

Black Twitter: Building Connection through Cultural Conversation

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There's power in these Black Twitter streets...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. Someone once told me, "your greatest resources in life are people," and that's especially true of 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)

Thanks to the curiosity and extended gaze of mainstream mass media producers, Black Twitter has been definitively framed for its ability to "get things done" through online conversation. Black Twitter forms its own hashtag public through an ongoing process of self- and group-identity maintenance, using hashtagged tweets to set boundaries of inclusion and articulate its values. These users, stand-outs among the 26% of all African Americans who use the Internet, have often been characterized as a digital mob. Using online messaging to draw attention to news of interest to Black communities in the United States, these users participate in what Brock (2013, p. 529) describes as "cultural conversation" — engaging in the banal, chatting about television shows, and notably, lampooning and lambasting offenders. Their communicative acts contribute to an ever-evolving sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Via everyday conversation and the use of hashtags as communication performance, these communicators act and react with

one another rather than with an imagined audience, as scholars from Anderson (1986) to Marwick & boyd (2010) have previously described.

Community Through Conversation

The use of so-called “Blacktags,” culturally resonant language and phrases combined with hashtags, was cited by academics as one of the differences between Black and non-Black Twitter users. Brendan Meeder, a Ph.D. student at Carnegie Mellon who researched the spread of trends via social networking, explained how these hashtags became so popular (Manjoo, 2010). Meeder explained that close offline relationships and a certain density contribute to the trending ability of 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).

The initial wave of scholarly inquiry into African Americans’ Twitter use centered on the use of the hashtag and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to express a degree of commonality (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Cantey & Robinson, Chapter 16, this volume). Historically, this work is linked to Banks’s (2005) analysis of how members use Black orality (spoken AAVE) in their written communication on social forums including the website BlackPlanet. Banks (2005) described how BlackPlanet users drew upon AAVE in their online exchanges, encapsulating the qualities of the spoken word in written form. Byrne confirmed these findings: “[T]hey show how participants can use these traditional communication patterns as markers of cultural and racial authenticity” (Byrne, 2008, p. 320). Yet previous studies on so-called Black Twitter lacked two perspectives: (1) media reports of minority use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology and (2) explanation of the phenomenon of “Black Twitter” from the perspective of its contributors. Recognizing Baym’s (2006) exhortation that critical cyberculture studies require the researcher to interview communicators in order to make claims about online phenomena, this chapter draws on interview data from 36 research participants to describe Black Twitter’s three-level structure, its functions, and its observable impact in social media and news media environments.

The lived experiences of Black Twitter participants contribute to the formation of a self-selecting, constantly shifting, web-based community of Black Internet users. Usually pegged as an outgroup, these communicators use culturally based language, phrases, and references to organize and elevate their group status (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1972, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Their shared ethnic and cultural background serves as the foundation for what Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) refer to as personal communities. The connections, built around

specific topics of interest that participants repeatedly return to within what Jones (1997) called a virtual settlement, create thematic nodes. As these two levels of community connect through the tweeting and retweeting of hashtagged messages that resonate with Black users, the meta-network of Black Twitter as a whole emerges. Where boundaries of class, education, gender, and geography might otherwise stratify Twitter's Black users, the use of culturally resonant hashtags affords them the opportunity to form multilevel networks online, developing a sense of online community (Blanchard, 2007). Black Twitter as a hashtag public is formed through the uniting of individuals who share some of the interest and characteristics reflective of each participant's physical and virtual identities. As cultural artifacts, the hashtags move through Black Twitter's three levels of connection through a six-stage process of self-selection, identification, performance, affirmation, reaffirmation, and vindication. Based on participant interviews, I've selected two hashtag episodes that my consultants used to describe how Black Twitter's structure and function has contributed to its existence as a phenomenon of cultural communication.

These hashtag conversations are iterative examples of how Black Twitter's structure, grouped into personal communities and interconnected thematic nodes, is used to mobilize and create conversation topics that trend via hashtags. **#PaulasBestDishes**, a hashtag that trended in the wake of the celebrity chef being sued for workplace bigotry, and **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen**, a hashtag created by Black feminist Mikki Kendall, are two watershed examples of Black Twitter's ability to interrupt mainstream media narratives about Black life online.

#PAULASBESTDISHES: DIGITAL EVIDENCE OF COLLECTIVE SOCIAL IDENTITY MAINTENANCE WORK

One of the first trending topics created by Black Twitter that gathered media 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. As part of the in-group dialogue, the base phrases used in tweets hashtagged with **#PaulasBestDishes** consisted of references to Southern food culture and Jim Crow that made sense to other Blacks who had familiarity with the vocabularies in both their original and intended meanings. One example:

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

@Rebel_Salute's tweet was retweeted by two Black media elites on Twitter: @KidFury (who at the time had more than 70,000 followers) and @Crissles (more than 35,000 followers), hosts of a weekly podcast called *The Read*.

