

DOIN' IT FOR THE CULTURE:
DEFINING BLACKNESS, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY ON BLACK TWITTER

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To the community of Black scholars who have come before me and who will come after me, I see you. Thank you for affirming me and my work.

To my family members and close friends who passed on into eternity with the heavenly Father during this journey, I carry each of you with me. I love you and miss you.

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Katrina Marie Overby

DOIN' IT FOR THE CULTURE:

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This dissertation broadly explores the intersections and tensions among race, social media usage, identity, and culture. More specifically, its purpose is to examine how Black Twitter users interact on Twitter through the portals of three trending hashtags from 2015: #BlackExperience, #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies, and #AskRachel. The hashtags #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies sparked conversations about the lived racial experience of Black people, racism, food, culture, Black pride and Black family holiday traditions. The hashtag #AskRachel started a robust conversation about what constitutes Blackness and Black culture in response to the Rachel Dolezal story.

The interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks and relevant literature guided the methodological approaches and interpretation of the tweets analyzed using textual analysis and the focus group interview responses conducted with 11 Black undergraduate and graduate students at a midwestern PWI. This dissertation's findings extend previous research on Black Twitter that argues hashtags and signifyin' are gatekeeping strategies to protect Black cultural identity. Additionally, this dissertation reveals Black Twitter plays an imperative role in cultivating narratives about Black identity and culture for a subset of Black people on social media and that participation in conversations about Black culture and Black identity works to produce a validation of Black racial authenticity for its users.

This dissertation is situated within the current environment of citizens using social media to foster civic and political engagement, dialogue, and debate over controversies and issues that matter to them. Thus, the implications of this dissertation suggest Black Twitter plays a critical role in creating a space for racial formation, identity construction, community building, cultural awareness and resistance, and racial dialogue. Even more so, the need and desire for Black spaces in the digital era surpasses earlier models of geographically-rooted local communities and is now being funneled through a range of social media to enable community formation across state and even national borders. The contributions of this dissertation could be situated within research on social media and race, Black Twitter, Black feminist thought and racial formation.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Chapter I: Introduction and Methodology

In June 2015, an investigative reporter with a local Idaho newspaper, the *Coeur d'Alene Press*, reported a startling story about a White woman passing as Black (“Black Like Me,” 2015). The former president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington and professor in the Africana Studies Program at Eastern Washington University, Rachel Dolezal, not only pretended to be Black among colleges, associates, and friends, but fabricated facts about her racial and ethnic identity on job applications. Adding to the shock of this reality, Dolezal’s parents, Lawrence and Ruthanne Dolezal, admitted to the local Spokane, Washington newspaper, *Spokesman-Review*, and nationally to CNN news, that their biological daughter was in fact White. They expressed their concerns after Dolezal made several reports about being the victim of multiple hate crimes. Dolezal, a civil rights leader, artist, teacher, ethnic hairstylist, and mother, told major news outlets that she did not believe she was deceiving anyone, but that she simply identified as Black. In a June 16, 2015 exclusive interview with Matt Lauer on NBC’s the TODAY Show, when asked, “Are you an African-American woman?” Ms. Dolezal swiftly replied, “I identify as Black.” In these reports and resulting interviews Ms. Dolezal and her parents created a firestorm of controversy around race, Blackness, the Black lived experience, racial formation and identity construction. Additionally, many commenters liken her actions, purposely darkened skin complexion, and curly afro-like hair to putting on Blackface, (the practice of non-Blacks mocking Black people through physical features such as skin, hair, clothing, language and culture). Inevitably, this left everyone wondering: Who is Rachel?

The controversy over Ms. Dolezal’s racial identity sparked lively debates within various media spaces and forums, including Twitter. The hashtag #AskRachel was subsequently created to negotiate what constitutes Blackness amongst Black users on Twitter. Hashtags (“#”) are used

on Twitter and other social media sites to identify words or phrases related to a specific topic. The hashtag #AskRachel became a top popular topic of conversation on Twitter, what is also known as a Trending Topic. Though unique in the way the conversation began, the hashtag #AskRachel illustrates the way Black users are utilizing Twitter to create and sustain conversations that address Blackness, Black culture, politics, news and entertainment through the use of hashtags. Reactions and resulting dialogue have created a subculture on Twitter that is the focus of this dissertation: Black Twitter.

Statement of Purpose and Interest

Broadly, this study explores the intersections and tensions among race, social media usage, identity, and culture. More specifically, its purpose is to examine how Black Twitter users interact on Twitter through the portals of three trending hashtags from 2015: #BlackExperience, #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies, and #AskRachel. The hashtags #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies sparked conversations about the lived racial experience of Black people, racism, food, culture, Black pride and Black family holiday traditions. The hashtag #AskRachel started a robust conversation about what constitutes Blackness and Black culture in response to the Rachel Dolezal story.

Discussions centered on the ethos of Black culture have created a tangible digital dialogue and debate about the shared, lived experiences of Black people among its Black Twitter users. The hashtag #AskRachel triggered interest in exploring the broader topic of Black Twitter and Black Twitter usage. Conversations similar to #AskRachel begin on Twitter and lead to multiple post-conversations exploding across other social spaces, both online and offline. Conversations increased in bars, restaurants, sporting events, churches, barbershops and beauty salons. Now more than ever before, the accessibility and vast reach of media sites like Twitter

facilitate diverse, public and global conversations on race, gender, class and sexuality, especially for minority users.

This study is two-fold. First, textual analysis was executed to read and analyze imbedded messages in tweets and images using the hashtags #BlackExperience, #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies and #AskRachel. Second, this study uses focus group analysis to understand how Black undergraduate and graduate students use and respond to Black Twitter. One of the major goals of this study is to make a significant contribution to the literature that examines how Black people use social media to construct Blackness, individual and collective identities and a distinct online culture. It is important to situate this study within the current environment of citizens using social media to foster civic and political engagement, dialogue, and debate over controversies and issues that matter to them.

Interest in this topic began after constantly sharing several screenshots of tweets with friends and family via social networking sites, including Facebook, Instagram, and GroupMe. While sharing these insights, it was discovered that hashtags associated with the tweets were often used to initiate and engage in the conversations and was followed by sharing opinions and feelings. For the most part, the tweets shared humorously (through language and/or imagery) argued and pushed back against racist and demeaning representations and narratives from mainstream national news and entertainment networks, such as the following trending hashtags: #CNNBeLike, #ABCReports, #OscarsSoWhite, and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. At the time, the tweets were not viewed first on the Twitter site by the researcher (late adopter to Twitter), but an understanding of *who* they were created by and for was established: Black Twitter.

Black Twitter was often brought up during discussion segments of invited presentations the researcher conducted on social media usage and perception to Black undergraduate students,

cementing the interest in researching previous literature on the topic. After further research and exploration of the topic, an abstract for a presentation on Black Twitter was submitted to The African American and African Diaspora Studies Graduate Society's annual Herman C. Hudson Symposium in spring 2016 with a colleague and mentee. Consequently, an invitation was extended and accepted to present in spring 2017 on "Black Twitter as a form of resistance" and to present again in 2018 on "Black Twitter and colorism." From these presentations and meaningful discussions, a curiosity and mission to examine Black Twitter and how it functions as a space of cultural creation, racial formation, identity construction and resistance blossomed into this current dissertation study.

Statement of Problem

Reports from PEW Research Center from 2014 to 2018 indicate social media outlets have played a key role in generating a majority of the conversations about race that are held on a national level. An August 16, 2015 report from the Pew Research Center examined how social media sites have provided new spaces for national conversations on race and inequality and that Black Twitter has been credited with helping these issues to gain national attention (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Zooming in on the demographics of *who* is talking about race, the report further explains that, "Among black social media users, 28% say most or some of what they post is about race or race relations; 8% of whites say the same. On the other hand, roughly two-thirds (67%) of whites who use social media say that none of things they post or share pertain to race" (p.1). The article claimed one reason for this dissimilarity in conversations on social media about race amongst whites and Blacks is due to current events that have focused on race and racial discrimination. According to the same report, statistics show that between January 1, 2015 and March 31, 2016 every six-in-ten tweets about race, 60 percent, were related to a current event

(Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). #AskRachel is one of many hashtags that have been created to critique a current social issue – this hashtag helped ordinary citizens launch a counter-discourse on Black Twitter.

Although several social media sites have similar software functions, such as the use of hashtags, the ways in which these functions connect users and content can vary drastically depending on the site, creating different experiences for its users. A significant reason for exploring Twitter as a means of examining Black social media communicative practices is rooted in Twitter's unique technological affordances related to the use of hashtags and follower/followee relationships. As Schmidt (2014) explained:

Because hashtags are made searchable by the interface, they connect tweets from users who have no preexisting follower/followee relationship. Hashtags are unmoderated, so any user can introduce and use them, giving rise to a wide and uncontrolled variety of hashtags. This results in possible ambiguities in meaning and spelling, but processes of suggestion, imitation, and learning, as well as Twitter's "trending topic" functionality promote a shared use of certain hashtags for current events, cultural expression, or engagement in ongoing conversations (p. 6).

With this in mind, the Black community uses hashtags and trending topics on Twitter to construct multiple identities and shared meanings and Twitter has become a social media tool the black community uses to communicate opinions, news and cultural, and individual identities (Pruitt, 2015). A January 6, 2014 report from Pew Research Center explains that Whites (87%) use the Internet at an overall higher rate than Blacks (80%) (Smith, 2014). Conversely, a February 3, 2015 Pew Research article stated that there are differences in social media site preferences based on race, stating that 28% of Twitter users were equally Black and Hispanic while 20% were White. Though Whites use the Internet at a larger overall percentage, Blacks and Hispanics use Twitter at a higher rate than their White counterparts. A recent report from Pew Research Center titled "Public Attitudes Toward Political Engagement on Social Media,"

suggested that although roughly half of American users of social media have engaged in some form of political and/or civic engagement, Blacks and Hispanics state that social media sites are personally essential for them to express their political views and find like-minded individuals (Anderson et al., 2018). The rise in the usage of Twitter amongst the Black community, which has seemingly risen over the past few years, needs to be explored further in terms of how the Black community constructs and negotiates their identities online.

The intersection of race and social media usage has not yet attracted sufficient academic attention. Florini (2013) argued, “Digital media studies often erase users of color, and the dynamics of race and racial identity online.” Social media have become the vehicle in which opinions and ideas are expressed rapidly despite physical geographical limitations. Specifically, there is limited research on how Blacks create, influence, and counter-narrate conversations about race, identity, and current social issues. Communication studies rarely examine how race influences the contours of online discourse (Brock, 201). Additionally, Pruitt (2015) argued, “It is impossible to ignore the importance of social media when asking questions about how the black community constructs and maintains identity in the 21st century (p. 1).” Thus, there is a great need for scholars to advance our understanding of how Black users influence and create trending conversations on social media platforms like Twitter and Black Twitter.

Black Twitter has offered a space for producing and sharing Black cultural discourse and counter-narratives to mainstream news outlets and sources of information. The Black community uses hashtags and trending topics on Twitter to construct multiple identities and shared meanings. Black Americans have the ability to create and tell their own stories and narratives with such immediacy at a time when progressive discourse on race is generating a backlash. Black Twitter now serves as the “watchdog” to mainstream media who at their inception, were

established to be the “watchdog” of the government and to provide citizens with unbiased news and information. However, it is understood that mainstream media are often tools of the government and various other systems of power that create, perpetuate, and sustain self-serving narratives and representations for their own gains, benefits, and economic pursuits. Black Twitter provides a cultural outlet for the Black participants that use this platform. Marginalized voices of the Black community have the opportunity to become voices of authority in the stories shared, giving credibility to lived experiences being circulated in this ubiquitous digital social media space. Hence, as outlined in the next section, there are two main justifications for advancing research on this topic.

Significance of Study

This study makes several recommendations that advance the topic of race and social media usage. First, it is recommended that communications, media and cultural scholars should further explore how race is constructed and defined on social media. Specifically, they should investigate Twitter as a tangible cultural media outlet. Tweets and hashtags create online artifacts that mediate cultural discourse and cultural practices (Brock, 2012). As Black Twitter shows us, tweets are now a part of the material culture of Black history, tangible digital archive of Black life. The performativity of race online illustrates that users do not simply engage in social media in a passive and disconnected manner. Users actively acknowledge who they are as cultural beings, while bringing their multiple identities, both physical and non-physical, into exchanges with others online. Broadly speaking, advancing research on race and social media may be beneficial for future scholars exploring additional cultural identities of social media users.

Second, Black Twitter is specifically an undervalued online public community, and it is understudied due to a lack of sufficient research that has examined its relevance and use. As of

the writing of this study, it is discouraging to report that there are less than 20 published peer-reviewed articles that focus on Black Twitter, yet there are several news articles and blogs that discuss the scope and significance of this online forum. More of the ways in which minority groups use social media is quite urgent and necessary. Research that focuses on Black Twitter offers insight to the ways in which Blacks construct and discuss Blackness, culture, lived experience, and identity in a public space. These conversations push back against an assumed majority white social space and white mainstream narratives of Black people and Black life. Brock (2012) argued, “Like other Black online activities, Black Twitter would have been considered ‘niche’ without intervention of the hashtag/trending topic. These two features brought the activities of tech literate Blacks to mainstream attention, contravening popular conceptions of Black capitulation to the digital divide” (p. 530). Black Twitter’s dominance over Twitter discourse at times has went against the idea that white users dominate the Internet (Brock, 2012). Thus, notions of a “digital divide” have shifted instead to concepts of digital access and influence. This ever-evolving shift in information access and identity construction for Black users on Twitter is deserving of examination.

Research Questions

As a result of various academic presentations, conversations with colleagues and friends, and subsequent information and literature found, three broad research questions were formed, which will be reintroduced in Chapter 2 with sub-questions:

1. What are some of the primary concerns and issues regarding the Black racial experience that have surfaced within the cultural space of Black Twitter?
2. What kinds of issues and meanings about the Black racial experience and culture did the hashtag #AskRachel provoke?

3. What opinions and responses do undergraduate and graduate students express about the space Black Twitter and the hashtag #AskRachel?

Methodology

The purpose of this section is to describe the research methodology applied to this study that investigates the proposed research questions regarding Black Twitter, racial experience and Black culture. The methodological approaches utilized in this dissertation allowed for a deeper understanding of how Black Twitter functioned as a space to discuss and create knowledge about the Black lived experience and identity formation and construction amongst its various users. The applicability of textual analysis and focus groups for this dissertation are discussed in depth in this section. Moreover, the research design, study participants, coding and analysis procedure, ethical concerns and limitations are the primary components of this section.

This dissertation utilized a mixed methods approach, incorporating two qualitative methodological approaches: textual analysis and focus groups. This study achieved triangulation by using these two different techniques to collect, organize and analyze the data (McMurray, 2004). Triangulation combines several “lines of sight” to obtain a more complete means of verifying symbols and theoretical concepts, thus providing a better picture of reality (Berg, 1998, p.4). Additionally, a brief quantitative component is provided in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 that laid out the big picture with basic numeric counting of the data used to create themes in the analysis. Conversely, it is not the goal of this dissertation to account for statistical significance, however, a numerical representation added context and helped identify some preliminary patterns in the findings.

Further, the philosophical assumption, or worldview, that influences your study should be identified (Creswell, 2009). This study aligns more with the pragmatic worldview because

pragmatism allows the research to have a “freedom of choice” in incorporating: both qualitative (constructionist) and quantitative (positivist) assumptions, methodological approaches and techniques, data collection and analysis, and worldviews (Creswell, 2009). Pragmatism is also an approach mostly associated with research studies that use mixed methods.

Creswell (2009) identified six types of mixed methods strategies and this study is closely aligned with the sequential transformative strategy. This strategy applies to research that is guided by theoretical perspectives and has two phases (both phases can be either qualitative or quantitative), in which the second phase builds upon the previous phase (s). However, in this study, three phases of analysis were selected where **Phase 1** (textual analysis of two hashtags) and **Phase 2** (textual analysis of a third hashtag) informed **Phase 3** (focus group). Creswell (2009) explained, “By using two phases, a sequential transformative researcher may be able to give voice to diverse perspectives, to better advocate for participants, or to better understand a phenomenon or process that is changing as a result of being studied” (p. 213). This study aims to give voice to the community being studied.

Black Twitter is a fairly new topic of research for media and communications scholars. Applying a mixed methods approach to collecting and analyzing this particular data has allowed for new avenues of exploration for future studies exploring Black Twitter. Thus, the methodological approach is broken up into the following three phases:

1. In **Phase 1**, a textual analysis was used to explore two trending Black Twitter hashtags from 2015. A purposive sample of tweets (microblogs/comments) was collected and analyzed: #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies.

2. **Phase 2** utilized textual analysis to examine the hashtag #AskRachel. A collection of tweets posted using the hashtag during Day 1 (initial start of the conversation) and Day 7 (one week later) was collected and analyzed.
3. **In Phase 3**, focus groups with Black undergraduate and graduate students at a large Midwestern PWI (Predominantly White Institution) were conducted. This phase explored student's usage and knowledge of Black Twitter and their understanding and opinions of the findings analyzed in **Phase 1** and **Phase 2**.

These phases will be explained thoroughly later in the chapter and in each individual chapter.

The qualitative approaches of this dissertation allowed for interpretations of the data and emerging themes to be made, as well as further understanding on how participants make sense of Black Twitter. The rudimentary quantitative approaches of this study involved counting to take an inventory of the data. The numerical interpretation highlighted how many and how much of the data constructs the various categories and themes in the data analysis. A primary goal of this dissertation is to further discover how Black Twitter users are collectively creating conversations, interpretations and discourse about Blackness, identity, culture, and lived experiences.

Phase 1: Textual Analysis of #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies

In this phase of this study, textual analysis was conducted that explored two popular Black Twitter hashtags from 2015: #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. McKee (2003) explained, "Textual analysis is a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world" (p.1). For this study, each tweet was treated as *text* that was analyzed for interpretation. There are many ways to research and make interpretations of a text. Therefore, there is not one single interpretation of a text that is accurate,

nor is there a single correct way to conduct textual analysis (McKee, 2001; 2003). Moreover, a basic strategy for conducting qualitative analysis introduced by Creswell (2003) was applied. The steps include: 1) organizing and preparing the data for analysis; 2) reading through the data to get a general sense of its overall meaning; 3) beginning the detailed analysis with a coding process; 4) using the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis (p.190-192).

Data Collection, Coding and Sample

Multiple purposive sampling techniques (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) were utilized to collect and filter tweets for this phase of the study. Tweets from Twitter can be considered naturally occurring qualitative data that are a record of human behavior and thought (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). An advantage of analyzing documents is that the researcher can obtain, unobtrusively, the words and language of the participants (Creswell, 2014). The social marketing intelligence and analytics website *Union Metrics* was used to collect tweets for **Phase 1** and **Phase 2**. The purposive sample collected cannot be generalized to a larger population and were chosen to best address the study's research questions and purpose (McDougal, 2014). Data from Union Metrics were downloaded as Excel files used for data coding, sampling, filtering and analysis.

In each phase of methodology, a form of coding was used that borrowed from Johnny Saldaña's book, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (2009, 2012) that offers directions for several methods of qualitative data coding. Saldaña (2009) explained, "Coding is not a precise science, it's primarily an interpretive act" (p.4). Thus, several cycles of coding allow researchers to refine and negotiate their initial interpretations and readings about the text they are analyzing, decoding and encoding. Ultimately, it is the researcher's choice regarding what gets coded and how it gets coded and categorized. Sipe and Ghiso (2004) reflected on the

intellectual challenges of data coding and the importance of our previous knowledge and perspectives in categorizing. They explained:

“Prior knowledge is always in the background, whether consciously or unconsciously, when approaching coding. The more we add to our repertoire of knowledge, the more baggage there is for categorizing data. This tension is intrinsic to ethnographic research, and in embracing the contradictions we can draw on multiple lenses and construct a richer, more complex analysis” (p.483).

The final section of this chapter includes the researcher’s transparent reflection that describes the researcher’s theoretical and cultural lenses and perspectives. For this phase of analysis, a total of 150 tweets were purposely selected for analysis. Tweets from January 1, 2015 to December 30, 2015 were purchased and downloaded into an Excel sheet from Union Metrics. The researcher filtered the data Excel sheet to only display the top 150 “regular” (original) tweets with the most retweets (shares) to gather tweets that appeared to resonate prominently with users. According to Stevens & Maurantonio (2018) the significance of filtering the data by the most retweeted is collecting tweets that resonated the most amongst users. There were a total of 1,719 regular tweets in the first data set. The coding procedure, along with data sampling and filtering, executed for **Phase 1** is explained below:

1. First, an open Initial Coding of 50 tweets was conducted. Analytic notes to decipher the meaning of the tweets (open coding) were written in a journal.
2. Next, open Initial Coding was implemented to analyze an additional 50 tweets. Initial Coding was utilized to determine if patterns emerged from the conversations that were similar to the first set of 50 tweets coded.
3. In the third round of coding, Values Coding was applied to each of the 150 tweets (some were filtered out as NA during this process). The data was labeled with the researcher’s subjective perspective of the meaning of the tweets. In this step,

several of the initial codes were changed based on others that emerged. For example, the codes “share” and “read” were initially used for tweets that shared news and information related to the hashtag or encouraged others to observe the content of those tweets. These codes were changed to the code “participation” to include additional tweets that emerged encouraging other users to retweet posts using the hashtag. Black colleagues of the researcher from different academic disciplines were consulted to negotiate the interpretations of some codes.

4. Then, a one-two word Descriptive Code was assigned to each tweet to summarize the researcher’s final interpretation of the tweet’s primary topic, issue, concern or subject (Saldana, 2009) and typed in the Excel data sheet. For example, the code “appropriation of culture” was changed to the code “appropriation” and “Black culture’s influence” was changed to “culture.”
5. Finally, each code was assigned to a category.

It should be noted that each code may not have been repeated to represent another tweet or produce a pattern in the data. **Table 3.1** (Appendix 1) and **Chart 3.1** (Appendix 2) display the breakdown of codes and categories and a visualization of the quantity of the data coded. The emergent themes from the data coding will be described in the findings of the individual chapters. In subsequent chapters, example tweets from the data were selected to illustrate the study’s findings were chosen based on the racial appearance of participants from their avatars and profile information (Florini, 2013 & Righler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014). These users were selected if they appeared to be Black.

Data Analysis

A range of interpretive strategies were used for **Phase 1** and **Phase 2** to find themes, pattern, and interpretations of tweets selected for analysis. This included tools of discourse analysis, looking for metaphors, and examining images (GIFS and memes that accompany the text of tweets). For this phase, a discourse analysis approach primarily guided the analysis of the two hashtags examined. A deeper explanation of discourse analysis as a strategy of interpretation is needed to explain how it was applied in this dissertation.

Language-in-use is a tool for actively constructing, building, and rebuilding activities, identities, and institutions around us (Gee, 2005). Moreover, the primary function of human language is "...to support the performance of social activities and social identities and to support human affiliation within cultures, social groups, and institutions" (Gee, 2005, p. 1). Analyzing discourse allows researchers to make interpretations and meaning of language. McDougal (2014) noted, "Discourse analysis is a research technique that allows you to systematically analyze the hidden and visible content in communication messages" (p.265). Furthermore, Lemke (2012) stated, "...discourse analysis is a set of techniques for making connections between texts and their meanings" (p. 79). The foundation for applying this methodological strategy of interpretation is attributed to Brock (2012), Florini (2013), Clark (2014) and Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson (2014). Each of these researchers used a form of critical discourse analysis or discourse analysis in their studies to analyze discussions of Twitter's utility and audience, performance of Black cultural identity online, semantic content of tweets on Black Twitter, and constructions of gender and race in trending topics.

Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak (2011) explained that discourse works in a two-way relationship: it is not only socially constructed but is also socially constitutive as it reproduces and sustains the status quo and it helps to transform it. Further, the authors discussed how social

networking sites are examples of the “technologization of discourse” and are sites of everyday knowledge production and self-reflexivity. Fairclough et al (2011) stated:

“This reflexive construction and reconstruction of the self is a normal feature of everyday life and is continually taking on new forms. For example, the currently popular trend of ‘social networking’ creates reflexive discourse practices (e.g. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter), constructing social identities, relationships, political protest, social struggle, consumption, and entertainment” (p.360).

In this study, Black Twitter serves as a site of collective-reflexivity, cultural knowledge production and Black identity construction. The exploratory and immersive reading of the hashtags #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies demonstrated how these conversations on Black Twitter place authority, credibility, and agency on the lived experiences of its participants and how these experiences are negotiated to create shared meanings. **Phase 1** provided context for **Phase 2** (textual analysis) of the methodology. Finally, the themes that emerged from **Phase 2** guided several of the questions asked during **Phase 3** (focus group) of the study.

Black users are congruently negotiating their own individual identities and constructing a collective identity through racial performance and culturally specific hashtags on Black Twitter. Florini (2013) explored the Black American tradition of “signifyin’” and how Black users perform their Black cultural identity on Twitter, examining how the primarily oral tradition is played out in a text-based medium. Although not explicitly stated, Florini (2013) conducted a discourse analysis of tweets that exhibited “signifyin’ games” and exchanges from Twitter’s public timeline that were collected and archived over a year. One of the sections of analysis explored on how Black users create hashtags as social critique in Black communities and critique mainstream narratives about Black culture and identity. For example, one of the hashtags

analyzed in the study, #BlackNerdUnite, was used by Black users to discuss their frustration with monolithic understandings of Blackness.

In this phase of the study, two popular Black Twitter hashtags from 2015 were examined. This choice was made for congruence, considering the hashtag analyzed in **Phase 2** was also created in 2015. According to Essence Magazine's online article *The 23 Most Memorable Black Twitter Hashtags of 2015*, Huffington Post's 2015 online article *18 Times Black Twitter Broke The Internet In 2015*, and NBC News' online article *Top Ten #BlackTwitter Moments of 2015*, the following hashtags were considered to be popular conversations created by Black Twitter users in 2015: #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. The hashtag #AskRachel was also mentioned, in each article, and will be analyzed Chapter 4. The hashtags were chosen specifically because of their popularity during the time period selected and because they are representative of how a wide range of topics discussed on Black Twitter. The #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies hashtags were created by Black Twitter users to engage in discourse about racism, cultural family traditions, and identity.

Phase 2: Textual Analysis of #AskRachel

For the second phase of this dissertation, textual analysis was applied to examine the hashtag #AskRachel. For this phase, tweets were analyzed to find themes, patterns, and metaphors using two primary tools of interpretation using discourse analysis. Gee (2005) argued that things in society are built through language and that there are "seven building tasks" of language which include: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (p. 11-13). In order to identify units and emerging themes/categories from the tweets, the questions that correspond with each of these seven building tasks were utilized (Gee, 2005). There was no specific order used when analyzing the

data. In the same way, each of the questions were not answered in the analysis as the questions posed served more so as guidelines, particularly for the scaffolding of the analysis. The questions are (p. 11-13):

- 1) How is this piece of language being used to make certain things *significant* or not and in what ways?
- 2) What activity or *activities* is this piece of language being used to enact?
- 3) What identity or *identities* is this piece of language being used to enact?
- 4) What sort of *relationship* or *relationships* is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?
- 5) What *perspective on social goods* is this piece of language communicating?
- 6) How does this piece of language *connect* or *disconnect* things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?
- 7) How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief?

Data Collection and Sample

Tweets were gathered from the peak 24-hours of the hashtag #AskRachel on Day 1 (Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014) and from Day 7 of the hashtags initial usage as mentioned previously in this chapter. Traffic is the heaviest during this early period and later tweets could be subject to incongruities amongst heavy users and outliers (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). The peak 24 hours that will be the scope of Day 1 were gathered from June 12, 2015, the day after the news story aired featuring Rachel Dolezal's parents admitted that their biological daughter was White and not in fact, Black. The tweets for Day 7 were collected from June 19, 2015. A total of 450 tweets were collected and analyzed for this phase of the study. The findings

from this phase of methodology were used to inform some of the questions used in **Phase 3** of this study.

