don't really care what *they* have to say. I have almost as many White followers as Black. When they (White users) come to me to ask about them (Black users), I'm not offended. Most of the people who ask me are genuinely interested.

I feel like too many of us have taken that stance that we don't need to explain. You don't want them subverting you like you're in a zoo, but you don't want to ask questions about it. I am going to answer according to how I'm addressed.

Black people in general are communal people (@FeministaJones, 2013).

Line by line, @FeministaJones's description touches upon the concept at work in Black Twitter as a meta-network: collective action to solidify and affirm a social identity through digitally based conversation. These actions, which begin in personal communities, and connect through thematic nodes, provide a safe space for diversity of experience and perspective while maintaining a sense of cohesion within the constructed community's boundaries. This provides participants with great agency to form their individual and shared social worlds as part of the larger network.

Toward the end of her description, @FeministaJones talks about the position of self-defense against subversion that some outspoken Black users of Twitter have undertaken to avoid having the private-in-public occurrences of their online behavior (to draw on a phrase from Audre Lorde) being crunched into others' fantasies of what it means to be Black. By defining their network for themselves via their everyday interactions on Twitter, Black Twitter participants use their communicative acts as a dual-level social identity maintenance strategy to combat mediated racism. Black Twitter's personal communities and thematic nodes provide spaces for us to represent ourselves and our experiences as both united and diverse.

When something outrageous happened in the Black community Blacks took to Twitter. Black Twitter is subjective. It's not a website. It's all about who you follow. If you follow a bunch of Black people, you'll be a part of it. We'll put people on blast when you talk about their behavior. I try to follow diverse groups, but I follow mostly African-American community. Black Twitter is something that you've got to put yourself in a position to engage in it. It's one of those things that you have to experience for yourself. Get on Twitter, start following as many as you can. If you follow more Black people, you'll be involved faster than you think. Be respectful, because what you say can come back to haunt you. Try not to draw attention to yourself (@rdjenkins83, 2013).

Another user described her organic conceptualization of Black Twitter, and how she watched the initial hashtag #BlackTwitter catch on:

I think I've always had an awareness about Black Twitter. I used a hashtag #negrotwitter. Negro is such an antiquated term, and I'd use it. Then you had people like Elon James White, Toure and pseudo intellectuals using the #BlackTwitter hashtag and then it caught on because they have so many followers.

Black people find a way to congregate wherever they are. Twitter is the world's largest cocktail party. And when you get there, you don't know anybody. Sadly, a lot of Black people only know Black people. Black people to think there's a portal to White Twitter somewhere. No, it's just Twitter (@IamTiffJones, 2013).

So who considers themselves a part of it? How do others become a part of it? Black Twitter participants are both self-selecting and communal in their orientation to the phenomenon. About half of my consultants said explicitly that to be Black and on Twitter was to be a part of Black Twitter. Others spoke of different criteria for inclusion.

When someone mentions Black Twitter I think young (under 40) Black people who have like experiences and are tweeting from their perspectives. At the same time, there's diversity. It's not group think. It's a place we can go and you can have your own opinion (@IAMTiffJones, 2013).

I don't know if you are de facto part of Black twitter by being Black. I would guess not, because I was completely confused when I first heard of it. I don't think it changes so much, I think it's about what people do/say/what they're about. For a long time, I was completely confused as to what Black Twitter was – I wasn't a part of Black Twitter so to speak. I didn't know who the major players on Black Twitter were. Yeah, I do consider myself to be a part of Black Twitter. I don't think I'm an important member. It's like being a part of any community. You're only going to know what's going on in the community when it's relevant to you, or when it's put in your face. Most of the things in my timeline or in the Black Twittersphere are relevant to me (@PresidentialHB, 2013).

These two consultants initially present different ideas on race-based social identity as an automatic criterion for inclusion in the Black Twitter network. @IamTiffJones assumes that Black Twitter is comprised of young Black adults; whereas @PresidentialHB is reluctant to do so, based on his own experience of feeling unfamiliar with the network's activity.

These differences may be attributed to their use patterns. @IamTiffJones came to Twitter a year earlier than @PresidentialHB, who joined in 2009. She has greatly expanded her

personal community via connections made in thematic nodes, has tweeted nearly twice as much (as of March 2014, she held 114,000 tweets to his 51,000), and has connected with other users both online and in real life, going so far as to travel from North Carolina to New York to meet some of the “tweeps” she names as part of her Black Twitter crew, including @f_uitlist, another one of my consultants. @PresidentialHB, on the other hand, told me that he met only two of his followers — one incidentally when they were both in the same nightclub; the other, a planned face-to-face meeting, was a disappointing encounter, he said.

Both of their answers allude to the importance of thought leadership among the meta-networks active, visible participants. @IAmTiffJones, who appears to be more grounded in the Black Twitter network by virtue of her online/offline connections and self-reported Twitter behavior, speaks about the importance of each individual’s perspective, and how each contributes to what Black Twitter is:

Black Twitter is a combination of all of these Black people. To say what is important to Black twitter is to say we’re one-dimensional. Marc Lamont Hill (@marklamonthill), Goldie Taylor (@goldietaylor), me. We’re all a part of Black Twitter. I know people who have waaaaaay less education. Where voting rights are going to be important to some Black people, it’s not important to someone who’s never voted. Black Twitter is a smaller version of Black people everywhere. Not just in this country, but everywhere. What’s important to us in the real world. It’s not just one thing, it’s several different things (@IAmTiffJones).

Her comments suggest that the meta-network of Black Twitter is an entity formed through a process of participation. The consultants agreed that Black Twitter was a *thing* - an online convergence of ideas exchanged within the cultural context of the Black experience in America. One consultant discussed her attempt to describe the active components to her mother, who isn’t on Twitter, after some of the meta-network’s more acerbic performances made national news.

I was trying to explain to my mom what Black Twitter was. She understands Twitter. It feels a little silly, but it's a real place, it's a community, it's transformative. When I look about the conversation about #PaulasBestDishes, Juror B37 getting her book deal canceled. To turn it into this kind of space in such short time, that's amazing (@Serial, 2013).

Individually, as reflected in @IAMTiffJones' description ("Black people who have like experiences,") the phenomenon is a reflection of conversations along digitally mediated community ties in the forms of symbols including words, phrases, hashtags and re-tweets. Conversations within those individual communities resonate as part of a larger network. Her description supports to the notion of Black Twitter as a large and stable structure, which several scholars put at the center of sense of community - both online and off (Sarason, 1978; McMillan & Chavis, 1983; Peterson, 2008; Blanchard, 2007). Her response is also indicative of her belief that she, individually, is part of that structure, willing to participate in it, and knows that others are too, claiming that "we're all a part of Black Twitter." (@IAMTiffJones, 2013).

This is the concept that @FeministaJones also describes when she says, "it's a collective of people from different walks of life, different parts of the Black community; college students, doctors, lawyers, mothers, comedians, homeboys, so many representations of Black community around the country and around the world represented by such a small group of individuals. (@FeministaJones, 2013). I describe the activation of the meta-network as the process of being Black Twitter.

The six-stage process of being "Black Twitter"

As a socially constructed "collective," Black Twitter would not be possible without active participation and use of Twitter's technological tools to spread ideas from intimate

community settings to open cultural conversation to larger groups. One consultant described watching the Black Twitter phenomenon as it unfolds:

The mode of locomotion for the ideas that are represented there is through re-tweets, that's the means through which Black Twitter's flowers pollinate. That's how the words get spread, that's how people learn about the moment. Without the re-tweets the people who have followers, they have statements to make, but the audience that reads that statement grows exponentially because their followers can re-tweet exponentially (@Presidential HB, 2013).

His description gets to the heart of the activity that sets the process of being Black Twitter in motion. It requires: 1) self-selection by users who 2) identify as Black and/or are connected to issues of concern among Black communities. It moves from the individual level of personal communities to collective action among thematic nodes via the 3) performance of communicative acts that are 4) affirmed online and 5) re-affirmed offline, leading to 6) vindication of the network's power through media coverage, attempted replication of the phenomenon within other demographic groups, and the creation of that hashtags serve as mediators of Black culture in the virtual and physical worlds. Although the six-stage process of "being Black Twitter" does not proceed wholly linearly, for the ease of explanation, it will be explained here in the aforementioned order.

Self-selection into community structure. In order for Black Twitter to exist as an active network, it must first have individual users and contributors. The first is a given; Black Twitter participants must have an account to be a part of the phenomenon. The second is scaled to the user's own degree of participation. The consultants who described Black Twitter had varying levels of self-selection in terms of being a part of the network. For some, the definition was as simple as being Black and using the web-based technology:

"I think all people who are Black and on Twitter as part of Black Twitter"
(@F_uitlist, 2013).

“I do feel like I’m part of Black Twitter. I don’t think of myself as an influencer, but I participate in topics that are relevant” (@Serial, 2013).

But the majority of responses indicate a wide degree of variability in terms of what self-selection as part of the larger network actually means. @Karnythia, who described Black Twitter as “a series of neighborhoods,” indicated that she fit into more than one of those neighborhoods — what I deem thematic nodes.

I’m probably ‘mean girl’ Black Twitter. Folks try me, they do, and it’s always going to be something (@Karnythia, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain acknowledged the presences of allies and empathetically minded contributors that are not Black as being part of the larger network:

I would say that Black Twitter is a community on Twitter that is mostly defined by the Black people who contribute to it. Not everyone who contributes is Black, but they don’t define the group. There are Black people on Twitter who don’t contribute, they’re not Black Twitter. If you contribute, engage with that community, *that’s* Black Twitter. You don’t have to be Black, but you also don’t define the topics that are talked about, the concerns, the experience of it all. It’s defined by the Black people that contribute to it (@MoreAndAgain, 2013).

Her comment is indicative of a secondary process of self-selection that is essential to episodes powerful enough to tip digital and legacy media’s agenda-setting functions. Black Twitter is built around self-selection as a user, but also on participation by individuals who positively self-identify as Black, as indicated by the language of their conversations and interactions with other users. This Black existence is not uniform - as interview data from @Karynthia, @FeministaJones and @IAmTiffJones illustrates, there are many different presentations of Black self-identity at work in Black Twitter. One user, @roxane, spelled this out a few days after the day the Black Twitter Wikipedia (2013) page debuted:

@roxane: 1. “Black Twitter is a force to be reckoned with, but it’s not the whole of the black community nor is it, in and of itself, monolithic” (August 19, 2013).

@roxane: 2. “Several months ago, I tweeted something like, Black Twitter is actually twitter. What I meant is, “This is not a precious class of user.”” (August 19, 2013).

@roxane: 3. “Stop putting baby in a corner. When you separate off Black Twitter, you’re saying, “you’re not part of the main.”” (August 19, 2013).

@roxane: “Now I don’t say ignore Black Twitter as a force, but think carefully about how and why you’re using the term.” (August 19, 2013).

By elevating what has been historically categorized as an outgroup, and purposefully addressing personal experiences within that outgroup as an identity-maintenance strategy, Black users of Twitter collectively position themselves as an ingroup with common history, struggles and triumphs. The individual concerns may be different, but the cohesion fostered through a sense of collective responsibility for the health of the larger (offline) Black community. I chose to focus on a singular, social-activism oriented aspect of Black Twitter, which presents itself as an expression of collective social identity maintenance work, rather than exploring more lighthearted takes.

By joining in online conversations across thematic nodes via Twitter as a self-selecting, positively self-identifying Black person, participants are claiming an identity for themselves individually and collectively. Their identity-maintenance work is grounded in Tajfel’s (1974) original premise of defense and hostility, but also includes a sense of community responsibility to include and protect smaller, positionally weaker groups who otherwise might not have the same level of representation. Unless the topic of conversation divides Black participants into specific ideological or demographic groups (i.e., how #BlackPowerIsForBlackMen highlighted a rift between Black men and Black women, and furthermore Black feminists and Black women who do not identify as feminists), this sense

of positive Black racial identity is cohesive enough to include individuals who might otherwise be split along fault lines including education, socio-economic status and political ideology. @F_Uitlist illustrates this collective identity as an outgroup's existence in her description of "what Black Twitter is":

The first thing that comes to mind is like a mafia. All of us are in Black Twitter. Not just the popular ones. We have a crime family mindset. If it's about the women, we all get together. If it's about race, we get together. We're a family. It's just like a stream. It starts flowing, it hits different places, people jump in and they start talking and talking. As a people, we can band together. Everybody's opinion in that moment was when respected. Then sometimes it's like a dam, like gender issues. It explodes, everyone's kind of knocked down (@f_Uitlist, 2013).

The external events that participants identified as triggers for episodes in which Black Twitter mobilized generally positioned Blacks as an outgroup, which addresses RQ 9, how specific trending topics reflect the employment of identity-maintenance strategies among African-American Twitter users. #PaulasBestDishes and #PaulaDeenTVShows used radically food and entertainment metaphors to satirize stereotypes of Blacks as subservient. Several consultants who mentioned the Juror B37 episode spoke of the helplessness and injustice they felt in the aftermath of the verdict in the George Zimmerman trial as motivation for participating in conversations about the juror's televised interview using the #JurorB37 hashtag and/or signing the related petition to have her book contract canceled. The two key consultants with direct ties to #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen spoke of how, as Black feminists who advocated for Black women, their presence and experiences were trivialized, ignored, and blamed for "derailing the conversation" on feminism (@BlackAmazon, 2013).

These external events influenced participants' decisions to get involved in the conversations, beyond their personal communities, adding to the conversation based on their

social realities relative to the ideas being discussed. By using their Twitter timelines as an echo chamber of sorts, Black Twitter participants indicated their willingness to self-select as a process of participating in the phenomenon. The ability to self-select as participants in these race-centric conversations is inextricably linked to the users' identity as part of an existing outgroup.

