#BlackTwitter come for everybody:

The Hashtag as a Site for Discursive Construction of Group Identity

Abstract

Ever since the hashtag was brought to the web in 2007, it has been garnering more and more attention from scholars. However, most of this attention has been in the form of large-scale quantitative data from the fields of mass communication, sentiment analysis, and variationist linguistics. Critical discourse analysis has played a comparatively small role in the exploration of the linguistic allowances given by the hashtag. This study seeks to expand CDA’s role in hashtag scholarship by examining Black Twitter, an online racialized identity found in the Twittersphere. I argue that Black Twitter is a kind of imagined community. I apply Wodak (2009)’s and De Cillia et al. (1999)’s notion of constructive group identity strategies to the online discourse found in the #BlackTwitter hashtag stream. Findings show that users of this hashtag use referential strategies, deixis, and assumption of common attitudes and practices to discursively construct Black Twitter as a unified, bounded imagined community. I also discuss the role of intertextuality in the construction of self and other in Black Twitter. This paper expands the current scholastic understandings of the hashtag by proving it to be a meaningful site for group identity work.

Introduction

In 2006, a new microblogging website called Twitter was introduced into the digital landscape. “Microblogging” refers to a subset of blogging practices that involves the production of small, open broadcast pieces of content for an online venue. In this case, users produce “tweets” - messages limited to 140 characters each – which are available for public viewing on their profile and also appear in the feeds of other users who have chosen to “follow” them. A key feature in Twitter’s mechanism is the hashtag, which was invented soon after the creation of the site to help organize content and “improve contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity within Twitter” (Messina 2007a). Twitter designer Chris Messina came up with the idea from existing Internet Chat Relay practices, where the pound sign was used to channels of talk. The hashtag’s invention was part of a larger trend in ‘web 2.0’ design to allow for user-
generated meta-data to organize content (creating what scholars call ‘folksonomies’). But since 2007, the use of the hashtag has been massively expanded, both in mechanical design (the concept has been adopted by a wide array of social networking sites including Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram and Flickr) and in social application. The linguistic flexibility of the hashtag, along with the lightning pace of content creation afforded by microblogging, has contributed to Twitter’s emergence to the forefront of the digital media landscape.

The hashtag’s prominence in the Web 2.0 zeitgeist has garnered a considerable amount of scholarly attention. The hashtag does have its original function of clerically organizing talk into specific channels, and many linguists have exploited this function to examine public sentiment, lexical diffusion, and grammatical variability of Computer Mediated Communication (Shapp 2014). Other scholars have paid attention to the large-scale social work hashtags have come to serve in sense-making and the formation of public opinion in response to political crisis (Bonilla & Rosa 2014, Bruns & Burgess 2011, Chiluwa & Ifukor 2015). Still others concentrate on the semiotics of hashtags and the phenomenon of “inline metadata,” which I will discuss in detail later (Zappavigna 2012, 2013, Shapp 2014). However, little work to date has been done on the different kinds of group identity and community building that is done through discourse that includes, or even centers on, certain hashtags. It’s in this area of research that critical discourse analysis can lend new insight into the functions of hashtagged online talk.

In this paper, I hope to prove this point by examining #BlackTwitter. Black Twitter is a term which originated from a slew of online articles commenting on the recent activity of dense networks of late-night twitter users, the majority of whom appeared to be African American (Manjoo 2010, Sicha 2011). The focus of the discussion was on “blacktags,” a term given to
racially-charged hashtags that ‘suddenly appeared’ in the trending topics of Twitter\(^1\). Sociologist Sanjay Sharma says that blacktags “virally circulate through the Twitter network, and on occasions *unexpectedly* appear as top trending topics. These short-lived internet memes, often in the form of ambiguous racialized humor have fueled the notion of ‘Black Twitter’” (Sharma 2013). The Black Twitter “community” has become increasingly associated with the ability to quickly create trending hashtags, not only for humor, but for political activism as well. For example, Black Twitter is credited with large online social movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #Ferguson (Bonilla & Rosa 2015).