Phase 3: Focus Groups with Black Undergraduate and Graduate Students

In the final step of this dissertation, focus groups of Black undergraduate and graduate students at a Midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI), Indiana University in Bloomington, IN will be conducted. Pruitt (2015) suggested that because Black Twitter is considered to be a counterpublic for marginalized voices, these voices should have a chance to tell their stories through interviews or focus groups. Focus group interviews are designed for small groups to have discourse about a particular topic that is of interest or importance to both the participants and the researcher (Berg, 1989), and for research studies where the focus is on “joint meaning making and the co-construction of ideas” (McDougal, 2014, p.269). This phase of the project builds on **Phase 2** (textual analysis of #AskRachel) and gauged participants’ understanding, usage, and experience with Black Twitter and the findings from **Phase 2**.

Kitzinger (1995) explained that focus groups, or group interviews, are useful for several reasons. For example: 1) they are a quick and convenient way to collect data about people’s knowledge and experiences from several participants at the same time, 2) they don’t discriminate against participants who can’t read or write, 3) and can encourage participation from what they call “nonresponsive patients” who engage and respond to other participant generated discussions. However, Kitzinger (1995) suggested that a couple of disadvantages of focus groups are that they compromise the research session’s confidentiality and that participants with opposing viewpoints, that differ from the majority of the group, may be silenced. Conversely, Berg (1989) stated, “The informal group discussion atmosphere of the focus group interview structure is intended to encourage subjects to speak freely and completely about behaviors, attitudes, and

opinions the possess” (p.100). The focus groups conducted in this study may have positively encouraged participants to have a deeply engaged discussion and it is believed that the opposing viewpoints that surfaced added useful perspective to the conversations.

There are strengths and limitations to conducting focus groups. Hennink (2014) noted several of the strengths of using focus groups as a method that are relevant for this study. This includes: the flexibility of the method, its appropriateness for mixed methods research designs, its suitability for exploratory and explanatory research, and its affordance to gather a range of viewpoints from participants. Additionally, Hennink (2014) explained reasons why researchers would decide to conduct a focus group versus in-depth interviews explaining they are useful for allowing participants to: discuss and justify their viewpoints, collectively explain nuances of an issue, and produce community-level data on issues discussed.

Focus groups can also reap benefits that are similar to conducting traditional face-to-face interviews. For example, Clark (2014) conducted ethnographic semi-structured interviews in “Study 3” of her dissertation on Black Twitter. In this part of the dissertation, Clark collected participant narratives (via in-person, telephone, Skype, or Google Hangout) to use in conjunction with the first two studies of the project (content analysis and discourse analysis). Several of the focus group and pre-focus group questions for this study were included directly from Clark’s interview map (Clark, 2014, p.160-162), while others were left out, expanded or condensed for the purposes of this project. When discussing the importance of the responses collected from her interviews, Clark (2014) explained:

“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 (p. 47).”

Similar to Clark (2014), the responses from the focus groups allowed for a comparison of the textual analysis conducted in **Phase 1** and **Phase 2** with the narratives and responses of the participants in **Phase 3**. These comparisons of similarity and difference helped paint a fuller picture of how Black Twitter and #AskRachel is creating and influencing conversations and definitions about Blackness, identity, and culture.

Participants

The participants for the focus groups were purposefully selected, as this strengthens the focus group because of the specific characteristics sought for the study (Hennink, 2014). Further, Kitzinger (1995) explained that homogeneity amongst group participants should be aimed for to maximize on their shared experiences. Black undergraduate and graduate students ages 18 to 30 were specifically selected to participate in this study. This sample frame was selected because it is representative of the population being studied among Black Twitter users. According to a Pew Research Center report, 40% of African Americans who use Twitter are between the ages of 18 to 29, 21% are ages 30-49 and 9% are 50-64 years old (Smith, 2014). Additionally, this sample frame was accessible through the researcher's networks and rapport with personnel who manage listserves serving undergraduate and graduate Black students at the institution. The IRB application for this study was approved and obtained exempt status.

The researcher used several methods of participant recruitment to increase the response rate and to attract participants likely to use social media. In the first step of this recruitment and selection process, an email invitation was sent (see Appendix 4) through three listserves operated by the Black Student Union (BSU), Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA), and the campus chapter of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ). Second, the researcher used the social networking mobile application for group chats, GroupMe, to reach out to

graduate students. Finally, the researcher's colleagues emailed the invitation to their personal networks.

Students who received the email were instructed to complete the Focus Group Participation Form (see Appendix 5) to submit their personal information to be contacted if selected for the study. Focus groups typically have between six to eight participants to maintain the diversity and productivity of the discussion (Hennink, 2014; McDougal, 2014). There were two undergraduate focus groups and one graduate focus group. Focus Group #1 (undergraduate) had two participants, Focus Group #2 (graduate) had five participants, and Focus Group #3 (undergraduate) had four participants. The three focus groups had a total of 11 participants, nine female and two male participants. Additional details related to the participants selected for the study are presented in Chapter Five.

Data Collection and Analysis

Berg (1989) explained that in some cases, researchers will administer a questionnaire that is given to the focus group participants prior to the study, an approach called the extended focus group. Typically the questionnaire will include information that will be discussed during the session or is useful to the focus group participants or researcher/moderator. The researcher implemented a Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire (See Appendix 6) to obtain basic initial information about the participants' demographics, social media usage, and familiarity with the hashtags being researched in this study. The Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire was emailed to the selected participants one week prior to the focus group date to allow the researcher time to view the responses. Several of the questions for the extended focus group questionnaire were drawn from Clark (2014), similar to the Focus Group Protocol. The Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire addressed the following open and close ended categories: Participant Demographics, Social

Media Usage, Twitter Demographics, Twitter Experience, Black Twitter Experience and Hashtag Familiarity.

Next, the Focus Group Protocol (see Appendix 7), used to guide the focus group, addressed the following categories: Black Twitter Experience, #AskRachel (based on **Phase 2** findings) and Additional Information. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved and granted exempt status to the focus group portion of this study. Participants received an electronic Participant Informed Consent (Appendix 8) form in an email along with the Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire one week prior to the focus group session.

During the focus group, Kitzinger (1995) suggested that researchers make the environment as comfortable as possible, which may include sitting in a circle and providing refreshments. The researcher provided light refreshments and the participants sat around a large frosted glass dry-erase table that accommodated up to six participants. In terms of administering the focus group, the role of the researcher is to be a moderator/facilitator, keep participants on topic, encourage communication between participants, urge debate and present general open-ended questions (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2006; Kitzinger, 1995 & McDougal, 2014). For this study, a method offered by Kitzinger (1995) that involves the researcher using group exercises to encourage participants to focus on each other and not the moderator and encourages participants to collectively sort out and discuss their perspectives on certain topics, was utilized. Finally, data from focus groups was analyzed at the individual level and the group level, taking into account the narrative of the group that emerges (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). In Vivo Coding was used in the first cycle of coding followed by a cycle of thematic coding. Additional details about the data coding and analysis process is provided in Chapter 5.

Limitations

Textual Analysis. The findings from **Phase 1** and **Phase 2** were not generalizable, as there could be several interpretations of a text based on the context and the researcher conducting the analysis (McKee, 2001; McKee, 2003). The sample of tweets collected for these phases were purposive and should not be generalized to the entire population of users and responses. Finally, the reliability of the project may be jeopardized in selecting tweets from users who appeared to be Black based on their avatars, there is no true way to know the truth of user provided content (Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson 2014).

As stated, there is no one correct way to conduct textual analysis but there are ways to get a “likely interpretation” of a text by considering: other texts in the series, the genre of the text, intertexts about the text itself and the wider public context in which a text is circulated (McKee, 2003, p. 93). In **Phase 1** and **Phase 2**, this was considered as a guide in the analysis. Finally, Creswell (2009) explained that there is a lack of literature on the sequential transformative strategy and limited guidance on how to guide the methods with the transformative vision.

Focus Group. McDougal (2014) explained some of the limitations of conducting focus groups. One possible issue for researchers is the analysis phase. The data obtained from focus groups are time consuming and can be tedious to analyze and expensive to transcribe. Another issue is the ability for the researcher to control the research process in comparison to conducting structured interviews. Additionally, there is the possibility that participants will express what they perceive to be “socially desirable” attitudes about sensitive topics (p. 270). Finally, Hennink (2014) noted several limitations explaining that focus group responses aren’t independent, some participants can dominate the discussion, and that the issues discussed can lack depth (p. 30).

Qualitative Research

Standardizing qualitative methods has drawn criticism from some qualitative researchers. However, Tracy (2010) suggested that criteria are useful, stating, “Guidelines provide a path to expertise” (p. 838). According to the article, there are eight criteria that should be considered to produce good qualitative research and the application of these are based on the objectives of the study and skills of the researcher. The criteria include: (a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence. This study achieves each of these criteria throughout the research process. In relation to sincerity, the researcher would like provide a statement of transparency and reflection concerning how her overarching theoretical lens informed her approach to coding and analyzing the tweets in this dissertation for Chapter Three, Chapter Four, and Chapter Five.

A Note on the Analysis Process with a Black Feminist and Cultural Perspective

In her book *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, author, feminist and social activist bell hooks elucidates the ethical issues of white males having the “authority” to write about oppressed groups and their experiences yet be absent of their voice, calling the process the “manifestation of the politics of domination” (p. 43). She argued, “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject” (p.43). With this particular Black feminist perspective in mind, the researcher is treating the creators of the tweets that have been analyzed as subjects who exercise authority in crafting their narratives and experiences.

The researcher is also granting herself authority and credibility to interpret the context of their tweets because of her claim to groups to which she belongs: Black and Black woman. Yet, the researcher understands that her interpretation of the tweets is not the only or best reading that

can be made from the data set. The Black perspective is not a monolith, however, her personal experiences with Black culture and Black Twitter afford her the authority to render a credible understanding.

The researcher is positioning herself as a Black Feminist/Womanist scholar whose perspectives influence and challenge particular methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Collins, 1986). According to Collins (1986), many African-American women have an “outsider-within” status that allows for a unique viewpoint on self, family and society (p. 514). Additionally, Collins (1986) argued, “A careful review of the emerging Black feminist literature reveals that many Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender” (p. 514-515). The argument is that Black women create Black feminist thought based on their marginal positions in academic settings (outsider) and personal and cultural perspectives (within). The researcher is an inside-outsider who actively participates in the very conversations being analyzed. She can relate to a majority of the narratives shared in the tweets that discuss first-hand experiences with racism, grappling with racial identity anxiety and vehemently having Black pride. Thus, the researcher has a great level of experiential knowledge in relation to the topics unveiled in the findings of this dissertation.

Chapter Outlines

The order and content of the following chapters of this dissertation are outlined below:

- Chapter Two describes the interdisciplinary nature of the dissertation through a review of relevant previous literature review. The chapter will also apply the theoretical lenses, perspectives, and approaches of race, racial formation and online identity construction, uses and gratifications, new media and online communities. The

research questions with the addition of sub-questions will be presented at the end of the chapter.

- Chapter Three, **Phase 1**, includes the findings of the textual analysis of two popular Black Twitter hashtags from 2015: #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies.
- Chapter Four, **Phase 2**, contains the findings of the textual analysis of the hashtag #AskRachel.
- Chapter Five, **Phase 3**, details the findings from the focus group of Black undergraduate and graduate students.
- Finally, Chapter Six is the concluding chapter that presents implications that emerged from the findings of the previous chapter's findings. The chapter concludes with an explanation of this dissertation's limitations and suggestions for future research.

Chapter II: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Black Twitter remains vastly understudied although it has been identified by previous Black Twitter scholars as an influential counterpublic and subculture on Twitter. Developed through Black users' adoption of Twitter hashtags, what Sharma (2013) called "blacktags," Black Twitter allows Black users on Twitter to discuss relevant cultural, social, and political events that are worthy of dialogue and critique to Black communities both nationally and globally.

This chapter first situates this dissertation in the context of previous literature on social media usage and Black Twitter. Second, this chapter grounds this dissertation within three theoretical frameworks: racial formation, new media and online communities, and uses and gratifications. The literature review and theoretical perspectives presented in this chapter provide a limited yet relevant scope of knowledge that has been applied to this study.

A Relevant Review of Black Twitter Scholarship

An important element of interpreting texts is understanding the context in which you are analyzing the text (McKee, 2003). Thus, having a historical and current understanding of African American discourse and language and their use of social media to form digital communities is imperative to make likely interpretations of the tweets selected for analysis. To date, there is a lack of research that explores and investigates Black Twitter and its role and influence in society.

Since its conception, Black Twitter has sparked curiosity, controversy and critique. Black Twitter is often viewed as an entity with power and authority when problematic issues regarding the Black community surface. Some Black people "demand" that Black Twitter address these issues and/or the person(s) responsible. Conversations about Black Twitter have become a part of the public discourse and curiosity about social media use, culture, and race, receiving attention

both in and out of the academic domain. Listed below are some, but not all, of the ways Black Twitter has functioned as news source or topic of conversation and debate:

- In 2014, a team of researchers at the USC Annenberg Innovation Lab created the “Black Twitter Project” to affirm the existence of Black Twitter
- The Los Angeles Times, in 2015, hired a “Black Twitter” reporter
- A Black Twitter conference was held by the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) at Columbia University in 2016
- The Daily Show with host Trevor Noah aired a segment titled “What is Black Twitter” in 2017

Twitter, launched in 2006 (Sharma, 2013), is a social networking site or SNS (boyd & Ellison, 2008 & Nayar, 2010), where its users can use 140 characters to share short messages to with other users. A typical practice among its user is to use a hashtag to categorize the conversation. The Twitter website explained, “A hashtag—written with a # symbol—is used to index keywords or topics on Twitter. This function was created on Twitter, and allows people to easily follow topics they are interested in.” The popular hashtags can become part of the “Trending Topics,” which indicates popularity in discussion of that topic in terms of use by others on Twitter. Blacks have used Twitter from the start of its creation, but Black Twitter gained mainstream attention, both positive and negative, because the hashtags, topics of interest to several Black users, often become trending topics (Brock, 2012; Sharma, 2013). Dr. Meredith Clark, considered one of the few leading scholars on Black Twitter, explained:

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” (2014, p.30).

Clark's (2014) influenced this current study as mentioned in Chapter One. The first uses of the moniker "Black Twitter" is somewhat in debate, however scholars who study Black Twitter credit the following two people with the concept: *Slate* Technology Writer Farad Manjoo and *The Awl* writer Choire Sicha. Both writers questioned and observed Black people's Twitter habits and the racial divide on Twitter between Blacks and non-Blacks. The phenomenon Black Twitter for the most part has been described as a social networking subculture and counterpublic. This subculture operates as a space for Blacks on Twitter to discuss topics (critically and/or humorously) that are important to them, occurring outside of mainstream conversations on Twitter.

Because this research topic is still in its infancy, scholars who have researched Black Twitter have utilized several different exploratory approaches. For example, Florini (2014) explored how the Black oral tradition of signifying is used by Black users online to perform racial identity. Florini (2014) claimed, "For racial identity to function in social media spaces, racialized users must make those identities visible online. The construction of race in U.S. culture is closely tied to corporeal signifiers. However, in social media, those signifiers can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar)" (p. 224). Additional contributions from Florini (2014) on signifying, Black humor and Black Twitter are presented in the next section.

In another study situated within the framework of viewer participation on Twitter, second screening and co-viewing, Williams and Gonlin (2017) explored the shared cultural history of Black womanhood through technocultural discourse on Twitter of the television show *How To Get Away With Murder*. Williams and Gonlin explained, "Because our online lives and offline lives often converge to create an ongoing identity negotiation, Twitter acts as a stage on which

identity claims are made, including racial identity claims” (p. 988). These studies and several others have contributed to the researcher’s understanding of Black Twitter.

Black Humor and Signifyin’ Black Twitter

As Clark (2014) explained, there is no singular definition of Black Twitter, as the definition and understanding is constantly negotiated by its participants and their individual experiences, and Black Twitter functions as many things. In terms of “how” Black Twitter works, Brock (2012) explained that there are several material and function rationales for how Blacks use Twitter and that the interface elements and simplicity of Twitter’s messaging system contribute to the phenomenon. Further, Brock (2012) stated, “The cultural conventions – message length, hashtags, and the trending topic – map onto performativity, signifyin’, and publicness in ways that add unexpected sociocultural dimension to the service” (p. 535). Black Twitter participants use the hashtags and signifyin’, often through Black humor, to create cultural conversations.

In-group humor for Black people often includes making light of their situation, dating back to slavery. Gordon (1998) explained, “American slavery provides the backdrop of tragedy against which African Americans developed their distinct form of humor, in which the material of tragedy was converted into comedy, including the absurd. This often included self-deprecation, as the slaves themselves were often the subjects of their comic tales.” Similarly, Bailey (2012) explored African American humor in regard to in-group jokes that are mass mediated and consumed by white audiences by Black comics, arguing that there is a potential for exclusion to outsiders. It is believed that the concept same happens when a majority of Black Twitter topics make it to the trending topics. Florini (2013) explained:

“For generations, as Black Americans navigated an environment of hostile racial oppression, signifyin’ offered a site of resistance and allowed for double-voiced and

encoded communication. A deeply collaborative practice, signifyin' has traditionally fostered group solidarity in Black American communities. Dexterous use of language and skilled verbal performance are key elements of signifyin', and such performances have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities" (p. 226).

The historical traditions of Black humor and popular culturally relevant jokes elevates Black Twitter as a "hot topic" of discussion, not just among Blacks, but among those who want to simply understand what's happening. Black users performance of racial identity on Twitter is primarily rooted in humor and signifyin'.

Florini (2014) provides extensive insights about the ways in which Black users on Twitter incorporate signifyin' in their discourse and interactions to create a Black Twitter. Thus, an understanding of specific cultural references and language is a necessity on Black Twitter and if a person is not immersed deeply in Black culture, they will not understand the context and meaning. Further, Florini (2014) asserted:

"Signifyin' is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and, as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels. The very act of signifyin' is a powerful performance of Black cultural identity because it indexes the genre's previous instantiations, and the sociocultural contexts in which it was cultivated and practiced" (p. 224).

Further Florini (2014) explained that memes serve as a vehicle for signifyin'. An additional way of signifyin' in current social media is the use of GIFS. Nostalgic memories about food and familial interactions are expressed through humor, language, "playing the dozens" (Nordquist, 2018), and textual and visual storytelling. The use of memes and GIFs is prevalent in many of the tweets analyzed in this dissertation and several examples are presented in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4. In this regard, Florini (2014) claimed:

"For generations, as Black Americans navigated an environment of hostile racial oppression, signifyin' offered a site of resistance and allowed for double-voiced and

encoded communication. A deeply collaborative practice, signifyin' has traditionally fostered group solidarity in Black American communities. Dexterous use of language and skilled verbal performance are key elements of signifyin', and such performances have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities" (p. 226).

Black Twitter is able to play a role in the preservation of Black communities through the continued use of signifyin' and racial identity performance online.

Theoretical Framework

According to Berg (1998), theory is a system in which logical statements or propositions are used to explain relationships between two or more objects, concepts, phenomenon, or characteristics of humans. Furthermore, Creswell (2003) explained that in mixed methods approaches, theory can be considered as a lens or perspective that guides the research study. This dissertation incorporated and combined several theoretical lenses, perspectives and approaches to guide this study at different stages of the project, from data collection and sampling to the analysis and interpretation of the data. The theories used by the researcher speak to the interdisciplinary nature of the project. Thus, this dissertation applied approaches to race, racial formation and online racial identity, uses and gratifications theory, and theories about new media and online communities. A brief description detailing the extent to which each of these theoretical perspectives informed this study is presented below.

First, this project explored the manifestation of defining Black culture, identity, lived experience, and Blackness on Black Twitter. The theoretical approaches on race, racial formation, and online racial identity informed the researchers understanding of racial construction, how race presents itself in online spaces, and the analysis and interpretation of the data. Furthermore, these frameworks informed the construction of the research and focus group questions in Chapter Five.

Next, this dissertation examined participant's usage of and response to Black Twitter through the method of focus groups. The incorporation of uses and gratifications theory as well as new media theories in this dissertation inform the possible motivations for using social media. Further, these theoretical lenses made clearer the ways in which new media influence the creation of online communities and affect communication practices between individuals and the groups they associate with on social media sites. Additionally, these two media theories provided perspectives that advance and inform questions asked at different stages of this study. Uses and gratifications research conducted about user-generated and social media networking sites will be discussed, followed by theories of new media.

Race, Racial Formation, and Online Racial Identity

Theories on race and racial formation are often complex concepts that have been explored, defined, and debated by several scholars from an array of disciplines. Omi and Winant (2002) argued that we not merely think of race as a dichotomous debate between whether it is an *illusion* or an *essence* (something concrete). Further, Omi and Winant (2002) proposed a definition of race, explaining that, "...*race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies*" (p.123). The authors suggest the acknowledgement of the role that the selection of racial signifiers (human features) is a social and historical process that is necessary.

Additionally, Omi and Winant (2002) defined racial formation as "...the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" (p. 124). Race is then, from the standpoint of racial formation, an inclusion of both social structure and cultural representation (Omi & Winant, 2002). In this dissertation, understanding race and racial formation provided a framework to explore how Black culture and Blackness is imagined,

constructed defined, and transformed by Black Twitter users and the participants in the focus group. The researcher's exploration of the shared stories of lived experiences on Black Twitter present new ways in which damaging narratives perpetuated by mainstream media systems can be dismantled and redefined by the Black community in a public online space.

When discussing the adoption of digital media by African Americans, scholars typically address the concept of the digital divide. This concept refers to African American's lack of access to the Internet through broadband connections and access to computers. Based on Nielsen Media Research, Hoffman and Novak (2000) explored the differences between whites and Blacks regarding computer access and web use, assuming income and education as key factors. The authors found that whites had significantly greater access to computers at work and home than Blacks.

However, over the last several years, technological advances of mobile phones have made Americans "smartphone dependent" and they offer many people with the option of not needing a broadband connection, which has decreased the gap in Internet access between whites and Blacks (Smith, 2015). Pew Research statistics from 2015 reported, "...72% of all African Americans—and 98% of those between the ages of 18 and 29—have either a broadband connection or a smartphone" (Smith, 2015, p.1). Mobile phones can be credited with the wide use, and ease, of Twitter by Americans and specifically Blacks (Norris, 2002).

Several scholars have addressed how racial identity, cultural identity and ethnicity operate online (Brock, 2009, 2012; Brock, Kvasny, & Hales, 2010; Byrne, 2008; Florini, 2014; Nakumara, 2008). The Internet was believed to be void of racism because users could hide their race, leaving some to not believe in this idea of cyberrace (Nakumara, 2008). Earlier research on the Internet, audience, and usage did not understand and consider how offline identities

permeate and carry over to online identities. The often-cited Lisa Nakumara's "Cyberberrace" (2008) laid some of the foundation for how scholars explore and consider how race functions and presents itself online. Nakumara (2008) stated, "Seeing the Internet as a virtual space that was like real life while being separate from it—a second life—figured it as a place to escape from reality, especially racial realities" (p. 1676). Our offline identities permeate our online identities. Understanding how race manifests in online spaces is important to understanding identity, cultural and racial constructions.

Brock (2012) argued that like other cultural objects, cultural and racial identity is influenced and mediated by technology in the United States. Florini (2014) suggested that other social and cultural markers, such as signifiyin' for Black people, function to perform race when physical signifiers aren't available. Race and ethnicity web studies have previously believed identity to be a "lived" social construction (Sharma, 2013). Moreover, Florini (2014) explained, "For racial identity to function in social media spaces, racialized users must make those identities visible online. The construction of race in U.S. culture is closely tied to corporeal signifiers. However, in social media, those signifiers can be obscured or even imitated (e.g., by a deceptive avatar)" (p.224). Having access to mobile phones and SNSs has transformed online racial inclusion, exclusion (Sharma, 2013) and visibility, hence the ability for Black Twitter to exist via Twitter's own system tools.

Finally, there are some issues to consider regarding theorizing racial identity and participation online. The issue is that the online practices of Caucasians is considered to be normal or the standard while Black users' practices are intuitively believed to be linked to Black identity. Brock (2012) argued, "White participation in online activities is rarely understood as constitutive of White identity; instead we are trained to understand their online activities as stuff

‘people’ do. Black Twitter confounded this ingrained understanding, even while using the same functions and apparatus, by making more apparent through external observation and internal interaction how culture shapes online discourses” (p. 534). Considering this statement, the question posed by Sharma (2013) was considered throughout the analysis of this dissertation “...how are both race and digital networks transformed in their mutual encounter?” (p.47).

New Media Theory and Online Communities

New media technologies provide a diverse assortment of media systems (Flew, 2005) that have permeated society’s options of seeking information and communicating with each other in the 21st century. Wilson and Peterson (2002) argued that new media is a subcategory of media, much like mass media, alternative media, and print media. The authors, while acknowledging that these definitions are flexible and can be improved, consider new media to be digital-based electronics, in the form of multimedia CD ROMs, the Internet, and video games. Based on their definition, social media can be considered as a subset of new media. Press and Williams (2010) explained, “Nonmainstream and/or international websites serve as alternative sources of information and opinion on social, political, and economic issues, challenging the gatekeeping functions of the older media producers” (p. 20). The authors argued that the concept of mass audiences, like in the early years of the television, is no longer existent and that media audiences are fragmented as each individual can expose themselves to messages and content that are of interest to them.

Social media sites like Twitter provide tools for their users to be fragmented if they decide to do so through the use of the hashtag function, which is what Black Twitter participants use to create and join culturally specific conversations in a public space.

Parks and Floyd (1996) explained that there is a two-sided debate about how computer-mediated communication affects interpersonal relationships. One side of the debate believes that computer-mediated relationships are shallow, impersonal, hostile, lack social cues, and can be a deceptive perception of community. The other side believes that because the confines of physical location can be surpassed online, it is liberating in achieving opportunity for genuine relationship and community building. In Robert D. Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), he explored whether modern technological innovations and mass media have had a hand in eroding America's social capital. In regard to the effects of the individualization of choice in news and entertainment made available by mass media and the Internet, Putnam stated, "No longer must we coordinate our tastes and timing with others to enjoy the rarest culture or the most esoteric information" (p.216).

Conversely, Norris (2002) discussed the bonding function of the Internet where, "...pure bonding groups are most likely to occur online where social and ideological homogeneity overlaps, deepening networks among people sharing similar backgrounds and beliefs" (p.5). In other words, online communities can strengthen the relationships between people who have shared beliefs and interests. Furthermore, Nayar (2010) explained how social networking sites, like Twitter and Facebook, blur the lines between public and private and that offline and online identities and relations integrate. Subsequently, Nayar (2010) argued, "SNSs could be an extension – *augmentation* – of existing social relationships when friends hang out in virtual space, or they could facilitate the creation of new relations when strangers come together due to shared interests" (p.60). Thus, I argue that Twitter has become a vehicle for ordinary Black citizens to bond over similar interests and beliefs, with both people they know and don't know, and that they carry their offline identities with them in online spaces.

Uses and Gratifications

The primary question posed in uses and gratifications theory, often called (uses and gratifications approach) is “...why do people use media, and what do they use them for?” (McQuail, 2010, p. 423). Uses and gratifications theory at times assumes that media audiences are active and have goals (McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972), and have motivations and expectations for media use and consumption. Liu, Cheung, and Lee (2010) explained, “The main purpose of this paradigm is to explain the reasons that people choose a specific medium over alternative communication media and to elucidate the psychological needs that people use a particular medium” (p. 930). Ruggiero (2000) explained scholars of uses and gratifications theory agree that the concept of active audience should be revisited in regard to the Internet. Additionally, Ruggiero (2000) suggested that scholars are considering how the Internet possibly creates individualism and conversely can build community through online relationships, unlike traditional media. Uses and gratifications theories and approaches have a number of limitations, however, it will provide a lens and guide for the research questions and focus group protocol in this project that ask the “why” and “what” for using Black Twitter.

McQuail (2010) presented “An Integrated Model of Audience Choice” in Figure 16.3 (p. 428) that visualizes the “influences on media choice” and “sequential process of audience formation” in an exploratory model (p. 427). The model has two sides that “...are not independent of each other but the result of a continuing process of mutual orientation and adjustment” (p.428): audience factors and media factors. The “audience side” factors include: 1) personal attributes; 2) social background and milieu; 3) media-related needs; 4) personal tastes and preferences; 5) general habits of leisure time media use and availability; 6) awareness of choice; 7) specific context of use; and 8) chance of media exposure. The “media side” factors

include: 1) the media system; 2) structure of media provision; 3) media publicity; and 4) timing and presentation. For this dissertation, several of the factors listed in this model are useful for how I form questions about, analyze and interpret Black Twitter participation.