Identification: Recasting Black social identity. At this point, I must reiterate that this model does not proceed linearly, in part because the identification step can and does interchange with the self-selection step as a part of the network's construction. As part of the process of "being Black Twitter," identification is the crystallization of identity-maintenance strategies that members of the devalued group (Blacks) use to elevate and reposition themselves as an ingroup. In order to fulfill Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory of collective action to elevate the group, individuals must identify with the both the perceived threat and the belief that, through group involvement, the outgroup can change its position. I have found no better explanation for contextualizing this process of social identity maintenance — which includes seeing one's self as part of the community, and thus, part of the solution for elevating the community — than the work of Dr. Maluna Karenga, who created the seven principles of Kwanzaa. Two principles in particular, *kujichagulia*, the principle of self-determination; and *ujima*, collective work and responsibility, are useful and more culturally appropriate than existing concepts from literature produced by scholars of the dominant culture. The former means "to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves" (Karenga, 2008, p. 7). The latter is to "build and maintain our community together, to make our brothers' and sisters' problems our problems too, and to solve them together" (Karenga, 2008, p. 7).

Nearly in tandem with identifying as part of the community, participants become active contributors to the community's welfare through creating conversation about issues of interest to and from the perspective of Blacks, and spreading those messages via re-tweets, hashtags and mentions. @Blackamazon spoke about how participation in the conversations that tend to activate the Black Twitter network requires a sense of identifying with the community and taking on responsibility for its representation in the media.

What contributes to that critical mass is that as African-Americans were often see ourselves underrepresented. When stories are reported, there might be something missing that's important to our community. When something comes out that's offensive or ignorant, Twitter is one of the places where people can pick up on that and speak back about it. If something happens and I talk about it at a function or a barbershop, the conversation doesn't go beyond that room. It's about bringing things to the forefront that otherwise wouldn't be. I don't think that we do it for mainstream news. It's to bring it to a wide audience. Not "I hope CNN brings this up," It's a nice side benefit to these conversations (@Blackamazon, 2013).

Part of being in a community is loving and defending them, because no one else does it (@Blackamazon, 2013).

Her response is indicative of the salience that Black users express about their status as a devalued group, as well as their power to elevate the group via Twitter-based conversation. In the identification stage, participants react to mediated depictions of Blacks, as well as internal characterizations of the group. Their reactions contribute to both serious and silly tweeting around issues of concerns to Blacks who use Twitter. The external depictions are often precursors to the kind of defensive actions that the network takes when its members perceive a slight. Internal characterizations lead to the creation of light-hearted hashtags like #BlackParentQuotes. While seemingly benign, the latter types of hashtags can also be interpreted as a defensive strategy, wherein the devalued group speaks about its private

experiences in the public sphere, presenting a direct, intimate narrative to counter public perceptions of Black culture.

Making reality with the imagined audience. The identification stage moves from simple participation in personal communities to a certain degree of self-actualization as a member of the group. Participants initially tweet to add their perspective to the discussion. Through ongoing interactions, they increasingly grow aware of the commonality of their experience among other users. They identify as part of the structure, and recognize their ability to have influence within that structure (McMillan & Chavis, 1983). The most salient example of this common ground I found was in the immediate responses to the question “who do you tweet for?”:

“I see myself tweeting for ME ...” (@PresidentialHB, 2013).

“I tweet for myself ...” (@FeministaJones, 2013).

“I’m tweeting for myself ...” (@IAmTiffJones, 2013).

“I tweet for myself ...” (@F_uitlist, 2013).

“I tweet for myself most of the time ...” (@rdjenkins83, 2013).

“I see myself tweeting for me ...” (@MoreAndAgain, 2013).

“... I tweet to entertain myself” (@Wribrarian, 2013).

Each consultant concluded their response to the same question in a way that indicated they weren’t only tweeting for themselves. Their complete answers, taken verbatim from their respective interview transcripts:

“I see myself tweeting for ME. I like to talk, and I like to think that everything I say is important. Since I know someone is following me, I’d like to think that someone else might

think it is important. It depends on what I'm tweeting about. There are times that I post something that I want certain people to see" (@PresidentialHB, 2013).

"I tweet for myself. There are times that people tell me I'm tweeting for them; they couldn't articulate themselves or put themselves out there. I may represent people, but it's not an accurate representation to say I tweet FOR them. I tweet my thoughts, my experience. By re-tweeting them, it's the ability to say something through someone else's words. I look at re-tweets and say 'that's what I would have said.' Sometimes I tweet for those people. Which is pretty awesome. I represent a faction of Black women who feel like they've been ignored. Because of the following I have and the conversations I have, I'm able to talk about them" (@FeministaJones, 2013).

"I'm tweeting for myself. I'm only tweeting for me. I see tweets all the time that say, 'I tweet for (this crazy group of people).' But I'm not here for that. If you do that, you open yourself up to represent that group. I'm not representing diabetics, natural hair and the 30-plus crowd" (@IAmTiffJones, 2013).

"I tweet for myself. I tweet for Black women who don't necessarily fit the Black Twitter circle. I don't follow the Black Twitter circle for a reason" (@f_uitlist, 2013).

"I tweet for myself most of time - from anger, or to space off for part of the day. I do not take myself seriously. Most of the people who respond can relate to what I'm doing" (@rdjenkins83, 2013).

"I see myself tweeting for me, for anyone who feels like they are engaging with others" (@MoreAndAgain, 2013).

“When I first started, I found that I was tweeting for and to people in my newfound profession. I was trying to talk to them and network with them. These days, I tweet more for entertainment purposes. To entertain myself” (@Wribrarian, 2013).

These responses indicate that my consultants have an imagined audience, a discrete and textually situated group (boyd and Marwick, 2010). Several clues in their responses indicate that linguistic and stylistic cues from others contribute to a more concrete conceptualization of who is in that audience (Scheidt, 2006). The pre-existing ties that helped them create personal communities upon and soon after joining Twitter ground these users’ concepts of just who their imagined audience is — a group far less discrete than the ones boyd and Marwick (2010) initially describe. One the whole, the consultants indicated that part of their imagined audience is a larger network of Blacks with whom they feel a connection and an ability to influence. When respondents @FeministaJones and @F_uitlist spoke about Blacks on Twitter and their representation through one another’s tweets, I connected their observations to statements that others made about how tweets and re-tweets relevant the Black experience contribute to the formation of online community.

Interpreted via the Afrocentric value concepts of kujichagulia and ujima, these connections provide a tangible, textual forum for the public process of affirming Black people and Black interests as significant. As one consultant said, “Black people have been hurting. Been hurting for some years. If they are given a valve, a way to express that hurt, they’re going to take it. Watch it fly. They are going to take it. They are going to take it” (@Blackamazon, 2013).

Another consultant agreed: “I think of Black Twitter as a space where Black people can express and be ourselves among other Blacks,” @duskyjewel told me (2014). I would

call it a powerful, parallel Twitter. It's a place for Black people to read and speak to each other. If it's Black people talking about a particular subject, it's Black Twitter."

As the larger connections form — moving beyond the thematic nodes and into the space where data points from individual timelines converge to create national trending data indicating that there is widespread conversation — users begin to take notice of the power of Black Twitter as a network, and identify themselves as part of that collective.

"Black Twitter is more active and more defined when there is a larger issue at hand. So when people are talking about R. Kelly or Nelson Mandela, things that are relevant to Black people, that's when I tend to see more about Black Twitter," @duskyjewel said in our interview (2014).

As users begin to solidify their roles as part of Black Twitter, they recognize the structure as a space for conversation where depictions of Blackness can be competently analyzed from authentic perspectives. @rdjenkins83' comments solidified my interpretation of this step of the phenomenon when he discussed the relevance of the Black lived experience to Black Twitter's discourse.

"How can you insert yourself in a conversation that you don't live from day? ... It's kind of different when Black people talk about Black Twitter versus when other people are talking about it (@rdjenkins83, 2013)."

Identifying with the experiences of other Black users is key in activating the network itself. In doing so, users speak for themselves, and defend their online community as an ingroup rather than the outgroup it is perceived to be in the physical world. As this identification is made, deliberate, targeted tweeting, including the use of hashtags that can help quantify the scope of Black Twitter's network connections, begins to take place.

Dealing with negative perception of the network. I struggled with defining this part of the process as “performance” using seminal terminology (i.e., Goffman, 1959). My own experience is that when a Black person does or says something in a public space without context for culturally competent interpretation of their “performance,” that act becomes something that is “Black,” and thus, inherently bad. @Blackamazon (2013), however, expressed a positive counter-sentiment: “I’m of the mindset that if I’m Black and I’m doing something, I’m doing something Black.”

However, in some cases, Black Twitter’s performances, the issuance and re-tweets of tweets around a specific subject of interest, have been framed negatively. My consultants spoke of seeing this in some of the acts that have been mentioned in the news media as examples of Black Twitter’s activity.

People don’t say “Black Twitter brought that to the forefront,” they say “people are being mean to you on Twitter. What’s going on?” The mainstream media finds a way to separate the controversy from the people who create it. When I heard about the woman who tried to get the book deal shut down [@MoreAndAgain], they tried to make it sound like it was one person who was disgruntled instead of a network. That’s the beauty of it. There’s not one leader. There’s a project manager for each cause. We were all hurt, and she led the charge. The mainstream story was not the legitimate story. I know people who know her. Things aren’t properly credited to Black Twitter as an entity (@RLM_3).

@RLM_3’s testimony of how the news media has described some of Black Twitter’s performances illustrates some of the problems that exist with attempting to describe the tangible, defensive collective action of a historical outgroup through the eyes of the dominant culture. His comments were confirmed by a few other users:

“Somebody tweeted out that ‘Black Twitter is the modern-day lynch mob.’ I kinda agree. You know in the Black community, we get something, we take it and run with it. ... When something happens, the Black community will take to Twitter” (@rdjenkins83, 2013).

“I wrote an article about this in Salon and got some coverage. As recently as 2010, people were going on and on about it. ... Black people were talking to each other like White people are. It ended up being turned into an epidemic. It ended up being pathologized and it’s not different than how White people use the Internet — no different at all” (@Blackamazon, 2013).

“The downside of Black Twitter is that White people have become deathly afraid of Black Twitter because they don’t want to say something to offend Black Twitter. Remember USA TODAY with the ‘race-themed movie’? That’s a perfect example of a negative Black Twitter hashtag. It doesn’t educate, it basically bullies” (@April_Davis, 2014).

These negative reactions to trending topics of note linked to the Black Twitter phenomenon are part of the backlash to performances of the most salient episodes of Black Twitter’s collective activity. That my consultants spoke of these impressions without any prompting indicates two things: First, they perceive Black Twitter’s conversation as more than just conversation. They interpret it as culture and identity, and believe that the news media do, too. Second, they perceive that when these acts are performed as a collective defense against racism and bigotry, they are framed as part of public perception of Black Twitter as a hostile space.

@Karnythia, who rose to prominence in international news media following her creation of the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag called herself a part of Mean Girl Black Twitter because “folks try me. They do, and it’s always going to be something. I don’t

go out of my way to be mean. It's just that I have a temper and you don't want to test it. And they're surprised that I'll go there in public" (@Karynthia, 2013).

Performing identity as a network function. As part of the process of activating Black Twitter's meta-network, "performance" describes the process of tweeting and re-tweeting around specific hashtags and phrases. These tweets are a means of the network's way of saying to the public sphere that the participants — whether they support the overarching sentiment — value what is being said.

Procedurally speaking, performance as means of participating in the Black Twitter phenomenon online includes creating a topic that is adopted by the network, adding to such a conversation via use of a key phrase, tweeting with a specific hashtag that has been adopted by a large enough portion of the network so that it extends beyond a particular region and/or re-tweeting such communicative messages. When I asked participants "how would someone know Black Twitter when they see it?" the responses collectively pointed to the process of participation by joining a public conversation that was reflective of the historical and contemporary experiences of the Black body in the United States. One consultant, @TalibHudson, described this conversation as the modern-day drum, connecting African-Americans to their African heritage of using drums to communicate messages.

Someone beats on the drum that there's an issue. And Black people pick up. 'Oh, word? There's an issue going on?' And then you have a whole chorus going on. I remember once Roland Martin jumped on and asked "what's going on?" [in reference to Black Twitter's reaction to Russell Simmons' Harriet Tubman satirical 'sex tape'] and he had like 10 people fill him in. I posted about it on Facebook, and I had a friend there who asked about it, but I couldn't work with him because Facebook is too static. Twitter is dynamic. On Facebook you've got ads, people inviting you to play Candy Crush, whatever. Not that you don't have that on Twitter. But Twitter allows you to respond and loop people into the conversation. With Facebook, you can message a group of people, try to tag up to X amount of people. But there's a limit. With Twitter, there's the value of up to 140 characters. So you be quick; make sure what

your tweet is saying is relevant. You have even fewer characters if you want to speak directly to someone. If you want your tweet to be seen, you have to make sure it's relevant in some way. It's just pure messages coming through. Twitter has the ability to get the message out and *engage* with people. I re-tweet to push conversations. A lot of times I re-tweet because I want to co-sign on something. Twitter is a way to engage in conversation that you might not have had otherwise. And I love Black people and I love Twitter, so it works out." (@TalibHudson, 2013).

The consultants' responses support my assertion that Black Twitter works as a collective in the larger, nuanced interests of Black people. One example is the ongoing conversation around Black women's experiences as survivors of sexual assault and a culture that exploits the Black body. Of interest to me were responses from two consultants who talked about how Twitter helped frame conversations about what its like to survive predatory sexual encounters as a Black woman in a culture that devalues our existence.

One [hashtag conversation] I was thinking about recently was what happened after [rapper] Too Short's comments about 12-year-old girls. He made some comment about teaching middle-school boys about how to turn out (sexually exploit) middle-school girls. It sparked a really useful conversation about violence and sexual assault and harassment among Black girls (@GraceIsHuman, 2013).

@Karynthia's comments about #FastTailGirls, a hashtag conversation she organized around the sexualization of young Black girls, echo @GraceIsHuman's point about how Twitter helped foster culturally based dialogue about such experiences and their impact with the Black community:

When I first decided to have it, we were having one of those interminable "what girls should do," conversations, and then there was the picture of the girl dressing up in her mom's clothes, of men calling girls thots [That Ho Over There], and I thought we should talk about the idea that girls should do ____ to earn respect. We've had those conversations, me and some friends (@Karynthia, 2013).