Trending blacktags have continued to garner attention, examination, exaltation and criticism from a number of outside sources. Unfortunately, these works too often rely on essentialist notions of African American identity. By doing so, scholars and journalists alike tend to miss the complexity at work in the discursive construction of social groups. They also fail to recognize how those practices may differ between online and offline contexts. And at their worst, they can recreate problematic representations of African American culture.

I do not wish to add to this discourse. For that reason, I will avoid trying to define Black Twitter by defining its participants or its practices. I also don’t intend to make claims about African American experiences, identities, histories, or current struggles, as they are not my own. However, the amount of talk produced both by and about Black Twitter as an entity provides a scholarly opportunity to explore how communities are discursively constructed and maintained in online spaces. In this paper I propose that Black Twitter can be viewed as an imagined community as theorized by Benedict Anderson (1985). Consequently, we can examine use a

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\(^1\) Of course, they are only “sudden” from an out-group perspective, but this is how it was characterized.
critical discourse analytic framework to uncover strategies for the construction of Black Twitter group identity much in the same way that earlier scholars have analyzed the construction of national or racial identities (De Cillia et al. 1999, Fairclough 1995, Wodak 2009).

I focus specifically on what De Cellia et al. (1999) call constructive strategies of group identity building. Constructive strategies emphasize an imagined community as a unified body with shared values and behaviors, and create distance from other communities. I identify several specific strategies for intragroup assimilation and intergroup dissimilation including the use of deictics, affective stance, and approaches to intertextuality. I will also discuss the discursive linking of Black Twitter to blacktags. It is my hope that this analysis can positively contribute to the public imagining of how race is done online. I also hope to expand current conceptualizations of the hashtag and its functions in the creation and maintenance of online community.

Literature Review

*Twitter as a site of inquiry.* As previously mentioned, hashtags on twitter have been approached using a wide range of theoretical frameworks. Notable among them is Bruns & Burgess’ conceptualization of hashtags as a means of creating *ad hoc publics* around acute political issues and crises. Their framework hinges on the use of thematic hashtags as “an explicit attempt to address an imagined community of users who are following and discussing a specific topic…Users from the follower network who respond and themselves include the hashtag in their tweets thereby also become a part of the hashtag community, if only temporarily” (Bruns & Burgess 2011). The hashtag becomes a means of direct engagement on a unified, common topic even if individual users are not directly speaking to each other. Hashtag communities are theorized “not as separate, sealed entities, but as embedded and permeable meso-level spaces which overlap… with other, related or rival, hashtag communities at a similar meso-level.”
These scholars draw attention to the speed at which hashtag communities can be built and maintained around breaking news. This new kind of formation is called an *ad hoc issue public*. Many other scholars have used this framework as a base for dissecting the mechanisms of sense-making and activism in temporally bound events unfolding on Twitter (Bruns & Burgess 2011, Bonilla & Rosa 2015, Chiluwa & Ifukor 2015). Most studies of this sort concentrate on singular events rather than an ongoing community. One exception to this is Bonilla & Rosa’s study on #Ferguson which discusses the “inherently aggregative” nature of Twitter activism, which contextualizes each individual Twitter public in a wider interrelated network of talk.

Another scholar to be considered is Michelle Zapavigna, who pioneered the concepts of *searchable talk* and *ambient affiliation*. She began her extensive work with the observation that searchable talk is a feature of talk newly available only in CMC through the ability assign meta-data. Twitter hashtags are a special kind of *in-line meta-data*, meaning that they are semantically integrated in the content itself, rather than hidden or relegated to separate channels of talk. She argues that including meta-data as a subject of evaluation or semantic framing encourages community-building – a hashtag comes to function as an invitation to “search for me and affiliate with my value,” or against it, depending on the nature of the evaluation accompanying the tweet. What’s more, meta-data such as hashtags become by nature of their searchability semiotically “louder” than regular talk. They become “hyper-charged” with the discourse, attitudes, and publics which are ambiently affiliated with the tagged content. Zappavigna contends that hashtags consequently tag the text, but also color the text with a particular frame of reference. This theme is echoed in Bonilla & Rosa’s observations that hashtags “have the intertextual potential to link a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics as part of an
intertextual chain, regardless of whether, from a given perspective, these tweets have anything to do with one another” (Bonilla & Rosa 2014).