Recently, several scholars have applied uses and gratifications theory to research why individuals use user-generated media and social media (Chen, 2011; Liu, Cheung, & Lee, 2010; Johnson & Yang; 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Shao, 2009; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). Some of these studies have specifically researched the motivations, satisfaction, and gratifications of using Twitter. Johnson and Yang (2009) were interested in exploring Twitter users' motives (gratifications sought), satisfaction of Twitter use by Twitter users (the comparison between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained), and the relationships between gratifications obtained and Twitter use (p. 5). The authors found there were two important factors for Twitter use: social motives and information motives. Surprisingly, their study found that social motives had less significance for Twitter use than information motives. Conversely, based on previous literature and the researcher's own subjective understanding, it is believed the opposite will be true for Black Twitter participants in the focus groups.

Additionally, Liu, Cheung and Lee (2010) suggested eight motives for Twitter use that include: self-documentation, information sharing, social interaction, entertainment, passing time, self-expression, medium appeal, and convenience (p. 932). The authors explained, "Motivation can be referred as a user's pre-use expectation towards an information system. Disconfirmation is defined as the discrepancy between a user's expectation and perceived performance of the system/service, is considered to have a strong impact on user' gratification" (p. 932). Thus, in collapsing the eight motives presented, the authors proposed that there are four types of gratifications for using Twitter: content gratifications, process gratifications, social gratifications,

and technology gratifications. From their survey, Liu, Cheung and Lee (2010) found that satisfaction is important in the continuance of Twitter use, which is determined by the content gratification (disconfirmation of information sharing and the disconfirmation of self-documentation) and technology gratification (disconfirmation of medium appeal and the disconfirmation of convenience).

As this dissertation seeks to understand how Black Twitter hashtags are used to create definitions and shared understandings about Black culture and Blackness, understanding the types of gratifications of Twitter use proposed by this study will be useful in the analysis and interpretation of Black Twitter usage and participation. Next, new media and online community theories and approaches will provide a framework for the investigation of how new media influences the creation of online relationships, community, and ultimately spaces like Black Twitter. The following theoretical perspectives will additionally aid in understanding how race is constructed and how it manifests online.

Returning to Research Questions

Based on information explained in the previous sections, literature review and theoretical perspectives, the researcher is returning to her research questions to further break them down. In this study, open-ended nondirectional questions will be asked with the expectation that research questions in qualitative research are not necessarily fixed and may evolve and change (Creswell, 2009). Thus, following Creswell's (2009) structure for research questions for qualitative studies, the researcher posed a broad central question followed by sub-questions for each phase of the dissertation. Additionally, Creswell (2009) suggested that researchers should include at least one mixed method "hybrid" or "integrated" (Tashakkori and Cresswell, 2007, p. 208) research question that will address the mixing of method. In regard to this study, there are questions

included that address how **Phase 3** builds on **Phase 1** and **Phase 2** (primarily). Considering the theoretical perspectives on new media and online communities, racial formation, Black feminist thought, uses and gratifications and framing, the research questions are further broken down as follows:

RQ1: What are some of the primary concerns and issues that arise in the space Black Twitter, which address Black racial experience?

1. How does Black Twitter discuss the lived experiences of Black people using the hashtag #BlackExperience?
2. How is Black culture explored on Black Twitter using the hashtags #GrowingUpBlack, and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies?
3. What do the conversations using these hashtags illuminate about Black racial formation and construction?

RQ2: What kinds of questions and meanings about Black racial experience and culture did the hashtag #AskRachel provoke?

1. What are the major themes that emerge from the tweets using #AskRachel?
2. How is Blackness defined on Black Twitter using #AskRachel?
3. How are race and ethnicity negotiated in the tweets using #AskRachel?
4. How are culture and identity negotiated in the tweets using #AskRachel?

RQ3: What are the opinions and responses that undergraduate and graduate students articulate about Black Twitter and the hashtag #AskRachel?

1. How do participants define Black Twitter?
2. How do participants actively participate in Black Twitter conversations?
3. Why do participants participate in Black Twitter conversations?
4. How do participants define the hashtag #AskRachel?
5. How do participants react to the findings from Phase II?

Chapter III: Living Black: Figured Worlds and Black Cultural Expression

“If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive.” – Audre Lorde.

This chapter includes two sections of analysis that used exploratory research to examine two sites of conversation on Black Twitter: #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explained that exploratory research aims to examine a little-known phenomena that asks basic questions to discover patterns and themes to better understand what is happening. As described in Chapter One, a purposive sample of 300 regular tweets were coded and analyzed for patterns and themes using textual analysis. Several tweets (38 tweets) were selected to demonstrate the emerging themes and patterns found in the two sections of analysis. This chapter's analysis and interpretation seeks to answer the following research and sub-questions to investigate how Black users Twitter participate in various conversations about Black life and how the space of Black Twitter functions:

RQ1: What are some of the primary concerns and issues that arise in the space Black Twitter which address Black racial experience?

1. How do participants in the space of Black Twitter discuss the lived experiences of Black people using the hashtag #BlackExperience?
2. How do participants in the space of Black Twitter explore various aspects of Black culture using the hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies?
3. What do the conversations using these hashtags illuminate about Black racial formation and construction?

This chapter's specific focus is to explore Black Twitter hashtags that highlight Black users' conversations around the topics of Black identity, culture, and racism. Through an immersive reading of these two hashtags, this chapter demonstrates how conversations on Black Twitter

offer a space for Black users to have authority, credibility, and agency of their lived experiences and illustrates how these exchanges function racially, culturally and structurally.

This chapter includes two sections of analysis and a summary of the findings in which a sample of 300 texts and images are unpacked to examine the hashtags #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. In the first section of analysis titled “*Living While Black: Racism, Anxiety, Black Pride, And Dialogue,*” the hashtag #BlackExperience united Black Twitter users seeking to have discourse with others in their community about an range of topics including: verbal harassment, physical assault, racial profiling, police brutality, and Black pride. In the second section of analysis titled, “*#ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies: A Configuration of Discussing Black Life,*” the hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies illustrates the structure and process in which culturally relevant conversations happen on Black Twitter. Through language, signifyin’, humor, images, popular culture, and familial positionality, offline identities are performed and online racial identities are created.

Using a data coding, analyzing and filtering process (Saldana, 2009; 2013), a total of 300 regular (unique) tweets were coded and analyzed for this chapter. A purposive sample of the tweets was obtained and rearranged to filter out 150 of the most retweeted (shared) regular (unique) tweets from the data sets collected for #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. According to Stevens & Maurantonio (2018), the significance of filtering the data by the most retweeted is collecting tweets that resonated the most amongst users. The researcher incorporated a Black Feminist lens and perspective, as well as situated herself as an insider to Black culture, and Black social media culture, which allows her to render an appropriate interpretation of the context and meaning of the data. Therefore, an understanding of the data should not be considered as generalizable interpretation of the data. It

is conceivable that a researcher with a different theoretical lens and perspective could make a dissimilar interpretation of the data.

Living While Black: Racism, Anxiety, Black Pride, and Dialogue

Black Twitter has been recognized as a counterpublic for Black users on Twitter who consistently use the space as a digital community to hold conversations of concern and interest to Black people (Graham & Shawn, 2016). They utilized the #BlackExperience hashtag to specifically articulate and express their thoughts and opinions about everyday racism, Black identity, and racial engagement. The #BlackExperience hashtag conversations were largely influenced by one key contributor: @KidNoble. This contributor, whose name appears as “Reggie Cunningham” under his Twitter username, facilitated and engaged with other Black Twitter users by consistently posing questions and encouraging users to tag their responses with the #BlackExperience hashtag. Following the national news stories about the University of Oklahoma’s chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) singing blatant racist chants, @KidNoble posed two questions that increased the use of #BlackExperience significantly.

In March 2015, according to an article in *Inside Higher Education*, SAE chapter members were heading to a formal event on a bus and singing a song with lyrics about lynching and exclaiming a “nigger” will never sign with their fraternity (“Deadliest and Most Racist,” 2015). In response to this incident, @KidNoble asked the following questions to Black Twitter users: 1) When was the last time you experienced blatant racism? 2) When was the first time you were called a nigger? These questions garnered several responses from Black Twitter users and @KidNoble maintained constant dialogue using the #BlackExperience hashtag by asking the following questions (not in order): 1) Have you ever been followed around a store because you were black? 2) When did you first become aware of your skin color? 3) What makes you proud

to be black? 4) How do you feel around police? Safe, or not? 5) Do you know anyone who's a victim of police brutality? 6) Why Black Girls Rock to you?

Sample and Themes

A total of 150 regular tweets were coded and analyzed for the #BlackExperience hashtag. **Table 3.1** (Appendix 2) illustrates how codes were created and how many codes filtered into each subsequent category. There were a total of 36 codes that were placed into eight categories. Of the 150 tweets, eight were coded as *Not Applicable* (NA) and unusable and 142 coded tweets that filtered into seven categories of analysis: Anxiety, Childhood, Encounters, Engagement, Law Enforcement, Participation, and Pride. **Chart 3.1** (Appendix 3) is a visual representation of the categories to which the codes were assigned, highlighting frequency. Finally, the categories were separated into the following three themes that emerged from the analysis: 1) Racism and the Everyday World, 2) Black Identity and Reflexivity, and 3) Expanding and Amplifying Racial Engagement.

Racism and the Everyday World

This theme comprised of three categories: 1) Childhood, 2) Encounters and 3) Law Enforcement. The categories *Childhood*, *Encounters* and *Law Enforcement* encompassed tweets from Black users sharing experiences with: adolescent racism, overt and covert microaggressions, stereotyping, and verbal and/or physical harassment. The *Law Enforcement* category contained tweets from users expressing opinions about police officers and experiences with police brutality.

Childhood: Racism in America appears to be inescapable for many Black Americans, as first encounters with racism are often reported at a very young age. Evidence suggests that children may experience racism in the classroom, in social settings at school, and unfortunately,

in their interactions with adults in their communities. Boutte et al. (2011) urged educators of young children to teach about race and racism. The authors insisted, “Young children learn racism through a variety of avenues such as interactions among adults in social settings, television (even children’s television), children’s books, and many other covert and overt ways. Therefore, homes, communities, schools, and society are not neutral spaces absent of racist overtones and actions” (n.p.).

Pediatrician and researcher Nia Heard-Garris, MD, MSc reported in her May 2018 personal narrative, *From the Mouths of Babes: Preschool Racism*, that her 4-year-old son experienced what she perceived to be a racial encounter with a White classmate. During playtime, this classmate told her son that he didn’t play with Black kids. As a result, the son casually mentioned that he wanted to be white so he could play with his friend. While he appeared unharmed, Dr. Heard-Garris, believed this encounter would have long-term negative consequences that could frame his self-concept and identity. Dr. Heard-Garris responded by explaining and encouraging his own Blackness and telling him stories about strong Black figures and role models. Despite her efforts, in her heart she feared that this would likely be the first of several racist incidents that he would experience in his lifetime.

In the *Childhood* category ($N=22$), tweets are reminiscent of Dr. Heard-Garris’ account of her son’s experiences with racism. Several responses in this category describe user’s personal experiences with verbal and/or physical racism, as well as recollections of incidents that happened to other people in the Black community. In this category, users acknowledge that their first awareness of their blackness and skin tone was a result of the racial incident. While there was an initial lack of understanding, their experiences caused the children to ask questions, feel a sense of anxiety, confusion, often disappointment, and begin developing an understand of

chasms that existed between Black and White folks. The following responses offer representative examples of expressed and perceived childhood racism:

Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3



Figure 3.4



A user recalled an experience he had as a teenager being physically assaulted by members of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) (the profile of this user was suspended after data was collected, thus a screengrab of the tweet is not available):

“at 13 years old.. my cousins & i were chased by klansmen in pulaski, tn; i still have the scar in my mouth bc he punched me #BlackExperience” (@QuikWest, 2015)

This excerpt is not unique as it parallels a history of violence against young Black children. History reports while visiting family in Mississippi, 14-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped and violently murdered in the late summer of 1955 after reportedly whistling at a White woman (Library of Congress, “The Murder of Emmett Till,” N.D.). Beaten to death, Emmett Till became a symbol of the violence and hatred inflicted on Black people in the United States and a reminder of injustice. Users conveyed feelings about their childhood encounters with racism years after they occurred. Childhood racism tends to have a lifelong negative impact on those experiencing these traumatic encounters. Racial discrimination is associated with negative mental health and substance abuse consequences for Black Youth (Assari et al., 2017 & Seaton et al., 2008).

@KidNoble commented:

Figure 3.5



Black Twitter in these instances becomes an outlet for sharing stories of traumatic incidents that users’ remember from their childhood. Connecting traumas that are similar in nature to other users offers a level of validation of their experiences and a digitized connectivity.

Encounters: Blacks in America have experienced a substantial amount of racial bias, discrimination, and racial violence. In 2017, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reported, “In the context of individual discrimination, a majority of African Americans have personally experienced racial slurs (51%) and people making negative assumptions or insensitive or offensive comments about their race (52%). Four in ten African Americans say people have acted afraid of them because of their race, and 42% have experienced racial violence” (p. 1). In recent years, a number of Blacks have been racially profiled while performing everyday activities. Outrage following the incidents resulted in instances where the accusers were given humorous nicknames from members of the Black community as a way of highlighting and underscoring the sad, unfortunate, and ridiculous nature of the baseless reports. One White woman after calling the police on a Black family she saw barbecuing in the city park, was given the moniker, “BBQ Becky.” A White woman who called the police on an eight-year-old Black girl for selling lemonade on the sidewalk “without a permit” was consequently named “Permit Patty.” In two separate cases On Yale University’s campus, a White female student, Sarah Braasch, called the police in outrage on two Black graduate students, Lolade Siyonbola and Reneson Jean-Louis, for sleeping in their dormitory common room.

In a startling case that received national attention, two Black men, sitting in Starbucks waiting for their White business associate were reported and ultimately arrested when a White employee deemed them suspicious for sitting without ordering. One was told that he could not use the restroom because he wasn’t a paying customer. Case after case of erroneous police reports have been made on Black people who were performing seemingly “regular” tasks or engaging in everyday activities. While Black Twitter users discussed their outrage, many added that these incidents were not new and often go unreported by many in the Black community.

Within the space Black Twitter, rage and sentiment could be explored in a controlled and somewhat safe environment.

Nineteen tweets described stories about microaggressions, racism, discrimination, stereotyping, racial profiling, and being verbally and/or physically harassed. Microaggressions are damaging for many Blacks living in the United States as demonstrated by users' comments. Sue et al. (2007) insisted, "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 273). In **Figure 3.6**, user *@BWofBrazil* writes about an encounter with a physician who made what she perceived to be insulting based on their physical appearance. In the following example in **Figure 3.7**, the user describes their perception of a white person's attraction to them based on race as a microaggression:

Figure 3.6



Figure 3.7



Internalized racism is an experience that adds an alternative viewpoint to the conversation relative to racial profiling. Internalized racism reveals a need to conform to Whiteness, which devalues a person's identity, race, or culture. Jones (2000) explained, "Internalized racism is defined as acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth. It is characterized by their not believing in others who look like them, and not believing in themselves" (p. 1213). In **Figure 3.8** and **Figure: 3.9**, two users validated this experience in their tweets:

Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9



Law Enforcement: Black Twitter users expressed their opinions and concerns in 13 tweets regarding police officers, police brutality, and their overall level of comfort with the police. Following the deaths of several young Black men and women at the hands of the police, rage has been heightened in the Black community. The untimely death of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Rekia Boyd, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, Korryn Gaines and many others has forced Black Twitter users to express a myriad of feelings from anger, grief, hopelessness, frustration, shock, fear, anxiety and discomfort. Along

et al. (2017) claimed, “Each episode of police brutality has emotional and physiological effects on individuals and communities” (p. 3). In **Figure 3.10**, user *@SoulfulBrotha* describes having a feeling of paranoia, possibly confusion and guilt, regarding how safe he feels around police:

Figure 3.10



Figure 3.11 shows another users’ feeling of disgust with police officers. They liken their behavior to being animalistic:

Figure 3.11



According to Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI, 2017), “A majority (57%) of Americans do not believe that police treat black Americans and members of other minority communities generally the same as whites” (n.p.). This reality may account for feelings of disdain and fear of police in the Black community. In **Figure 3.12** and **Figure 3.13** *@KidNoble* reveals an unfortunate reality that many in the Black community feel in relation to their fear of calling the police for help and being stopped by police:

Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13



Members of the Black community who have family members that are police officers, or know one personally, may feel conflicted as it relates to their personal feelings about police officers. While they may care for and respect their family members, there is also an unsettling and divergent perception about police and police brutality. **Figure 3.14** provides a depiction of a user who is experiencing this sense of conflicting thoughts:

Figure 3.14



Black Identity and Reflexivity

This theme was comprised of the two categories: 1) Anxiety and 2) Pride. Tweets in this theme consisted of Black users' negotiating their Black identity relative to others and themselves. A total of 19 tweets were coded as *Anxiety* and 33 tweets were coded as *Pride*.

Anxiety: In the category *Anxiety*, users expressed several thoughts and opinions about what it feels like to be Black. Users admitted feelings of anxiety, fear, exhaustion and fatigue associated with being Black. Everyday run-ins with racism and discrimination may be the root of some users' negative state of mind of mind with being Black and can affect Blacks present themselves to the world. Jones et al. (2007) emphasized, "The toxicity stemming from unfair race-based treatment can cause negative emotional reactions and stress." In **Figure 3.15**, user @Moeby_Slick reveals this idea:

Figure 3.15



In addition to the anxiety and hopelessness felt as a result of racist encounters, users described a fear and apprehension about birthing children into what they perceive as an often racist society. Black. **Figure 3.16** highlights this line of thinking:

Figure 3.16



Next, users in this category also discussed navigating their biracial identity. Literature on biracial and multicultural individuals suggests that there are unique ways these individuals identify racially and how they are treated by others. Rockquemore (2002) expounded, “While in the past, the offspring of interracial unions may have considered themselves to be biracial, they were recognized in society as Black. Today, the one-drop rule is slowly losing power over racial identity construction, accompanied by new hybrid categories of identity that reflect the changing nature of race relations in post–Civil Rights America” (p. 485). **Figures 3.17** and **Figure 3.18** showcase the layers of identity construction that exists for some individuals who are biracial and conversations about accepting these individuals in the Black community:

Figure 3.17



Figure 3.18



The final topic that appeared in this category was the appropriation of Black culture by non-Blacks. Cultural appropriation, the use of another groups symbols and rituals (Rogers, 2006), may leave individuals in the Black community feeling exhausted from attempting to protect their culture from others. In essence, many in the Black community may feel that while non-blacks

frequently use Black symbols and rituals, there is little appreciation of Blacks themselves.

Figure 3.19 and **Figure 3.20** address some users' ideas about appropriating Black culture. For

one user, other cultures perpetrate several facets of “being” that originated in Black culture.

While the other user expresses frustration with the emulation of Black culture by others without love for Black people.

Figure 3.19



Figure 3.20



Pride: In the article “Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity” Fouché (2006) wrote about the affordances that technology grants members of the Black community in terms of redeveloping positive self-narratives and affirmations. The author claimed:

“Currently tech-nology - even with the ever-growing volume of technological critiques is publicly understood to change society positively by making life more healthy, productive, and efficient, thus better. Americans are continually bombarded with seemingly endless self-regenerating progressive technological narratives. In this capitalist-supported tradition, the multiple effects that technology has on African American lives go under examined. This uplifting rhetoric has helped obfuscate the distinctly adversarial relationships African Americans have had with technology” (p. 640).

Users in this category reflect this use of technology to affirm their identities. An array of qualities and characteristics, both physical and non-physical, were mentioned as being reasons why they and other members of the Black community should have pride in themselves. In

Figure 3.21, one user asserted:

Figure 3.21

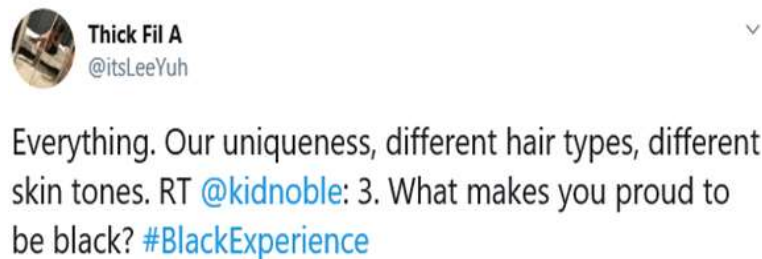


Figure 3.22 shows one users' adoration for his Black identity, and the ability to overcome the hardships and wrongdoings:

Figure 3.22



Black aesthetics (physical appearance and cultural underpinnings) are a major source of pride and self-love for many Blacks users. In **Figure 3.23** and **Figure 3.24**, users suggest that features such as hair textures and skin tone variations are reasons to be proud of their Blackness:

Figure 3.23**Figure 3.24**

In recent years there have been two popular movements, *Black Girls Rock!* (2006) and *Black Girls Magic*(2013), that specifically uplift the strength, power, and beauty of Black women and girls on social media and in other spaces. Both of these movements exemplify pride shown by Black women who are celebrated in a number of areas including but not limited to philanthropy, the arts, music and entertainment, and education. Black Girls Rock!, founded by former DJ and model Beverly Bond, hosted its first televised award show on BET to honor the achievements of Black women and girls. In the following examples, when asked by @KidNoble why Black girls rock (are amazing), users responded with a number of positive characteristics and affirmations:

Figure 3.25

Figure 3.26



Figure 3.27



Figure 3.28



Expanding and Amplifying Racial Engagement

The final theme that emerged from the data included the categories *Engagement* ($N=22$) and *Participation* ($N=14$). In these categories, current users encouraged expanded use of the hashtag among their followers. It is important to note that many of the tweets in these two categories were questions and comments posted by @KidNoble in his attempt to have other users join the conversation. In her book “Barbershops, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought,” author Melissa Victoria Harris-Lacewell (2004) explained that historically Black people have utilized several public social spaces, such as churches and barber shops and beauty salons, to discuss race, politics, entertainment, news and other issues relevant to their

communities and the country at large (Harris-Lacewell, 2004). In framing and understanding the political thought process that happens in “spaces of ordinary Black life,” Harris-Lacewell (2004) claimed:

“To more fully appreciate the political thought and action of African Americans, it is imperative to understand that these interactions are more than social. They are the spaces where African Americans jointly develop understandings of their collective interests and create strategies to navigate the complex political world. These strategies are best understood as ideologies, tied to a black intellectual tradition and alive in contemporary African American public opinion” (p. 1).

Currently, many racial and politically engaging conversations among young Black adults are manifested in public and private social media spaces like Black Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This discourse adds depth to conversations that would ordinarily only happen in the constraints of home or other social settings. Tynes et al. (2010) suggested that racial and ethnic identity formation for young adults is often developed in social media networking spaces through intraracial dialogue and discourse. Tynes et al. (2010) proposed that their online networks may give more freedom to display their true racial identity than the confines of offline surroundings. Tynes et al. (2010) argued, “In forging their identities online, participants are aided and perhaps emboldened by Internet contexts and online peers to ask important questions and to engage in critical dialogue” (p. 92). Examples of the honesty that is forged in these online spaces can be found in the following figures:

Figure 3.29



Figure 3.30

#ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies: A Configuration of Discussing Black Life

This section highlights the structure of how certain topics are explored on Black Twitter. Florini (2014) stressed that several interactions on Black Twitter are signifyin' games and exchanges between its users organized around hashtags. Since 2015, annually the hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies has provided discourse surrounding the celebration of Thanksgiving within Black families. Users post memes and GIFS that they believe symbolically express what they and other Black families across geographical boundaries are experiencing on Thanksgiving day from cooking, eating, recounting memories of times past, and sports and other forms of entertainment. Florini (2014) explained that memes serve as a vehicle for signifyin'. An additional way of signifyin' in current social media is the use of GIFS. Nostalgic memories about food and familial interactions are expressed through humor, language, "playing the dozens" (Nordquist, 2018), and textual and visual storytelling. The vast amount of retweets and likes displayed allude to unified comradery amongst Black community members on Twitter seemingly attempting to survive some funny and potentially uncomfortable family conversations, all while sharing a family meal.

The following three patterns emerged from the data coding and analysis of 150 regular tweets from November 23, 2015: Black Emotion: The Infusion of Language, GIFS, Memes, and

Visual Culture, Black Popular Culture as Proxy and Figured Worlds and Black Familial Positionality.

Black Emotion: The Infusion of Language, GIFS, Memes, and Visual Culture

The first pattern that emerged from the data analysis is the practice of communicating an emotional feeling related to the Thanksgiving holiday using GIFS, memes, and African American humor. The #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies hashtag functions in two ways. First, Black users participating in the #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies hashtag conversation have adopted social media's culture of using memes and GIFS to celebrate, critique, and laugh about their experiences. In their paper "Predicting Viewer Perceived Emotions in Animated GIFs," Jou et al. (2014) discussed the role of GIFs in today's society, which has ultimately influenced the curation and use of memes. The authors argued, "Meanwhile, animated GIFs have quickly become a channel for visually expressing emotion in our modern society. Their role in popular culture has even contributed to the rise of widely, rapidly spread cultural references called *memes*" (p. 213). Often rather than using words to describe a feeling, a socially acceptable and popular trend has been the use of GIFS and memes in lieu of phrases. However, in this case, both GIFS and memes and text are used together, typically, to communicate a message.

Second, users assert Black racial identity that is performed online through several rhetorical and oral traditions, like signifyin' and storytelling. Florini (2014) claimed:

"Verbal performance, linguistic resources, and modes of interaction are key means through which Black users perform their racial identities on Twitter. One such cultural resource is the practice of "signifyin'." Signifyin' is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and, as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels. The very act of signifyin' is a powerful performance of Black cultural identity because it indexes the genre's previous instantiations, and the sociocultural contexts in which it was cultivated and practiced" (p. 224).

This statement implies that race in online spaces for Blacks is created and represented through a number of simultaneously used verbal and oral techniques adopted by most Blacks online.

These commonly used anecdotes and phrases among Blacks from different parts of the world with varied experiences produce an uncanny relatability through discourse discovered on social media. Further, Florini (2014) argued:

“For generations, as Black Americans navigated an environment of hostile racial oppression, signifyin’ offered a site of resistance and allowed for double-voiced and encoded communication. A deeply collaborative practice, signifyin’ has traditionally fostered group solidarity in Black American communities. Dexterous use of language and skilled verbal performance are key elements of signifyin’, and such performances have historically served important roles in the creation and preservation of Black communities” (p. 226).

Together memes, GIFS, commonly used phrases, signifyin’, and humor strengthen and increase a communicated message between Black users. In order to fully participate in the conversation, users must understand Black cultural and social references and traditions, Black oral and linguistic expressions, the GIF and meme, as well as any imbedded text that alludes to the sentiment being communicated. Florini acknowledged, “Signifyin’ generally involves elements of humor and displays of wit, and at times may seem frivolous to the uninitiated” (p. 224). Thus, without a Black cultural competency, you cannot actively engage in the conversation.

For example, in **Figure 3.31** a user shared a meme signifying a widely held stereotype about Blacks sleeping following a big family meal, called the “itis.”

Figure 3.31



In another instance, in **Figure 3.32** another user signifies in a meme that not all the food will be tasty but that you can't publicly insult the cook. In turn, you try to hide the discarding and wasting of food. This is perceived as another cultural behavior related to having manners.

Figure 3.33



Black Popular Culture as Proxy

A significant pattern that emerged from the data reflects how Black popular culture becomes a representation of Black cultural tradition expressed on Twitter through the use of images and GIFS. In regard to the relationship between popular cultures and its people, Stuart Hall (1993) asserted:

“Popular culture carries that affirmative ring because of the prominence of the word ‘popular’. And, in one sense, popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experiences of ordinary folks (p. 472).”