I watched this stage of the process activate the network after @Karynthia tweeted — to no one in particular — whether people would participate in #fasttailedgirls, a conversation about how Black women are sexualized and blamed:

@Karynthia: “If I did a chat for #FastTailedGirls as part of a greater discussion of Black women’s sexuality, would y’all participate?” (November 29, 2013). The tweet was re-tweeted more than a dozen times before the conversation took off at its scheduled time the next day. The #fasttailedgirls (and the off-keystroke conversation I wound up following, #fasttailgirls) tweets continued to pop up long after the initial discussion, conveying reflections of personal experiences from Black women who shared cultural capital in discussing their experiences:

@smooth_orator: “I read shit like that, read #fasttailgirls, and I’m just like man, black women getting abused and everybody just acting like it’s cool.” (November 30, 2013).

@godivabap: “#FastTailGirls oh man, all the pregnant teens called up to the front for “prayer”. NONE of the dads, and they were there!” (November 30, 2013).

@aliention: “I never associated #fasttailgirls with rape.” (November 30, 2013).

@EvetteDionne: “Little Black girls are under assault, but do we believe them when they reveal their traumas? Bit.ly/1ak8Z0x #FastTailGirls” (November 30, 2013).

@HoodFeminism: “#FastTailGirls Walking to a friend’s house and someone mistaking you for a prostitute, no matter what you’re wearing and how old u r” (November 30, 2013).

The conversation prompted some online criticism by members of the dominant ingroup (specifically White women) who lacked the language and shared cultural perspective to participate in the conversation, and sought to criticize it rather than to simply listen. The #fasttailgirls tweets was framed by Black culture, and was undertaken by Black people speaking for themselves, in a hegemonic space molded by the dominate ingroup. It was in no

way created as a conversation of hostile barbs directed at the dominant ingroup. @Karynthia explained that the discussion was an intentional dialogue meant to elevate, connect, and protect Black women who were discussing their real-world experience in this digital space.

I had a few people ask me about what it [the #fasttailgirls hashtag] meant. It was one of those things that's weird to explain outside of its cultural context, and I see White women pearl clutching [acting shocked or outraged] around it, and I don't have time. There were people who asked and they were explained to and they were fine, and there were others who said it was reverse racist. Apparently we weren't supposed to talk about things that happened to Black women (@Karynthia, 2013).

@GraceIsHuman expounded on how these conversations are undertaken as part of a defensive means of building community and protecting the Black community via digital media. She took aim at new and legacy media that cover Black Twitter without considering the cultural context in which the network, and the conversation, exists:

Part of what frustrates me is that what journalists write about is Black Twitter. Black Twitter is just Twitter. Black Twitter talks about everything – sports, pop culture, etc. But this week, the conversation was about Mr. Cee. Black people are the only ones talking about it. I'm not even sure White people know this is happening. Like with Whitney Houston's funeral. You could see a divide with people who were familiar with Black church traditions. It's sort of a both/and. It's just Twitter, but it's Twitter with a cultural framework. Where you can see conversations that wouldn't happen elsewhere, or they wouldn't happen in a way that happens elsewhere (@GraceIsHuman, 2013).

My observation is that these conversations are performed explicitly for the benefit of the Black community. The attention of outsiders, whether they are ordinary onlookers, disrupters of the conversations, or interlopers who co-opt the conversations materials, is incidental. Much like a group conversation in public among friends sitting within earshot of others, these interactions may take place where others can access them, but the others are not envisioned as part of the conversants' imagined audience.

However, the criterion of Black race as a ticket to entry within the private-in-public conversations is only present on *some* occasions. There are other cases in which participants expect the conversation will be seen by outsiders. Sometimes there is an indirect invitation to join. Sometimes the conversation is undertaken as a matter of teaching cultural insight and competency. These two types of dialogue set the tone for the stages of affirmation and reaffirmation, wherein participants confirm some of the sentiments expressed via the Twitter-based conversations, and bring that confirmation, in the form of external stories, comments and reflections, back to Twitter.

Affirmation of online community values. Without the physical communities that are used to establish some of the preliminary ties — including institutions such as high-school and college, the church, and Black Greek-letter organizations — it would be harder for individuals to define their personal communities online. The same is true, to an extent, of the thematic nodes in which Black Twitter participants form key connections. Many individuals connecting around thematic nodes have offline communities or other electronically mediated spaces (i.e., podcasts, blogs and email) in which they reinforce their online ties in the physical world.

Offline spaces serve a secondary function in the formation of Black Twitter as an active network of communicators. They are the spaces that participants return to in order to affirm points of conversations that have taken place in the Twittersphere. Here, language, symbols and cultural practices common to Black physical-world communities are used to validate the ongoing interactions of Twitter users, non-users and texts relevant to Black Twitter's conversations. Here, individuals can present their arguments and personal experience from the Twittersphere and subject them to analysis with like-minded members of their offline

personal communities and thematic nodes for confirmation. Confirmation, in this stage, is a matter of having one's personal voice heard — whether the Twitter user has participated in larger online conversations about a topic or not. By surveilling and sharing, participants in Black Twitter's active meta-network can take bits of the news and cultural conversation expressed online into their physical spaces and confirm its validity and relevance as a means of extending and diversifying the conversation in a way that is liberated from the frenetic pace of Twitter-based dialogue.

Hashtags as indicators of cultural competency. My consultants alluded to this practice when they told me about the offline conversations they've had based on information exchanged via Twitter with members of their personal communities, conversation partners in their thematic nodes, and other participants in conversations across the activated Black Twitter network. #FastTailGirls is one example: @karynthia and @thewayoftheid engaged in conversations about the construct of sexuality among young Black girls, and came up with a plan to hold an online discussion around the hashtag. Similarly, the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag is one that has its origin in the Twittersphere, yet has been affirmed offline in a physical spaces as a unifier for conversation around interests of race, gender and power. When the Dream Defenders, a group of Florida youth activists of color held their first conference, one of the sessions was titled “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen.” The session, a panel discussion featuring young women who were prominent in the Dream Defenders' social activism activities, was an affirmation of the need for intersectional discussion around gender dynamics, racism and power in an offline space.

That same discussion could have been held with a different title — certainly with one

that did not use the hashtag. But inclusion of this specific hashtag is a reflection of the hashtag's power in transferring meaning from the virtual to the real and back as a cultural artifact. By using hashtags and hashtagged conversations offline, Black Twitter participants create greater permanence for the extension of cultural conversations. It is a practice similar to sharing a message heard first in one public forum, such as a graduation speech or classroom lesson. Audiences are expected to be receptive to the message because it was initially communicated in an authoritative space. In Black Twitter's case, that space is the vast recess of the Twittersphere, bounded by the participation of self-selecting communication partners who use their existing social capital to shape the discussion. Hashtags created in a discussion originating online and used between the virtual and the real serve as markers of cultural competency for individuals moving between both worlds as they interpret and extend Black Twitter's private-in-public conversations.

Roles of public-private conversation. The public-private conversations that initially take place among Black Twitter's participants online are generally characterized by Schudson's definitions of problem-solving discussions. Schudson (1997) posits that private-in-public conversations consist of dialogue undertaken to the end of addressing a common problem in a way that is agreeable to the involved parties. The hashtag-driven extension of these conversations into physical-world spaces fits Schudson's definition of sociable conversation, in which the participants expect that sharing the information gleaned will reinforce their pre-formed views. Sociable conversation centered around Twitter-based discourse that takes place within the physical world gives the user's online/offline conversation partners an opportunity to test their opinions with the assurance they are being shared within a space where fundamental values are still agreed upon, allowing participants

greater freedom to disagree.

To apply this argument to one of the aforementioned hashtags, consider that one or more of Black Twitter's participants, who was also a Dream Defender, selected the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag as a cultural artifact because of its embedded meaning as a tool for defending the perspectives of feminists of color. The Black Twitter participants/Dream Defender members responsible for building the discussion around the hashtag in the physical space of the panel discussion did so knowing that the fundamental value in the opinions and roles of women of color would be upheld in the panel discussion, even if there were individual-level disagreements. This made the offline discussion a safe space for affirming the views initially expressed via online conversation, giving the hashtag greater permanence among this group of offline participants. The discussion also helped cement the hashtag as a cultural artifact recognizable in the minds of both Black Twitter participants and individuals with no knowledge of the initial discussion. As the panel proceedings were tweeted using the hashtag, the final stage of "being Black Twitter," reaffirmation, was acted out as the hashtag passed back through the boundary from the real to the virtual.

Reaffirmation of values via culturally resonant language use online. As

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen became a panel discussion for the Dream Defenders (and led to the creation of spin-off hashtags), it also became an example of the reaffirmation stage that takes place when Twitter-based discourse is affirmed in the physical world and then reaffirmed as Black Twitter participants incorporate insights from the physical world into ongoing discussion in the Twittersphere. In the case of #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, the hashtag was used in the offline panel discussions as participants and onlookers discussed the topic in physical settings. Additional tweets and re-tweets from those discussions, as well as tweets and re-tweets from individuals familiar with

the initial Black Twitter-mobilized discussion, create a secondary layer of affirmation, bringing the discourse back into its original space with support from individuals and insights outside of Twitter. This stage unfolds in two ways. Primarily, it is a matter of Black Twitter participants re-using the hashtags to discuss ongoing issues that they relate to the initial discourse. Secondly, within personal communities and thematic nodes, this process occurs both by the re-use of the hashtags as well as the RT'ing of information that cites the initial hashtag as part of the physical-world discussion.

This is the stage of the Black Twitter phenomenon that gives legacy status to some of the key markers of the cultural conversation that takes place online. Arguably, three years from now, when the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag is used, individuals who are familiar with it as a cultural artifact will know of its significance because of both Twitter-based conversations *and* real-world reaction to it. Reaffirmation is a necessary step that separates the symbolic discourse of the Black Twitter network from everyday chatter among a group of connected Black users of Twitter, leading the way for conversations that yield tangible outcomes in the real world.

Achieving vindication via social change. Where Black Twitter's discourse is concerned with some specific end — be it the cancellation of a book contract (#JurorB37) or bringing attention to ongoing issues of race, gender and power (#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, #BlackPowerIsForBlackMen), its participants use the public-private conversation as their means to achieve it. Like “performance,” I find vindication to be a word charged with racial and power dynamics that have pegged Black Americans as the outgroup, perceived as either victims in need of external confirmation or aggressors for whom outside approval is deemed justification for our actions. Vindication is the stage in which Twitter-based discourse can be contextualized as a phenomenon linked to media

processes and effects. The measurable impact of these conversations in terms of the headlines, news stories, reports, editorials, blogs, etc., that they generate advance the conversations out of the realm of Black Twitter's community-based existence via the mass media.

Part of the vindication stage is evident in the news media's problematic seizing upon ideas, trends, hashtags and conversations that occur via one or more of Black Twitter's levels, such as Manjoo's (2010) description of the phenomenon he saw unfolding as #WordsThatLeadToTrouble began to trend. Another part of the vindication stage is observed in Black Twitter's ability to create discourse that tips the mass media's agenda-setting function, bringing the public-private conversations out of the Twittersphere and into the hegemonic public sphere via the mass media. A final occurrence of the vindication stage is the economic impact that the Twitter-based discourse has in the physical world. Examples of this include the coincidence in which Paula Deen's sponsors abandoned her brand as attention around tweets satirizing her legacy grew, and the cancellation of Juror B37's book deal.

Examples of vindication exist both within the Black Twitter network and in the outside world (among those who are not participants in the network) - both online and in the physical world. Vindication within the community occurs when the online conversation leads to tangible action: conversation partners become real-life partners; a member of the network will profess a need, and others will act to fill it. As one consultant said of Black Twitter's participants: "People have made friends, people have gotten married. People are having babies together, getting married. This is not the joke that some people make it. It is a virtual meeting place where people come together and make things happen" (@FeministaJones,

2013).

The collective, as she described it, provides for its own in keeping with the spirit of ujima. Internally, when culturally resonant discussions unfold within a personal community or thematic node, individuals contribute to the solution. Several consultants, including @TalibHudson, mentioned using Twitter to mobilize their connections for offline social action. @TalibHudson tweeted information to his timeline to advance his mother's social activism in Brooklyn. @April_Davis, who built her business around promoting history and cultural events in Harlem, described watching Black Twitter's participants organize to support individuals who'd fallen on difficult financial circumstances: "Over the summer, somebody needed money for something and this lady put up a page and said she needed money, and people on Twitter were giving her money. It was interesting that people that felt that connected. It was all the hardship cases" (@April_Davis, 2014).

The established discourse around this type of action uses words including networked activism and crowdsourcing. However, the foundational characteristic that makes what Black Twitter participants do, starting with their personal communities and building to the larger network, is inherited from their physical-world existence as Black people in America. The difference in the digital age is attributed to the nature of the connection through which these contributions are made. My consultants spoke of witnessing individuals who would otherwise be complete strangers contribute to causes raised within their timelines, and advanced through the consultants' decision to re-tweet certain information. The collective action of individuals in the Twittersphere to advance a cause of importance to a primarily Black personal community or Black-centric thematic node is evidence of finding vindication within the network. The ties and sense of community fostered and felt by my consultants is

real, tested and confirmed by individuals' willingness to take action in the physical world based on information shared and relationships formed in the digital world. This is described in detail in the final chapter of this dissertation through three distinct episodes. To address RQ 7, the three episodes presented in Chapter 5 were the instances most mentioned by my participants as being indicative of Black Twitter's sense of community. Each of these three involves the Afrocentric principles of kujichagulia, to speak for ourselves, and ujima, collective work and responsibility. Through them, I observed how Black Twitter participants used communicative acts to strengthen community ties, at once building a meta-network that linked personal communities and thematic nodes, as well as forging their own representation in the digital world. I also observed Black Twitter participants' use of identity-maintenance strategies, particularly elevating the outgroup, using humor as a coping mechanism against ingroup disparagement, injustice and marginalization. Each of these episodes occurred during the summer of 2013 - the first, a reaction to news of a lawsuit against celebrity chef Paula Deen, took place in early June. The second, a reflection of outrage and perceived injustice in the aftermath of George Zimmerman's acquittal in the slaying of Trayvon Martin, took place in July. The final episode, which stems from a personal conversation being held by two Black feminists, which went on to spark an international trending topic, took place in August.