By retweeting @Rebel_Salute's satirical take on the situation, the pair's follower counts gave outsized amplification of the message. Their retweets were indicative of two stages of the process: selection, in that they recognize this particular user, and affirmation, in that they retweet her message to share it with their thousands of followers, along with 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 retweet was intentional, as were his keyboard strikes. @Crissles's addition to her retweet was feigned shock. Ultimately, these tweets provided a signal boost to members of the duo's personal communities, which included clusters of other digital media "high centers" who also have tens of thousands of followers (Cha, Benevenuto, Haddadi, & Gummadi, 2012; Wu, Hoffman, Mason, & Watts, 2011). The retweets exponentially echoed the message to dozens, if not hundreds, of thematic nodes and personal communities. All at once, it became an artifact of information and humor, as well as a symbol for others to add their own input. The results of tweeting and retweeting such messages were reflected in a matter of minutes:

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

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

Procedures for Promoting Community Connectivity

These follow-up tweets display several of the six 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 through original contributions or retweets, are mostly self-selecting users who are concerned with an issue affecting Black communities. 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 with the hashtag to share tweets with their own personal communities and thematic nodes, and commenting on tweets they find particularly incisive or funny, as @Crissles did with a simple "Oh my God," in front of retweeted 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 the message with what might otherwise be an untapped audience

for the tweet's creator. By commenting, particularly favorably, other users affirm that they have received the original communicator's message, and, with the text of their own comments, either accept it or challenge it. As participants tweeted their contributions to the conversation and retweeted messages emblazoned with the tag, the six-stage process of Being Black Twitter helped form a meta-network of communicators linked by the **#PaulasBestDishes** hashtag. Their connections serve several roles in solidifying Black Twitter as a hashtag public—a phenomenon that has the ability to influence the news day's topic of conversation.

Reshaping an In-group Identity

One participant, @RLM_3, made observations of Black Twitter that 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; and the effective strategy of exposing and publicly shaming the hegemonic in-group's competing social construct of dominance.

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)

Such action in the digital space has proven difficult for Black Twitter's out-group to process. For outsiders who have been historically absent or outside the real-world centers of Black cultural conversation, being thrust into the dynamic without a buffer of social courtesy can create a sense of unease. The news media, as @RLM_3 noted, brings this online friction to the attention of a wider audience. The news media's ability to characterize individuals and groups creates communication shortcuts and stereotypes that contribute to negative framing of the phenomenon as it unfolds (Hall, 2003). If the episodes are not interpreted in a culturally competent manner, or if they are solely interpreted through the dominant group's cultural worldview, the resulting texts will lack the context necessary to decode the interactions and their significance to the Black experience, both digitally and in the physical world.

When Black Twitter Strikes

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.

The resulting news coverage is an example of how Black Twitter found vindication after its participants employed the hashtag in a defensive strategy against racism. The creation of a message—all of the shaming tweets hashtagged **#PaulasBestDishes**—became significant enough to warrant news coverage. An additional example of Black Twitter reaching the vindication stage was 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** began to trend, Deen issued three public apologies via personal video messages that were posted to her own website.

This six-stage process of out-group elevation seen in the Paula Deen case demonstrates how Black Twitter users employ humor within their hashtagged messages as an identity-maintenance technique. Participants in that hashtag conversation simultaneously held up some clear examples of how Blacks in the U.S. have been marginalized and discriminated against and joked with others who recognized the symbolism. Participants affirmed the messages being sent in the satiric tweets by retweeting and responding to them, reinforcing the original communicator’s message and signaling their company in publicly shaming such micro-aggressions and racial hostility through creative, humorous means. That the conversations were discussed among my consultants, such as @sherial and her mother, who does not use Twitter, and @RLM_3 and his fellow students at a Midwestern university is another part of the process—affirmation that this interaction and conversation is not just relevant in the virtual realm, but also a part of the community’s conversations in the physical world as well.

Finally, the participants who contributed to the hashtag had their sentiments vindicated by the mass media, which 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 participants who contributed to the trend, the mass media were able to frame the story for wider audiences, making the central issue of humor as a coping mechanism for dealing with bigotry in the workplace 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.