Black celebrities, movies, and television shows become a means to communicate familiarity with Black culture and Black identity. More important are the Black cultural nuances assumed to be relevant and recognizable among Black users. In order to understand what is being communicated means that users should have an appreciation of Black cultural relevance and the accompanying text in the tweet which makes Black Twitter possible. While there is some appreciation, shared knowledge, and experience being drawn upon and Black popular culture is often consumed widely, sometimes it may not be fully understood and can be taken out of context.

In **Figure 3.34**, a meme including mogul Oprah Winfrey and activist Al Sharpton depicting the ever present concern about the quality of a favorite dish and the skepticism about the cook.

Figure 3.34

Similarly, **Figure 3.35** illustrates a cultural phenomena that suggests that family members are keeping score of how much you are eating.

Figure 3.35

Figured Worlds and Black Familial Positionality

Members of the Black community often identify themselves in terms of their interactions with members of their families. Black familial roles are unique, thus particular archetypes have been shaped, formed and widely accepted. Black mothers, fathers, aunties, and cousins in different families share common characteristics and behaviors.

Black Twitter users illustrate the concept of identity building in “figured worlds” as part of their identity is linked to their relationship with members of their families. According to Holland et al. (1998), “Figured worlds rest upon people’s abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized ‘as if’ realms.” Similarly, the authors suggest that a collective understanding of the realm, in this case the Black family, forms the worlds that people live and function within. Within the Black family, there are agreed upon meanings to activities, interactions, relationships, and roles.

Identity construction for members of the Black community is partially linked to their roles in the family and the archetypes of family members that shape interactions, expectations and the familial identity of those in their families. There is a distinct way that members of the Black family are described and narrated in stories shared with one another. In order to actively participate and decipher the underlying meanings and humor shared through conversations like #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies, one must be able to have an understanding of Black positional familial identities and the Black figured world. Further, Urrieta (2007) explained:

“In figured worlds, people learn to recognize each other as a particular sort of actor, sometimes with strong emotional attachments, value certain outcomes over others, and recognize and attach significance to some acts and not others. Whether people are drawn into or recruited into them, or by some other means enter particular figured worlds, depends on who they are and their personal social history (history-in-person)” (p. 108).

For example, **Figure 3.36** displays the notion and value of the familial hierarchy in Black families that suggests elders, such as grandparents, have the final say in decisions that perhaps overrides a parent’s rule and authority with their own children. Thus, in this hierarchy sometimes in the favor of the children involved, as the meme suggests with the smirk on his face.

Figure 3.36



In **Figure 3.37**, a user recants how aunts and uncles in Black families who often fabricate stories about the “good old days,” regrets, or what could have been.

Figure 3.37



Finally, **Figure 3.38** depicts that one family member who exposes “family secrets,” deems herself the moral authority, and is seen as the person who relays the family gossip in Black families.

Figure 3.38

Conclusion: Connective Discourse and Unity on Black Twitter

This chapter sheds light on topics discussing verbal harassment, physical assault, racial profiling, police brutality, and Black pride and the structure of conversations on Black Twitter through #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies. A total of 300 tweets were coded and analyzed through textual analysis of text and images. The reading of the texts and images suggests that discourse on Black Twitter connects and strengthens the relatability of Blacks with each other across geographical boundaries. Articulations and linguistic expressions of lived experiences online may have the ability to bridge gaps between Blacks more than location may separate them.

The implications of this chapter are not meant to be generalized. As stated earlier in the chapter and in the introduction, this dissertation is exploratory and a purposive sample of data was collected and analyzed in this chapter. What should also be noted here are the limitations of working with small data sets, some voices not included may render additional representations and meanings not summarily reflected in this analysis.

This chapter informed the data collection and analysis for the next two chapters. In Chapter Four, the #AskRachel hashtag investigates how Blackness as an identity is negotiated via Black users. In Chapter Five, a Focus group is conducted with undergraduate and graduate Black identifying students to examine their articulations and understanding of Black Twitter and their usage of the space. In the concluding chapter, Chapter Six, theoretical frameworks are revisited for the purposes of making connections between the findings, critiquing the limitations of the dissertation and provide suggestions for future research.

Chapter IV: Black Is, Black Ain't: #AskRachel, Racial Passing, and Blackness

This chapter uses textual analysis to investigate prominent themes in the commentary posted at the hashtag #AskRachel. The chapter explores how Black Twitter users negotiated their racial identity as they debated and expressed opinions regarding the Rachel Dolezal controversy. The chapter begins with a brief summary and presentation of relevant literature centered on several of the controversial events surrounding Rachel Dolezal, including racial passing and the subsequent creation and purpose of the hashtag #AskRachel. This particular controversy allows for a deeper investigation of how race, specifically Blackness, is negotiated online. Background of the controversy is necessary for understanding the context in which the #AskRachel hashtag was created. The second section of this chapter contains a description of the research questions and methodology. In the third section of this chapter, the findings of the textual analysis are presented with supporting literature and exemplary tweets purposely selected from the data, followed by a discussion of the themes and patterns that emerged. The final and concluding section summarizes the implications of the space created by #AskRachel for racial identity formation.

Forging Black Identity: Rachel Dolezal and “Transracial” Politics

Born as Rachel Anne Dolezal on November 12, 1977, Ms. Dolezal officially changed her name in October 2016 to Nkechi Amare Diallo following the public exposure by her parents, Ruthanne Dolezal and Lawrence Dolezal for passing herself as Black (NPR). Ms Diallo, a white woman who reportedly identified her ethnicity as Black on employment applications, legal filings that were ultimately dismissed, and other documents was outed publicly by her white parents for falsifying her identity. In June 2015, as detailed in Chapter One, in an article titled “*Black Like Me? Civil Rights Activist’s Ethnicity Questioned*,” Dolezal’s Caucasian parents

outed her as being white to several local and mainstream news networks, providing her birth certificate for evidence of her authentic racial identity.

In 2002 as a student at Howard University, Ms. Diallo sued the university indicating that she felt discriminated against as a white woman. According to a CNN news report, “She specifically alleged that the decision to remove some of her artwork from a student exhibition was motivated by a discriminatory desire to favor black students over her. The suit was dismissed” (Dolezal Sued Howard section, 2015, para. 1). The same report explained that Dolezal began to associate herself with African-Americans increasingly in 2007 and had allegedly urged her Black adopted brothers not to reveal her true identity. In a March 2017 *Washington Post* article, the journalist, Cleve R. Wootson, Jr., reported that Ms. Diallo made a post on her Facebook page asserting that the Black gentleman standing next to her was her father. Ms. Diallo’s request to her adopted brothers to hide her identity and her Facebook post about her “father,” validate Ms. Diallo’s continued and seemingly intentional misrepresentation of her truth as it relates to birth ethnicity.

Prior to her fabrications being exposed, Ms. Diallo claimed to have been the victim of racial hate crimes, and those claims were dismissed after police investigations decided the evidence in the cases was not sufficient. Though Dolezal’s racial heritage does not include African Ancestry, she is mother to two biracial boys. Additionally, at the time of the reports surfacing, Dolezal was Africana Studies adjunct professor at Eastern Washington University (EWU) and President of the Spokane, Washington NAACP. Immediately following the incident, Dolezal resigned from her NAACP presidency, her EWU contract was not renewed, and her online biography was removed from the university website.

In initial posts online and during offline conversations, members of the Black community wondered and questioned a person's willingness to self-identify as Black in the current social climate, often questioning what that person perceived as the "gain" in passing as Black. Considering the ever-present attack on Blackness and Black bodies, Blacks in America struggle to feel safe in their skin and to avoid the societal ills of racial hate crimes, violence, and criminalization in the United States. Moreover, the controversy surrounding this topic has also unfolded in relation to the deeper rooted history of *racial passing* and racial ambiguity that will be discussed in the next section.

Immediately following heightened discussions surrounding Ms. Diallo's "transracial" identity claims, Black Twitter users began a signifyin' exchange (Florini, 2014) using the hashtag #AskRachel to humorously ask questions viewed as relevant to Black culture and Black racial identity development. As mentioned in the literature review, humor in the Black community is often used to diffuse the tension and seriousness of having difficult and complex conversations. Through the use of signifyin' and memes and GIFS, users posed a variety of culturally relevant (you'd have to be Black, only know/understand this if you're Black) questions to each other to "test" and declare what constitutes authentic Blackness.

Two significant works provide a framework for Black Twitter discussions about racial and gender identity. Brubaker (2016) reviewed the difference in transgender claims and race identity claims through the framework of *transgender vs. transracial*. Parallels have been significantly noted about one's ability and societal acceptance, to change gender identity with less fanfare than an individual's ability to assign themselves to a different race. The second study conducted by Stevens and Maurantonio (2018) examined #AskRachel by qualitative content analysis. Using Florini (2015) as the guiding principle for their study, they analyzed 693 of the

385,000 tweets recorded. The 693 tweets selected represent those tweets that had been retweeted more than 50 times. The analysis found that 93.8% of the #AskRachel tweets used signifying as a method of discrediting and disrespecting Ms. Diallo's performance as a Black woman. Stevens and Maurantoni (2018) argued, "The patterns of the #AskRachel tweets reinforce the centrality of signifyin' as a tool for social critique of identifying the cultural competencies deemed lacking for Dolezal to claim Blackness as her identity" (p. 192). Ultimately, Stevens and Maurantonio (2018) is insisting that Black identity is complex and is troubled through signifyin' on Black Twitter. The ability to craft culturally significant questions, as the authors suggest, demands one to understand the cultural context of the question, why it resonates with Black users, and a deployment of cultural capital. Thus, though one who is not Black may be able to answer the questions posed, that alone does not qualify them to claim Black identity.

Varying methods of qualitative data analysis can produce different results and interpretations depending on the purpose of the study and research questions posed. First, this dissertation builds on their qualitative content analysis by using textual analysis to make meaning of the messages in the tweets from the #AskRachel hashtag without the use of frequencies or percentages to qualify salience in the conversation. Although this analysis produced similar findings to their study, additional themes emerged based on the research questions in this study and specific process of coding, categorizing, and interpreting guided by Gee (2005). Some of the variance in the results was influenced by the data collection method that included analyzing the #AskRachel conversation one week after its initial usage. Finally, this dissertation builds on these previous studies by adding focus groups in order to provide greater insight and higher levels of interpretation of those selected to respond to the #AskRachael hashtag. Additionally, through the use of focus group investigation and analysis, triangulation of

the data was added to examine divergent viewpoints and to minimize researcher biases that may have existed by using a single research [collection and interpretation] method.

Between Two Worlds: A (Very) Brief History of Racial Passing in the United States

The goal of this section is to provide an understanding of the historical significance of both the overarching concept of passing and racial passing. This discourse is necessary to understand one of many underlying concerns that may exist within the Black community regarding the problematic Rachel Dolezal controversy. Several scholars have discussed and defined the broader concept of passing. According to Fordham (1993), "Passing" implies impersonation, acting as if one is someone or something one is not" (p. 3). This chapter focuses on the phenomenon of racial passing. According to Khanna and Johnson (2010), "Racial passing has generally been understood as a phenomenon in which a person of one race identifies and presents himself or herself as another (usually white)" (p. 380). Passing for white has a deeply painful and complex history and in discussions of passing for white, one controversial, yet seemingly overlooked issue has been the role of the one-drop rule and its influence on racial identity construction.

The one-drop rule has long played a part in how others have racially defined African Americans. Only defined within the United States, the "one-drop rule," a social and legal principle of racial classification historically used as the primary deciding factor for assigning someone a "Black" racial identity, dictated that a person who had "one drop" of Black blood, was considered Black. Although never codified into federal law, this outdated rule that has a long and troubled history in shaping racial interactions in the South, is still being referenced as a starting point in many cases related to how people are racially identified. The rise of miscegenation, racial interbreeding, between Black and white persons was the catalyst for the

implementation of the rule in the south, many incidents were the result of white slave owners raping Black female slaves. It was often viewed by Southern whites that the biracial offspring of rape victims threatened the purity of the white race. Khanna (2010) argued:

“With the reality of miscegenation, mulatto children posed problems to the strict color line separating black and white. Where did they belong? Free or enslaved? To deal with the growing number of multiracial children, an informal one-drop rule was born in the South—anyone with any known trace of black blood was considered black. Thus, mulatto children of enslaved mothers were classified as black and remained slaves, which provided an economic asset to white slave owners” (p. 98).

The one-drop rule in the South was an example of the racist adoption of a “legal” definition of Blackness (Davis, 1991; Brubaker, 2016) that was really intended to protect whiteness. Further, the one-drop rule afforded slave owners the ability to justify the mass enslavement of white-appearing individuals and later enforce strict race-based social and relational norms that lasted through the Jim Crow era (Khanna, 2010). Sadly during that time, being caught “crossing the color line” (whether passing for white or being involved in an interracial relationship or sexual encounter) could have serious consequences, including even death.

Jordan (2014) debated that in the current social racial climate, people in the United States persistently continue to function in relation to this outdated “rule” and standard without question or understanding. In describing the one-drop rule and its continued impact on current American society, Jordan (2014) explained:

In this country, the social standard for individuals is superficially simple: if a person of whatever age or gender is believed to have any African ancestry, that person is regarded as black. Basically, by this social rule, a person was, and is, either black or not. Any person of racially or ethnically mixed descent who has some “Negro blood” has been or still is regarded as “colored,” or “African,” or “Negro,” or “black,” or “Afro-American,” or “African American”—whatever designation has prevailed by convention at the time” (p. 99).

An “American notion” (Gosselin, 1998), passing for white often assumed that an individual was committing an act of racial deception—the notion that a Black person was concealing a Black

racial identity to “cross the color line” to white. However, Khanna and Johnson (2010) emphasized, “Passing as white was especially attractive during the Jim Crow era when blacks had few rights and opportunities, yet little is known about racial passing today. Some scholars argue that given the increase in opportunities for Black Americans, passing is a relic of the past” (p. 381). Thus, inequitable circumstances and limited opportunities essentially became the motive for passing for white. There were, and still are, basic privileges afforded to those who pass for white and have lighter skin in America.

In some melodramatic films that portray characters who pass for white, the subject has been deemed as only deceptive, often obscuring and trivializing the complicated history of racial passing of mixed raced individuals. These narratives often critique, criticize, and diminish the experiences of individuals who have, intentionally or unintentionally, been able to benefit from their ability to pass for white regardless of their reasons. The question of passing for survival versus desire in these texts is often a site of contestation, undermining the need for the former. One noteworthy film representation of a character passing for white was in the 1934 movie *Imitation of Life* featuring two legendary Black actresses, Fredi Washington (Peola) and Louise Beavers (Delilah). In the film, Washington plays a young woman who is at odds with her racial identity. From an early age, she has the desire and ability to completely reject her Black ethnicity. As a mixed race individual with a lighter skin complexion passed down from her father, her skin tone afforded her the ability to pass for white. As a passing white girl and woman, Peola was able to attend an all-white school and is granted additional privileges thereafter that come with being white that were inaccessible to her mother. The rejection of her Blackness in this film came at the price of having a strained relationship with her mother, Delilah, until her death in the film. One of the most memorable and emotional scenes is when

Peola runs out of the church after the funeral and sobs heavily seeing her mother's casket as it is being placed in the hearse.

Author Charlene B. Regester's book on the visibility of African-American actresses from the 1900s-1960s discusses the subsequent critical and negative responses about Washington's character portrayal in Chapter 4 titled "Freda Washington: The Masquerades and the Masks." In this chapter, Regester (2010) argued:

"While steadfastly denying that she sought whiteness, Washington was vilified for her screen role in *Imitation of Life* and forced to assume a defensive posture to extricate herself from the mulatto role. Despite this controversy and some noteworthy commonalities between actress and character, the prevailing evidence is that the similarity between Washington and Peola was only skin deep and that Freda Washington was unlike Peola. Though Washington and Peola were born with masks of whiteness (they were white mulattoes), Washington's performance as Peola was merely and only a masquerade" (pgs. 107-108).

Peola's eager need and persistence to align herself with Whiteness in the film was a representation that many Blacks did not welcome, considering this was an era when they were trying to defy and resist the perpetuation of negative stereotypical characters. While Washington's off-screen racial identity and community involvement did not mimic her characters' desire for Whiteness, she was met with disdain by many Black audience members.

Although the film conveys the message that passing as white as a route to seek upward mobility is ultimately unfulfilling and tragic, *Imitation of Life* continues to be one of the most critiqued and mentioned film representations that romanticized the desire versus the need for some Blacks to pass as white. Further, the storyline offered a melodramatic tale of the negative trope of the tragic mulatto. Gosselin (1998) explained, "The narrative of passing-for-white is embodied in the trope of the tragic mulatto, a figure characterized by betrayal and race-denial, haunted by racial impurity, and whose very body bears the stigma of relations unsanctionable in the United States" (p. 047). The *Imitation of Life* theme fixated on Peola's betrayal of the Black

race and her seemingly deceptive ability to “hide” her Blackness in white spaces as opposed to the representing the pressures and necessity of racial passing that was inevitable for someone in a pre-Jim Crow racially segregated America.

Recent studies on racial passing have shed new light on biracial and multiracial individuals passing as Black, which previous studies had not addressed. Piper (2016) addressed this idea in relation to biracial individuals in America and how they “do” identity work in the current racial and social climate. In some instances, the work of being Black requires proving it through stories based on racial experience. Piper (2016) recounted:

“And I have sometimes met blacks socially who, as a condition of social acceptance of me, require me to prove my blackness by passing the Suffering Test: They recount at length their recent experiences of racism and then wait expectantly, skeptically, for me to match theirs with mine. Mistaking these situations for a different one in which an exchange of shared experiences is part of the bonding process, I instinctively used to comply” (p. 6-7).

Thus, Black biracial Americans often feel they must use shared experiences with other members of the Black community, in addition to declaring their Black biological racial composition, to stake their claims for Black identity and for their membership in Black culture.

When the US Census was modified in 2000, multiracial individuals were provided with additional and more racially appropriate options to self-identify their racial identity. This has expanded the ways that people “do” and articulate race in America. The overarching takeaway is that Black identity and Blackness is complicated. Black-identifying individuals in the United States continue to safeguard who can be Black and how Blackness is performed based on past racial traumas associated with passing for white and possible repercussions of crossing the “color line” that infringed upon and threatened white racial purity. The perception of many Blacks, based on the data collected from the #AskRachel hashtag, is that non-Black individuals do not have the privilege of self-identifying as Black in order to benefit from the Black experience.

Conversely, identity work can be difficult for some Black and biracial individuals who appear white or are considered to “act white” to align themselves with Blackness because other Blacks don’t believe they are “Black enough” no matter the biological racial composition (Piper, 1992). An acknowledgement and brief explanation of this complex racial identity production in regard to Black identity and passing is necessary and was provided to lay the foundation for how the researcher considered, evaluated, and analyzed this particular underlying conflict associated with Rachel Dolezal and the #AskRachel tweets.

Research Questions and Methodology

The following research question and sub-questions emerged from an exhaustive review of literature on online communications, racial formation, and Black Twitter.

RQ2: What kinds of questions and meanings about Black racial experience and culture did the hashtag #AskRachel provoke?

1. What are the major themes that emerge from the tweets using #AskRachel?
2. How is Blackness defined on Black Twitter using #AskRachel?
3. How are race and ethnicity negotiated in the tweets using #AskRachel?
4. How are culture and identity negotiated in the tweets using #AskRachel?

This chapter applied textual analysis to categorize themes, patterns, and metaphors within the hashtag #AskRachel. Using discourse analysis as a primary tool of interpretation, meanings were drawn from the discussions within the tweets. Gee (2005) argued that things in society are built through language and that there are “seven building tasks” of language which include: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, and sign systems and knowledge (p. 11-13). In order to identify units, emerging themes, and categories from the tweets, questions that correspond to each of these seven building tasks were utilized. During

analysis and coding of the tweets, not all questions were relevant for the researcher to pose for each tweet (Gee, 2005). In the same way, each of the questions were not answered in the analysis as the questions posed served more so as guidelines, particularly for the scaffolding of the analysis. The questions are (p. 11-13):

- 1) How is this piece of language being used to make certain things *significant* or not and in what ways?
- 2) What activity or *activities* is this piece of language being used to enact?
- 3) What identity or *identities* is this piece of language being used to enact?
- 4) What sort of *relationship* or *relationships* is this piece of language seeking to enact with others (present or not)?
- 5) What *perspective on social goods* is this piece of language communicating?
- 6) How does this piece of language *connect* or *disconnect* things; how does it make one thing relevant or irrelevant to another?
- 7) How does this piece of language privilege or disprivilege specific sign systems or different ways of knowing and believing or claims to knowledge and belief?

Data Collection and Sample

For the purpose of this study, 450 regular tweets were collected and analyzed. Using Rightler-McDaniels and Hendrickson (2014) peak 24-hour methodology, the researcher analyzed 300 tweets gathered from Day 1 of the #AskRachel hashtags initial usage. Additionally, the researcher examined 150 tweets from Day 7 of the hashtag. Yardi and Boyd (2010) asserted that social media traffic is heaviest during this early period and later tweets could be subject to incongruities amongst heavy users and outliers. The peak 24 hours that will be the scope of Day 1 were gathered on June 12, 2015, the day after the news story aired featuring Rachel Dolezal's

parents admitting that their biological daughter was white and not in fact, Black. The tweets for Day 7 were collected on June 18, 2015. Several example tweets from the data are used throughout this chapter to illustrate the themes and patterns that emerged from the analysis. The findings from this phase of the methodology informed some of the questions used in **Phase 3** (Chapter 5) of this dissertation.

Black Is Biologically and Culturally Constructed

Race and racial formation are two topics that have been debated and contested for decades. Universal and concrete definitions of these concepts have yet to be determined and are generally nebulous. Scholars have also argued about definitive ways to research and analyze race. In response to the #AskRachel exchange on Black Twitter, users' tweets determined that Blackness is both a biological and cultural construct. Based on examples from the data and conceptualizations offered by racial identity scholars, Black identity comes across as constructed, inherent, and contested in the digital media sphere.

Biologically Black: Physical Appearance, Black Hair, and Ancestral Lineage

Previous theories supporting that race was biologically constructed did so to delegitimize the intelligence of persons from other races. According to Goodey (as cited in Lester & Gabriel, 2014), losses in human rights, forced sterilizations and assumptions of incompetence have been the result of arguments surrounding the truth of intelligence and the mental intelligence of minorities. Biological determinism and markings of racial difference were primarily used to justify slavery and racism. Unjust laws and social norms based on race as a biological construct allowed whites to implement institutional, structural, and systematic forms of racism, such as the 'One-drop' rule discussed earlier in this chapter. How Caucasians scientifically researched and defined Black identity and Blackness resulted in negative connotations and consequences for

Black communities around the world. These conceptualizations of race helped white Americans to frame and accept theories that supported their ideologies of White supremacy, which proposed that Whites were economically and educationally superior to Blacks.

Studies related to scientific racism suggested that Black people were anatomically different and in many cases larger and primitive when compared to whites. The racist researcher then validated the dehumanizing notion that Blacks were more sexually and physically aggressive. In one such incident (McKittrick, 2010; Henderson, 2014), the body of Sarah Baartman, who reportedly died in Paris in 1815 and also known publicly as “Hottentot Venus,” was posthumously dismembered and dissected for the purpose of biological (race) determinism and gender difference. Her body parts were on display in the Museum of Natural History in Paris, France until 2002 when her remains were transported to Hankey, South Africa for burial. Such studies related to race and inferiority span decades in attempts to classify Black as a different and inferior species.

Ancestral lineage is important to the biological makeup of Black Americans that share DNA to the ancestors that were forcibly transported across the Atlantic to the United States and then in many cases, raped by those of non-Black descent. While their DNA may have changed as well as some of the physical features, the basis for Black identifying persons, ancestral difference and lineage remains sacred and the basis of their Black identity. Zack (2017) noted, "Even though they change as social constructions, American racial identities have stability that can be related in historical, familial, and generational accounts of how they become constructed" (p.3). Many Blacks often still suffering the effects, noted by one scholar to be post-traumatic slave syndrome (DeGruy-Leary, 2005), that exceeds time as they link this historical event to their own

Blackness and identity in the current social media era. **Figure 4.1** highlights one user's reference of The Middle Passage to Ms. Diallo's validation of Black identity.

Figure 4.1



On Black Twitter, Blacks have been able to recognize and acknowledge the biological features of Blackness and appreciate them. Though not a direct response to previous studies that devalue Blackness, Black Twitter inverts the notion of the negative connotations often associated with biological racial differences as those worthy of praise and celebration, and as those that denote and define the richness and diversity recognized within the Black race. An example from the tweets that signify biological differences are users' references to Black women's hair texture and hair care. While the thought about white women's hair care may be seen as relatively simple, Black women's hair care involves caring for her hair, a daily routine, and maintenance that is totally different from white women, but that results in hair care being a cultural experience. The pride and historical prominence of Black hair is widely known and shared among those of African descent. For example, users responses in **Figure 4.2**, **Figure 4.3**, and **Figure 4.4** discuss differences in hair texture and knowing how to properly prevent hair damage.

Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4



Tweets related to Blackness as biological construct suggest that there is a shared opinion among Black Twitter users that Black biological differences don't have to subscribe to the negative connotations found in scientific research. Black Twitter users were openly calling attention to and recognizing the beauty and uniqueness of their physical features rather than as features that should be feared and devalued. Blacks are assertive about and eager to re-humanize what is often dehumanized by non-Blacks in the space of Black Twitter and other digital mediaspheres.

Experience and Popular Culture as Black Cultural Constructs

The tweets collected and analyzed for the purposes of this study are consistent with the findings of Stevens and Maurantonio (2018) that defined Blackness by shared experience and widely acknowledged, accepted, and recognized cultural traditions and popular culture. Analyzing the influential W.E.B. DuBois book, *Souls of Black Folks*, Wilson (1999) suggested that DuBois was urging for an understanding of what Black “means” as opposed to what Black “is” that moved away from biological determinism, suggesting that social practice is a determinative factor in racial identity construction as well. Based on his exploration of DuBois’ work, Wilson (1999) suggested that DuBois foreshadowed a current and contemporary discursive theory of racial identity. DuBois’ critical analysis of racial identity gives credence to power inherent in the “marriage” of social norms and lived experiences that create meaning and social consciousness, Black subjectivity, and ultimately the formation of Black identity. Further, in regard to ethnic and cultural conceptions of Black identity, Shelby (2002) asserted:

There are two dominant ethnic conceptions of black identity. One emphasizes the fact that black people are descendants of certain subSaharan African peoples, and it maintains that they share a culture that is traceable to the culture of those ancestors. The other stresses both the experiences of blacks with oppression in the New World and the rich culture they have created in the context of that oppression since being forcibly removed from Africa. On both versions, though, one does not have a black ethnic identity unless one both has the relevant biological ancestry and embraces the appropriate cultural traits” (p. 241).

Thus, there is seemingly no way to co-opt Black identity and Blackness as it is a combination of African biological ancestry and lived cultural experiences that creates a complete Black identity. Altogether, familiarity with the culture, social practices, language, traditions, and the evolutions in beliefs and cultural practices are important to claiming Black identity for users participating in the #AskRachel conversation.

Figure 4.5, Figure 4.6, and Figure 4.7 exemplify users’ recognition of cultural activities that serve as markers of Blackness and Black identity that are specific to Black life and culture.

Figure 4.5**Figure 4.6****Figure 4.7**

Among Black Twitter users using the hashtag #AskRachel, there is a correlation between social activities (i.e., parties, outings, religious associations, and memberships in Black Greek organizations, and other affiliations) and the Black racial experience.

Black popular culture and entertainment allow further engagement with Black identity. **Figure 4.8**, **Figure 4.9**, and **Figure 4.10** describe users' experiences with popular culture and entertainment. Based on the data, Blackness is a biological construct that is strengthened by Black lived experiences and cultural activities involving language and popular culture. There

was an increase in enrollment at HBCUs following the popularity of *The Cosby Show*, *A Different World*, and other shows and films depicting the strength of the Black family and school that embraced the importance of education and Black culture (Watson, 2016). As a result of similar shows such as *Good Times* featuring strong Black families and the presence of Black male role models, Blacks began to see themselves as healthy, strong families working together to raise independent and socially productive members of society. The hashtag #AskRachel makes the assumption that unless Rachel has general familiarity with these well-known and highly viewed shows and films and the issues raised within these shows, it is highly likely that Ms. Dolezal is in fact co-opting Blackness. The general assumption is that Black individuals would adamantly know that: the fictitious Hillman College was located in Virginia, the word “damn” was passionately vocalized three times by Florida Evans following the untimely passing of her husband James, and Craig was hilariously fired on his day off.