Summary of the Studies' Findings

Until early 2014, Black Twitter was not commonly referred to as such in the mainstream media. Instead, reporters relied on readily available data — trending topics, algorithms, hashtags — to inform the public of the phenomenon at work. In news stories about #PaulasBestDishes, #PaulaDeenTVShows, #JurorB37 and

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen written before January 2014 and published in the mainstream media, one will rarely find a mention of “Black Twitter.” Instead, there are anecdotal descriptions of how users (occasionally described by race) contributed to these topics, and to what end. But these users are not faceless. Their identities are not secondary or tertiary to their online activities, they are part of a distinct multi-stage process of networked communication of Black actors linked via Twitter. These particular occurrences, and many more that may or may not have warranted such extensive coverage, are the workings of a network of Black users, mostly based in the United States, who have carried their physical world existences into the virtual, and there built a kind of community that has qualities that African-Americans have not been readily afforded in real life: freedom to write, speak and publish their perspectives on the issues of the day; the ability to assemble, protest and affect change via collective action without fear of harm to the Black body; enough safety to speak of intimate personal harm in public spaces without great consequence, and the ability to command the attention of the American people — and the world — without the permission or assistance of legacy mainstream media.

Black Twitter’s collective action in this digital space has given its community another opportunity “to plead our own cause” without having to wait for the mass media to take notice, or to “help” through the procurement of resources such as a printing press, computer access or quotation. Through the six-stage process of self-selection, identification, performance, affirmation, reaffirmation, and vindication, Black users of Twitters have leveraged their personal communities and thematic nodes to create an linked network of communicators who band together around shared cultural identity and perceived outgroup status. These users have formed for themselves a collective identity, using the service to

communicate their views as a defense against hegemonic pressures to behave and conform to the stereotypes and frames that the mass media and its consumers have selected for them. In doing so, they speak back to public perceptions of Black people and Black culture, elevating themselves from outgroup to ingroup status, and taking ownership of social ills that damage Black communities, working together to address these issues. Three accounts of the outcomes of these communicative practices will be explored in the fifth chapter of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 5: EPISODES

Chapter 4 used grounded theory method to create a framework for understanding the levels of community within Black Twitter, as well as the significance of race as an operator in its participants efforts to form a positive collective social identity online. It outlined the process of “being Black Twitter” at work in six stages. Chapter 5 will further address RQ 7, RQ 8 and RQ 9, using three Twitter-based episodes to illustrate several stages of the process at work in Black Twitter’s meta-network activation. These episodes, #PaulasBestDishes, Juror B37, and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, have been selected because they reference three hashtags frequently cited among participants as texts that are indicative of Black Twitter’s sense of community, and offer temporally bounded examples of the phenomenon’s six stages as they unfold.

The discourse in their tweets put Black Twitter’s identity-maintenance strategies on display as participants work through overlapping stages of the process to represent, protect and defend positive Black social identity in the online space. This chapter uses the tweets’ content, including hashtags, phrases, mentions, and re-tweets to provide an analysis of the grounded theory established through the participant interviews and my own participant observations of Black Twitter. The chapter presents the episodes in the order listed above, with related suggestions for further research closing each of the individual episodes.

The lived experiences of Black Twitter participants have contributed to the formation of a self-selecting, constantly shifting, web-based community of Black Internet users whose

ethnic and cultural background serves as the foundation for both their personal communities and the larger network of Black Twitter as a whole. In self-selecting, participants identify and connect with various thematic nodes within the larger network, and reject categorization in others. While seemingly contradictory, these actions reflect the real-life experiences of Black folks in the physical world. Where boundaries of class, education, gender, geographical location and their related influence might otherwise stratify Black Twitter participants, online they have the opportunity to form multi-level networks by uniting with individuals who share some, but not all, of the characteristics that guide the identities they perform in real life and in the virtual world.

At various points, Blacks who proudly self-identify as such, and accept the complicated heritage of being Black in America, occasionally mobilize around a particular cause or conversation as a means of elevating group members in light of their perceived mediated framing as part of an outgroup. This unity is seen on a daily basis in controversy that involves Black Americans at intersecting circles of our individual identities. This is the truth that is reflected in Black Twitter's ability to use its numbers (individual users), personal communities and interconnected thematic nodes to mobilize and create conversation topics that trend - both with and without the use of hashtags. At least one of the three episodes that follow was mentioned or implied during *each* interview with the consultants. Several consultants referred to each of them by their specific hashtags to answer questions about "what Black Twitter looks like." The first, which discusses the network's reaction to the social problem of bigotry in the workplace, is #PaulasBestDishes.

#PaulasBestDishes: Digital Evidence of Collective Social Identity Maintenance Work

One of the first trending topics created by Black Twitter that gathered media agenda-setting buzz emerged on June 19, 2013, when the National Enquirer reported that television personality Paula Deen was being sued by a former employee over allegations of racism and bigotry in the workplace. The satirical nature of the hashtag used to discuss the dishes named by participants simultaneously took jabs at the case itself, an intimate knowledge of Southern food culture, and familiarity with racist phrases, symbolism and practices. Unlike more structured conversations, such as latter ones designed to achieve vindication through awareness and economic impact, this hashtag and its resulting conversation was more a public social commentary on the issue than a social movement designed to is linked to resulting media coverage, which shifted from discussion and highlighting of the hashtag to the impact of negative press on Deen's brand.

Several interview participants mentioned this episode when asked "how would you describe Black Twitter to someone who doesn't know what is is?" In these instances, the cultural conversation (Brock, 2013) and the signifiers (Florini, 2014), that have been discussed a key components of the phenomenon were active components of the conversation. This particular episode is one in which participation is not predicated on identity with a specific social cause, but one that arises out of the lived experiences of Blacks who have experience of the racist phrases that make up their wordplay. This experience in related to the structural makeup of Black Twitter as an online community. In order to serve as effective jokes, the base phrases must consists of culturally resonant language that makes sense to other Blacks who have familiarity with the vocabulary and its original and intended meaning. This episode relies on a shared conceptual map that includes agreed-upon meaning around specific terms, including racial stratification, and, interestingly, traditional southern foods.

The tweet about Deen’s legal troubles was one of the first ones I saw when I opened my Twitter client early on the morning of June 19: @NatEnquirer: “Jun 19, 2013 ... In a blockbuster world exclusive, The ENQUIRER rips the lid off a shocking racial scandal in which celebrity chef PAULA DEEN ...” (June 19, 2013). I might have ignored it and avoided clicking the link for more information if not for the National Enquirer’s previous reporting feat in exposing former presidential candidate John Edward’s affair and love child. But ultimately, during the daylight hours of that Friday's news cycle, it was commentary by social media users, not news outlets, that pushed Deen's legal troubles to the forefront. One example:

@crissles: “oh my God. RT @KidFury SDFLHDSKJFADHALK RT@Rebel_Salute: You Hear White Folk Talkin You Better Hushpuppies #PaulasBestDishes” (June 19, 2013).

I chose to begin with this tweet because it was re-tweeted by two media elites on Twitter: Kid Fury (more than 70,000 followers) and Crissles (more than 35,000 followers), who host a weekly podcast called “The Read” that re-caps the week’s news, reality TV moments, celebrity gossip in the voice of youthful, urban cultural conversation that is now the norm among Black of Millennial age whose spaces for such conversation are found online, not just in the real world.

By simple virtue of retweeting @Rebel_Salute’s satirical take on the situation, the two gave outsized amplification of the message, allowing it to reverberate throughout their networks. Their re-tweets are indicative of three stages of the process: selection, in that they recognize this particular user; affirmation, in that they re-tweet her message to share it with their thousands of others, as well as the comments that they add to the original tweet.

@KidFury’s addition of what appears to be a series of mistyped characters, is the digital

syntax for being flustered, flabbergasted or otherwise amused by the message. His re-tweet is intentional, as are his keyboard strikes. @Crissles's addition to her re-tweet is feigned appall. Ultimately, these tweets provide a signal boost to members of each users' personal communities, which consist of other digital media "evangelists," who also have tens of thousands of followers, exponentially echoing the message to dozens, if not hundreds of thematic nodes of personal communities. It presented at once an artifact of information and humor, as well as a symbol for others to add their own input. The results of tweeting and re-tweeting such messages was reflected in a matter of minutes:

@DebGodFollow: "Uncle Tom's Instant Rice, with butter #PaulasBestDishes – (June 19, 2013)

@Luvvie: "I thought I was done laughing at the #PaulasBestDishes until i saw "Leggo My Negro Waffles." I DON DIE! (June 19, 2013)

Procedures for promoting community connectivity. These follow-up tweets display several stages of the process of "being Black Twitter." First, the individuals who chose to tweet with the hashtag, adding their satirical offering to the mix, whether through original contributions or re-tweets, are mostly self-selecting users who are concerned with an issue affecting Black communities, in this case, workplace bigotry (admittedly, these individuals may have simply joined in on the topic because of its humorous nature). The performance of communicative acts consists of creating tweets around the hashtag's theme: using Deen's own brand to publicly mock and shame her documented bigotry, retweeting tweets using the hashtag to share them with their own personal communities and thematic nodes, and commenting on tweets that individuals find particularly incisive or funny, as @Crissles did with a simple "Oh my God," in front of re-tweeted text. The latter two acts, retweeting and commenting on tweets, are also two examples of affirming other users online.

By retweeting, a user is effectively sharing with what would otherwise be an untapped audience for the tweet's creator. By commenting, particularly favorably, other users affirm that they have received the original communicators message, and, with the text of their own comments, either accept it or challenge it.

The process of reaffirmation was one I heard about from my consultants *after* the episode unfolded, and thus can only describe in terms of their reaction to seeing the hashtag trend. @April_Davis said she participated in the trend in a more passive way, re-tweeting hash-tagged tweets that she found humorous: "I'm not as funny as a lot of these people, so I don't engage in the same way. I re-tweet mostly." (@April_Davis, 2013). Aside from the humor, my consultants discussed the significance of the Paula Deen episode in their egocentric understanding of what Black Twitter was or could be.

"Exposing Paula Deen's racism was under Black Twitter, but some of the things said turned people off. Is this going to be investigative journalism, social activism or name-and-shame? The people who don't consider themselves a part of it is because they get a negative picture of it because of mainstream media coverage" (@RLM_3, 2013). His observations of Black Twitter point to three potential communicative roles for the active meta-network and its participants: The ability to investigate, uncover and inform; the tendency to employ collective action identity-maintenance strategies to promote social change; creating an ingroup from the existing outgroup, or the effective strategy of exposing and publicly shaming the hegemonic ingroup's competing social construct of dominance.

Such action in the digital space has proven difficult for Black Twitter's outgroup to process. When White Twitter users and other outsiders have been just that — historically absent or outside the real-world centers of Black cultural conversation — being thrust into

that dynamic without a buffer of social courtesy is likely to contribute to a sense of unease about the boundary's penetration, whether intentionally or by incidental exposure to the messages. Such discomfort was expressed by individuals that @Karnythia interacted with around #fasttailgirls, as mentioned in the previous chapter. The media, as @RLM_3 noted, brings this online friction to the attention of a wider audience, and in its ability to characterize individuals and groups, creates communication shortcuts and stereotypes and participants perceived as contributing to negative framing of the phenomenon as it unfolds. If the episodes are not interpreted in a culturally competent manner, or if they are solely interpreted through the dominant group's paradigm, they will lack the context necessary to understand and explain the interactions and their significance to the Black experience, both digitally and in the physical world.

It took a few hours for major news networks to pick up the lawsuit story, and by then, Black Twitter had picked up the pace. It wasn't long before the hashtag's play on words began to trend nationally, prompting coverage by mainstream and alternative media outlets: The trend was covered by Fox News (2013); Eater, a special-interest publication for food lovers (2013), BuzzFeed (2013), CNN (2013) and more.

These news articles are examples of vindication through disrupting the media content selection process. The creation of a message separate from the selected news story became significant enough to warrant news coverage. An additional example of vindication of the community's acts publicly lampooning Deen's racism is the release of a statement from Food Network, which said it was "monitoring" the situation on the afternoon of June 19, 2013. Two days after the National Enquirer story broke, and #PaulasBestDishes trended, Deen issued three public apologies via personal video messages that were posted to her own

website. It's interesting to note that after the first video was released, a follow-up hashtag, #PaulaDeenTVShows, emerged a few days later on June 21:

Battlestar Gobacktoafrika #PaulaDeenTVShows (@thesarcastro, 2013).

Sex and The Slave Quarters #PaulaDeenTVShows (@BehaveKashyia, 2013)

Cultural communication on display. Each of the tweets listed as part of this episode taps into the cultural communication aspect of Black Twitter in a different way.

@AwesomelyLovie's "I don' die!" reflects a semantic that reflects Black orality (Banks, 2011) — the spoken remixing of phrases and the intonation of regional dialect — points to flat-out humor in handling an otherwise racially weighty topic. The use of satire that combines racially loaded language and pop culture in messages tweeted and re-tweeted within the network reflects the shared cultural experience that allows for ease of comprehension in understanding the cultural meaning embedded in each message. That the messages were re-tweeted again and again in the network, providing both an echo and influencing media coverage points to cohesion among members of this shifting community who chose to participate in this conversation.

This strategy of outgroup elevation is also an example of how Black Twitter users employ humor as an identity-maintenance technique. Participants in this hashtag conversation simultaneously hold up some clear examples of how Blacks in the U.S. have been marginalized and discriminated against, and joke with others who will recognize the symbolism. Other participants affirm the messages being sent in the satiric tweets by retweeting and responding to them, reinforcing the original communicator's message and letting him/her know that he/she has company in publicly shaming such views through a creative, humorous means. That the conversations were discussed among my consultants,

such as @sherial and her mother, who does not use Twitter, or @RLM_3 and fellow students at his Midwestern university, is another part of the process — affirmation that this interaction and conversation is not just relevant in the virtual world, but is a part of the community's conversations in the real world.

Finally, the participants who contributed to the hashtag becoming a trending topic had their sentiments vindicated by the mass media, which picked up the hashtag and made it part of a news item, framing it as an issue of concern to several overlapping interests — centrally, Black consumers, but also entertainment executives, major corporations and endorsement partners. By selecting the hashtag first, and having to rely on tweets as the primary source of indirect input from Black Twitter users who participated in the trend, the mass media was able to frame the story for wider audiences, making the central issue of humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with bigotry as a salient part of the narrative surrounding Deen's deposition. Because traditional news gatekeepers could delve into Twitter to listen in on the cultural conversations without having existing relationships with the communicators, digital communication and raced identity became part of the media narrative, while the complex structures of the communicative network were ignored.