Black Twitter and online racial construction. Black Twitter is itself the subject of several studies. The earliest among the studies approached it from a network analysis position, asking “How are the use patterns among African Americans different than the rest?” (Manjoo 2010). Other articles have sought to find linguistic features that reflect African American Culture, specifically the use of African American Vernacular English and the cultural practice of “signifyin’” and other kinds of wordplay (Florini 2013, Brock 2102). However, Black Twitter scholar Meredith Clark points out that the interpretation of Black Twitter as a simple reflection of offline identity practice not only flattens the complex mechanisms of online community building, but also falls into a problematic historical trend of positioning minority groups in an exotic outsider role to be marveled at:

These stories often report on “Blacks” or “the Black community,” and sometimes, as in the case of Manjoo’s (2010) piece, attempt to identify connections based on common language and experience. However, they lack a rigorous examination of how thousands of individuals from different socioeconomic, geographical, gender and interest groups, to name a few, link their experiences to form a complex yet unified social identity. This process is best explored through the theoretical framework of social identity. (Clark 2014:14)

Clark’s dissertation on Black Twitter is a good deal more complex than earlier work. She herself is a member of Black Twitter, and pulls on ethnographic study, discourse analysis, and narratives of fellow members to define the community from within. She also critically analyzes the portrayals of people of color online and describes how Black Twitter users position themselves in response. She concludes that Black Twitter is a fluid “meta-network of communicators” and that membership is best characterized by a multi-step process of engagement and community-building. Anyone interested in a more complete characterization of Black Twitter should read her work.
The other scholar who properly complicates the nature of Black Twitter is Sanjay Sharma. He also warns against identity-based explanations of African-American users, which “fetishize the behavior of Black people by highlighting a relatively insignificant phenomenon” (Sharma 2013). Furthermore, he argues against studying race online by relying on offline demographic/phenotypical classification, saying that this is a flattening of users of color. Instead, Sharma envisions blacktags as *digital-race assemblages*, which are dynamic, discursively constructed arrangements of heterogeneous elements. In this case, elements include usernames, profiles pictures, tweets, hashtags, language, and software algorithms, which collectively form the process of race online. Racial identities in this framework are understood as messy, loosely bounded, and in a constant state of production. Sharma says that “understanding race as an assemblage acknowledges the oppressive force of racial categorization and the violence of racism, yet seeks to activate the potential of race to become otherwise” (Sharma 2013). In the spirit of Clark and Sharma, I deliberately attempt not to rely on any offline essentialist notions of what it means to be a person of color in America (especially since I am not one). Instead, I will focus on the discursive construction of the Black Twitter identity, and how that identity is tied to portrayals of race.

**Theoretical Framework**

#BlackTwitter is best conceptualized as what Benedict Anderson calls an *imagined community*. An imagined community is a group large enough that members cannot meet or know the majority of their group, and may not even hear from one another. This trait is clear from other imaginings of hashtag publics (Bruns & Burgess 2011, Zappavigna 2012, 2013). Despite this, members still conceptualize a belonging to a unique, bounded community with associated *common ideas, emotional attitudes, and behaviors* (Bourdieu via De Cillia et al 1999). De Cillia
et al. showed that imagined communities are discursively constructed and maintained in
conversation about the community in question – a fact I use as a starting point for my own
analysis. Clark emphasizes that Twitter networks emulate news production, a process that’s
important in Anderson’s concept of nation building. Like newspapers, a body of tweets allows
users to “shape consciousness and produce norms including attitudes that define aspects of social
life which are either of interest or importance to citizens” (Tuchman 1978 via Clark 2015).