Although this chapter does not establish a causal link between the trends **#PaulasBestDishes** and **#PaulaDeenTVshows** and Deen losing both her cable-network contract and 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 and real worlds. Through the creation, sharing, and retweeting 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 **@BWBC** conference 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 (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), 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 hashtag **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen**.

#SOLIDARITYISFORWHITEWOMEN: HASHTAG USE AS SYMBOLIC RESISTANCE

The second episode examined in this chapter is linked to the first by the theme of digital, socially networked resistance to racism. **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** operated on the same assumptions that unite so many participants in Black Twitter—a shared experience that includes a historical, systematic marginalization. However, participation in this conversation reached far beyond Black communities in the United States, both online and in the physical world (Guardian, 2013). Its success can be anecdotally linked to connections made within thematic nodes between personal communities of feminists and their allies.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen was created as a response to an ongoing online and offline interaction between Hugo Schwyzer, a White professor, author, and self-proclaimed "male feminist," and several feminists of color, including **@Blackamazon**, who served as one of my consultants.

In August 2013, retweets from Schwyzer's very public, Twitter-centric meltdown¹ began circulating within feminist circles online, where they eventually attracted the attention of mainstream media outlets (*International Business Times*, 2013). As feminists of color retweeted and commented on Schwyzer's Twitter antics, **@Karnythia** and **@Blackamazon** conversed about the deafening silence—in cyberspace and the physical world—of White feminists who had ignored or tried to explain away Schwyzer's self-described "awful" behavior when it was directed toward **@Blackamazon** and other critics. As the tales of his misdeeds unfolded and were later catalogued in blogs and alternative media, **@Blackamazon** wondered

aloud whether and 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 vilified women of color, specifically Black women:

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

The hashtag took off as women around the world used it to discuss slights perpetrated by White feminists against feminists of color. The tweets were not limited to mentions by Black women or women of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American descents. 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:

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

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

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

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

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

As a hashtag, **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** has had some of the strongest offline transference with respect to conversation topics originating with or being linked to Black Twitter. In the weeks and months after the hashtag appeared, it was covered by mainstream media and adopted by existing social communities as shorthand for discussion of the exclusion of women of color within feminist circles. **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** is a summation of Patricia Hill Collins's description of Black feminism: a demonstration of Black women's emerging power as agents of knowledge (Collins, 1990). Participants in the hashtagged conversation offered personal examples of their experiences being marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, gender, abilities, etc. Some examples include:

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

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

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

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

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen calls Hillary the first viable women’s candidate even though Shirley was the first and only nominee. (@favstar_pop, 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, connecting them 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, 1990, p. 221). 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.

In this instance, @Karnythia acknowledged how 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 chose 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. It evoked a venerated form of protest—the threat of bad publicity—all of which drew greater attention

and negative press for the silent majority of feminists complicit in the marginalization of feminists of color.

As a digital artifact that represents some of Black Twitter's boundaries, the **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** hashtag became a symbol that was easily shared between online and physical settings 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.

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen became the inspiration for two similar hashtags that would follow in later months: **#BlackPowerIsForBlackMen** and **#NotYourAsianSidekick**, which were designed to highlight oppression by Black men (many of whom took to Twitter to bash Black women around the **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** 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 or 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 offline events and media coverage of **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** point to an interesting phenomenon: Black Twitter's participants becoming gatekeepers for information, setting an agenda for mainstream media publications and their consumers. The days, weeks, and months after **#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen** began to trend, not only was it covered by digital and legacy mainstream and niche media outlets but so was each step of its aftermath. Years later, this hashtag is often cited in discussions about hashtag activism. It has become a widely recognized 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 retweets—to draw attention to a particular cause.

MAINTAINING BLACK TWITTER'S PUBLIC ORDER

Black Twitter's actions, modeled in episodes characterized by satire, petition, and shaming, have demonstrated that the Black digital presence is one that demands recognition by other users and the mainstream news 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 retweets.

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. 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. The communicative acts of these interlinked communities have prompted real-world consequences and lead 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; Black bloggers in a linked network had smaller success in earlier years (Pole, 2007). 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.

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. Additional studies could be situated in the literature on social movements. Further study stemming might build upon Gates's 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. Finally, as hashtags are relied upon to organize social movements both online and in the physical world, additional studies of Black Twitter will contribute to the refinement of this framework. This framework is introduced with the intention of including the narratives of individuals within the community under study as a collaborative effort to create meaningful and accurate depictions of a social-media public in the literature.

NOTE

1. Schwyzer tweeted "now you get the truth" in ongoing Twitter posts about his life and career on July 29 and 30. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/alisonvingiano/why-did-controversial-feminist-hugo-schwzyer-have-a-twitter#.lcn2K1nQV>

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