Flight of the endorsements. Late in the afternoon on June 21, Deen's parent company, the Food Network, issued this statement: "Food Network will not renew Paula Deen's contract when it expires at the end of this month." There was no direct mention for the motivation behind the decision, nor did studio executives give additional comment. Additional endorsement deals were cancelled within a few days, although Deen's supporters rallied. The companies that dropped deals with Deen include K-Mart, Target, Sears, Walgreens, Novo Nordisk, Wal-Mart and JCPenney. While the foundation's of Deen's empire

were undone by a former employee, observations of the online phenomenon created by Black Twitter suggest that the tipping point was the social-media firestorm ignited by the hashtag-driven mockery and outcry. Although this study does not establish a causal between the trends #PaulasBestDishes and #PaulaDeenTVshows and the implications of the Deen losing both her cable-network contract and a host of endorsement deals, the events and participant narratives suggest that the online phenomenon triggered by Black Twitter's public discourse had impact both in the digital world and real worlds. Through the creation, sharing and RT'ing of creative hashtags drawing upon culturally resonant themes, this social media contingent created a wave of negative press with multimillion-dollar implications: "Someone mentioned at the @BWBConference that major brands are afraid of #BlackTwitter ... #TheyDontWantToFaceTheWrath" (@bgg2wl, 2013).

As Deen's empire crumbled, purportedly in part because of the negative attention she'd garnered in the Twittersphere, the mass media's agenda-setting function was primed, and future occurrences of Black Twitter's meta-network mobilization would further advance its selection as a mainstream news item, as evidenced by reaction to the hashtags #JurorB37 and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. No one would have to wait long to see what Black Twitter could do next — the second key episode in the process that would shape the phenomenon's mainstream framing would occur less than one month after the #PaulasBestDishes fallout. It, too, began with an event that occurred in the real world — the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager in Central Florida.

Connecting beyond hashtags: The Takedown of JurorB37

There's power in these Black Twitter streets. How motivating masses to do anything creates something. There's always results. A lot of times on twitter there are just a lot

of words, but then something gets done. So-and-so changes their name. On the more real sense of things, like with the book deal. “Your greatest resources in life are people.” Especially Black Twitter, because we don’t do a lot in life to motivate each other. People reach people to get things done. If you reach a lot of people, you can get things done via Twitter (@PresidentialHB, personal communication, 2014).

One of the areas in which Black Twitter “got things done” was in the aftermath of the verdict in the manslaughter trial of George Zimmerman. The Sanford, FL, man had finally been brought to trial in July for the March slaying of Trayvon Martin, a 16-year-old boy who was a stranger to Zimmerman on the night that the police academy reject killed him. Martin died on Feb. 26, but Zimmerman went without indictment for 46 days until April 10, after outcry built online about a case that was initially reported as a news brief. From the time the boy’s parents first addressed the media at a press conference organized by their legal team, until the night of July 13, Black Americans monitored developments in the case as it played out in both mainstream and niche media. George Zimmerman was acquitted on all charges. Black Twitter’s reaction, ranging from confirmation to outrage to profound sadness, thundered down my timeline in 140-character bursts.

One day after the verdict, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper aired an interview with one of the jurors in the case, who, until then, had been sequestered from public view. Juror B37, as she was called, comfortably discussed the details of the deliberation. A little too comfortably for some. As the program rolled, #JurorB37, a hashtag used to discuss the show and the juror herself, began to trend. So too, did a movement to stop the woman’s proposed book deal — an example of cultural conversation in the public sphere that did not specifically use a hashtag phrase to gain traction, but one that serves as an example of how the layers of community connection at work within Black Twitter are activated in collective work and responsibility for defending and protecting its members.

Connecting personal communities and thematic nodes. @MoreAndAgain doesn't consider herself an activist. A writer, yes. A New Yorker. A Black woman with many connections within the creative world that has its nucleus in the Big Apple. But not an activist, she says. That's the label that the media chose for her. She'd been following the trial of George Zimmerman daily, though she'd been at work the day that Juror B37 gave her interview on Anderson Cooper's evening show on CNN. It was a busy day, she recalled, and rather than checking in periodically during what might have otherwise been a regular workday, she didn't check Twitter until she was on her way home. @MoreAndAgain's commute involves walking and taking the train, so there were patches of time when she missed the discussion, but by the time she arrived home, two things were clear: Juror B37 had landed a book deal as a result of her experience with the trial. And there was no way she was going to allow that to happen, she said.

Reflecting on the outcome of the trial, @MoreAndAgain recalled being discouraged, even distraught, though not surprised. She remembered, however, the attention and fallout surrounding allegations of racism perpetrated by celebrity chef Paula Deen. Although there wasn't any empirical evidence to identify a correlation between the hashtags' #PaulasBestDishes and #PaulaDeenTVshows and the flight of endorsers, there was experiential evidence that allowed Black Twitter's participants to believe in and articulate their ability to affect social change through economic means – without staging a boycott:

@MoreAndAgain: !!!!! RT @miss_hellion: If we can't do anything else, we can stop the publishing of that book. See:Paula Deen" (July 15, 2013).

Tweeting as she worked to find the publishing house and agent responsible for the pending book deal, @MoreAndAgain said she connected to other Twitter users who were similarly outraged about the interview as it unfolded on TV:

@MoreAndAgain: “We just gotta find out her name and the publisher. But, we can stop that book.” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “If anything, we can stop all the book sellers from stocking it.” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “RT @MF_Greatest: @LoveMySkip @MoreAndAgain @miss_hellion do we know the publisher? The agent? Firestorm. We need one.” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: @MF_Greatest @LoveMySkip @miss_hellion I’m gonna find an article about the book and see if there was any mention of a publisher (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “The literary agent for juror B37 is Martin Literary Management. @miss_hellion @MF_Greatest @LoveMySkip” (July 15, 2013).

Once @MoreAndAgain arrived at home, she logged on to her computer and quickly created an online petition at Change.org, a web-based vehicle for quickly amassing signatures to support or decry a cause. Hearing the juror refer to George Zimmerman with a first-name familiarity didn’t help. Outrage swirled, but between the time of the verdict being announced and the petition being created, there was little concrete action anyone could take to change the situation. Trayvon Martin would never come home. Sabrina Fulton and Tracy Martin would never see their son’s killer behind bars. Thousands of people of all races who had come together in marches, forums, letter-writing campaigns, social-media posts and private discussions in homes, workplaces and houses of worship had no recourse. Until the petition went live.

Within hours, the document had been shared by thousands of Twitter users, and gathered more than 10,000 signatures. @MoreAndAgain had created it, talked about it with her followers and friends on Twitter, posted it and let the network take over:

@MoreAndAgain: “Only thing I can think to do is flood Sharlene Martin’s phone, email, and snail mail, w/requests that she drop juror B37. That sound good?” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “Martin Literary Management LL 7683 SE 27th Street #307 Mercer Island, WA 98040 206-466-1774” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “Hey, @sharlenemartin, please drop B37. Do not help the person who let a murderer get away profit from this tragedy.” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “This is only the beginning. I, personally, won’t ease up until you are no longer the literary agent for B37. @sharlenemartin” (July 15, 2013).

As the night progressed, her Twitter direct-message (DM) inbox and email inboxes were filled with automatic notifications of the petition being signed by unique users – including me – as well as two key DMs, both from the agent and publisher who’d contracted Juror B37’s book. The first was to tell @MoreAndAgain that the book deal had been cancelled. The second was to ask her to ask her followers, and the thousands who’d signed the petition, to stop emailing the agent directly. The cyber links of communication to her publishing house had become unmanageable:

@MoreAndAgain: “Sharlene Martin just messaged me on chn.ge/13LRc670_0 (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: “The private message that I just received from Sharlene Martin via Change[dot]org reads as follows (wait for it):” (July 15, 2013).

@MoreAndAgain: ““I appreciate your passion for the death of Trayvon Martin. Stand by for a message shortly. I grieve his death as well.” – Sharlene Martin” (July 15, 2013). [113 re-tweets; 43 favorites]

@MoreAndAgain: “After careful consideration regarding the proposed book project with Zimmerman Juror B37,” (July 15, 2013). [426 re-tweets; 66 favorites]

@MoreAndAgain: “I have decided to rescind my offer of representation in the exploration of a book based upon this case.” (July 15, 2013). [469 re-tweets; 106 favorites]

Analyzing networked digital protest. @misshellion's and @MoreAndAgain's early tweets concerning Juror B37 are indicative of their sense of online community: the "we," they refer to are the individuals who tweeted about the Deen controversy. The initial author acknowledges the linked communicators' ability to have an impact on real-world situations, particularly, the ability for Twitter users to bring economic consequences to an offending party. @MoreAndAgain instantly self-selects as part of this "we," and takes the next step toward mobilizing the network.

The number of re-tweets and favorites are indicative of the activity of a small thematic node — one united by time and the call to impromptu activism. A third user, @MF_Greatest, enters the existing conversation by @LoveMySkip, @MoreAndAgain, and @miss_hellion. @MoreAndAgain re-tweeted this users questions as a means of broadcasting them to a wider audience — perhaps someone who had the information this particular user mentions.

Once the information is located, @MoreAndAgain taps into her thematic node, and then suggests a plan of action. The small number of RT's for that particular tweet, which contains the name of an individual who has a direct connection to the book that these users are protesting, can be considered indicative of the size of the thematic node currently at work. It was re-tweeted only 9 times (and Twitter's parameters only allow a user to RT an unedited Twitter message once). This suggests that the immediate network involved is not the large-scale meta-network that might have the ability to influence decision-making surrounding publication of the book, but a few personal communities merging to create a thematic node linked by previous ties and shared indignation.

When @MoreAndAgain provided individuals with information and a plan of action, the node expanded quickly and dramatically. The large number of re-tweets and favorites toward the end of this episode, despite the presence of a hashtag, indicates that @MoreAndAgain was still effectively speaking far beyond her own personal community or even a thematic node. In order for another user to know that @MoreAndAgain had this information, and to receive her exhortation to action, he/she would have to have been following @MoreAndAgain, or have received word that she possessed and was sharing the information. As @MoreAndAgain told me in her interview, she was connected to a number of Black writers in New York City. It is likely that several of those pre-existing connections, members of her own personal community, are among the individuals who re-tweeted this call to action to their followers, alerting up to 78 personal communities of the protests' beginnings.

Protest in the form of tweeting, retweeting, mentioning and linking provide an example of how personal communities and thematic nodes converged to activate Black Twitter's collective power as communicators. In this case, @MoreAndAgain did not use the #JurorB37 hashtag herself until she began talking about the outcome of the petition, indicating that her communication was a parallel of existing discussion elsewhere on Twitter. I observed as others used the hashtag to spread the petition via Twitter. In fact, that is how the petition came to me — I was not one of @MoreAndAgain's followers when she created it. However, through the hashtag, and the conversation of the thematic node created around the hashtag, the space between similarly minded communicators dissolved. I, along with potentially hundreds of thousands of others, was able to connect with @MoreAndAgain's personal community and link together in social action. In this case, the petition created a

bond among otherwise disconnected Twitter users. It moved within and across network connections, reinforcing a sense of community within multiple structures: the personal communities of those who have self-selected as being interested in or tied to the case and the thematic nodes of those watching the interview. Whether a person tweeting with the hashtag was Black, its use, so long as accompanied by a message indicating agreement, linked them with others willing to participate in this fast and furious communicative act of resistance. Signing the petition was further commitment to being part of that structure, and indicated that the signees felt they had some ability to influence outcomes. Circulating the petition with a RT, or using its link in a message directed at another user is indicative of willingness to maintain membership in that structure.

Tweets from @MoreAndAgain's feeds indicate that there were literally hundreds who were willing to self-select in this process of connection via the Black Twitter meta-network. They re-tweeted her tweets with references to Juror B37, sharing the information with their networks, and spreading sentiment about what the community could and should do. Interestingly, while several of my consultants who mentioned this particular episode referred it by a hashtag, #JurorB37, @MoreAndAgain did not use the hashtag in any of the tweets that reference the juror and the book. The disparity between participant recollection and the texts created by the central figure indicate that something else was at work in linking so many individuals behind a particular cause. By noting the number of re-tweets for each of the tweets listed here, the assumption is that existing networks — personal communities and thematic nodes — spread word of and access to the petition. The lack of a hashtag to link the central figure in this episode to some 78 users/accounts who re-tweeted the literary agent's information, and more than 400 individuals who re-tweeted confirmation that the book deal

was being dropped, certainly suggests that there was greater connectivity at work in making this an episode of note to be attributed to Black Twitter's power to affect change.

Using community ties to raise public awareness around unjust issues, particularly when that awareness is linked to economic punishments — such as the cancellation of endorsements or a book deal — may be the greatest consequences that can be wrought by social-media mobilization. Even when there is no individual or process to target through this form of community-centric digital activism, Black Twitter has used its ties to draw attention to the injustices the outgroup faces: racial profiling, bigotry, and as the final episode will demonstrate, marginalization — even among would-be allies.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen: Hashtag use as Symbolic Resistance

The final episode examined in this chapter is linked to the others by the theme of digital, socially networked resistance to racism. #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen operates on the same assumptions that unites so many participants in Black Twitter — a shared experience that includes a historical, systematic progression of being Othered. However, unlike the #PaulasBestDishes and #PaulaDeenTVshows hashtags, participation in this hashtagged conversation reached far beyond Black communities in the United States — both online and off (The Guardian, 2013). Its success can be anecdotally linked to connections made within thematic nodes between personal communities of feminists and their allies.

The hashtag as a cultural artifact is at the root of the final episode examined in this chapter. This particular episode reinforces my argument for a rigorous interdisciplinary approach in examining the fluidity, significance and context of the hashtagged phrase as a cultural artifact gathering meaning as it is suspended between virtual and physical worlds.

Unlike the other hashtags noted in this study, this one specifically calls out a group as its subject – White women. This may be a reflection of the background of those who first began to tweet about it – Black women who feel disenfranchised among the circles of second and third-wave feminism in academia.

Although I participated in this hashtag on the day it began to trend, I did not learn its backstory until months later when one of my consultants pointed me to its creator, @Karnythia. As it turns out, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen was created and advanced as a response to an ongoing online and real life interaction between Hugo Schwyer, a White professor and author and self-proclaimed “male feminist,” and a woman who would become one of my consultants, @BlackAmazon. The latter, also a feminist, operates in many of the circles where Schwyer’s work was heralded and welcomed. @BlackAmazon’s, not so much.