Figure 4.8



Figure 4.9



Figure 4.10

Black is Constructed in the Black Family

Another pattern that emerged from the #AskRachel hashtag is the concept that many Black Twitter users gain perspective of Black identity from their interactions and conversations within their families. They learn elements of their history, culture, and Black family traditions from their family of origin, including parents, grandparents, cousins, and other [close] family and friends. Demo and Hughes (1990) suggested there are several significant determining factors of Black identity that include: interpersonal relations with family and friends, religious involvement, socioeconomic status, interracial interaction, and age. Demo and Hughes (1990) further maintain that familial relations are significant to childhood socialization and focused learning.

As **Figure 4.11**, **Figure 4.12**, and, **Figure 4.13** display users' Black identity is often closely linked to their unique interactions and conversations that may not be familiar to those outside of the Black family. The figures below are representative of conversations that are widely held and the answers commonly known for Black individuals. Different communities, for example, may have different norms for disciplining children. Non-black families may consider the ways that Black families discipline and socialize their children as excessive and needing correction. Common and "popular" colloquial phrases and household rules used by Black parents are recognized to be cultural "rites of passage" for Black youth at a certain age and grade. The

children of a Black mother, when asked, “What did you say?” knows that the question is a rhetorical one and if smart, the child will NOT answer the question. A Black child would also understand that whatever answer s/he provides as a result, would be seen as defiant and whatever answer when provided, would be unwelcome and would earn the perception of being viewed as a smart aleck, “know it all!” Placing a high value on respect for one’s elders, Black children are socialized to know when and what to say to the Black parent or grandparent, aunt, uncle, or cousin. In the examples below, users responding to the #AskRachel hashtag, understand that within the Black community, the answers to the questions are commonly known if you were born, raised, and socialized within the Black community.

Figure 4.11



Figure 4.12



Figure 4.13

Black Twitter users using the hashtag #AskRachel are nostalgic about what it meant to grow up as a Black child with Black parents. The users imply that to be Black means to have Black parents and to have had particular experiences that are rooted within the cultural beliefs and values of Black communities.

Black is Not a Monolith

There is no single definition that can capture Blackness, nor is there a static, “one size fits all” racial conceptualization for Black identifying persons. It is understood that there is diversity in Black identity related to age, income, physical appearance, commonly held stereotypes by non-Black individuals, preferences for representation as in “Who speaks for Black folks,” language, slang, and culture based on geographical location. The data in this theme point to a diverse understanding of Black culture that at times is still being debated without resolution. In **Figure 4.14**, debate ensued about whether Aunt Viv, from the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, was light skinned or dark skinned after the actress, Janet Hubert-Whitten, was replaced in Season Four of the show by a lighter skinned actress, Daphne Maxwell Reid. The debate was heavy and in some instances, controversial about which Aunt Viv was preferred among Black individuals. Some aspects of what is deemed as Black may not be familiar or important to everyone in the Black community. Some behaviors ascribed to Black folks are mere unhealthy stereotypes. The user in **Figure 4.15** asks, “Big Luther or Skinny Luther?” Without considering the health consequences

of such a debate in the Black community, Black folks were unable to agree which Luther was preferred or which comedian was the funniest on the Kings of Comedy, as illustrated in **Figure 4.16**. It is also reasonable to understand that while Black, many of the thought processes among Blacks would be different. Commonly held stereotypes (by Blacks) are discredited because not all Black people eat fried chicken, watermelon, or drink Red Pop. Not all Black people have the same preferences nor do all Black people live in rented apartments as opposed to owning their own homes. The users' tweets validate that "...it is reasonable to conceptualize black identity as a multidimensional phenomenon, and that being black means different things to different segments of the black population" (Demo & Hughes, pg. 371) when defining Blackness using #AskRachel.

Figure 4.14



Figure 4.15



Figure 4.16

In recognizing possible differences in preferences, and sometimes varying degrees of cultural knowledge shaped by class and location, some users acknowledge that all Blacks may not know the “correct” answers to some of the #AskRachel questions.

Finally, users toggled with the notion of Black racial authenticity and self-identification. Nguyen and Anthony (2014) discussed Black authenticity as a cultural resource and categorize it in two ways based on previous literature: commodifying realness and legitimizing membership. In the later, Black authenticity is viewed as a combination of personal and group identity construction. Nguyen and Anthony (2014) argued, “Black authenticity includes ideals and expectations that affects what it means to ‘be Black’ in relation to personal, public, and cultural identities” (p. 770). The authors further explained how Black authenticity can be a source to assist, yet at times, constrain individual identity construction. In the **Figure 4.17** and **Figure 4.18** below, users following the #AskRachel hashtag jokingly self-examine their Blackness or their “Black card,” a fictitious status of racial authenticity that is given after assessing a person’s Blackness based on their ability to answer a set of questions.

Figure 4.17**Figure 4.18**

Maragh (2008) explained, “On Twitter, specifically, navigations of racial authenticity often take the shape of implicit cultural understandings and enactments that digitally make visible and replicable the constructed parameters of blackness” (p. 593). Racial authenticity in terms of Blackness exists in the discourse of the #AskRachel hashtag to define and challenge the boundaries of Blackness and also as performance online that can both include and exclude.

Black Could Mean Life or Death

The 16th Avenue Baptist Church, the first Black church in Birmingham, AL was bombed on September 15th, 1963. The explosion injured at least 14 people and buried beneath the rubble were four little girls ages 11 to 14: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair (Waxman, 2018). This incident and other church bombings have crystalized the magnitude and prevalence of violent hate crimes in the United States in the minds of many Americans. SimmsParris (1998) argued, “Church burning represents the dangerously violent heights to which racial hatred may rise. Like cross burning, the message of racial hate

and promised harm is clearly articulated to African-Americans when a Black church is burned. However, unlike cross burning, the burning of Black churches articulates hatred toward the larger Black community, to which the church is inextricably linked” (p. 129). Racial hatred in this incident is rooted in racism and religious prejudice.

Hate crimes against the Black community in general have a long standing history as Black people in the United States have been victim to public lynching, mass riots (Tulsa, OK), and other individual acts of violence and terror against public and non-public figures (Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr.). The consistent rise in hate crimes received public attention and outcry leading to policy and law changes at the federal level with the FBI investigating hundreds of cases dating back to World War I (“Hate Crimes,” n.d.). Yet, hate crimes against the Black community still exist, seemingly without repercussions.

On the evening of June 17th, 2015, Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old white gunman, went to Bible study at the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, a Black church in Charleston, S.C. According to a 2015 *New York Times* article, “Nine Killed in Shooting at Black Church in Charleston,” that night as he sat in on their prayer service, he opened fire killing nine people, all African-Americans, including senior pastor and state senator Clementa C. Pinckney. In the data collected on Day 7 of the study, June 18th, 2015, the tone of the #AskRachel conversation reflected a shift from a joking exchange between users to dialogues that had serious undertones.

The reality and tragic reminder of violence and death inflicted on Black bodies caused many users to angrily ask if Ms. Diallo still wanted to be Black in light of this massacre. In the examples below, users assert that there is a privilege of removing one's Blackness when they are pretending to be Black that is not afforded to actual members of the Black community.

Users also assert that merely existing and participating in mundane everyday activities while being Black, like praying at a church or swimming at a neighborhood pool, can be met with unwarranted harassment that could ultimately result in death. In **Figure 4.19**, **Figure 4.20**, **Figure 4.21**, and **Figure 4.22**, the notion from users is that Ms. Diallo should not claim to be Black because she has the ability to escape and hide from the violence inflicted on Black people whenever she chooses to, a choice not afforded to Blacks.

Figure 4.19



Figure 4.20



Figure 4.21



Figure 4.22



Conclusion

In conclusion, the boundaries of Blackness may be confined by biology, history, and perception of what defines Blackness. Blackness may be defined differently by different people or groups of people. Non-Black individuals often self-identify with Blackness when it is commodified and serves a purpose for personal gain. Black can be seen as favorable when trying to secure employment or other resources, when they attempt to gain access, when there are financial benefits involved. Being diverse is politically correct and sought after when there's a “reward” for Blackness. Diversity is a politically correct term that engenders creativity and support for innovative programs where Black individuals are typically invited to “sit at the table” when institutions and organizations seek to improve their inclusiveness with Black bodies, though this is typically achieved in numbers not in positions of authority. In contrast, Black may be viewed negatively when there are not financial or social benefits attached. During moments when Black lives and bodies are harassed, policed, and killed, non-Black individuals may choose not to act Black and this is the privilege not afforded to Black individuals.

Rachel Dolezal benefited by being Black and was not held accountable for deceiving the public, her employers, or in some cases, the students she worked with. She was accepted as a Black woman, received employment and organizational position in spaces that may have been

otherwise reserved for a Black person. Users' perception is that she violated the trust of those who accepted her Blackness based on her word alone.

Seven days after the start of the #AskRachel hashtag, the connection between Rachel's fraudulent Blackness could not be viewed as mutually exclusive from the Charleston shooting in users' responses to #AskRachel. Users collectively questioned why Rachel, or anyone else, would want to be Black when having Black skin is a warrant for being targeted by others, sometimes resulting in death. Responses to #AskRachel turned from social critique through humor to a condemnation of the white privilege and manufacturing a fake temporary Black identity.

Racial performance and signifyin' online creatively created a space for users to ask and respond to each other's questions about Black racial identity using #AskRachel. However, as Stevens and Maurantonio (2018) argued, "To reduce Blackness to a series of categories and questions to which one can learn the 'right answer' risks essentializing Blackness (p. 192)." There is danger in minimizing the fullness of Black life, history and culture through the use of a Twitter hashtag, yet it is an imaginative and resourceful tool that should be used to further enhance and expand current meanings of Blackness and the experiences of a subset of the Black community.

While Rachel faced immediate backlash after being exposed by her parents, Blackness seems to be still working for her. Her life as Rachel the lone working, single mother of two, has increased her celebrity status. She has had the liberty of being offered a book deal and becoming a published author, she has a Netflix documentary about her life and life story, and she is a multimedia artist, opportunities she may not have had otherwise. While it is a fact that she was terminated from her position with the NAACP and her contract as a part-time Instructor (2007-

2015) at Eastern Washington University was not renewed, Rachel Dolezal's self-identification of Blackness and her co-opting of Blackness have continued to benefit her chosen life and lifestyle.

Chapter V: “Being Woke and Black...Period”: A Focus Group Analysis of Black Twitter

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and analyze the combined voices of Black Twitter users to better understand the meanings that users are attributing to the phenomenon of Black Twitter. In fact, Black Twitter gains its cultural force as a racialized space only through its circulation and distribution among users who contribute to its currency within the Black community. Focus groups are used in this study as a methodological approach to explore participants’ understanding of and interactions with the space of Black Twitter and their opinions about the commentary posted at the hashtag #AskRachel. In this dissertation, focus groups are used for three significant reasons.

First, Pruitt (2015) suggested that in future research the voices of Black Twitter users should be amplified, allowing them to share their stories in future research studies through focus groups or interviews. Hennink (2014) explained, “The discussion element of the method gives participants greater control of the issues raised in the dialogue, because they are essentially discussing the issues among themselves rather than directly with an interviewer” (p. 5). Conducting focus groups allows for another methodological approach to be used by scholars exploring Black Twitter to gain robust insights directly from participants about usage, participation, and experience. Second, this method allowed the researcher to collect a substantive amount of data that included a variety of views and perspectives through group interaction about Black users’ participation and experiences with Black Twitter. Finally, focus groups are an ideal method to use when conducting exploratory research on an understudied phenomenon (Hennink, 2014).

The chapter begins with an overview of the broad research question and sub-questions posed and the methodological approach, including the study setting and design, population and

participant recruitment, data collection, the researcher's reflexivity, data analysis procedure, ethical issues and study limitations (See Chapter One). In the second section of this chapter, the findings of the focus group analysis are explained through themes, supporting literature, and example quotes from the participants in the study data. The final and concluding section of this chapter summarizes the study's findings and their implications in connection to **Phase 2** findings.

Research Questions and Methodology

The following research question and sub-questions were informed by the literature and theories on online communities, uses and gratifications, and racial formation. Additionally, the research questions were influenced by previous studies on Black Twitter and the findings from **Phase 2** of this dissertation.

RQ3: What are the opinions and responses that undergraduate and graduate students articulate about Black Twitter and the hashtag #AskRachel?

1. How do participants define Black Twitter?
2. How do participants actively engage in Black Twitter conversations?
3. Why do participants seek out or contribute to Black Twitter conversations?
4. How do participants define the hashtag #AskRachel?
5. How do participants react to the findings from Phase 2?

The methodological procedures conducted in this study were presented in Chapter One and are further discussed in this chapter to identify additional information about the study structure, design, and data collection process, beginning with the study setting.

Study Setting

This study took place at a large Midwestern Predominantly White Institution (PWI). The researcher selected a university with a student body population that was large and diverse enough

to find participants in the study target population. The target population for this study was Black undergraduate and graduate students and this institution has at least 10 times the number of Black students ideally needed for the focus groups (18 participants) in this study. The researcher decided this research site was the most appropriate for a successful study based on the population of Black students, the proximity of the institution to the researcher, the research budget, and the time constraints. Data collection lasted from June 2018 to August 2018 and the focus groups were conducted in the focus group room at a research center at the institution.

Study Design

One of the major goals of this study is to make a significant contribution to the literature that examines how Black people use social media to construct Blackness, their individual and collective identities, and a culturally distinct online space. As discussed in Chapter One, this dissertation employs a mixed-methods approach. Creswell (2009) identified six types of mixed methods strategies and this study is closely aligned with the sequential transformative strategy. This strategy applies to research that is guided by theoretical perspectives and has two phases (both phases can be either qualitative or quantitative), in which the second phase builds upon the previous phase (s). Textual analysis was used to analyze hashtags and tweets in **Phase I** and **Phase II** and this phase uses focus groups to explore students' usage and knowledge of the space Black Twitter. This study achieved triangulation by using these two different techniques to collect, organize and analyze the data (McMurray, 2004). Contributing to the overall research purpose of the dissertation, focus groups allow for an exploration of how Black Twitter users explain the construction of race and racial identity on social media.

Study Population and Participant Recruitment

The participants for the focus groups were purposefully selected, which strengthens the focus group discussion because of the specific characteristics sought for the study (Hennink, 2014). According to a Pew Research Center report, 40% of African Americans who use Twitter are between the ages of 18 to 29, 21% are ages 30-49 and 9% are 50-64 years old (Smith, 2014). Study participants were Black undergraduate and graduate students ages 18 to 30 who were enrolled at a large Midwestern PWI. Non-Black identifying students were excluded from the study. This sample participant frame was selected because it is representative of typical Black Twitter users. Thus the participants selected for this study were appropriate for the target population.

The researcher used several methods of participant recruitment to increase response rate and to attract participants likely to use social media. This study sought inductive discovery of Black Twitter, so the participant recruitment strategy and process were not meant to yield generalizable results. However, a representative sample of participants was obtained based on the PEW data listed above. Following approval from Human Subjects, first the researcher distributed the Focus Group Participation Email Invitation (Appendix 4) to administration and personnel who manage the listserves serving undergraduate and graduate Black students. The researcher requested these individuals to distribute the Focus Group Participation Form (Appendix 5) embedded in the email to their students. Second, the researcher utilized the social networking mobile application for group chats, GroupMe, to contact Black graduate students from the private chatroom to determine their overall interest in participating in the study. Finally, the researcher's colleagues were also requested to email the invitation to their personal networks of students.

Students who received the email invitation were instructed to complete the Focus Group Participation Form, which invited them to submit their personal information to be contacted if selected for the study. Focus groups typically have between six to eight participants to maintain the diversity and productivity of the discussion (Hennink, 2014; McDougal, 2014). Initially, 25 students volunteered to participate in the study: 11 undergraduate and 14 graduate students. Due to time constraints and anticipating full participation from those who committed to being a part of the study, the researcher selected 6 graduate students to participate in the study and all 11 undergraduate students were invited to participate.

Homogeneity is important for individual focus groups and this was achieved by recruiting Black undergraduate and graduate students to participate. While homogeneity within the focus groups was desired, the groups were segmented by undergraduate and graduate classifications. Perspectives on Black Twitter usage may have differed based on age, academic status and classification, social realities, or power dynamics. There were two undergraduate focus groups and one graduate focus group. Focus Group #1 (undergraduate) had two participants, Focus Group #2 (graduate) had five participants, and Focus Group #3 (undergraduate) had four participants. The three focus groups had a total of 11 participants, nine female and two male participants. The participants' pseudonyms and demographic characteristics related to their social identities are presented in the Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics table and charts below:

Table 5.1: Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics

Participant Pseudonyms and Demographics Table			
<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Classificatio n</u>	<u>Gender Identity</u>	<u>City/State</u>
Lucia	Grad	Female	New Albany, MS
Cameron	Grad	Male	South Carolina
Aaron	Grad	Male	Chicago, IL
Tonya	Grad	Female	Hammond, IN
Ariel	Grad	Female	Indianapolis, IN
Bryana	Undergrad	Female	Fishers, IN
Francine	Undergrad	Female	Kenya, East Africa
Kayla	Undergrad	Female	Gary, IN
Madison	Undergrad	Female	Hazel Crest, IL
Iantha	Undergrad	Female	Orlando, FL
Avalene	Undergrad	Female	Indianapolis, IN

Chart 5.1: Participant Family Income

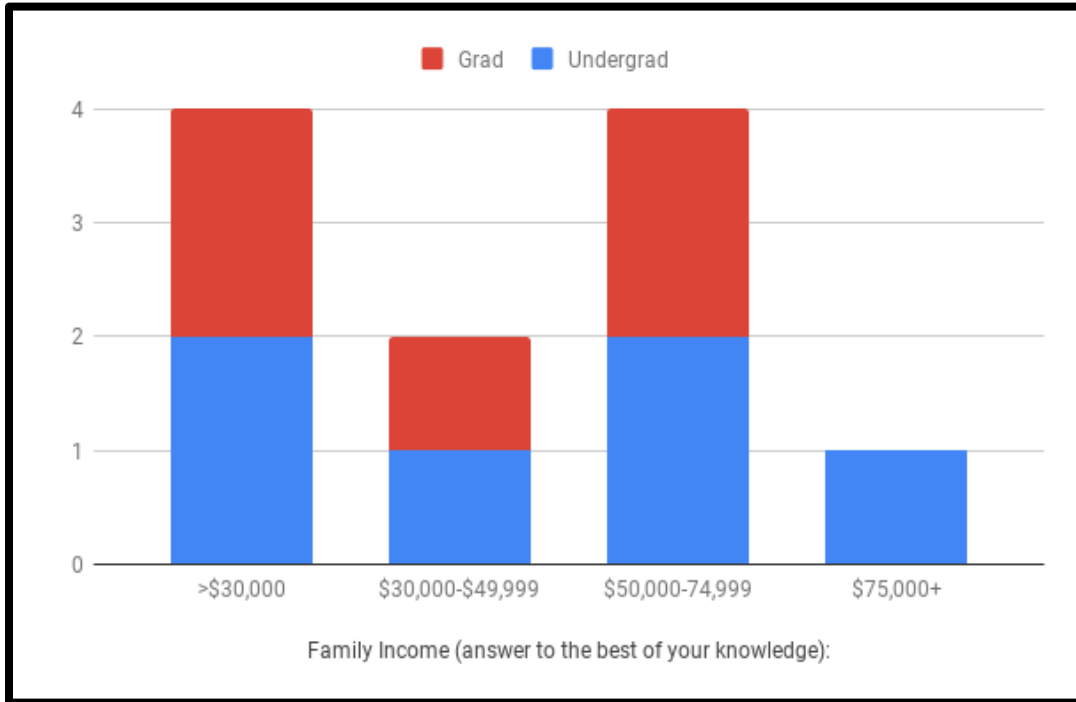


Chart 5.2: Participant Organizational Leadership on Campus

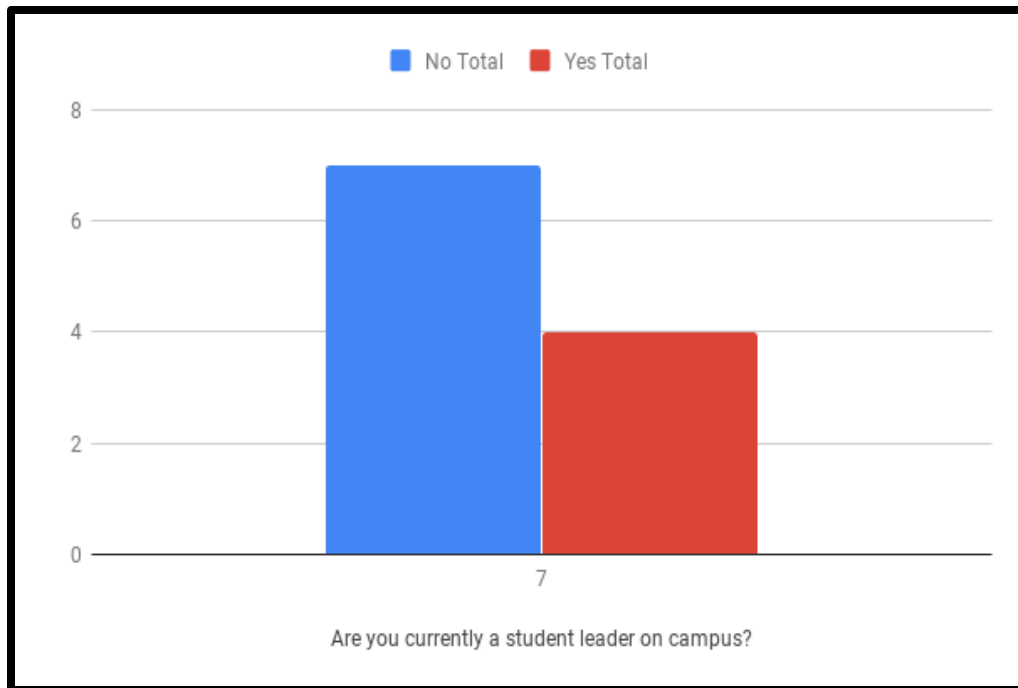
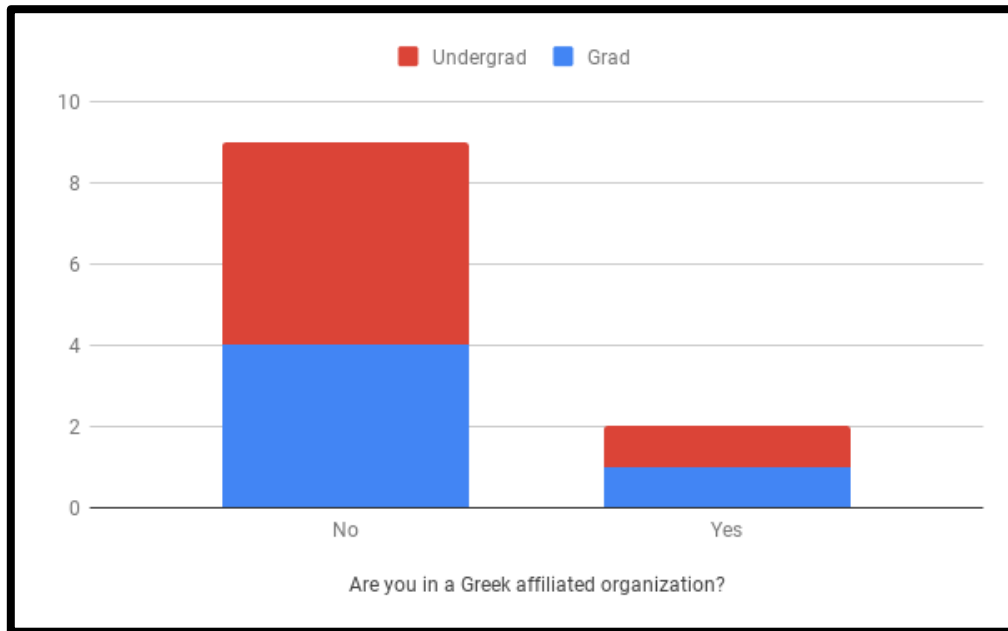


Chart 5.3: Participant Greek (Sorority/Fraternity) Membership***Data Collection***

The rationale to use focus groups is empirically grounded and is the most appropriate method to use in combination with the textual analysis conducted in both Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Focus groups are an effective methodological approach when collecting data about a specific topic or issue from participants' perspectives and offer a broad range of insights through interactive discussion (Hennink, 2014). The group interviews were conducted and moderated by the researcher (a 31 year old Black female). Additionally, the researcher served as the note-taker and was thoroughly trained by colleagues with experience in focus group methods, in addition to consulting various readings and digital video resources. A Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire developed by the researcher (Appendix 6) and a Focus Group Protocol (Appendix 7) guided the process of data collection.

Berg (1989) explained that in some cases, researchers will administer a questionnaire that is given to the focus group participants prior to the study, an approach called the extended focus group. Participants completed a Pre-Focus Group questionnaire prior to attending the group interview. The Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire addressed the following open and close ended categories: Participant Demographics, Social Media Usage, Twitter Demographics, Twitter Experience, Black Twitter Experience and Hashtag Familiarity. The Focus Group Protocol, used to guide the focus group interviews, addressed the following categories: Black Twitter Experience, #AskRachel (based on **Phase 2** findings) and Additional Information. The Additional Information section provided further insight that may not have been reflected in the research questions regarding their experiences with Black Twitter. Responses to the Additional Information section included, but were not limited to: fetishes over black culture, funniest Black Twitter hastags, “Nigger Navy” hashtag, and various discussions about Rachel herself. The questionnaire and protocol for the focus groups were developed based on previous literature, specifically the interview protocol created by Clark (2014) in her dissertation study.

The focus group interviews were held at a research center at the midwestern university in a small room designed for focus groups and interviews. The room was equipped with a large frosted glass dry-erase table that accommodated up to six participants. This table enabled participants to take notes and engage in creative exercises that explored common themes in Black Twitter usage. The results of the exercise provided additional data to describe the participants understanding of Black Twitter conversation topics. Finally, the sessions were recorded using an audio-recorder and video-camera. Two audio recorders were strategically and centrally positioned on the table for optimum hearing. Two video cameras were positioned on

opposite sides of the room in order to capture reflections, tone, and gestures that would substantiate the audio recordings and the researcher's field notes taken during interview sessions.

Each focus group was interviewed once. Focus Group #1 lasted approximately 40 minutes, Focus Group #2 approximately 56 minutes and Focus Group #3 approximately 58 minutes. The three focus groups combined lasted close to 3 hours, with consideration for rounding. Participants enjoyed light refreshments of chips, granola bars, and water during the sessions and each received a \$25 gift-card of their choice to either Walmart, Target, or Starbucks.

The researcher performed post-research follow-up interviews for the purpose of answering sub-questions about the findings of **Phase 2**. The set of questions were related to gauging participants' reactions to the themes found from the #AskRachel hashtag, definitions of Blackness and Black identity. Five participants were randomly selected to participate in the follow-up interviews and each were compensated with a \$10 electronic Starbucks card or a \$10 PayPal payment. Three responses were received from two undergraduate students and one graduate student. These findings were included in the final analysis of this chapter.

Reflexivity

As discussed in Chapter One, qualitative research is interpretive, thus it is important for researchers to identify any possible biases that may affect the analysis and interpretation of the data and findings. It is important to include information about past experiences and connections between participants, researchers, and the research site (Creswell, 2009). The researcher positioned herself as a Black Feminist/Womanist scholar whose perspectives influence and challenge particular methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation (Collins, 1986). According to Collins (1986), many African-American women have an "outsider-within" status

that allows for a unique viewpoint on self, family and society (p. 514). Moreover, Collins (1986) asserts, “A careful review of the emerging Black feminist literature reveals that many Black intellectuals, especially those in touch with their marginality in academic settings, tap this standpoint in producing distinctive analyses of race, class, and gender” (p. 514-515). The argument is that Black women create Black feminist thought based on their marginal positions in academic settings (outsider) and personal and cultural perspectives (within). The researcher’s position as an insider, a Black woman, will be explained further in relation to her connection to Black culture and the participants in the study.