In their paper on Austrian identity, De Cillia et al. discuss a number of discursive
strategies present in the construction of national identity, including constructive, transformative,
and destructive strategies. I will be concentrating on constructive strategies, which they describe
as “linguistic acts which serve to ‘build’ and establish a particular national identity. These are
primarily linguistic procedures which constitute a national ‘we-group’ through particular acts of
reference, for example by using the pronoun ‘we’ in connection with the de-toponymimical
labelling ‘Austrians’…which serve as a basis for appealing directly or indirectly to national
solidarity and union” (De Cillia et al 1999). Those could be described as intragroup assimilation,
which limits intra-group difference and constructs the image of a unified group identity. The
mirror of this practice is distance and difference from constructed “others”. De Cillia et al.’s
descriptions of construction of in-group solidarity are mirrored in other CDA theories
(Fairclough 1995, Wodak 2009).

The particular strategies mentioned in the quote above can be termed deixis and
referential strategies. Referential strategies which include nominals, metaphors, and
metonymies, are a kind of strategy to label in-groups and out-groups and assign implicit
evaluations to them (Wodak 2009). Deixis refers to the linguistic class of words which only
contain meaning when the utterance is put in context. Both Decillia and Wodak point out that the
use of personal pronouns in particular can contribute to the discursive construction of self and other. Wortham (1996) shows that mapping deictics can help a researcher to expose the organizational context of various groups in the narrative and can serve as a starting point for further analyzing evaluative language (Wortham 1996). Fawn Draucker (2009) demonstrates that deixis is relevant to linguistic practice on Twitter by showing how pronoun usage can “draw in” different subsections of Twitter audiences and create boundaries of engagement more specific than earlier definitions of hashtag communities would suggest (Draucker 2009).

**Stance-taking** can be another important strategy to build intra-group solidarity. Stance is defined by Strauss & Feiz as “the speaker’s or writer’s feeling, attitude, perspective, or position as enacted in discourse” (Strauss & Feiz 2013). Stance-taking is theorized as a public act that both evaluates an object and positions the self in alignment with other subjects (DuBois 2007). The stance-taking relevant to my data is **affective stance**, defined as the expression of mood or attitude towards a subject. Twitter scholars Chiluwa & Ifukor (2015) found that affect is used on Twitter to construct in-group attitudes about crises and subsequent collective action.

The influential CDA scholar Norman Fairclough pays particular attention to the work that **intertextuality** can play in the construction of sameness and difference. He draws a distinction between **assumption**, which is implicit and “unsaid”, and intertextuality, which explicitly attributes or references other texts and voices. Fairclough says, “An important contrast between intertextuality and assumption is that the former broadly opens up difference by bringing other ‘voices’ into a text, whereas the latter broadly reduces difference by assuming common ground” (Fairclough 1995). Another aspect of intertextuality is that it highlights what Bakhtin calls the **dialogicity** of a text, meaning that it is relativized and deprivileged; undialogized (assumed) language is authoritative and absolute.
Methodology

The following analysis is carried out on a corpus of tweets pulled from Twitter on Nov 6, 2015. 5,000 tweets were collected using Twitter’s streaming API, which allows the user to search and download tweets containing specific search terms. I decided to analyze tweets which included the hashtag #BlackTwitter. To be clear, this is not where Black Twitter “lives” - the majority of activity is in following networks, racial hashtags, and responses to political events (Clark 2014, Manjoo 2010, Sharma 2013). I use #BlackTwitter because I predicted that it would be the site of meta-discourse about the phenomenon, and therefore be ripe for analysis in the style of De Cillia et al.’s (1999) paper on national identity. Retweets were discarded from the corpus. I also removed tokens originating from @blacktradelines, a business conglomerate account whose advertisements totaled 872 out of the original 5,000 tweets.