I first became aware of Schwyer in August 2013 when re-tweets from his very public, Twitter-centric meltdown began making their way into my Twitter feed (International Business Times, 2013). As the small community of White, Black and “other” feminists I follow shared and commented on Schwyer’s antics, @Karnythia and @Blackamazon were conversing about the deafening silence – in cyberspace and the physical world – of White feminists who had ignored or tried to explain away Schwyer’s abusive and predatory behavior when it was directed toward @Blackamazon. As the tales of his misdeeds unfolded and were later catalogued in blogs and alternative media, @Blackamazon wondered aloud when her White feminist sisters would come to her aid.

They’re not coming, @karnythia reminded her, because #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen. @Karnythia then began to tweet with the hashtag, offering up

examples of how White feminists ignored, marginalized and/or villainized women of color, specifically Black women:

@Karnythia: “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when you ignore the culpability of White women in lynching, Jim Crow & in modern day racism.” (August 12, 2013).

The hashtag took off as women within their two circles used it to discuss slights perpetrated by White feminists against feminists of color. Interestingly, the tweets were not limited to mentions by Black women or women of Hispanic, Asian and Native American descent. The hashtag was also used by White allies and individuals both male and female to discuss the fault lines of race within progressive community spaces, particularly online:

@blogdiva: “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen means Rihanna has a responsibility but Miley is just experimenting” (August 12, 2013).

@zblay: “#SolidarityisforWhitewomen when pink hair, tattoos, and piercings are “quirky” or “alt” on a White woman but “ghetto” on a black one.” (August 12, 2013).

@pushinghoops: “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when you think I need to be saved from the men in your community while ignoring fetishization from the men in yours” (August 12, 2013).

@weian_fu: “#SolidarityisforWhiteWomen paints #Madonna as a multi-talented feminist icon, while @rihanna & @Beyonce are vapid & hypersexualized” (August 12, 2013).

@RaniaKhalek: “#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when convos about gender pay gap ignore that White women earn higher wages than black, Latino and Native men” (August 12, 2013).

As a hashtag, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen has had one of the strongest offline transference among conversation topics originating with or being linked to Black Twitter. In the weeks and months after the hashtag appeared it was subsequently covered by mainstream media and adopted by existing social communities as shorthand for discussion of the seemingly unlikely exclusion of women of color within feminist circles. The feminist

approach to social science is purported to be situated and inclusive, a retort to objective, positive views of a phenomenon (Haraway, 1988). The hashtag and the sentiment behind it, both online and offline, are a testament to the experiences of Black women who find themselves excluded at best and silenced at worst in their lives and work as feminists.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen is a summation of Patricia Hill Collins' description of Black feminism: a demonstration of Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge (Collins, 2009). Participants in the hashtagged conversation offered personal examples of their experiences being marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, abilities, etc.

Some examples include:

@nursetohbad: "When White women are seen as being the default and women of colour are the other / exotic / forbidden #SolidarityisForWhiteWomen" (August 12, 2013).

@blogdiva: "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen when Lena Dunham is called the voice of a generation even though there are no women of color on 'Girls'" (August 12, 2013).

@adnaansajid: "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen When Black/brown women get abuse online few even care; when White women get it it's a transnational talking point" – (August 12, 2013).

@charlenecac: "#solidarityisforWhitewomen who cry when a woman of color directly confronts their White supremacist and imperialist thinking" (August 12, 2013).

@favstar_pop: "#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen calls Hillary the first viable women's candidate even though Shirley was the first and only nominee" (August 12, 2013).

These tweets, taken from a cross-section of users, both Black and non-Black, incorporate different voices linked by @Karnythia and @BlackAmazon's personal communities and thematic nodes, and then connecting to a larger meta-network. On the first levels, many (but not all) of the individuals who tweeted with it were Black.

Cultural significance and symbolism of the hashtag. “When I launched the hashtag #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, I thought it would spark discussion between people impacted by the latest bout of problematic behavior from mainstream White feminists,” (@Karnythia, 2013). Purposefully acting as a Black feminist, @Karnythia’s online speech was the digital embodiment of “portray(ing) African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression” (Collins, 2009). This hashtag is an example of formal deliberation that Schudson (1997) describes as the type of conversation that occurs in the public sphere with the intention of influencing decision and policy-making. This process is described as one that implies an agenda, has boundaries to protect weaker conversational parties, and an explicit purpose (Wyatt, Katz & Kim, 2000).

In this case, @Karnythia acknowledges how the experiences of feminists of color have been marginalized by their White counterparts, and even when the opportunity to stand in solidarity with the otherwise “weaker” members presented itself, White feminists choose to band together, ignoring or discounting experiences which are unlike their own. The hashtag, as @Karnythia described, was created with an agenda of making feminists of color and the communities they represent visible both within feminist circles and in public conversation on the whole. Thematically, this conversation is a sort of middle ground between the #PaulasBestDishes hashtag, which examined one component — racism in the workplace — and #JurorB37, which gave depth to the frustration expressed by Black communicators and their allies. Although #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen did not have an explicit economic purpose, it evoked a venerated form of protest - the threat of bad publicity - all of which drew greater attention and negative press for Schwyzer, his public appearances

and academic works, and more broadly, his apologies and the silent majority of feminists complicit in the marginalization of feminists of color.

Hashtag as vehicle between digital and physical spaces. As the hashtag episode involving #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen demonstrates, the significance of a hashtag can move beyond a simple one-to-one communicative process (as it began between @Karnythia and @Sydletter), and transform into a symbol used by a variety of networked communicators.

The #Solidarity hashtag created a symbol that was easily shared without losing meaning. As a cultural artifact, it was initially embedded with the meaning its creator(s) and initial users ascribed to it. As it grew in popularity and began to trend, a sense of collective identity grew among its users. By choosing to tweet using this shared hashtag, feminists of color and their allies self-select as stakeholders in a distinct conversation. Their tweets are linked together as part of a larger conversation that can be searched, indexed and mapped through the use of the common hashtag. Additionally, critical mass behind their use of the hashtagged phrase centralized the language as it was used to express diverse sentiments from one user to another. Those who were unfamiliar with the hashtag were also forced to pay attention to it as it began to trend.

The discussion surrounding #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen had the greatest offline mobility of the three episodes in this. Individuals within Black communities online and in the real world seized upon it; so to did LGBTQ* women and men and their allies. It was the inspiration for two similar hashtags that would follow in later months:

#BlackPowerIsForBlackMen and #NotYourAsianSidekick, which were designed to highlight oppression between Black men (many of whom took to Twitter to bash Black women around the #Solidarity hashtag, saying they were being divisive) and the fetishization of Asian-

Americans. The hashtag lived a divergent existence offline as well. In some cases, it was outright co-opted by pre-existing organizations, without proper attribution of @Karnythia nor inclusion of her voice in the panels and discussions it was used to unite and draw attention to. In smaller, more grassroots circles, the hashtag was used as a signifier true to its initial creation - that community support for feminist visibility and activism was limited to privileged (read: White, elite) feminists, and shut out feminists of color.

The examples I refer to include the use of the hashtag by organizers of a New York chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and Feministing, which used the hashtag as part of their online promotion of a panel titled “Activist Night: What is Solidarity for Women of Color” (2013). Initially, the hashtags’ founders and her supporters called the use of the hashtag and her exclusion from the panel into question, charging that by failing to properly attribute the hashtag and include @Karnythia in the discussion, the organizers were perpetrating the very behavior that led to the hashtag’s creation. The offline events and media coverage of the #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen hashtag point to an interesting phenomenon — the ability of Twitter- centered digital content creators of color to serve as gatekeepers for information, setting an agenda for mainstream media publications to follow. The days, weeks and months after #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen began to trend, not only was it covered by digital and legacy mainstream and niche media outlets, so was each step of its aftermath. A year later, this hashtag is often cited in discussions about hashtag activism. It has become a widely recognized digital artifact of digital culture, and is arguably a main point of reference for the mass media’s framing of the online phenomenon known as Black Twitter: as a “mob” of angry individuals using Twitter — its hashtags, mentions and re-tweets — to draw attention to a particular cause.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

Chapter 5 detailed three key episodes in the early formation of Black Twitter as a meta-network of communicators with shared cultural history and common values who protect one another as members of an outgroup building ingroup status. The episodes focused on the use of the hashtag and the connections of personal communities and thematic nodes to activate a meta-network that has drawn legacy mainstream media attention for its outspoken stance on social issues of concern to Black communities. This chapter will discuss the implications of such connectivity, and will connect emerging theory around social-media use with existing theoretical frameworks used to contextualize user selection of particular communication channels. It will also identify directions for future research and detail an interesting occurrence of the participant researcher as influence in ethnographic work.

Black Twitter's disruption of legacy media routines

The mass media conversations around the #PaulasBestDishes and #PaulaDeenTVShows are evidence of how Black Twitter effectively used the hashtag to very visibly insert the perspective of hundreds of thousands of Black consumers, who otherwise would have gone unheard, into the agenda-setting process. This is more than an insertion; it is an interruption of the traditional news-gathering process. Where else might gatekeepers have gone for such a rich description of a particular public's sentiment? The agenda-setting process unfolds in eight steps: first, the initial event takes place. Second, the media takes notice and attempts to meet an initial need for stories. Third, the media and public opinion leaders participate in debate and commentary around the initial event. Fourth, the media's

attention is heightened toward stories of the same theme. Fifth, media attention increases around subsequent events that are linked to the initial occurrence. Now, as more media outlets have begun to pay attention to similar events, there is increased competition for coverage of the events. Sixth, more debate and commentary ensues. Seventh, there are public calls for something to be done. Eighth, the event and its coverage serve as the impetus for a change in policy.

Arguably, it was #PaulasBestDishes that tipped the national news media's awareness on Black Twitter's power as a linked meta-network. Earlier studies for the Pew Center for the Internet and American life had already revealed that Black users were numerically "overrepresented" on the social network, but few had taken notice (or even knew) what such dense numbers could mean in terms of communication and digital practices. However, with the initial event of Twitter-based reaction to Deen's deposition, the agenda-setting process was set into motion and shifted around the story as the latter stages of Black Twitter's own community-based communication process.

In the cases of #PaulasBestDishes, Juror B37 and #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, Black Twitter's participants engaged in a six-step process of targeted communication that challenges the uses and gratifications framework's scope in its ability to properly operationalize the actions of thousands, if not millions, of online participants. Contemporary studies, such as those undertaken by Cha et al. (2012), provide rich empirical analysis on Twitter's use as a broadcast medium for information-sharing. However, the development of such these studies often rests on the conceptual structures of print and broadcast media, viewing user conversations and interactions as two-way at best. As the multi-layered, multi-directional nature of Black Twitter underscores, Twitter's Internet-based technological

capabilities create a different web of communications patterns, one that allows many speakers to articulate and share messages with rapid-fire succession and exchange. Twitter users are unlike mass-media consumers of yesteryear who had to wait a week to interact around their favorite radio program (Herzog, 1944), or even a day as they developed individual positions of opinion-leadership and information flow based on the daily newspaper (Loges & Ball-Rokeach, 1993). While the framework is still arguably “cutting-edge” for keeping up with the initial stages of emerging mass communication technology and *audience* behavior (Ruggerio, 2007, p. 27), it is challenged by Twitter’s technology, which allows greater “audience” activity than any other communication technology to come before it. There is no waiting for content to be produced by a single source, or even the myriad sources accessible by a single consumer. Instead, every user, by tweeting out a message, becomes a producer. Every user is also part of the active audience, though the technology mitigate the individual’s ability to so distinctly select the messages imported into his or her timeline. Studies that attempt to describe Twitter use via uses and gratifications framework built on print and broadcast technology fall short in describing the hive of production and consumption that Twitter makes possible for an active audience unlike any that media researchers have studied before.

The framework is in need of an update to reflect the influence of multiple-direction communication technologies, rather than building on typologies shaped by the age of radio and television. This research adds to the call for such updates by identifying the six-step process of “Being Black Twitter,” as an outcome of multi-directional communication technology use. Black Twitter participants went beyond the traditional categories of using social media to satisfy needs of information consumption, sharing and escape. The process

also places an onus on social-science researchers to continue to advance the work of scholars like Blanchard (2007), who interpreted the sense of community framework through an Internet-centric paradigm, moving away from geographically bound community centers to describe nodes of connection formed via Web-based technologies. Black Twitter participants used the service to fulfill the basic criteria of sense of community in building temporal, culturally linked structures that gave its self-selecting participants a sense of influence and agency, but they also used it to shape a meaningful online existence that goes beyond what can be described using the tenets of the existing framework. The users repeatedly emphasized that they used Twitter to connect with community, and to build around common ideas and ideals.

Returning to the theoretical frameworks referenced in Chapter 2, I'd like to discuss the disparity between existing mass communication theories and their fitness for examining research questions born of new and emerging communication technologies. This study began with four theories/frameworks that were developed prior to the Internet Age: framing, social identity, sense of community and uses and gratifications. While some are more relevant than others to this particular study, there were still significant gaps in the literature that require either an update to the existing typologies or the extension of the theories into digital communication via additional grounded theory work.

As evidenced by the lack of materials suitable for the intended coding scheme, framing was not a suitable theory to work with for this particular study. Perhaps now that the term "Black Twitter" has gained traction in mainstream and ethnic news media publications, a repeat of this study would yield more robust results. Additional study on the use of stereotypes and specific images in the digital age should reach beyond the perspective of the

media that dominated the 20th century – print and broadcast. New framing studies must – to borrow a concept from uses and gratifications framework – consider the role of the active audience in identifying the creators and disseminators of the images, words and phrases used to create and perpetuate race-based frames in online spaces. While Nakamura’s (2002) observation that race has crossed the boundary from the physical world into the online world is true, it focuses on the creation of frames created by mass media and used by online communicators. It does not sufficiently address the role that online communicators themselves play in creating new frames via the use of hashtags, transcoded language, memes, mash-ups and other images. For decades, print and broadcast media, through their selection of language, images and quotes, have created images of behavior and traits assigned to specific races, with little impunity save for studies that identify implicit bias and the occasional letter to the editor or column that points out these practices. Until Internet access became ubiquitous for all Americans – well after the early 1990s, as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation – there was little way for a communicator to push back against these images, and certainly no way for him or her to publish and circulate contradictory frames of their own.