The transparency of positionality strengthens the qualitative dimensions of the study. Additionally, the researcher was consistently engaged in critical dialogue with other Black scholars in her graduate community about her interpretations of the focus groups to enhance the research quality and validity. The conversations that took place aided in the overall development of concepts and challenged any far too narrow or broad subjective interpretations. The researcher and her Black scholar colleagues met once a week for one month to discuss the findings and themes that emerged from the data analysis.

It is important to be transparent about the potential of the researcher to influence the research process or data produced in terms of internal reflexivity (Hennink, 2014). The researcher is a known social advocate in the institution’s Black community. The researcher’s authenticity as an insider of Black culture and social status at the institution may have afforded a level of rapport and trust from her established relationship with participants that may not be achieved by other scholars. Thus, the researcher assumed that she was viewed as trustworthy and was positioned as an insider-outsider to the group discussions, positively influencing the interpersonal interactions between the researcher and participants. Additionally, the participants

in the graduate student focus group were familiar with one another academically and socially. The researcher also has rapport with the participants in the graduate student focus group as she is actively involved in some of the same academic and social organizations.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research is iterative in nature and involves several cycles of analysis. First, the researcher coded the data using In Vivo Coding, or verbatim coding to manage interpretive subjectivity (Hennink, 2014). The first cycle coding method “refers to a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record...” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 91). Thus, the codes are extracted using the verbatim language of the participants. This coding method is used in ontological research studies that seek to better understand participant’s social realities.

Second, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the issues presented by the participants. Thematic analysis is an inductive approach and “...can build evidence-based descriptions or explanations about social phenomenon...” (Hennink, 2014, p. 90). Thematic analysis is a common method of qualitative analysis and often used after In Vivo Coding. According to Hennink (2014), “Thematic analysis requires a verbatim transcript of the group discussion, so that participants’ own expressions and perspectives can be identified. One of the hallmarks of thematic analysis is the use of quotations to illustrate specific issues in participants’ own words” (p. 90) Data for this study was processed using a transcription mobile application that helped develop verbatim transcripts. The researcher then cleaned the manuscripts to ensure accuracy. Additional data included in the analysis were the Pre-Focus Group questionnaire responses and field notes the researcher wrote during and after the focus group sessions.

Ethical Approval

The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved and granted exempt status to the focus group portion of this study. Participants received an electronic Participant Informed Consent (Appendix 8) form in an email along with the Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire one week prior to the focus group session. Participants were instructed to digitally sign their name on the questionnaire if they consented to participating in the study. The informed consent explained the voluntary nature of the study, the purpose of the study, the study procedure (audio and video recording, pre-focus group questionnaire, and study duration and location), benefits and risks of participating in the study, and the subsequent payment for participating in the study.

Study Limitations

Focus group research does have some general limitations. Hennink (2014) explained that focus group responses aren't independent, like interviews, thus participants may dominate the discussion while others don't contribute much. Additionally, some issues discussed may lack depth and the data analysis is time consuming and costly. In this study, there were specific limitations that may have affected or influenced the analysis and findings. First, this was the researcher's first exposure to conducting and moderating a focus group. Next, saturation determines an adequate sample size in qualitative research, however due to the budget constraints and other logistical reasons (such as space and time), saturation was not achieved. The researcher sought to include six participants in each focus group based on the availability of space and the compensation budget, however this was not achieved. There were 25 students who responded their willingness to participate in the study. Of the 25 willing respondents, 18 were invited to participate in the study, which would meet the minimum number of participants for a quality focus group (Hennink, 2014). From the 18 students invited, the researcher received 15 Pre-Focus Group Participation Forms. There were four participants who agreed to participate

that were no-shows on the day of the focus group interviews. Consequently, there were only 11 student participants among three groups. As a result of the no-shows, one focus group was limited to two participants, which resulted in shorter discussion time. The number of participants and the shortened discussion time of one group, may be viewed as a serious deterrent to the quality of the data collected and analyzed. The researcher acknowledges the impact that the four no-shows had on this research, but she also notes that the conversations that emerged added a new dimension to existing work on Black Twitter. Those conversations also added value to the overall research purpose and goal. It is important to note that focus group research specifically, and qualitative research broadly, is not intended to be representative or generalizable (Hennink, 2014). The researcher considers that the focus group research conducted for this dissertation to be preliminary work that will inform, improve, and strengthen future research.

In the following section, the three major themes that emerged from the data are presented. The themes are based on major findings in the study that address the research question and sub-questions stated previously in the chapter. Direct quotations from the participants and references made to Black Twitter hashtags are used to illuminate the findings of the analysis.

RQ 3.1: How do participants define Black Twitter?

Black Twitter as Cultural Commons: Community, Support, and Engagement

A September 2018 report from the American Press Institute suggested, “In a fragmented media landscape, the notion of a mass media that everyone consumes together — as in the era of the three nightly newscasts nationally or a singular newspaper in every city — no longer captures the reality of how news is consumed” (para. 3). Previous theories on media consumption have evolved to consider how and *why* people consume and use media. Uses and gratifications theory, or approach, suggests that media users are not merely passive receivers of content but that they

seek certain types of media and certain kinds of content to meet different motivations and needs. At its core, uses and gratifications theory asks, "...why do people use media, and what do they use them for?" (McQuail, 2010, p. 423). In the age of the Internet and social media, uses and gratifications research has witnessed a shift in the needs and motivations of users who interact with new media.

In recent years, several scholars have applied uses and gratifications theory to investigate why individuals use user-generated media and social media (Chen, 2011; Liu, Cheung, & Lee, 2010; Johnson & Yang, 2009; Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008; Shao, 2009; Smock, Ellison, Lampe, & Wohn, 2011). In their study examining motivations, satisfaction, and gratifications of using Twitter, Johnson and Yang (2009) found there are two important reasons for Twitter use: social motives and information motives. These two motives for using Twitter are supported by the responses from participants in this study. In the following subsections, findings from the focus groups are presented to explain the meanings and boundaries of Black Twitter and how users gain access to and participate in the space.

What is Black Twitter? As discussed in Chapter Two, Black Twitter is still a relatively new area of research scholarship and there is not a single definition of the space called Black Twitter. Clark (2014) argued that the definition and understanding of this relatively bounded online space is constantly negotiated by its participants and their individual experiences, and Black Twitter functions to fulfill diverse needs and motivations. Accordingly, when asked how they would define Black Twitter, participants in this study defined it in their own words and in a myriad of ways. Derived verbatim from the In Vivo Coding, are several examples of the commonly repeated words and phrases participants associated with defining the space listed below. The words included, but are not limited to:

- community
- support
- open forum
- “News that should be news”
- family reunion
- therapy
- platform for black culture
- culture

These defining words and follow-up commentary suggested that Black Twitter affords participants the opportunity to find like-minded individuals, with differing opinions on various topics, and adds value to their online media experience by creating a space for them to discuss Black issues with other Black people. The excitement in their voices and facial expressions as they described what Black Twitter is hinted at the appreciation they have for the space and for having access to this digital “community inside a community.” One participant described this notion in detail:

Kayla: “I feel like it's a community inside a community because it's just a place where no matter where you are, you can still be in a black community but you can't get that in a lot of places. So if you go to an area that might not be normal for you, you can still have that joking around...that support.”

Participants believe that Black Twitter has the ability to keep people in the Black community connected to each other across limits of geographical locations. The ability to access a Black community from any place at any time may keep some Black Twitter users from feeling distant and displaced if there are not many Black people within close proximity to where they are physically located. Black Twitter users' communal experiences and commonalities are the building blocks of engagement on the site. Whereas, some users may reside far apart from each

other, their individual proximity to a source of collective Black identity and racial identification closes the physical gaps between them. The larger picture is that Black Twitter feels familial to participants and they feel “seen” and connected within the space of the digital screen.

Who is in Black Twitter? Participants debated the parameters of who is considered a part of Black Twitter. The primary qualifier agreed upon is that the person must self-identify as Black. Participants clarified that this includes mixed-race individuals as well Black-identifying persons of other Black ethnic ancestry and heritage, asserting that these persons also have lived the Black experience. Next, there was a variance between the graduate student group and undergraduate student groups in marking the conceptual boundaries and limitations of who is considered to be a part of Black Twitter. Participants in the undergraduate focus groups explained that you have to be on Twitter to be considered a part of Black Twitter, because “where it is happening” is important. According to some participants, even if someone was just retweeting, sharing and liking on Twitter, this person can still be considered to belong to Black Twitter. On the other hand, some undergraduates stated that one must be fully immersed in the conversations and not simply viewing the topics discussed. On the other hand, the graduate students extended their boundary of Black Twitter to include all Black social media users. Two participants in the graduate student group elaborated how they understood and conceptualized Black Twitter to function across other social media sites.

Lucia: This begs the question of access. I’m familiar with Black Twitter and friends send me like screenshots from Black Twitter...so I feel like I have access to a space that I don’t readily tap into. I don’t know if I would necessarily say that I myself...am a part of Black Twitter because I don’t feel like I participate enough...if someone says Black Twitter on the street I would know what that means...what starts on Black Twitter ends up on other spaces.

Cameron: I don’t think Black Twitter is even just about Twitter...I think that Black Twitter is like a moniker for the way that Black people interact across the variety of social media platforms and not just specifically linked to Twitter itself.

Expanding on their statements, Lucia and Cameron crystallized the notion that the “who” of Black Twitter can and should be more inclusive and representative of interactions and sharing of knowledge extends beyond Twitter. In this sense, Black Twitter itself could be understood as a race-focused cultural commons and available resource. According to Madison, Frischmann, and Strandburg (2010), “The phrase ‘constructed cultural commons,’ as we use it, refers to environments for developing and distributing cultural and scientific knowledge through institutions that support pooling and sharing that knowledge in a managed way...” (p. 659). Whereas undergraduates viewed the space in a much more restricted fashion, situating Black Twitter into the framework of a constructed cultural commons shifts the dynamics from *what* it is to *what* it can provide for its users.

Then, participants conveyed that Black Twitter is generational, specifically it is primarily for Black Youth and/or millennials and they mentioned feeling a disconnect between themselves and older generations of Black people. Although older Black people may be privy to and engage in Black Twitter, the space caters to young Black users and participants shared their concern with Black Twitter being inclusive of older Black people. Participants shared that they, or others, may not be as open when engaging in the dialogue as they are now if older people were active in this space, especially family members. Even more so, participants feel misunderstood in how they decide to address political and racialized issues on Black Twitter. Serious issues are often addressed with humor and mocking, a genre of communication they felt older generations would be too sensitive to accept based on their past experiences and lack of current acceptable forms of social critique:

Kayla: ...when it comes to political issues, I feel like people from the Rodney King era who were our age during the late 80s and early 90s, they have like a certain disconnect. Like Rodney King was the biggest thing to happen to that group at such a young age.

Where our grandparents had the civil rights movement and we had the over abundance of police brutality. I feel like people in that generation are kind of like disconnected from Black Lives Matter...because they haven't had to experience anything on that sort of platform.

Tonya: Older generations, I don't think that they are comfortable in the way they were raised in a way where they can have those types of open conversations in public..like the beauty shop was different...you knew them...they were in the neighborhood.

Tonya isn't certain how older generations would adapt to the public nature of Black Twitter, as she mentioned how older Black people have long enjoyed having conversations in private Black spaces like the beauty shop (or barber shops) with people they know as opposed to a large group of strangers on Black Twitter.

Finally, participants were adamant about Black Twitter remaining strictly for Black people. They acknowledged that non-Black users often attempt to take part in topics that are Black-relevant, insisting that they be granted the freedom to have a space to interact with other Black people. Participants recalled times when non-Blacks, specifically whites, chimed in on topics that were not meant to include them such as #ThanksGivingWithBlackFamilies. The main sentiment is that non-Blacks should not engage in using the hashtags, sharing or retweeting the content from Black Twitter. One participant lamented that "all of Twitter is white Twitter" and that Black Twitter should be free from the interference of "Twitter trolls" who attempt to derail conversations and trivialize the experience of Black Twitter users. On the contrary, participants find it appropriate for non-Blacks to view the conversations taking place to better understand Black issues and concerns. The next section articulates participant's opinions about using Black Twitter to raise public consciousness about issues.

Participant Engagement on Black Twitter. In the Participation Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire, participants in the study were asked questions about their familiarity with Black Twitter and how they engage in conversations in the space. First, almost all of the participants

considered themselves to be a part of Black Twitter. Participants shared sentiments close to Bryana's statement below:

Bryana: Yes, I consider myself a part of Black Twitter because I favorite/retweet their tweets and I can relate to everything they tweet about.

Only one participant hesitated during the focus group about what it means to belong to Black Twitter. For Lucia, she discussed seeing Black Twitter conversations mainly on their sites first, like Facebook or a GroupMe chat. She then engages with the conversations on those sites more frequently than on Twitter. The level of participants' engagement on Black Twitter varied and appears to not be consistent. Engagement is also situational and depends on the conversation. Participants who are less active expressed that they rarely share their own personal opinions but they will often like or retweet content that they find relatable or humorous. Other participants engage by voicing their individual thoughts about a topic and using an appropriate a hashtag(s) to accompany their tweet. Participants also discuss engaging with Black Twitter similarly to Lucia by sharing the content on other social media platforms. Finally, participants shared that they occasional share content from Black Twitter with parents and older family members that they feel will be able to related to the humor or concept in the tweet. It is assumed that these family members would not otherwise be able to see and engage with They discuss also trying to share the content with older parents who may not be on the site but would find the material relatable as well.

RQ 3.3: Why do participants seek out or contribute to Black Twitter conversations?

Raising Public Consciousness, Awareness and Accountability

In the ever evolving media landscape, the "media-audience relationship" in the digital arena has blurred the lines between producer and consumer of media content where those who are skeptical of mainstream media can find and produce alternative sources of news content

(Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2017). New media sites and online subcultures provide such media content that users trust based on like-minded perspectives found in these alternative spaces. The creation of some Black Twitter hashtags function to combat and resist negative dominant narratives and discourse found in mainstream media and news reports. In general, social media hashtag activism (or digital activism) has been a valuable tool in modern day activist movements. Goswami (2018) emphasized, “Hashtag activism, the act of building up public support or fight via social media for a cause, has been growing as a popular approach to voice out for change via social media. It has the ability to inject new voices into public discourse” (p. 3). In recent years, protests of police brutality and subsequent news coverage of victims have been front and center stage on Black Twitter. Some hashtags have included: #SayHerName, #BlackLivesMatter, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #Ferguson, and #HandsUpDontShoot.

The ability to disseminate information about issues to a multitude of various publics has become increasingly important for the viability of several movements and acts of resistance. Black Twitter users often contribute or participate on Black Twitter to find information about or discuss controversial racial topics. Participants more or less debated the possibilities and the constraints of Black Twitter to disrupt and dismantle racism in America or incite justice or changes in the current racial climate. Some responses echoed the ability of Black Twitter to raise awareness and visibility about issues in the Black community, from microaggressions to racial injustices. For example, the responses below from Iantha and Francine expound on the possibilities for Black Twitter topics to encourage engagement and dialogue with people outside of the realm of Black Twitter.

Iantha: I feel like it affects it in a way where at least people are aware. People who are not a part of Black Twitter can see the tweets sometimes that may be retweeted by a friend...and I remember this one conversation I had with this white person who...they were just so in shock that I get followed around in stores...I barely even register it...

Francine: The minute something happens we all know...even the people who aren't apart of Black Twitter who have Black friends that retweet Black Twitter stuff they're aware of what's happening in the Black community. Then it's like allowing everyone to be conscious of how racism is still very prevalent.

While, Avalene agreed that while it may be worthwhile to have conversations with fellow students on campus, she felt there is a burden placed on her to be the “voice” of Black people in the midst of having controversial racial dialogue:

Avalene: I have co-workers...we work on campus...we're students. So we have very heated conversations. But they're not heated it's just everyone is expressing themselves and we're really just trying to challenge each other. So a lot of times when something happens where someone has been murdered by a police officer in a brutal way and it's been on Twitter...Black Twitter specifically...and it's just going crazy, the next day if I go to work, it'll be a conversation that people want to talk about and people usually want to pick my brain about it...at first it was like irritating because I can't speak for all Black people but I do appreciate those who want to at least desensitize and create some awareness. So...I think it is it is doing some kind of change but I don't think it's effective yet... It's surfacing and making people kind of like realize it because they have to see it...unless you're going to block every person that retweets something related to it.

At the end of Avalene's response, she brings up the point that the conversations that circulate on Black Twitter difficult to surpass, as they are visible to others on Twitter who are outside of Black Twitter because of their relationships with people who participate in the space. She rationalizes that the only way to unsee the conversations is to actively remove people who share the information through the act of “blocking” them on the social media site. Even though there were additional statements similar to Iantha and Francine's which praised Black Twitter for its ability to raise public consciousness, both within and outside of the Black community, other participants displayed skepticism of how effective Black Twitter, and/or hashtag activism, is in combating racism beyond raising awareness. Bryana argued:

Bryana: I don't think that it's effective. I guess it's situation dependent. But when it comes to very serious issues like police brutality, or other social issues, I don't think that Twitter is the right platform to use.

Bryana’s response warrants the need to filter the use of Black Twitter situationally, and is overall unconvinced of the platform’s appropriateness for important Black cultural dialogue. Madison’s response is similar to Bryana’s, yet she seems to have mixed feelings. Although Madison isn’t fully convinced of Black Twitter’s capability to change the cycle of an issue like police brutality, she agrees with the comments from Iantha and Francine that champion awareness and exposure to the victim’s stories. Thus humanizing the individuals killed by the police, in this case, may be helpful in getting a conviction or “justice.”

Madison: I don’t think it personally has because I remember finding out about Mike Brown via Twitter. And that was when I was in high school, you think with all these people upset white, Black, Latino, and Asian that it would have led toward something happening. But when we had like Freddie Gray, Laquan McDonald...it's just been a continuous cycle. And so I find it great that you know, we're just becoming more aware and stuff of certain issues as opposed to them getting buried ...their stories and what's happening isn't just getting washed away and hidden. But I just feel like there hasn't been a lot of change. But...I'm from the Chicago area so I'm familiar with the Laquan McDonald case and I think Jason Van Dyke he's getting a conviction now...or something bad is happening for him...and that makes me excited because it's like justice.

Although some participants question the role that Black Twitter can play in being a catalyst for change, Black Twitter does exert some power in the larger arena of social justice.

The concept of being “cancelled” by Black Twitter has held people accountable for their actions, both Black and non-Black. According to a 2018 *New York Times* online article titled “Everyone is Cancelled,” being cancelled refers to a form of cultural protest that calls on people to disinvest in someone or something, and it starts mainly on social media (Bromwich, 2018). The author interviewed University of Michigan race in digital media professor Lisa Nakumara who explained, “It’s an agreement not to amplify, signal boost, and give money to. People talk about the attention economy — when you deprive someone of your attention, you’re depriving them of a livelihood” (n.p.). Black Twitter’s undertaking of this concept of holding others

accountable has yielded some power in creating awareness of people, or organizations, who should be disciplined by the Black community for their actions or words.

A recent example of this concept was illustrated by participants who recalled the incident involving African-American rapper, songwriter, entrepreneur and fashion designer Kanye West in August 2018. During an interview with two TMZ reporters, held in their newsroom, the Atlanta born and Chicago raised rapper, was asked about his relationship with the current President and his decision to wear a Make America Great Again (MAGA) hat. The MAGA hat, the President's campaign slogan, has been viewed by some members of the Black community, and others, to be a symbol of white supremacy and racism. As the conversation continued, Kanye began addressing the other TMZ reporters and staff members about controversial issues including "Black-One on-Black crime" and slavery. During his passionate rant, he makes the statement that slavery was a choice, insinuating that slaves made the choice to remain in captivity for over 500 years. Senior producer and journalist Van Lathan, a Black male, decided to combat Kanye's words telling him he was hurt and disappointed that he would make such remarks. Immediately after this segment was aired by TMZ, Black Twitter declared for Kanye West to be cancelled as several members of the Black community felt offended and angry with his statements. In similar fashion to #AskRachel, users pushed back at his comments using the hashtag #IfSlaveryWasAChoice to make a mockery of Kanye West. The hashtag invited a dueling mix of humorous and serious toned imaginative scenarios that would be "true" if slavery had been a choice.

RQ 3.4: How do participants define the hashtag #AskRachel?

Seat at the Table: The Privilege of “Acting” Black and Being White

Whiteness acts as a form of racial privilege. According to DiAngelo (2011), “Whiteness itself refers to the specific dimensions of racism that serve to elevate white people over people of color” (p. 56). In the United States, whiteness functions to safeguard access to resources on many levels systematically, institutionally, educationally, financially, and socially. Ms. Diallo activated her whiteness and privilege to escape her reality and gain access to an experience that was not her own. Although she was exposed years ago, she still continues to insert herself as an individual who is marginalized through the Black experience.

The concept of having “a seat at the table” symbolizes being included in essential conversations. Those who do have a seat at the table often wield power, influence, and authority in decision making. Having a seat at the table is a privilege. In this case, Ms. Diaollo’s privilege affords her the opportunity to tap into and out of Black life as she chooses, escaping the often exhausting burden and realities that come with being Black in America. DiAngelo (2011) argued that while most white people select to be racially segregated, Ms. Diallo chose to be in close proximity to Blackness, eventually co-opting Black skin and Black womanhood. It can be assumed that Ms. Diallo for some time has stolen space at numerous tables (school, organizations, meetings and etc) that could be occupied by actual Black women.

The participants in the focus groups state that the hashtag #AskRachel has two-fold implications: 1) to make a mockery of Ms. Diallo and push back against her superficial claims to Black identity and 2) test assumptions about what constitutes legitimate Black cultural topics among the Black community. Many participants expressed feeling that being of European descent appears to be “easier” to do than being Black. To them, Rachel’s desire to be Black is

perplexing and confusing and the extent to which she immersed herself into Black culture appalling.

Francine: It was hilarious, I was mostly just confused. I did more research into her after that because I needed to figure out what this girl's story is...I figured out she was like a hair braider in college...like she's been diving into this persona. Like full force.

Tonya expressed the impossibility of being able to pass as white and obtain certain privileges without dispute in the way that Ms. Diallo has been able to claim Black identity for several years of her life:

Tonya: You can't just say that you're Black and then be Black...it takes more. There is a certain way that you would have had to have grown up or certain types of food that you ate...I can't just wake up one day and say that I'm white and everyone pretend that is supposed to be ok. And I get certain privileges because of it.

Tonya's comment pushed back against the notion that a non-Black person can simply create a Black identity. Based on her statement, a person must be raised and nurtured through the cultural experiences of Black people. In other responses, there is a coherent agreement that Ms. Diallo is already has a "seat at the table" (as stated by Francine), granted by her whiteness alone.

There were strong opinions from participants who widely agreed that she could have done a great deal more as a white person for Black people than pretending to Black. For instance, in one focus group, a discussion about the well-known white people who publicly advocate for the Black community often have more credibility than Black people speaking on the same issue. In this conversation, participants compared her actions to those of anti-racism activist and writer Tim Wise who is an often sought-after speaker, informant, and educator on racism in America. Although Mr. Wise is not without critique from the Black community, the participants liken his ability to do the work and retain his white identity. As mentioned in Chapter 4, Ms. Diallo was the former president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington during the time she fabricated being Black. Participants found this to be problematic:

Avalene: The NAACP wasn't founded strictly by Black people...I have no problem if she wanted to join the NAACP. It's just the issue that she lied about her race and tried to portray a story...It's cool that you're down for the cause but you can't fake it until you make it...it's cruel actually in my opinion.

Avalene's response emphasized that faking a Black identity is not necessary for being included in organizations whose primary focus is fighting for equality and justice for the Black community. She reminded other participants that a lot of the early efforts by the NAACP were spearheaded by white and Black people. Avalene likened Ms. Diallo's identity appropriation as cruel and unjustified. The dialogue suggests that affinity should not equate to appropriation.

Although participants agreed that #AskRachel was a way to legitimize aspects of Black culture and life, suggesting that Black people should be able to at least answer a few of the questions posed, there was acknowledgement that the references mentioned don't represent the many layers and dimensions of Black identity that exists. The participants were asked: As Black Twitter poked fun at Rachel Dolezal through the use of #AskRachel, should self-identified Black people evaluate their Blackness based on their ability to answer the #AskRachel questions? An interesting and long caveat from Cameron highlights the complicated nature of identity work. As he alluded to the fact that his personal Black experiences aligned with many of the #AskRachel tweets, he cautioned against excluding Black people whose experiences are different than what may be considered the norm by others presented in the tweets.

Cameron: I do agree that we do define Blackness based off these sort of unique experiences, but then it's also like it's kind of problematic because it's difficult to essentialize Blackness to like these very specific sort of like events and moments and sort of cultural things that we do, because the reality is Blackness is going to exist so much further...we agree on so many of these things...I read these things and was like I'm Oh My God I'm dying...Because I felt myself in it. But I also know that there are other Black people who I feel like might not necessarily identify with those same sorts of things but this then does not mean they are excluded from Blackness because...they haven't been privy to this same sorts of experiences that I have. It doesn't make them any less Black. But it does mean...I don't know...their experience may have existed outside of you know these very specific things that many of us do...so it's hard then to like

create...I want to be careful of essentializing Blackness...because we can exist in so many other ways outside of those, even if we sort of conceptualize...It's weird to think about even the fact that we are able to sort of agree on so many of these things inside what of what it means to be Black. But this is also like us creating in-groups and out-groups...Because if you can't necessarily identify with these things, it doesn't necessarily make you less Black. But then there is this way where you are still kind of an outsider, despite the fact that you are like phenotypically Black because we don't necessarily see you as identifying with these markers that we have created as boundaries for who we are.

Cameron's statement demonstrates how the act of appreciating unique Black cultural signifiers may negatively create groups of inclusion and exclusion based on widely accepted and conceptualized notions of authentic Black culture and identity. Following Cameron's response, Ariel agreed that different variations of Black identity and Blackness should not be excluded.

Ariel: You can't devalue a Black person's experience because their experience is still going to be Black but it's different in their own unique way. At the end of the end of the day, they are still Black but it might not be relatable...you can't exclude them from being Black... It turns into a different conversation amongst people sometimes...I feel like sometimes people do: You Black but you not THAT Black...and it causes more problems.

While #AskRachel may have created unofficial boundaries about Blackness that possible excluded members of the Black community who were not as familiar with some of the cultural references, it created an opportunity to compare similarities across the diaspora. Francine shared that she identifies as Black and that her experiences in her African upbringing resonated with many of the American Black cultural ethos.

Francine: I obviously self-identify myself as Black, but a lot of those things...I'm also African. I grew up in an African house, so I definitely would not be American Black...but I still have many of the same experiences...There are still a lot of things I related to, but I feel like Black is such a universal concept.

Finally, #AskRachel also inspired some of the participants, specifically from Focus Group 1, to lean in and explore additional facet of Black culture that they are not as familiar with. Their interest in learning more did not appear to be out of a place of "lacking culture" but more so

wanting to find more ways to be connected as they are already confident in their own Black identities.

RQ 3.5: How do participants react to the findings from Phase II?

Reflections from the Culture: How a Hashtag Can Construct Black Identity

As Chapter 4 asserts, claiming to be a part of Black experience has to be more than a skin deep assertion. According to the findings from Chapter 4, being Black means the following: it is both a cultural and biological construct with complex interaction between nature and nurture; it is constructed within the Black family; it is not a monolith; and it can be a life or death issue. An important part of this chapter's focus is capturing the reactions of the researcher's interpretations of the #AskRachel hashtag and investigating whether their responses align with the interpretations made about Blackness and Black identity. The researcher posed four additional questions in the follow-up interviews to randomly selected participants to probe further about the study's findings in Chapter 4 (**Phase II**), as explained earlier in the chapter's methodology section. The following responses from three participants (Francine, Madison and Bryana) offer insight into the following questions:

1. Do you agree or disagree that being Black is constructed both biologically and culturally? (Why or Why not?)

The participants' comments conveyed harmony as they each believe that Blackness is both a biological and cultural construct. Lucia mentioned that her individual experiences, appearance and perspective of other Black people in her environment shape her beliefs about Black identity:

Lucia: I agree that Black is constructed both biologically and culturally based upon my own experiences and my own perceptions of Blackness around me. People look at me and see Black. And that's a good thing because I'm proud of that! I also think that culturally, there are activities that I engage in with my Black family and Black friends that someone of another cultural background may question, challenge, or never understand. I think about this particularly with the Black church..the call-and-

response...the participatory experience, the audience being an active part of the service. Or in a secular space, the family reunion...jumping up when the Electric Slide or “Before I Let Go” comes on...a certain exchange of a head nod or another look. Those things are cultural.