After initial analysis, I chose to narrow my scope even further, focusing only on tweets where #BlackTwitter has been semantically included in the main body of the tweet (as opposed to in an indexing list at the beginning or end of the body). This left a final corpus of 193 tokens. Following Wortham’s (1996) strategy, I began my analysis by mapping the deictic markers of each tweet and sorting them according to footing in relation to Black Twitter. I then coded my data for instances of referential strategies, stance-taking, and intertextuality. I quantify some of these findings but the majority of my analysis will be qualitative. I chose this method because the contextualized (and inter-contextual) nature of each individual tweet doesn’t lend itself well to purely quantitative measures. I also hope to show that a fine-grained qualitative analysis has a place among the larger-scale quantitative studies that are so popular in Twitter scholarship.

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2 This choice is elaborated upon in the following section.
Analysis

The following analysis and discussion are broken into four sections. First, I will discuss constructive strategies in the #BlackTwitter discourse; that is, the ways in which the Black Twitter is presented as a unified group. Second, I will examine the construction of the “other” in #BlackTwitter talk. I will show examples of who this “other” is, and how it often takes on a racialized tone. Third, I will discuss the role that intertextual discourse plays in the construction of group solidarity. And I will lastly briefly discuss the kinds of practices mentioned in #BlackTwitter and why they may be important in the construction of this particular community.

Construction of a unified #BlackTwitter

#BlackTwitter is a site for users to discursively construct and define the body of Black Twitter. Wodak’s work (1999, 2009) details several strategies that members of various in-groups use to construct collective identities, including nomination strategies combined with deictic pronouns. Within this data, I would like to first consider the perhaps overly obvious but still important fact that the field site itself is a kind of toponymical nomination strategy. Referring to a group called “Black Twitter” at all presupposes a network which responds to that name. Moreover, adding a hashtag both clerically and semiotically amplifies the tagged content. In this case, #BlackTwitter carries two meanings that “Black Twitter” does not: first, it raises the community name to the forefront of each individual tweet, making it the object of the evaluation and discussion, and second, it presupposes that there will be an audience for a stream of #BlackTwitter tweets, which in its own way is a meta-reference to the community it names.

The nominal construction of “Black Twitter” is strengthened even further when we consider the placement of the hashtag in the body of the tweet. Already, hashtags on Twitter
distinct from many other kinds of meta-data because they are visible in the main body of the tweet. Shapp (2014) found in her corpus that tweets commonly include *syntactically excluded* tags, which often carry the following meaning:

Out of context statement in prose #context #context (Shapp 2014:23)

Bonilla & Rosa similarly note that tags of this nature serve as context for what the tweet is “really about.” These tweets can belong to any semantic category (e.g. #fail (abstract noun), #werk (verb) #firstworldproblems (phrase)). My data, however, features #BlackTwitter in a position of *syntactic inclusion*. Shapp’s data suggests that position is common with tagged objects, people, places, or companies. Including #BlackTwitter in the sentence likewise grammatically presupposes its existence more concretely as an entity and involves it as a participant in the discourse.

Although all syntactically included tweets presuppose #BlackTwitter’s existence, I found that different users imagine the phenomenon in slightly different ways. Deictics and other clues about footing evidence these differences (Draucker 2013, Wortham 1986). Below I lay out three different ways in which Black Twitter is imagined:

**Table 1: Imaginings of #BlackTwitter**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Linguistic Strategies</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Tweets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Spacializing words, e.g. in, to, on</td>
<td>One of my mutual is getting dragged, but I’m to scared to intervene because once u enter #BlackTwitter you either come out dead or alive</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Direction verbs e.g. enter, leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group of reachable participants</td>
<td>1st and 2nd person pronouns (you, us, we)</td>
<td>Monolithic entity</td>
<td>3rd person pronouns (they)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last two strategies, which make up the majority of my corpus, are examples of #BlackTwitter being used as synecdoche. This strategy is highlighted by Wodak and De Cillia as a means of creating strong sense of homogeneity and unity in a group: “[i]t unquestioningly takes for granted that there exists a homogenous we-group with a shared mentality and that the traits… would characterize each single member of the imagined national group equally”(De Cillia et al. 1999).