The Internet changed that. The playing field is by no means level, but as Jay Rosen has pointed out, each keyboard, whether part of a smartphone or laptop, or connected to a desktop, is “a little First Amendment machine,” offering users an ability to publish information as they see fit (2006). As Black Twitter’s participants have proven, Internet access and a common language comprised of historical and contemporary experiences are two valuable tools in recasting the narrative around the Black experience in America.

This newfound access and gatekeeping influence also raises the issues of updating existing uses and gratifications typologies. One of the contributors to uses and gratifications framework, Philip Palmgreen, has said that qualitative inquiry must precede quantitative testing in building new theory in order to properly identify emergent concepts (personal communication, December 2010). The uses and gratifications typology, which limits the gratifications sought by the fulfillment of three specific needs – information, entertainment and escape – does little to explain the use of media as a tool of resistance. As detailed in this dissertation, Black Twitter participants used the Web as part of their work in combating negative news media messages and workplace racism. As the uses and gratifications typology exists, there is no category for this type of activity, or any other type that sees the active audience as it contributes to the production of new and diverse media messages. This gap in the existing literature is evidence of disconnect in updating theories for relevance to modern technologies. Audience-studies and media processes scholars should contribute to the extension of uses and gratification as a theoretical framework by observing the many ways that new media allows the active audience to assume an activist role – going beyond the selection of media for one of the three aforementioned consumption purposes, and using it with an intention to change entrenched media production practices.

Finally, the use of social identity theory for placing Black Twitter participants into context as members of a group also had its challenges. Fortunately, through supplementing the theory with concepts from Afrocentric valuation systems, this means of understanding

group membership still had relevant application to the research. The inclusion of the values drawn from Kwanzaa, a ritual celebration of African-American culture, is in keeping with Tajfel and Turner's criteria for understanding the norms of a social group in order to define its membership. Using the principles of ujimaa and kujichagulia to better understand the collective defense of Black social identity are key to understanding the boundary of those who consider themselves part of a Black Twitter as a social group committed to maintaining positive Black self-identity, and those who do not.

This dissertation would have been better served by a use of critical race theory to better parse the language, interactions and attitudes of participants in Studies 2 and 3. The exclusion of Black-centric scholarship is painfully evident in any inquiry of Black people and Black culture that relies on literature drafted from a White-centric, positivist point of view. By including my consultants' voices, and working with them to build a grounded theory perspective of their social realities, I am able to mitigate this shortcoming a bit. However, the irony of this dissertation's dependence on hegemonic scholarship is undeniable, and one that I will seek to address in ongoing work about Black life online. However, as mentioned in the first chapter of this dissertation, the exploration of Black digital life that uses timely, relevant, Black-centric literature is doubly difficult as: 1) Black participants and scholars alike were late to the "colonization" of the World Wide Web, as evidenced by the disparity in academic works among early so-called settlers of the Web, and 2) mass communication scholars are still largely using works developed in the pre-Internet age to inform studies about online communication. Both of these issues impacted the use of social identity theory to explore Black Twitter's formation and function as a loosely formed social group.

As cited with the theoretical frameworks mentioned above, Tajfel and Turner's work on social identity is rooted in studies that were also developed prior to the Internet's development and dominance. Although contemporary studies have attempted to update the concepts, their reliance on physical-world structures as reinforcement for social reality cannot be ignored. Tajfel's premise, that expression of group membership is reflected in language use and behaviors, is malleable and can be applied to analysis of Internet-based groups. However, questions linger about the lack of physical context that influences the language use and behaviors of members of an online social group. One participant in this study brought this to mind when she spoke of the differences she witnessed between herself and other Black Twitter participants. Noting that many of the high centers among Black Twitter's number live and work on the East Coast, she questioned the differences of language use, particularly as it referred to slang, as well as the impression of regionally specific cultural values — hustling (working hard, often with multiple jobs, usually with some degree of entrepreneurialism) in the Northeast, the proximity of family clan in the Southeast, and the spirit of independence among members further West. Taking her observation into consideration, there are questions that linger about the factors that have shaped the myriad subgroups within the readily recognizable group membership categories defined by Black Twitter's race. This issue confounds the basic tenets of social identity theory: Knowing *something* about how these groups were formed — via their Blackness, their offline connections, their common interests and their willingness to connect with one another — creates a defensible background for understanding Black Twitter as a whole, but not the intricacy of its parts. In order to substantially address this theory's requirements, it's important for the researcher to know about how the *subgroups* (personal communities) were

formed within Black Twitter's own environment. This may require stripping the Black identity away as a defining factor and instead focusing on common history among the individuals. It definitely demands additional inquiry into the second tenet of the theory — understanding the psychological effects of the personal community's construction. This approach is of critical importance where members of outgroups are concerned. As several of my consultants said, Black Twitter, and more largely, Black people, are often characterized as a monolith, lacking dimension and dynamics that the individuals experience within smaller subgroups of Black existence.

The Outcome of Collective Defense

I found that the ability to create a measurable, real-world impact is the key factor in understanding how some trending topics further reflect the employment of identity maintenance strategies among Black Twitter participants. This process is described in terms of collective work and responsibility to protect and defend members of Black communities. Using digital media to voice community members' interests, a communal sense of agency is developed by the users as they communicate one with another. It is what prompts self-selecting Black Twitter participants to start with their personal communities, connect through their thematic nodes, and ultimately participate in the activities of an ephemeral meta-network. It is this meta-network that will, from time to time, unite behind a cause to elevate public perception of the outgroup, thus creating outcomes that indicate that the outgroup is heard and valued. In this case, individuals who participated in the related conversations — using the #JurorB37 hashtag, advancing the petition, or through direct interaction with @MoreAndAgain, demonstrate their frustration, anger, and agency in lobbying to prevent the juror from profiting from the family's pain. This is also true in the case of the Paula Deen

satire, which had a purpose as public protest, but perhaps also an unintended outcome of negative economic consequences for Deen.

This particular episode, which can be described as one of Black social action, was perhaps the most oft-cited occurrence mentioned by my participants. Of the 36 individuals interviewed, 33 mentioned Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman by name, and spoke of discussing the trial on Twitter. Their online conversations reflected and were reflected by media coverage during and after the trial, particularly among Black media outlets. This interplay of online and real-world discussion present a process of affirmation and re-affirmation in processing the issues surrounding the trial, including the status of Black humanity in the White gaze; the concerns shared by parents of Black boys, and an ongoing grievance about miscarriages of justice where Blacks are concerned, among other topics.

Participation in the Juror B37 conversation was a direct form of activism, particularly once the petition was created and circulated. The petition itself is an articulation of opposition to insensitive media coverage that was seen as biased against the humanity of Black boys. After months of social-media discussion finally prompted a trial, and more time was spent petitioning legislative offices, marching in cities across the United States, and watching the trial unfold without a favorable outcome, the success of getting Juror B37's book contract canceled via social-media petition served as a measurable indicator of Black Twitter's offline power in affecting social change. In the aftermath of the Paula Deen fallout, this petition's success was a causal link between digital discourse and real-world outcomes that demonstrated Black Twitter's existence as more than just a group of Black communicators loudly demanding attention online.

What Black Twitter Does for Minority Digital Communities

The conceptualization of Black Twitter as a surprising, angry mob ignores two things: first, that there exists well-established network of Black communicators discussing the realities of their social worlds online, and second, how these communicators have triumphed in developing their ability to influence wider, culturally competent discussion about those realities. Via Twitter, Black communicators have demonstrated the ability to organize online and influence real-world outcomes, a major departure from the perceived inability to affect change that Pole (2007) noted in Black bloggers polled just six to seven years earlier. Then, one participant in the research limited his/her influence to the scope of the Black community – citing input, or an ability to participate in national conversations about political issues, but not the ability to have an impact.

On the mass national, collective level I wouldn't say I have much agency, as much as input. I get about 700 hits on a daily basis. Nationally I would say I have some input, but input isn't the same as influence. I would rate myself a two out of 10 nationally. I have a good deal of input. A friend of mine says that I am an opinion shaper. If I'm an opinion shaper I would say that among the Black community I have more influence and I would rate myself a seven out of 10 (Pole, 2007, p. 13).

Black Twitter's actions, modeled in episodes characterized by satire, petition and shaming, have demonstrated that the Black digital presence is one that must be recognized by other users and the media. Its individual users, personal communities and thematic nodes contribute to a greater ability for a linked network of Black communicators to plead their own cause via digital media in a shared space with influence that is quantifiable through follower counts, tweets, and re-tweets.

These actions point to a need for the development of communication theory that takes into account the ability of those whom we once considered media consumers to serve as co-

creators. Black Twitter's actions have had demonstrable influence – at least from its participants' perspectives – in the cases covered by this study.

Paula Deen was, at best, collateral damage in the phenomenon's growth and power. But her case was a testing ground for the success of individual Black users tapping into their communities to gain visibility around an issue. While @MoreAndAgain had a few hundred followers before she began her work to protest the book, she gained thousands within a few hours. Those followers may not review her posts everyday, but by choosing to follow her, they indicate that her online actions have had some impact, and that they desire to know about what she tweets. The 789 re-tweets surrounding the official cancellation notice are a dramatic uptick in community reach, far beyond the three or four individuals in her personal community that re-tweeted her initial proclamations of an intention to “do something” about Juror B37's book deal. And through #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen's metamorphosis from its online origin into offline iterations, Black Twitter incidentally modeled how the phenomenon could be seized upon and replicated by other groups.

To frame Black Twitter as a “mob” is to select specific elements of its presence — simply the sheer number of participants and what they tweet about — and to ignore the factors of community building through communication and collective action identity maintenance. It also ignores the technocultural factors at work in this work. These individuals are not drawing attention to their cause via a letter-writing campaign or a sit-in the way media consumers of a generation did. However, their use of social media has stretched beyond online boundaries, and has prompted physical-world consequences, and contributed to the social construction of hashtags as artifacts that carry meaning between the virtual and physical worlds. The essence of this phenomenon is not new; Twitter is simply a

new medium for connecting Black communities — personal, intimate ones and those linked by common interests — across physical, economic and social barriers, giving their members greater agency and visibility. In the spirit of *kujichagulia* and *ujima*, those Afrocentric values that undergird our collective right to speak for ourselves and our responsibility to defend our community ourselves, participants in Black Twitter’s meta-network are showing the world what goes on inside the Black box (no pun intended) of our personal communities and thematic nodes as they exist in the real world. Now digitized, and able to cross multiple boundaries, the cultural conversations that we have participated in for so long in traditionally Black spaces, are simply taking place in a realm where everyone can see. These private-in-public conversations have many applications as indicators of ethnocentric news and values, as well as starting points for inquiry about the development of constructed spaces for Black-centered digital discourse.

Directions for further research

Questions that arise from reflecting upon the online phenomenon known as Black Twitter are of an interdisciplinary nature, and can be explored as inquiry into symbolic communication. Further study stemming from the *#PaulaBestDishes* and *#PaulaDeenTVShows* episodes might build upon Gates’ definition of the process of signifying, and advance Florini’s (2013) assertions about the truncated language, mixed metaphors, purposeful misspellings and other linguistic devices used in this form of textual online discourse. As a case study, a comparative analysis of how this hashtagged conversation was discussed by Black-specific media outlets might provide additional insights on the significance of using Black orality in Twitter-based conversations.

Another study could be situated in the literature on social movements. The Twitter users who participated in this conversation did not merely focus on the action of a single individual at the center of the case, they drew upon historical slurs and prejudicial language to ignite a conversation that served as the tipping point for the cancellation of multimillion dollar endorsement deals. A causal link must be established to support this observation, but there's a compelling observation in understanding that the individuals who took the time to come up with their own "dishes" and "TV shows" effectively used humor as a device to draw attention to the lingering economic power of a public figure with a bigoted point of view. In examining this, it would be interesting to attempt to link data from the trend to the point in time when Deen's primary sponsors announced the withdrawal of their endorsement deals. Establishment of such a link would effectively identify a successful digital grassroots boycott with dramatic outcomes.

The boycott theme is also at the center of the second episode, captured in the wake of the George Zimmerman murder trial. Here, researchers can clearly observe how the use of a hashtag by one group of Twitter users, combined with a petition created and shared by another, had a direct impact on a corporation's decision to drop a book contract with a juror involved in the case. In this case, there is concrete evidence of a hashtag's ability to serve as a vehicle transferring culturally symbolic messages from the online world to the real world. This is an episode that should be contextualized on a continuum of protest movements in the social media age. Scholars in mass communication might consider it alongside analysis of media coverage of movements including protests such as #MoralMondays and #NoH8. A scholar in information sciences might offer input on a technocultural reading of the hashtag as a cultural artifact online. Anthropological or sociological study of the hashtag as a protest

tool affecting economic and political change might further complement such work. Where hashtags associated with so-called Black Twitter are involved, the additional factor of race, particularly in light of the legacy of protest and social movements within Black communities in America, presents an area that is ripe for research. Finally, the area in which I am likely to extend my research on digital media use among outgroup populations centers on an emerging media ethic — who gets to define it, what are the boundaries, and where are the areas of conflict between technoculture, feminism and public use? This is an interesting problem I stumbled upon as I began to select tweets for use in this research.

Finally, there are some very specific questions about the development of digital-centric theory that must be raised. The theories drawn upon for these studies were each found to be inadequate in different ways for developing an understanding the intersection of how race, culture and communication function in the online world and relate *back* to the physical world. To date, mass communication theory has developed along the same timeline that mass media has developed, looking only one way in terms of its scope. Black Twitter, with its ability to push back against legacy media, has exposed a weakness in this approach to developing theory that fails to account for a digital-first perspective. Nowhere is this more evident than at the intersection of legal, racial, cultural and gender issues as they are experienced by digital content creators who find their work and their images used by legacy media producers without permission, even when permission isn't necessarily required by ethic or law.

The Ethics of Permission

“Tip: What you say may be viewed around the world instantly ” (Twitter, 2014).