Culturally, her familiarity and participation in Black cultural traditions, such as Black religious practices, create a uniqueness to the Black experience that is unlike those from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

In describing her perceptions of whether Black is constructed biologically and culturally, Bryana claimed that one’s physical features are marcations of biological Black identity and that the unique differences in the appearance of Black people make them “unapologetically beautiful,” extending Lucia’s self-pride in her recognizable Black exterior.

Bryana: Yes, I agree that being black is constructed both biologically & culturally. Being black is about the challenges & experience that we all have in common that bring us together. For example, if a black girl was raised by white people her “black experience” would be completely different than the average African American. Biologically, our physical features & our hair texture sets us aside from other races making us unique & unapologetically beautiful.

The unifying aspects of Black culture create a particular boundary that cannot be accessed by others outside of the Black community.

An interesting aspect of the responses is that there was no disagreement among student participants and study findings that Blackness and Black identity are both a biological and cultural construct. While there was no disagreement, Bryana found that Black people who had low-to-limited culturally significant signifiers had less actual Black identity. As a result of their lack of Black identity, although they are biologically Black, they did not align with the cultural expectations of an archetypal Black life. Their Black experience is further marginalized within a marginalized community and otherized.

Madison viewed the discourse from the lens of excluding, leaving room for Black adjacent individuals to be embraced as allies to the Black community.

Madison: I believe that “being Black” is both biological and cultural. Some people who do not grow up in a diverse population, or a majority Black population will have their Blackness degraded or stripped from them because they aren’t “Black enough,” due to not being acclimated to the cultural standards. While they are still Black from a biological standpoint, culturally, they can be excluded from this community. It’s a two-part phenomenon, in my opinion. Although, some people who have no Black blood in their biological makeup will be invited to the metaphorical “cook-out.” However, it depends on the circumstances for those non-Black people’s Blackness, usually relying on cultural background.

Black adjacent individuals, as described by Madison as non-Black individuals who may have been, were considered to be “Blacker” based on their proximity to and appreciation of Black culture and upbringing.

2. Do you believe that being Black can sometimes result in facing “life or death” situations for some members of the Black community?

Participants mutually agreed that being Black can have life or death consequences. Each participant referred to some form of attack of their personhood through overt and covert forms of racism, discrimination, and tragically, violence.

Lucia: Absolutely! The policing and killing of Black bodies has definitely indicated that. My Black body is under indictment and under attack, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I can’t step out of it before I leave the house...Black men as well.

The use of the term “Black body” is emblematic of life and being in the physical sense that recognizes there is no separation of living self from the racialized self. These grim aspects and dangers of Black life are regarded as inescapable, intrinsic and obstructions to upward mobility.

Madison: I do believe that being Black is dangerous. No matter your age, gender, sexuality. It is dangerous being Black on the face of this earth. The evidence gets reinforced every day, no matter where you look. It goes deeper than America’s racism, and it’s a consistent fight of survival, no matter how many “steps forward” we may “progress.”

Bryana: Yes, because especially with the climate our country is currently in being black is hard. With police brutality, lack of employment, & discrimination this provides blacks with challenges that other races don’t typically have to face.

The challenges of Black life bond members of the community together. The fear of the absence of life, liveliness, and simply living while being Black is dreadfully contrary to the joys of being Black (cherished cultural traditions) described by participants from the last question. They mourn over the results of the Black experience which often accrue no consequences. These responses reflected the dichotomy of the lived Black experience, the embodied joy and pain.

3. How can interpersonal relationships within Black families shape Blackness or Black identity?

The communal aspect of the Black experience (people in the home, being around other Black people and friends), shape Black identity. Interpersonal relationships are essential to Black heritage and culture. Lucia believes that without her maternal family members, she would not have the sense of pride in Black identity and aesthetic that she does now.

Lucia: Black families is where it all begins. What is taught in the home and NOT taught in the home (or appreciated in the home) determines a lot in terms of how I move and shake in my Blackness. Had it not been for my mom and grandma instilling in me that my Blackness was beautiful and intelligent and worthy and all of those things, I don't think that I would have developed and sustained a love for my Blackness and Black identity.

Conversely, Bryana expressed that interpersonal relationships determine who you are and who your friends are based on a sense of common challenges in society, some of which likely include structural and institutional forms of oppression.

Bryana: Interpersonal relationships among black families can help black people identify with their heritage & culture. Being around other black people shapes your personality, how you act, & who your friends are. Because you all share the common struggle of being black in a white man's world.

Another layer of the responses that emerged is the concept that self is shaped by others and not so much what the individual has done to build identity, but being a byproduct of other's input and contributions. For Bryana, even when the outcome is unfavorable, the involvement of others seemed to greatly determine her actions, if they were ultimately her own choice.

Madison: Interpersonal relationships make a big part of establishing one's Blackness. Family is the cornerstone of a person's identity and where they learn everything. That is the basis for a person and structures how they do things (whether that may be following in those same traditions or choosing different routes). For example, personally, I was not exposed to HBCU's as some of my other counterparts were. Despite my father having attended one and my mother having attended a PWI, they did not emphasize or promote me even looking at HBCU's. When I did my research, it was a bad bias which led me to a decision that I regret each and every day, if I'm being honest.

Bryana's views on Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs) were blamed (or hindered in her perspective) on her lack of exposure from her parents. Her train of thought/original ideas about HBCUs were taught/not taught in her home thus dictating her outcome to not attend one and being at a PWI that she currently regrets.

4. How can #AskRachel expand or limit definitions of Blackness and Black identity based on these findings?

From these responses, #AskRachel had impact for these participants to draw either positive or negative conclusions about Blackness and Black identity. #AskRachel played a role in constructing some participant's ideas about their own Blackness. For Bryana, she expressed a sense of feeling "left out" or excluded from Black identity based on what she was not familiar with (i.e. playing a card game).

Bryana: #AskRachel, made some black people, myself included, feel as if they weren't "black enough." Or that they need to learn or watch certain movies that most black people have seen to fit in. For example, the hashtag featured a lot of tweets that talked about "playing spades." I don't know how to play spades & I felt like I needed to learn in order to be expected by the black community.

Lucia viewed #AskRachel as a time for reclaiming Black culture from being appropriated, however she reiterated the idea that Black is not a monolith and that moments like these can limit Blackness and Black identity as previously mentioned in the focus group discussions.

Lucia: #AskRachel, in my mind, creates a space for us as Black folks to grab hold to power that society often tries to take from us. Our traditions, our cultural norms, those things belong to us...but of course, as often said in our community when our culture is misappropriated, "We can't ever have nothing'!" However, with a risk of sounding hypocritical, #AskRachel may also cause us to misjudge or misconceive those in our

community who may not check the boxes of everything and every characteristic that we deem as a ‘pass’ for being considered Black. As the finding stated, Blackness is not monolithic. It’s multidimensional. So we have to be careful to not let hashtags like #AskRachel cause us to limit who we are and how we are defined as Black people.

For Madison, #AskRachel presented acceptable ideas and definitions about Blackness. She believes in the greater ability of all of social media to report life situations through humor.

Madison: I believe that #AskRachel is a great means and has done a thorough enough job of defining Blackness, especially with it being utilized in a non-academic platform. Social media is able to express real life through actual documenting, or satire, which is what I associate with the hashtag.

These responses also reveal the strengths and limitations of #AskRachel. Additionally, they point to the influences that both social media and interpersonal relationships have on shaping Black identity and culture. What is clear is that from their responses, Ms. Diallo is rebuffed to claims of a Black identity, as her only attempts at Blackness are aligned with a limited perspective of Black cultural experience.

Conclusion

This chapter used focus groups to gain insights about Black Twitter from Black undergraduate and graduate students. The participants in this study offered their own definitions for how they view Black Twitter, #AskRachel, and the implications about Blackness and Black identity from Chapter 4 findings. As an online subculture and counterpublic, Black Twitter is valued for its ability to connect users across geographical boundaries and bring users together like a family. Some participants described Black Twitter as therapy and others stated that sometimes laughing at the conversations worked as a coping mechanism. However, some participants were skeptical about the overall effectiveness of Black Twitter to create change in the ever-present face of racism and discrimination.

These findings have important consequences for the broader domain of Black social media and identity building. First, there exists an apparent disconnect between older generations

of Black people and Black youth or millennials may be a hindrance to the change they want to see. Second, viewing Black Twitter as a constructed cultural commons may lead to other ideas about knowledge production, race and social media usage in connection with uses and gratifications theory. Finally, relying on the anonymity of Black Twitter may be an issue in future research studies, thus it is suggested that more focus groups and interviews be used in Black Twitter research.

These findings indicate that a hashtag can be used to negotiate and construct understandings about what it means to be Black, yet possibly exclude the very members it is attempting to include. While Black identity is not defined conclusively through Black Twitter, there is room for it to be shaped and negotiated by its users. In that regard, Black Twitter may then only be relevant in identity construction amongst a subset of Black people. It may be difficult to contend with the notion that Black people are not monolithic, like the findings of Chapter 4 suggest, based on the idea that there may be “outsiders” created based on failure to align with an expected Black identity that is both biological and cultural. Participants in the study suggest that limiting the boundaries of Blackness can be damaging, but they expressed that it is equally important to make claims to the Black cultural and find ways to relate to each other.

If #AskRacel is an example of molding and defining Black identity and culture online, do we risk further ostracizing those who may view similar posts and weigh their own Blackness on undetermined and measured standards? There is an inherent flaw in the “rubric” to which Black identity is gauged because there is no official weight or standard to how significant individual cultural influences and norms are in the Black community. The encompassing idea of #AskRachel may not have been to test Black people’s identity, rather a chance to publicly exclude those who attempt to falsify Black identity for convenience and personal gain.

#BlackSpacesMatter

“People of color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people’s judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be—where we can get off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are.” – Kelsey Blackwell, The Arrow, August 9, 2018)

This dissertation aimed to explore how Blackness, culture, and identity is defined on Black Twitter. By analyzing conversations and interactions on Black Twitter through the portals of three hashtags and focus groups, the findings suggest that Black Twitter plays a critical role in creating a space for racial formation, identity construction, community building, cultural awareness and resistance, and racial dialogue. The writer’s quote above reflects sentiments that are similar to those held by Black Twitter users and the participants in this study. The need and desire for Black spaces in the digital era surpasses earlier models of geographically-rooted local communities and is now being funneled through a range of social media to enable community formation across state and even national borders. The contributions of this dissertation could be situated within research on social media and race, Black Twitter, Black feminist thought and racial formation. This chapter’s content covers the following areas: major findings from each chapter, the implications of this research, and the limitations of this dissertation and suggestions for future research.

In Chapter 3, #BlackExperience and #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies were explored using textual analysis to better understand major topics that arose on Black Twitter and to probe

the social dimensions of how users communicate and interact in this social media space. The exploration of these two hashtags provided context for the following chapters. Through an immersive reading of these two hashtags, this chapter demonstrated how conversations on Black Twitter offer a space for Black users to express their opinions on their lived experiences with confidence, authority and credibility and to express their agency. Moreover, the chapter illustrated how these exchanges on Black Twitter function channel larger racial, cultural and structural realities. The #BlackExperience hashtag allowed users to share their experiences with everyday racism and police brutality, express pride in their Black identity, and articulate their desires to amplify public discourses on race and racism. The #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies hashtag revealed that users' commentary on Black life is mediated and animated by emotive language and digital visual configurations (GIFS and memes), popular culture references, and Black familial interactions and positionality. The chapter suggests that discourse on Black Twitter, through images and text, connects and strengthens relations among Black social media users across geographical boundaries. Articulations and linguistic expressions of lived experiences online may have the ability to bridge gaps between Blacks more than location may separate them, thus strengthening interracial communication and group solidarity.

Textual analysis was applied in Chapter 4 to investigate prominent themes in the commentary posted at the hashtag #AskRachel. This chapter explored how Black Twitter users negotiated their racial identity using the hashtag #AskRachel as they posed and answered questions about Black cultural topics and expressed opinions regarding the Rachel Dolezal controversy. This chapter builds on previous research conducted by Stevens and Maurantonio (2018) who argued that Black Twitter is a tool for social critique. According to these scholars, the users of #AskRachel hashtag defined Blackness in strategic ways that would exclude non-

Blacks, racial outsiders who may not have been socialized within the specific historical and cultural contexts that resonate with and are familiar to racial insiders. Four major themes emerged in the findings of this chapter that defined Black individual and collective identities: 1) Black identity is both a biological (physical features; heritage and lineage) and cultural (popular culture; lived experiences) construct, 2) Black identity and experience cannot be reduced to a monolith, 3) Black identity is constructed in the Black home through interpersonal familial relationships, and 4) living as a Black person could be an everyday life or death experience. This chapter contributes to the scholarly understanding of Black Twitter as a site of reflections of identity and negotiation in which identity is revealed through language.

Finally, in Chapter 5 a focus group was conducted to analyze how Black undergraduate and graduate student participants define and articulate their experiences with Black Twitter and to explore their sentiments about the #AskRachel hashtag and the researcher's findings on this hashtag from Chapter 4. Ultimately participants believe that on the collective level, Black Twitter is a cultural commons for community, support and validation and that it raises public consciousness, awareness and accountability. On the individual level, users described Black Twitter as a form of therapy and a coping mechanism for young Black users who are active on social media. Furthermore, participants feel that the #AskRachel hashtag sheds light on white privilege and the racial appropriation of Blackness that carries no consequences for white individuals. The following sections outline the major implications of this dissertation.

Digital Advancement and Race on Social Media

The findings of this dissertation challenge the work of earlier researchers, who tended to report that Black people were technologically disadvantaged based on their lack of broadband connections and computer access, often assumed to be the result of their economic and

educational insufficiencies. Access to the Internet, specifically social media, by way of smartphones and mobile platforms (Brock, 2012; Smith, 2014) has altered earlier notions about race, technology, and information up-side down. Recent studies like this current dissertation, shed new light on the formation of online communities within individual social media sites, which previous studies had not addressed. Black participation in digital and social technologies have reduced the racial divide and gap in technological consumption and information access, and such access has also expanded previous limitations of interracial communication. However, the researcher recognizes that the participants in Chapter Five of the dissertation are college-going students at a large Midwestern institution, thus their level of access and ability to utilize social media is assumed to be a positive contributing factor and should be taken into account.

Understanding how race manifests in online spaces is important to analyzing identity today, especially how cultural and racial aspects of identity are also a byproduct of Black users going online and using social media. On the first hand, this dissertation extends previous scholars' conceptualizations about the importance of race and identity online as our offline identities permeate our online identities. Nakumara (2008) debated, "Seeing the Internet as a virtual space that was like real life while being separate from it—a second life—figured it as a place to escape from reality, especially racial realities" (p. 1676). This dissertation illustrates how racial identity is performed and negotiated on Black Twitter.

On the other hand, what should be taken into consideration are the possibilities of racial identity appropriation online. It is important to note that anyone can "fabricate" identity online, racialized or other. In this study, participants in the focus groups discussed the presence of "trolls" (unwanted commenters) online who would use the hashtags created by Black Twitter to discuss Black topics. The affordance of the anonymity of identity on social media sites trouble

the lines of authentic and fake racial identity online. Users are able to fabricate a Black identity online, possibly by way of profile avatar and/or biographical information, and such digital appropriations can be just as harmful as those who appropriate Blackness offline and pass in public spaces. Such appropriations work against the effort by many Black users to create more safe and culturally aligned spaces for themselves that cannot be easily infiltrated.

The hypervisibility of Black Twitter conversations is evidence of the strategic attempt of Black participants to carve out public spaces for themselves in the digital mediasphere. A July 2018 Pew Research article reported that Blacks feel lesser-known issues are amplified on social media platforms where they are not likely to receive coverage elsewhere. The article explained that 80% of Blacks share this sentiment, compared to roughly 62% for Hispanics and whites (Anderson et al., 2018). This report illustrates the prominence of social media in giving a voice to issues of importance for Black users.

Domination of the “trending” topics on Twitter within the space of Black Twitter catapults Black users on social media from a digital divide perspective to a digital advancement framework. Black users have adopted Twitter’s embedded tools and algorithms, language and cultural context to create their own space(s) on the site for conversations on Black topics. Hence, hashtags and signifyin’ are gatekeeping strategies to protect Black cultural identity and discourse online from possible “culture vultures.” Understanding how individual racial communities utilize social media sites is important to the future of media and communication studies.

Cultivating Agency on Black Twitter

This work disrupts previously held notions that Black Twitter does not exist and is trivial. Every day on Black Twitter, Black users are redefining Blackness and Black identity. They are deconstructing preconceived notions and stereotypical representations, negotiating identity,

reconstructing and articulating narratives about Black life and experience, and providing social critique and commentary on political and popular social topics. This study builds on previous social media research that explores Black Twitter as a space for the creation of a counterpublic and a racial/community subculture for Black users on Twitter (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Clark, 2018; Graham and Smith; 2016). Black life certainly exists beyond the confines of Twitter usage and interactions but recognizing Black Twitter as a site of Black cultural production and critique is important. Black Twitter plays an imperative role in cultivating narratives about Black identity and culture for a subset of Black people on social media, and possibly just on Twitter.

The media have long been considered the fourth estate, the people's watchdog of the government and pillar of democracy. Black Twitter is developing into a reliable watchdog of Black culture, along with other entities, by challenging damaging narratives from both non-Black and Black people. There has been a visible increase of Black solidarity on political and social issues. Black Twitter as a collective force demands accountability when actions and words do not align with positive representations of the culture or when there appears to be a threat to Black lives and culture. These issues remain typical topics of critique and debate on Black Twitter. As a watchdog Black Twitter:

1. Has "eyesight" to see issues before the rest of the general Black population
2. Signals the community when a problem approaches (hashtags)
3. Addresses the issue and invites the community to join the conversation

This sequence is observable in this dissertation as the participants primarily heard about Ms. Diallo on Black Twitter. Once they were familiar with the story, they were able to participate in the conversation by making a tweet of their own with the #AskRachel hashtag, like another user's tweet, and/or retweet posts using the hashtag. Although, it may be a limited population

that sees the conversations on Black Twitter, the possible impact of the content of the discussions could be far reaching in the greater Black community.

This dissertation applied uses and gratifications theory as a framework for understanding why Black users participate on Twitter and specifically in Black Twitter conversations. As discussed in Chapter 2, Liu et al. (2010) discovered there are four types of gratifications that users are attempting to satisfy by using Twitter: 1) content gratifications, 2) process gratifications, 3) social gratifications, and 4) technology gratifications. An argument can be made that Black Twitter users seek each of these possible gratifications while using Twitter to connect to other Black users and that the categories are not mutually exclusive. Simply put, the need to be informed and connected to other users and the ease of accessibility by way of mobile platforms, and the ability to utilize Twitter's embedded tools are fundamental for the sustainability of Black Twitter. This study continues to expand the understanding of uses and gratifications as a theoretical framework in media studies.

Forming Black Racial Identity Online

Black Twitter users' strategies of signifyin', humor and racial performance online are used to articulate, negotiate and define their Black racial identity online. Black identity is somewhat malleable and there is room for it to be shaped and negotiated on Black Twitter. Omi and Winant's (2002) racial formation theory was applied to show how racial configuration is happening and evolving daily on Black Twitter. As Nguyen and Anthony (2014) argued, "Black authenticity includes ideals and expectations that affects what it means to 'be Black' in relation to personal, public, and cultural identities" (p. 770). Participating in conversations about Black culture and Black identity works to produce a validation of Black racial authenticity for its users. However, it is important to note that a better understanding of who influences conversations on

Black Twitter is equally important to the work of identity production in this space. The conversations using the #BlackExperience in Chapter III were largely dominated by a male, making his individual concerns about race, identity, and experience central to the conversation. The analysis may have had richer themes had the population of Twitter users been women over 35 who are likely to not be as active on Twitter. For instance, the Thanksgiving rituals and behaviors mentioned by younger Black women may differ from older Black women who have a much more traditional connection to the labor surrounding family holidays and meals. Studies on racial authenticity should continue to investigate how various forms of racial authenticity are shaped on Twitter and other social media sites and how they intersect with gendered perspectives.

Limitations and Future Research

While qualitative methods, such as textual analysis and focus groups used in this study limit the generalizability of the findings, these approaches provide new insight into how to explore and analyze Black Twitter usage, social media and race, and racial performance and racial identity construction online. A few of the major limitations of the study are listed below:

- Small number of tweets analyzed
- Low focus group response rate
- Small number of focus groups
- Low number of participants in the focus groups
- Restricted age range of participants in the focus groups
- Participants in the study are college students (educated)
- The influence of the researcher's positionality as an insider-outsider
- Constrained time frame allotment for focus groups

- Budget constraints

Each of the following limitations listed may have affected or influenced the quantity of the data collected, analytical methodology or interpretations of the findings. Transparency about the research process throughout the dissertation addressed each of these limitations. Future studies should not only take these into consideration, but additional avenues of exploration of this should be investigated.

First, this research illustrates the importance of Black Twitter to young Black users on Twitter through the focus group interviews, but it also raises the question of how non-college going young adults ages 35-50 understand and use Black Twitter. Participants noted that there are significant differences in the way that Black communication about political and social issues used to take place (i.e. churches, barbershops, beauty salons and etc). Thus, they reported a generational disconnect in the way issues are currently discussed in the Black community on social media. Future studies should consider expanding the conversation of Black Twitter usage to include older generations of Black users on Twitter that fall outside of the range of participants used in this dissertation.

Broadly, future research studies should consider investigating other subcultures of Black social media usage. How does Twitter usage by Black users differ or compare to other social media sites? What are the technological affordances of social media sites like Facebook or Instagram that render or limit similar possibilities of community building on their sites? Additionally, researchers should consider applying another methodological approach, such as a survey, to include the voices of participants using social media sites. For instance, because Black Twitter has a vast population of users, conducting a survey of Black Twitter users would allow a researcher to collect a significant amount of data from a variety of users not limited by

geographical location like a focus group. Using a number of purposive sampling techniques, such as but not limited to snowball sampling or a conducting a survey on Facebook, would be an effective way to disseminate a survey to the appropriate population.

Finally, future studies could be enriched by applying Brock's Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) theoretical framework/analytic approach. Brock (2018) explained CTDA was developed from self-proclaimed frustrations with digital divide research related to information and communication technology (ICT) and Nakumara's (2006) recommendations for cyberculture research. Brock (2018) explained, "CTDA is designed to be open to any critical cultural theoretical framework, as long as the same critical cultural approach is applied to the semiotics of the information and communication technology (ICT) hardware and software under examination and the discourses of its users" (p. 2). Thus, Brock's CTDA approach may provide necessary insights to further understand the materiality of information technology and how Black users of social media sites like Twitter utilize the inherent affordances of varying communication technologies to have culturally relevant conversations through prescribing Black vernacular to communicate on the sites.

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Appendix 1

Definitions of Relevant Terminology

The following terms and definitions are significant to know and understand for this study:

Social Media Terms

@: The @ sign is used to call out usernames in Tweets: "Hello @twitter!" People will use your @username to mention you in Tweets, send you a message or link to your profile.

Contributor: The number of unique people who have tweeted about this topic.

GIF: Pronounced "giff," with a hard G, no matter what the actual creator of the GIF says. An acronym for Graphics Interchange Format, which refers to a file format that supports both static and animated images. GIFs rose to popularity as a way to react on social media without words.

Hashtag (#): A hashtag is any word or phrase immediately preceded by the # symbol. When you click or tap on a hashtag, you'll see other Tweets containing the same keyword or topic.

Meme: A meme on the internet is used to describe a thought, idea, joke, or concept that's widely shared online. It is typically an image with text above and below it but can also come in video and link form.

Mention: Mentioning other accounts in your Tweet by including the @ sign followed directly by their username is called a "mention". Also refers to Tweets in which your @username was included.

Regular Tweet: Any tweet that isn't a reply or retweet.

Retweet (n.): A Tweet that you forward to your followers is known as a Retweet. Often used to pass along news or other valuable discoveries on Twitter, Retweets always retain original attribution.

Retweet (v.): The act of sharing another account's Tweet to all of your followers by clicking or tapping on the Retweet button.

Social Media: Forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).

Trend: A Trend is a topic or hashtag determined algorithmically to be one of the most popular on Twitter at that moment. You can choose to tailor Trends based on your location and who you follow.

Trending Topic: Trending topics refer to the most talked about topics and hashtags on a social media network. These commonly appear on networks like Twitter and Facebook and serve as clickable links in which users can either click through to join the conversation or simply browse the related content.

Tweet (n.): A Tweet may contain photos, GIFs, videos, and text.

Tweet (v.): The act of sending a Tweet. Tweets get shown in Twitter timelines or are embedded in websites and blogs.

Twitter: An information network made up of short messages (including photos, videos, and links) from all over the world.

@Username: A username is how you're identified on Twitter, and is always preceded immediately by the @ symbol. For instance, Twitter Support is @TwitterSupport.

Race Related Terms

Racial Passing: A phenomenon in which a person of one race identifies and presents himself or herself as another (usually white).

Signifyin’: Signifyin’ is a genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection. It is a longstanding practice in Black American oral traditions, and, as such, serves as a linguistic expression of Black cultural identity on multiple levels.

Playing the Dozens: “Playing the dozens” is a verbal game common among young adolescents, especially those from low-income groups and ethnic minorities, based in African American culture. Verbal games such as “the dozens” help to establish communication and understanding between ethnic groups when the players know and follow the rules of the game.