**Whiteness and the Construction of the Other**

The strategy which mirrors intra-group assimilation and construction is *inter-group dissimilation*. Also described as othering, distancing, or negative other-representation, this strategy is arguably just as essential to group identity as internal definition/construction (Wodak 2009). In the case of #BlackTwitter, the “other” being named is almost uniformly associated with racism, and often with whiteness as well. The strategy of othering usually includes explicitly
naming specific groups, most of which belong to one or both of two categories (named categories in bold):

1) Political/economic figures or institutions who have negatively affected African Americans (25 instances)
   (1) #BlackTwitter don’t just come for #Twitter, come for everybody. What business or entity is lacking ur face? UR voice? #Speakup & #Speakout
   (2) Why did the government even allow this to happen. Is Carson ignorant to #BlackTwitter? [L|INK]

2) Whiteness/white people (27 instances)
   (3) Gotta love #BlackTwitter. Making racists white folk delete their Twitter one person at a time.
   (4) #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackTwitter, what fraternity is this, how do we get it expelled? White privilege at its worst! [L|INK]
   (5) Smh. #BlackTwitter gonna get em all up outa here RT @BookOfEly: #WhiteTwitter where art thou chill?

Out-groups are also implied through the use of second and third person pronouns or by using imperative structure:

   (6) Don’t piss off #BlackTwitter y’all. They will come for you racist folks HARD
   (7) @BlissfulAllure @tawnybananas Do not cross #BlackTwitter
   (8) They get mad that the black community wants to learn our history. Because as long as we dont know. They can control #BlackTwitter

Users show a tendency to couple references to an out-group with negative affective stance.

Negative qualities invoked include ‘racist’, ‘bigot’, ‘brutal’/ ‘violent’ (in relation to U.S. police), and ‘ignorant’, as well as more general negative markers such as ‘bad’, ‘worst’, ‘trash’, and ‘bitch’. Negative stance taking helps to distance from entities viewed as racist, and also promote solidarity within the perceived audience for the tweet.

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3 Referring to the fact that Leslie Miley, the only Black leader at Twitter, publicly quit after struggling to instigate more diverse hiring practices.


These entities which Black Twitter seek to distance themselves from are overwhelmingly white. As seen above, whiteness and blackness are placed in direct juxtaposition with each other, to the exclusion of other races and sociological categories. (The exception to this is political parties). In fact, in the entire corpus there is only one tweet which mentions a race other than white or black\(^6\) The large majority of individuals who are singled out as racist are white as well.

*Intertextuality and Racist Voices*

Interestingly, one very common discursive strategy within this twitter stream is not to take a negative stance toward the other, but to reiterate the other’s negative stance toward the self. In this strategy, othering is done through the use of third person pronouns and through referential strategies. Then negative stances or actions toward #BlackTwitter are ascribed to the other party. This can be seen in tweet (8) above, as well as (9) below:

(9) Odd how #BlackLivesMatter stands up for anyone from any group victimized by #PoliceBrutality, yet #AllLivesMatter condemns #BlackTwitter?

In the above example, there are two “others” named: policemen, and the #AllLivesMatter movement. The police are evaluated negatively in a straightforward way through the use of the words ‘victimized’ and ‘brutality’. #AllLivesMatter, however, is positioned as oppositional through the reported negative stance they take towards the in-group.

People also use #BlackTwitter to report extremely *specific* cases of racist discourse. Tweets of this nature are saliently intertextual – racist voices are simultaneously voiced along with the (presumably anti-racist) author of the tweet, all within the space of 140 characters. I believe that the authors of this specific kind of tweet maintain distance between their voice and

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\(^6\) * “I’ve got a question for both #BlackTwitter & #WhiteTwitter. Has anyone ever called a Native American person a #Redskin as a slur?”*
that of their “target” by relying on maximally intertextual methods of reporting. Twitter has a lot of ways to bring in voices. One can paraphrase, indirectly quote, or directly quote, as in other kinds of speech; however, one can also retweet, include a link to a tweet, share screenshots of other examples of CMC, hyperlink to a news article which then directly reports speech, etc. In the case of #BlackTwitter, authors consistently report by sharing screenshots of racist CMC discourse, with the remainder of their tweet aligned toward an audience of #BlackTwitter.