That's one of the opening lines of Twitter's Privacy Policy, posted to the service's main web

page and easily identifiable for its users. The privacy policy details how Twitter data - particularly public tweets - are used, including access via Twitter's own API and third-party services. An additional section describes what Twitter was designed for, and how it is used:

Our Services are primarily designed to help you share information with the world. Most of the information you provide us is information you are asking us to make public. This includes not only the messages you tweet and the metadata provided with tweets, such as when you Tweeted, but also the lists you create, the people you follow, the tweets you mark as favorites or re-tweet, and many other bits of information that result from your use of the Services. Our default is almost always to make the information you provide public for as long as you do not delete it from Twitter, but we generally give you settings to make the information more private if you want. Your public information is broadly and instantly disseminated (Twitter, 2014).

The Terms of Service are a contractual agreement that users agree to abide by through registering for and using the site. The language provides several warnings about how others can see and access what is posted, but aren't specific on the use of Twitter data by third parties -- particularly other individual Twitter users. This gap presents an ethical quandary for several of my study's participants, who discussed seeing their ideas, conversations and other exchanges co-opted by others. The offenses range from re-tweeting without proper attribution (i.e., including the @membername in the re-tweet) or re-tweeting a modification of the tweet without acknowledging the change (often signified with a manual "MT" instead of the automatic re-tweeting designation generated by the service), to outright copying of a user's bio and/or avatar. But one of the most flagrant violations discussed by participants both in the interviews, and more widely, online, was the use of Twitter-based texts created by Black Twitter participants for works that exist off Twitter, such as articles published by major outlets such as BuzzFeed.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen was one hashtag that generated claims of proprietary rights from its creator and participants. After @Karnythia and some of her online allies called

out organizations such as Feministing and Jezebel for their use of the hashtag without consulting with its originator, I began to notice a number of conversations about the ethics of permission in use of publicly available Twitter data in reproduced works.

Incidentally, as I began to prepare my dissertation proposal, I violated an ethical boundary of ownership by assuming use of tweets that had passed through my timeline without first contacting their originators to obtain permission. The first conversations I had about what I came to consider “the ethics of permission” occurred on Dec. 7, 2013. The conversation centered around whether I needed to seek the permission of two users with public accounts — @Blackamazon and @chiefelk — to use some of their tweets in my dissertation defense. It lingered on for a while about how/why/when to ask a user before harvesting some of their tweets. Hours later, the question of permission when using publicly available data that is perceived to be the intellectual property of Twitter users was addressed by a professor at Michigan State University in a comment on the Storify document itself:

Meredith. You have permission to use the tweet after you correct the language above. I'm not one of your followers and wasn't at the time of the tweet. Not shade at all just a truth--the follower/followed aspect should be clear and put in proper digital time/place. (@jmjafx, 2013)

Hi @jmjafx: Correx is noted; thank you for your comments. I acknowledge that there is more at stake than the academic conversation you see above, however, at this point in my research, I leave those discussions to those who can better contextualize them. If you're interested, I'd love to interview you for the second round of my research to put this perspective in its proper context. (@meredithclark, 2013)

I think @Blackamazon discusses it best (among others) but I've also written about the politics of citation vs. academia aspect. I think there is more at stake to what you and your colleague end up discussing here than just what the academic rules (APA, MLA or otherwise) say. Including a Black feminist politics and digital praxis that gets lost when we deal in terms of academe--and leads to many hurt feels and unintentional gaffes. Happy to chat more, the post is here <http://diasporahypertext.com/2013/08/01/attribution-part-2-reflecting-on-the-politics->

of-citation/ ... There is a lot of history and a lot of data to assimilate. This is an important conversation you've storify'd on a subject that doesn't get discussed enough on the Ivory Tower side. Hopefully it will lead to even more discussion, accountability, and change. You are welcome to interview me but I'd suggest bigger fish before you head my way: @Blackamazon, @lfb27, @brownfemipower, @karnythia, @dstrugg, @so_treu, @laripley. And always happy to chat in less formal ways as well. All the best in your studies. (@jmjafx, 2013)

This conversation left me with many questions about how Black users of Twitter, particularly Black feminists, view ownership of their online work, down to the conversations within their personal networks. When a highly visible Twitter user with a public account is elevated to national and international prominence, what are the boundaries for accessing and using her work as part of scholarly research? This is of particular interest in light of my own experience with the mass media and use of my tweets and interview quotes in coverage of the Black Twitter phenomenon.

I must herein include a mea culpa for those Twitter users whose tweets are cited in this dissertation although they did not participate in my study. Their words are gathered from Twitter under the technology's terms of service, and I am indebted to them for this use.

The Participant Observer Researcher as Influencer

In my dual roles as a participant observer and researcher toward the close of this research, I found myself in the interesting position of watching and influencing the concept of Black Twitter gain salience in mass media coverage of the phenomenon while *I* contributed to its understanding through mass media interviews. I initially began this research after co-presenting on a #BlackTwitter session at South By Southwest Interactive in 2012, putting out calls for participants via Twitter, interviewing my consultants, building theory around the phenomenon, and occasionally engaging in conceptual conversations with both consultants and curious onlookers via Twitter.

This activity led to my selection as an expert source on the phenomenon, giving interviews to major mainstream news outlets including The Wall Street Journal (Kim, 2014), The Washington Post (McDonald, 2014), two syndicated National Public Radio programs (Here & Now, 2014; All Things Considered, 2014), and the Associated Press (Washington, 2014). Consequently, the phrase “Black Twitter” began to appear in more media coverage about how Blacks use Twitter for cultural conversation to form and maintain collective social identity, and protect that identity and community members through digital activism. In essence, I’d begun to influence the data I might have collected if not for the time constraints placed on my research. As a self-identifying member of Black Twitter, I was incidentally able to plead the cause of the group I’d chosen to study. It is an interesting end to Black Twitter’s impact as measured in column inches and broadcast mentions by the mainstream media, and in the lived experiences of its participants, myself included.

APPENDIX 1: CODING PROTOCOL

The Unit of Analysis

This media content analysis will analyze all news items in selected newspapers, broadcast transcripts, web sites, magazine articles and blogs (exhaustive list and search procedures are described below). The content analysis will focus on items that have an explicit or implicit in-group/out-group perspective of the phenomenon “Black Twitter.” For an item to be included in this sample, it must contain at least one phrase or sentence that refers to “Black Twitter,” or Twitter use among Blacks/African-Americans.

The content analysis uses a sample of news media published between 2010 and 2013, including texts selected from mainstream and niche publications. Keyword searches using the Boolean operators “Black Twitter” and “#BlackTwitter” of four electronic databases:

America’s News, Lexis Nexis News, Alt-Press Watch and Ethnic News Watch, will be used to search for results in the top 10 U.S. newspapers ranked according to daily print and digital circulation by the Alliance for Audited Media (Lulofs, 2013). As of March 2013, these newspapers, listed in order of print circulation size beginning with the largest circulation, include: *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Post*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Daily News*, *Newsday* and *The Denver Post*. The newspapers, listed in order of digital circulation size beginning with the largest circulation include: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *The New York Post*, *The Denver Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Newark Star-Ledger*, *The New York Daily News*, *Newsday* and *The Houston Chronicle*.

Coding Sheet

Coder No.

Item No.

Today's date:

Headline:

Subhead (if any):

Author(s) name(s)/Byline:

Publication:

Publication date:

1. What is the document's source type? Circle one of the following:

1= Newspaper

2= Broadcast/news transcript

3= Web Publication

4= Web blog

5= Other

6 = None

7 = Cannot be determined

2. What is the document type? Circle one of the following:

1 = news

2 = commentary/opinion/editorial

3 = article

4 = feature

5 = general information

7 = review

8 = other

9 = blurb (fewer than 200 words)

10 = cannot be determined

3. How many authors are there? Circle one of the following:

1 = Single author/contributor

2 = Two or more authors/contributors

3 = Anonymous

4 = No author credited

4. What is the publication type? Circle one of the following:

1 = Mainstream publication (general interest)

2 = Niche publication (mission, description or content reflects a target audience)

3 = Cannot be determined

5. Does the quoted material make an explicit reference to the term "digital divide"? Please indicate whether the term "digital divide" is used, and highlight the reference(s) on the document, annotating it with the code "QEDD"

6. Does the quoted material make an implicit reference to the term "digital divide"? If yes, highlight the reference(s) on the document, annotating it with the code "QIDD."

7. How does the quoted material describe the number of blacks who are on Twitter? Where appropriate, please highlight the description of the number of blacks on Twitter in the document, annotating each one with the code, "QBoT."

8. Does the quoted material describe Twitter use among other racial or ethnic groups? If so, please highlight the reference(s) on the document annotating it with the code "QoGoT.

9. Does the quoted material explicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss African-Americans/blacks' Twitter use? (Material must contain the phrase: "the black community,"/"black communities.") If so, please highlight each reference on the document, annotating it with "QEBSoC.

10. Does the quoted material implicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss African-Americans/blacks' Twitter use? (Material should contain phrases such as: "groups," or "black users" or collective nouns such as "African-Americans" in reference to Twitter use among blacks) If so, please highlight each reference on the document, annotating it with "QIBSoC."

11. Does the quoted material explicitly use to a sense of community frame to discuss Twitter use among other racial/ethnic groups' Twitter use? (Material must contain phrases such as "the Asian community"/"the Latino community.")

12. Does the quoted material implicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss Twitter use among other racial/ethnic groups' Twitter use? (Material should contain phrases such as "Asians"/"Latino users.")

Does the item explicitly refer to "Black Twitter" in the quoted material of the body copy?

13. If yes, please highlight each reference on the document, annotating it with "EQBT. Does the item implicitly refer to the idea of "Black Twitter" in the quoted material of the body copy? (i.e., How blacks use Twitter/blacks' Twitter use)

14. If yes, please highlight each reference on the document, annotating it with "IQBT."

15. How many times does the quoted material mention the phrase "Black Twitter, including in the headline and subhead"?

16. Who is speaking in the quoted material about blacks' use of/presence on Twitter? Please highlight each name, title and/or Twitter handle on the document, and annotate with the code "QSpeaker."

17. Please complete this step for each speaker who discusses blacks use of/presence on Twitter in the text using "QSpeaker1" for the first speaker, and "QSpeaker2," etc. for additional speakers. You may code each speaker in more than one category.

Does the nonquoted material make an explicit reference to the term "digital divide"?

18. Please indicate whether the term "digital divide" is used, and highlight the reference(s) on the document, annotating it with the code "NQEDD."

19. Does the nonquoted material make an implicit reference to the digital divide? Please indicate whether the item includes a reference(s) to rates of Internet use and/or Internet access among blacks/African-Americans.
20. Does the nonquoted material the item describe the number of blacks who are on Twitter?
22. Does the nonquoted material describe Twitter use among other racial or ethnic groups?
23. Does the author, in nonquoted material, explicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss blacks'/African-Americans' Twitter use (Text uses the phrase "the black community"/"black communities").
24. Does the author, in nonquoted material, implicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss blacks'/African-Americans' Twitter use (Coders should indicate yes for the presence of the words and phrases such as "groups," "black users" and collective nouns such as "African-Americans" or "blacks" in reference to Twitter use.
25. Does the author, in nonquoted material, explicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss other ethnic/racial groups Twitter use. Text uses the phrase the Latino/Latina community, the Asian community.
26. Does the author, in nonquoted material, implicitly refer to a sense of community frame to discuss other ethnic/racial groups Twitter use? Material uses the phrase "Latinos"/"Asians."
27. Does the item make an explicit reference to the phrase "Black Twitter" in the nonquoted material of the body copy?
28. How many times does the nonquoted material mention the phrase "Black Twitter," including the main headline and subhead?
29. Does the item reference the creation of a blackspecific hashtag (i.e., the hashtagged phrase includes the word "black")?
30. Does the item reference the creation of a nonblack, racespecific hashtag (i.e., the hashtagged phrase includes the word "white")?
31. Does the item reference the creation of a specific hashtag that does not refer to race?

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW MAP

This map will guide the interview discussion, however, because the interviews are semi-structured, question order and wording may vary according to participant response. Questions will be similar to those provided.

Social media use

How often do you use social media?

What social media do you use?

How did you first decide to sign up for a Twitter account?

I see your Twitter account was created on (give date). What can you tell me about how you've used your account since then?

Practice

I'd like to review Twitter use for this account with you.

What part of the day do you first log on to Twitter?

Where do you Tweet from (desktop, laptop, smartphone)?

What are your physical surroundings like most of the time you are tweeting (at work, at home, with others)?

Do you read your timeline first, or do you immediately begin posting tweets?

Can you walk me through your timeline from today and tell me about the tweets you posted?

When you tweet, who do you see yourself tweeting for?

Tell me about some of the people you converse with on Twitter.

Have you ever participated in a hash-tagged conversation?

What was the hashtag?

What was the topic of conversation?

Who else participated in the conversation?

Network

Can you tell me a little about what encouraged you to follow: (name up to three accounts that the individual's account has a reciprocal follower/following relationship with, allow respondent to speak about each one).

How would you describe the relationship you have with your followers?

Have you ever met any of the people you've met on Twitter in real life?

How did you go about making a connection with these followers?

How has your relationship changed since you've met?

How does your relationship with followers you previously knew offline differ from those you've met via Twitter?

What makes you re-tweet (RT) another person's tweet(s)? (Give examples, ask respondent to explain)

What does it mean to you when you RT another person's tweets and add your own comments?

Black Twitter

What comes to mind when someone mentions "Black Twitter"?

Does your reaction differ depending on the person or entity who mentions Black Twitter? For instance, if Black Twitter is mentioned on an online news site like CNN, is that different than it being mentioned on a site like TheRoot.com?

When did you first become aware of something called Black Twitter?

How would you explain Black Twitter to a person who has never heard of it?

Who is a part of Black Twitter? Do you consider yourself a part of Black Twitter? Why or why not?

How does Black Twitter work?

How would a person who is not a part of Black Twitter know it when they see it?

How does a person become a part of/participate in Black Twitter?

Tell me about some of the topics you've seen Black Twitter discuss.

What's the last hashtagged conversation you remember being discussed by Black Twitter?

How did that conversation begin?

How would you say Black Twitter made the conversation its own (i.e., made the conversation different than what was trending that day or being reported in the news)?

What would you say is important to Black Twitter?

Name three themes that you believe are common in Black Twitter discussions.

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