Sources of Terms

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<https://help.twitter.com/en/glossary> (Twitter Glossary)

<https://unionmetrics.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/206349626-Quick-Twitter-Tracker-metric-glossary> (Union Metrics)

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media> (Webster Online)

Appendix 2

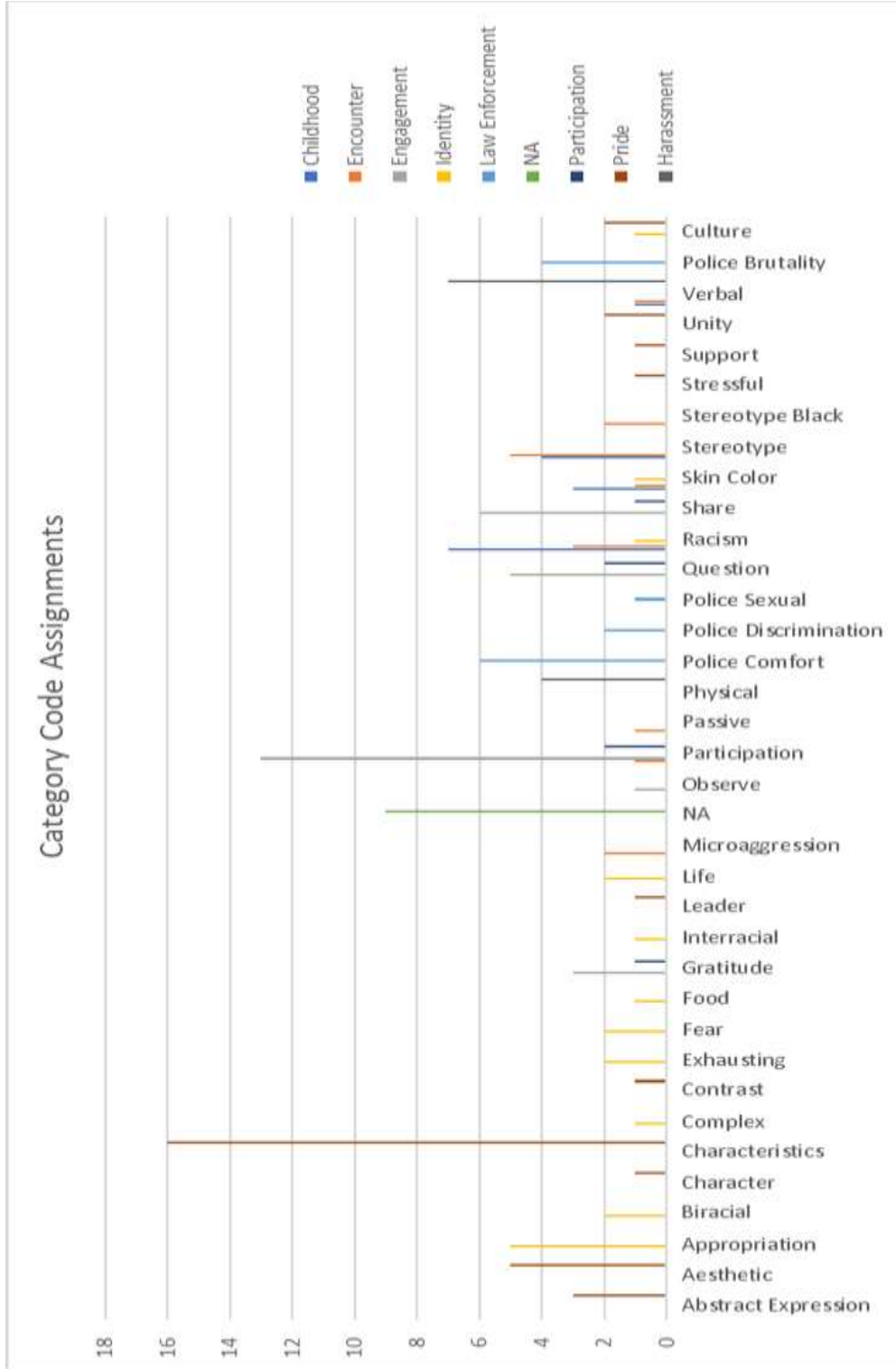
Table 3.1 Numeric Count of Categories

Row Labels	Count of Category
Childhood	15
Racism	7
Skin Color	3
Stereotype	4
Verbal	1
Encounter	16
Microaggression	2
Participation	1
Passive	1
Racism	3
Skin Color	1
Stereotype	5
Stereotype Black	2
Verbal	1
Engagement	28
Gratitude	3
Observe	1
Participation	13
Question	5
Share	6
Harassment	11
Physical	4
Verbal	7
Identity	19
Appropriation	5
Biracial	2
Complex	1
Exhausting	2
Fear	2
Food	1
Interracial	1
Life	2
Racism	1
Skin Color	1
Culture	1
Law Enforcement	13
Police Comfort	6
Police	
Discrimination	2

Police Sexual	1
Police Brutality	4
NA	9
NA	9
Participation	6
Gratitude	1
Participation	2
Question	2
Share	1
Pride	33
Abstract Expression	3
Aesthetic	5
Character	1
Characteristics	16
Contrast	1
Leader	1
Stressful	1
Support	1
Unity	2
Culture	2
Grand Total	150

Appendix 3

Chart 3.1 Category Code Assignments



Appendix 4

Focus Group Participation Email Invitation

Note: *The text below was used in the invitation sent to students to request their participation in the focus group. There was a link to a Google Form at the end of the text and it allowed potential participants to voluntarily submit their email address and name to possibly be selected to participate in the study.*

Subject Line: Dissertation Research Participant Request: Black Twitter Focus Group

Greetings,

I am Katrina Overby, a Doctoral Candidate in The Media School at Indiana University. I am seeking participants to take part in a focus group for my dissertation research. Below you will find more details about the: focus group purpose, date and time, time commitment, and compensation. If you are interested in being a participant, you will find the link below to sign-up.

Participants: African American undergraduate and graduate students ages 18 to 25.

Purpose of Focus Group: This focus group seeks to gain information about participants' experiences with and understanding of Black Twitter and the #AskRachel hashtag.

Time Commitment: This focus group (one session) will take approximately 2 hours to complete. Additionally, each participant will complete a pre-focus group questionnaire one week prior to the focus group session that will take between 45 mins to 1 hour to complete. *Total*

Estimated Time: 3 hours.

Date of Focus Group:

Undergraduate Student Focus Group: August 30th, 2018 at 11:00 a.m.

Graduate Student Focus Group: August 30th, 2018 at 2:30 p.m.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are selected and participate in the focus group, you will receive a \$25.00 gift-card from one the following businesses: Starbucks, Target, or Walmart.

Please complete the brief Focus Group Participation Form by clicking the link below if you are interested in participating. ***The form must be completed by Monday, August 20th, 2018 at 5:00 p.m. (noon) to be considered.*** Selected participants will be emailed a link with the consent form and the pre-focus group questionnaire.

<https://goo.gl/forms/8C3hcxjrMHIoy773> (Focus Group Participation Form)

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Katrina M. Overby
The Media School, Indiana University
Doctoral Candidate
kmoverby@indiana.edu

Appendix 5

Focus Group Participation Form (Google Form)

Note: *The text below was embedded in the Google Form link that accompanied the Participant Recruitment email to potential study participants.*

Greetings,

I am Katrina Overby, a Doctoral Candidate in The Media School at Indiana University. I am seeking participants to take part in a focus group for my dissertation research. Below you will find more details about the: focus group purpose, date and time, time commitment, and compensation.

Purpose of focus group: This focus group seeks to gain information about participants' experiences with and understanding of Black Twitter and the #AskRachel hashtag.

Participants: African American undergraduate and graduate students ages 18 to 25.

Time Commitment: This focus group (one session) will take approximately 2 hours to complete. Additionally, each participant will complete a pre-focus group questionnaire one week prior to the focus group session that will take between 45 mins to 1 hour to complete.

Total Estimated Time: 3 hours.

Date of Focus Group:

Undergraduate Student Focus Group: August 30th, 2018 at 11:00 a.m.

Graduate Student Focus Group: August 30th, 2018 at 2:30 p.m.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you are selected and participate in the focus group, you will receive a \$25.00 gift-card from one the following businesses: Starbucks, Target, or Walmart.

This form must be completed by Monday, August 20th, 2018 at 5:00 p.m. to be considered.

Selected participants will be emailed a link with the consent form and the pre-focus group questionnaire.

Thank you very much for your consideration,

Katrina M. Overby

The Media School, Indiana University

Doctoral Candidate

kmoverby@indiana.edu

Questions on the Form

1. Name: (first and last; open ended short answer)
2. Education Classification: (undergraduate student, graduate student; multiple choice)
3. Do you have a Twitter account? (yes, no; multiple choice)
4. How familiar are you with Black Twitter? (Likert scale from not at all familiar to extremely familiar, multiple choice)
5. How familiar are you with the hashtag: #AskRachel? Likert scale from not at all familiar to extremely familiar, multiple choice)
6. Email: (open ended short answer)

Appendix 6

Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire (Undergraduate Student or Graduate Student)

Note: *This questionnaire was sent to students in an email letting them know they were selected. This is sent as a Google Form and they will receive a link. The email stated:*

Subject Line: Selected Participant: Black Twitter Focus Group

Hello,

Thank you for your interest to take part in this study. You have been selected to be a participant. Please read the Participant Informed Consent attached to this email. After you have read the consent form, select the link below to **complete the Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire by Wednesday, August 29th at 12:00 p.m. (noon).**

Session Details:

(Undergraduate) Date and Time: Thursday, August 30th @ 11:00 a.m.

(Graduate) Date and Time: Thursday, August 30th @ 2:30 p.m.

Location: This study will take place at The Media School - Institute for Communication Research (ICR 812-855-3488) - in Franklin Hall ([601 E. Kirkwood](#) next to Sample Gates). Come in the front doors, and down the stairs just to the right as you enter, turn right and come to ICR Room 012. We will meet you there.

Form Details Section:

This questionnaire will take approximately 45 mins to 1 hour to complete. Answer questions to the best of your ability. If you are unable to answer a question please type "N/A" in the answer tab. Please read the Participant Consent Form sent to you via email before completing this questionnaire. Thank you. **Please submit by: Wednesday, August 29th at 12:00 p.m.**

Email Address (open ended).

Do you agree to participate in this study? (multiple choice, yes/no)

Questionnaire Questions

A. Participant Demographics

- 1) Name (**open ended**)
- 2) Age (**open ended**)
- 3) Where were you born? (City, State, and/or Country) (**open ended**)
- 4) How do you identify ethnically, racially, and or nationally? (**open ended**)
- 5) What is your gender identification? (if you do not want to disclose please type "N/A") (**multiple choice**)
- 6) What is your sexual orientation (if you do not want to disclose please type "N/A") (multiple choice)?
- 7) Major and Year of Study (**open ended**)

- 8) Family Income (answer to the best of your knowledge) (**multiple choice based on Pew Research income scale**)
 - i. >\$30,000
 - ii. \$30,000-\$49,999
 - iii. \$50,000-74,999
 - iv. \$75,000+
- 9) What are your parent's occupations? (**open ended**)
- 10) Where were your parents born? (**open ended**)
- 11) Are you currently a student leader on campus? (**multiple choice**)
 - i. If yes, what is the organization? (**open ended**)
- 12) Are you in a Greek affiliated organization? (**multiple choice**)
 - i. If yes, what is the organization? (**open ended**)

B. Social Media Use

- 1) How do you mainly access social media sites? (**multiple choice**)
 - i. Laptop
 - ii. Mobile Smartphone
 - iii. Desktop Computer
 - iv. Tablet
 - v. Other
- 2) How often do you access social media sites? (**multiple choice scale by hour**)
- 3) What time of the day do you mainly access social media sites? (**multiple choice**)
 - i. Morning (before noon)
 - ii. Afternoon (between noon and 3:00 p.m.)
 - iii. Evening (between 4:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.)
 - iv. Night (between 8:00 and midnight p.m.)
- 4) How many social media apps do you currently have on your smartphone? (**multiple choice**)
- 5) Select two social media sites that you use the most. (**multiple choice**)
 - i. Snapchat
 - ii. Instagram
 - iii. Twitter
 - iv. Facebook
 - v. Periscope
 - vi. LinkedIn
 - vii. Pinterest
- 6) Would it be hard for you to give up social media (multiple choice)?

C. Twitter Demographics

- 1) Why did you get a Twitter account?
- 2) Approximately, what month and year did you get a Twitter account?
- 3) How many Twitter accounts do you have? (**multiple choice**)
- 4) How many followers do you have? (**multiple choice**)

- 5) How many Twitter accounts are you following? (**multiple choice**)

D. Twitter Experience

- 1) How do you mainly access Twitter? (**multiple choice**)
 - i. Laptop
 - ii. Mobile Smartphone
 - iii. Desktop Computer
 - iv. Tablet
 - v. Other
- 2) How often do you access Twitter per hour? (**multiple choice**)
- 3) When you Tweet, who do you see yourself tweeting to?
- 4) What makes you re-tweet (RT) another person's tweet(s)?

E. Black Twitter Experience

- 1) When did you first become aware of something called Black Twitter?
- 2) How would you explain Black Twitter to a person who has never heard of it?
- 3) Do you consider yourself a part of Black Twitter? Why or why not?
 - i. Can you recall one time that you have participated in a Black Twitter hash-tagged conversation? If yes, how did you participate?
 - ii. What was the topic of conversation?
 - iii. What made you participate?
- 4) Describe how Black Twitter works:
- 5) What's the last hash-tagged conversation you remember being discussed by Black Twitter?
- 6) How did that conversation begin?

F. Hashtag Familiarity

- 1) Are you familiar with the Twitter hashtag #BlackExperience? (**multiple choice**)
- 2) If yes, explain your understanding of tweets using the hashtag #BlackExperience.
- 3) Are you familiar with the Twitter hashtag #GrowingUpBlack? (**multiple choice**)
- 4) If yes, explain your understanding of tweets using the hashtag #GrowingUpBlack.
- 5) Are you familiar with the Twitter hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies? (**multiple choice**)
- 6) If yes, explain your understanding of tweets using the hashtag #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies.
- 7) Are you familiar with the Twitter hashtag #AskRachel?
- 8) If yes, explain your understanding of tweets using the hashtag #AskRachel.
- 9) Did you participate in the conversation (make a tweet using the hashtag or share other's tweets that used the hashtag)? Why or why not?
- 10) If you participated by sharing the tweet, did you do so on other social media apps or messaging platforms (ex: Facebook, GroupMe, Instagram)?
- 11) How did you first see or hear about Rachel Dolezal? (Black Twitter news broadcast, other)? (**multiple choice**)

Closing Section:

**Please select your \$25 gift card for participating in this study. Thank you.
(Multiple choice) (Starbucks, Target, Walmart)**

Response confirmation to participants after submission:

Your response has been recorded. Thank you!

Katrina M. Overby

The Media School

Doctoral Candidate

Source Citations

Clark, M. D. (2014). *To tweet our own cause: A mixed-methods study of the online phenomenon*. THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL.

Duggan, M., Ellison, N.B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., Madden, M. (2014). Demographics of key social networking platforms. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/demographics-of-key-social-networking-platforms-2/>.

Appendix 7

Focus Group Protocol for Black Twitter Users (Phase III)

*Categories A through F will be filled out via a Google Form prior to coming to the focus group. Categories G through I will be used during the focus group.

Focus Group Categories:

- G. Black Twitter Experience
- H. #AskRachel Questions
- I. Additional Information

Opening Statement:

Thank you to each of you for participating in my dissertation study. My dissertation examines how “Black Twitter” users interact on Twitter through the portals of three hashtags: #BlackExperience, #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies, and #AskRachel. I am conducting focus groups to further explore and discuss how Black Twitter functions with likely users, Black college students, and to better understand your experiences with Black Twitter and Black Twitter conversations. My role is to facilitate the discussion amongst the group, however, feel free to ask one another for elaboration on a statement made or ask questions to each other. Everyone may not be able to answer every question, but I would like everyone’s viewpoints and perspectives to be shared if you have something to contribute. Is that clear to everyone? Let’s get started.

Focus Group Questions

G. Black Twitter Experience

- 12) *This is a follow-up to a question asked on the pre-focus group questionnaire:
How would you define or describe Black Twitter?*
- 13) *Who is Black Twitter?*
- 14) *Name three themes that you believe are common in Black Twitter discussions.*
- 15) *Can Black Twitter be a significant Black cultural outlet in terms of creating and influencing ideas about Blackness, culture, and identity?*
- 16) *What hashtag have you found to be the most relatable to your Black experience or personal definition of Blackness?*
- 17) *The #BlackExperience is used to discuss racism on college campuses. How can Black Twitter effect racism in America?*

In June 2015 reporting that the former president of the NAACP chapter in Spokane, Washington, Rachel Dolezal, was not only pretending to be Black, but lying about her race and ethnicity on job applications. After her parents outed her as being white, the hashtag #Ask Rachel started a robust conversation about what constitutes Blackness and Black culture in response to the Rachel Dolezal story

H. #AskRachel Questions (to be completely drafted after Phase 2 is completed)

- a. *How would you describe the hashtag #AskRachel?*
- b. *What was your initial reaction to the conversations on Twitter, or other social media sites, using the hashtag #AskRachel?*

- c. *How was Blackness defined and portrayed through the use of #AskRachel? Use specific examples if you can remember.*
- d. *As Black Twitter poked fun at Rachel Dolezal through the use of #AskRachel, should self-identified Black people evaluate their Blackness based on their ability to answer the #AskRachel questions?*
- e. *Culture critic Gerald Early stated: "Humor is an important creative act that binds a group together, gives it an identity, and defines its view of itself and the world outside itself." Further he explained: "A group's humor might contain elements of self-hatred as well as elements of self-protection." I ask, can this kind of public inside humor be affect the perception and understanding of Black culture and Blackness?*
- f. *Do you believe #AskRachel has affected Rachel Dolezal's celebrity or notoriety?*

I. Additional Information

- 1) Any additional information that you would like to add about your experiences with Black Twitter that you would like to further discuss?

KATRINA M. OVERBY

PERSONAL INFORMATION

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EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

Ph.D.	Indiana University (Bloomington, IN) Major Field: Mass Communications - Journalism Dissertation: <i>Doin' it for the Culture: Defining Blackness, Culture, and Identity on Black Twitter</i>	2019
M.S.	Oklahoma State University (Stillwater, OK) Major Field: Journalism Specialization: Media Management	2011
B.A.	Rust College (Holly Springs, MS) Major Field: Mass Communications Minor Field: Broadcast Journalism	2009

WORK EXPERIENCE

2019 to present	<i>Postdoctoral Researcher</i> , Rochester Institute of Technology
2019	<i>Adjunct Instructor</i> , Content Management & Systems, University of Indianapolis
2019	<i>Adjunct Instructor</i> , Social CRM in Digital Media, University of Indianapolis
2019	<i>Adjunct Instructor</i> , Mkt. Research, Metrics & Analytics, University of Indianapolis
2018	<i>Adjunct Instructor</i> , Digital Media Management/Applications, University of Indianapolis
2017; 2018	<i>Adjunct Instructor</i> , Public Speaking, University of Indianapolis
2017 to 2018	<i>Graduate Intern</i> , Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, Indiana University
2013 to 2018	<i>Graduate Assistant</i> , The Black Film Center/Archive, Indiana University

2016	<i>Assistant Instructor, Media, Indiana University</i>
2016	<i>Adjunct Instructor, Mass Media and Society (Online), East Tennessee State University</i>
2016	<i>Assistant Instructor, Design and Production, Indiana University</i>
2016	<i>Adjunct Instructor, Race and Gender in the Media (Online), East Tennessee State University</i>
2015; 2016	<i>Adjunct Instructor, Media Writing (Online), East Tennessee State University</i>
2015	<i>Assistant Instructor, Communications Law, Indiana University</i>
2014	<i>Research Assistant, The Media School, Indiana University</i>
2014; 2015	<i>Lab Assistant, High School Journalism Institute, Photojournalism, Indiana University</i>
2013	<i>Associate Instructor, The Media Village, Indiana University</i>
2013; 2014	<i>Associate Instructor, Race, Gender, and Media, Indiana University</i>
2012; 2015 2017	<i>Assistant Instructor, Visual Communication, Indiana University</i>
2011; 2012; 2015	<i>Associate Instructor, Reporting, Writing, and Editing, Indiana University</i>
2010 to 2011	<i>Assistant Instructor, Media and a Diverse Society, Oklahoma State University</i>

PUBLICATIONS AND REVIEWS

Peer Reviewed Articles

Overby, K. and McGuire, J. (2016, December). Contrasting Male and Female Sports Announcers during Women's NCAA Tournament Games. *Journal of Sports Media*. V.11 (2). Pg. 97-109.

Book Chapters

Howell, G., Wright Fields, C., Williamson, F.A. & **Overby, K.** (2018). Let's "S.L.A.Y." Together: Building Sisterhood, Scholarly Identity, and Solidarity among Black Female Doctoral Students. In *Black Sisterhoods: Black Womyn's Representations of Sisterhood Across the Diaspora*. Dannielle Joy Davis, Ph.D., Denise Davis-Maye, Ph.D., Tamara Bertrand Jones, Ph.D., and Jill Andrew, MA, Eds. (Accepted)

Manuscripts under Review

Overby, K. Back to Black: A Visual Analysis of Blaxploitation Pressbooks and Posters. *Black Camera*. (Under Review)

PRESENTATIONS

Overby, K. (2019). We Tried to Save Yaw: Black Women's Collective Responses to Trump's Misogynoir on Black Twitter. A paper presentation at the *69th International Communication Association Conference: Communication Beyond Boundaries*. Panel Title: Trump's Gendered Politics of Hate: Mapping Diverse Women's Responses in the Media Field. Washington, DC.

Overby, K. (2019). We've Got Your Back: Black Women's Collective Support on Black Twitter. A paper presentation at *The Center for Research on Race and Ethnicity in Society's 2019 Graduate Student Research Symposium: Beyond the Center: Liminal and Peripheral Perspectives on Race and Ethnicity* Panel Titled: Constructing and Complicating Gendered Relations. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2018). #Wakanda or #Wellkinda: An Examination of Black Panther, Black Twitter, Humor, and Colorism. A panel presentation presented at the *Herman C. Hudson Symposium: Attack on Black--A Defense of the Discipline*. Panel Title: I'll Make Me a World: Black Aesthetics and Culture. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2017). What's the Move(ment): Black Twitter, Signifyin', and Resisting Narratives. A paper presentation at the *2017 Herman C. Hudson Symposium--Resistance: Theory and Practice Through the African Diaspora*. Panel Title: "Too Much Sauce": Resistance in Media Culture. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K., Howell, G., White, F.A., and Wright Fields, C. (2017). Let's "SLAY" Together: Exploring Fictive Kinship Among Black Female Doctoral Students. A panel presentation at the *National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in American Higher Education (NCORE)*. Fort Worth, TX.

Overby, K., Howell, G., White, F.A., and Wright Fields, C. (2017). Building our Village: Fictive Kinship and Black Female Doctoral Students. A panel presentation at the *American College Personnel Association Conference (ACPA)*. Columbus, OH.

Overby, K. (2014). "From Asexual Mammy to Sexy Avenger: A Comparison of Black Female Performance in *Coffy* and *Sugar Hill*." A poster presented at the *Black Graduate Student Association Research Symposium*. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2013). Where is the Love?: An Exploration of Sexuality on *Love & Hip Hop*. A paper presented at *Reality Gendervision: A Conference on Sexuality and Gender on Reality TV*. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2013). *Back to Black: A Visual Analysis of Blaxploitation Press Books and Posters*. A paper presented at the second biennial Media and Civil Rights History Symposium. Columbia, SC.

Overby, K. (2012). *Sports Commentary: Comparing Male and Female Announcers During Women's NCAA Tournament Games*. A poster presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Conference. Chicago, IL.

Overby, K. (2012). *Contrasting Male and Female Sports Announcers during Women's NCAA Tournament Games*. A paper presented at Bradley University's Fifth Summit on Communication and Sport. Peoria, IL.

Overby, K. (2012). *Contrasting Male and Female Sports Announcers during Women's NCAA Tournament Games*. A paper presented at Oklahoma State University's Research Symposium. Stillwater, OK.

Invited Lectures and Presentations

Overby, K. (2018, April). Doing Difference Differently. A panel presentation at the *Media School Graduate Conference*. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2018, April). Doin' it for the Culture: Defining Blackness, Culture, and Identity on Black Twitter. A presentation at the *Media School Graduate Conference*. Session Title: Examining the Media from the Lens of Race and Gender. Bloomington, IN.

Overby, K. (2018, April). Doin' it for the Culture: Defining Blackness, Culture, and Identity on Black Twitter." Presentation at The Media School Research Symposium. Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K. (2016, October). "More than Clapbacks: Black Twitter and Black Cultural Discourse." Lecture (Skype) at Professor Marsha Horsley's *Introduction to Media, Women's and Gender Studies*, Ithaca College, Ithaca.

Overby, K. (2014, November). "Where is the Love? Sexual Scripts and Relationships on VH1's *Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta*." Lecture at Professor Radhika Parameswaran's *Race, Gender, and the Media*, The Media School-Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K. (2014, November). "Hegemony and Media Representation." Lecture at Instructor Emily Metzgar's *The Media as Social Institutions*, The Media School-Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K. (2014, June). "From Asexual Mammy to Sexy Avenger: A Comparison of Black Female Performance in *Coffy* and *Sugar Hill*." Lecture at Professor Marsha Horsley's *Contemporary Film: Blaxploitation Films*, African-American and African Diaspora Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K (2013, November). “Where is the Love? Sexual Scripts and Relationships on VH1’s *Love & Hip-Hop Atlanta*.” Lecture at Professor Radhika Parameswaran’s *Race, Gender, and the Media*, The Media School-Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K. (2013, June). “Black Female Performance: A Visual and Textual Analysis of *Coffy*.” Lecture at Professor Marsha Horsley’s Contemporary Film: Blaxploitation Films, African-American and African Diaspora Studies, Indiana University, Bloomington.

Overby, K. (2013, May). “Diversity and Sensitivity in Journalism Writing.” Lecture at Instructor Afton Ginlock’s *Reporting, Writing, and Editing I*, The Media School-Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

(Non-Academic) Presenter, Panelist, and Moderator

Panelist, (2019, March). *Sexual Assault, Harassment and Social Media Advocacy in Communities of Color* panel for the Summit for the Center of Excellence for Women in Technology – Indiana University

Moderator, (2014, October). *Black Power Mixtape*. The #BlackPanthersMatter: Black Panthers at Age 50 Film Series hosted by The Black Film Center/Archive – Indiana University

Presenter, (2014, April). *Minority Women in the Media: Reality TV*. Women in the Media: Exploitations and Explanations Symposium hosted by The Women of Color Leadership Institute and the National Association of Black Journalists – Indiana University

Discussion Facilitator, (2013, February). *The Black Press: Soldiers Without Swords*. Film Screening hosted by The Black Film Center/Archive and the National Association of Black Journalists – Indiana University

Presenter, (2013, April). *Black Women in the Media*. “Exposing the Bitter Truth”. Discussion hosted by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated – Indiana University

Moderator, (2013, September). *My Mic Sounds Nice*. The Ava DuVernay Film Series hosted by The Black Film Center/Archive – Indiana University

Panelist, (2013, November). *Things every undergraduate should know about graduate school*. The 19th Annual Indiana University Undergraduate Research Conference – Indiana University

Panelist, (2011, October). *Graduate School Experience: What it Takes!* 8th Annual Mass Communications Week – Rust College

SERVICE

University

Member, Neal Marshall Black Culture Center Search and Screen Committee, Indiana University, 2015

Mentor, Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program – Indiana University 2014 to present

Community Service Chair, Black Graduate Student Association – Indiana University, 2014 to present

Graduate Advisor, Black Student Union – Indiana University 2014 to present

AGEP Emissary, School of Graduate Studies and Research – Indiana University 2013-2014

President, Black Graduate Student Association – Indiana University 2013-2014

Vice President, Black Graduate Student Association – Indiana University 2012-2013

President, Black Graduate Student Association – Oklahoma State University 2010-2011

Social Events Chair, Black Graduate Student Association – Oklahoma State University 2010

Cope Center Mentor, Student Affairs Office – Rust College 2007-2009

Jr. Recruiter, Office of Enrollment Services – Rust College 2006-2009

Public Relations, NAACP Undergrad Chapter, Rust College 2008

Miss Mass Communications, Rust College 2005-2006

Non-University

Tutor, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church – Bloomington, IN 2013 to present

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Kopenhaver Center Fellow 2019, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Kopenhaver Center For the Advancement of Women pre-convention workshop: Women Faculty Moving Forward: Pathways for Success – Toronto, Canada. (2019).

President's Diversity Doctoral Scholars Program Institute on Teaching and Mentoring – Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. (2014 to present)

A Diverse ETSU Conference (Future faculty success program) – East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN. (2017)

Theory to Practice in a Diverse and Global Society. Study Abroad Course – IUPUI, Stockholm Sweden. (2016)

Research Symposium, The Media School-Journalism – Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. (2012 to 2015)

Lilly Conference on College and University Teaching and Learning – Miami University, Oxford, OH. (2011)

Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program – University of Mississippi, Oxford, MS. (2006)

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Media School Graduate Teaching Award, The Media School, Indiana University, 2018

Alex M. Doty Memorial Fellowship, The Media School, 2018

President's Diversity - Doctoral Scholars Program (DSP), Bloomington 2014 to present

Mass Communications Doctoral Fellowship & Teaching Assistantship, The Media School-Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington 2012 to 2015.

Finer Womanhood Award for Leadership of a Graduate Student, Upsilon Kappa Zeta Chapter of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, Bloomington, 2015

Rust College Trail Blazer Award, Department of Mass Communications, Rust College, Holly Springs, 2011

Kendall Durfey Broadcast Journalism Scholarship, Media and Strategic Communications Department – Oklahoma State University, Stillwater 2010-2011

McNair Graduate Fellowship, Graduate College – Oklahoma State University, Stillwater 2009-2011

Tom Joyner Foundation Scholarship, Rust College, 2008

Arthur Ashe Jr. Sports Scholar, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, Rust College, 2007

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Sports Interest Group, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated

- Kappa Tau Omega Chapter 2013 to present
 - ASCEND Scholars Chair 2014 to present
 - Emerging Young Leaders Chair 2013 to 2014
 - Ivy Leaf Reporter 2013 to 2016
- Theta Upsilon Chapter SPR2009
 - General member

Alpha Kappa Mu National Honor Society

Ronald E. McNair Post Baccalaureate Achievement Program

Center for Leadership and Development Alumni, Indianapolis