Consider the following example:

(10) #BlackTwitter y’all know what to do. [PHOTOSET A]

(11) #BlackTwitter get her [link to (10)]

(12) This happens everytime RT @Tawnybananas: #BlackTwitter Y’all know what to do. [PHOTOSET A]

(13) Get her tf outta here RT @tawnybananas: #BlackTwitter Y’all know what to do. [PHOTOSET A]

(14) Damn… I like that Denny’s too! RT @tawnybananas: #BlackTwitter Y’all know what to do. [PHOTOSET A]

Tweet (10), which was put forth by a popular African-American blogger and activist @tawnybananas, links to photoset (A) containing two offensive statements by a young white woman as well as her name and place of work. Her accompanying demand, based on previous tweets of similar nature (discussed in the following section), is to have the woman fired or her
place of work shut down. The author’s use of a photoset may have a practical purpose: the tweets may be deleted once attention is drawn, so the author may wish to keep a screenshot as a record. However, the photo capture serves another function, which is to create maximal distance between the authorial voice and the voice of racism. This is strongly contrasted with the assumptions in her own comment “y’all know what to do”. Tweets (11)-(14) copy/paste, link, or retweet (10). Here, the reported speech appears “closer” to the authors’ voice by appearing in the tweet body, whereas the racist discourse remains relegated to the photoset (and perhaps doubly distanced as a report of a report!) The four posters also utilize previously mentioned strategies to construct their group identity: naming (11), assumption of in-group practices (12, 14), and othering of racist groups through deixis (11) and negative stances (11, 13). From this exchange we can see that users actively manipulate various intertextual resources both to build in-group solidarity and to highlight difference between groups, much like Fairclough noted in his analyses.

Concerning Drags

The set of examples discussed above are a call to perform a practice called *dragging*\(^7\). I wasn’t initially familiar with this term, so at the risk of sounding like a stuffy academic, I tentatively define a dragging as disrespecting, humiliating, or otherwise negatively evaluating or influencing an individual or entity on a mass online scale. Drags can be a slew of insults or jokes (e.g. #TweetYourReactionToTheBenCarsonRap), or can have more serious consequences for the target such as loss of employment (e.g. tweet (10)). I bring up dragging two reasons. First, discussions of stance-taking are widened when we include not only negative stance-taking

\(^7\) Related verbs include “savage”, “slander”, “blast”, and the vaguer “get”
around racism, but also positive evaluation of drags, which are themselves essentially an aggregate of negative stance-taking strategies. Similarly, attempted instigations to drags could also be considered a negative stance-taking move. Examples (15)-(17) illustrate the various ways in which drags are invoked as a stance-taking move:

(15) When a #BlackTwitter drag is imminent. [LINK]¹⁸
(16) I do love witnessing #BlackTwitter drag the hell out of ignorant trash.
(17) shut it down #BlackTwitter [LINK]¹⁹

Beyond their stance-taking functions, mentions of drags seem to have a community-building affect in their own right. Users consistently frame drags as centrally tied to Black Twitter. They do so by either positively evaluating in-progress or recent drags (e.g. “#BlackTwitter comes through on a Thursday… #TweetYourReactionToTheBenCarsonRap”) or attempting to instigate a new drag (e.g. “#BlackTwitter, expose this racist. Posting this while publicly displaying her workplace. @ShaunKing [LINK]¹⁰). Discursive links between drags and #BlackTwitter occur in 55 tweets in my corpus. This link serves to build an imagining of Black Twitter that shares common practices. This reflects previous findings and theories about constructions of imagined communities (De Cillia et al. 2009).

Drags are a subset of the racially charged ‘blacktags’ that brought initial attention to Black Twitter and continue to trend through today. The constant discursive linking of these disparate but related discourses to the more cohesive imagining of #BlackTwitter has an important effect, both for the hashtags and for the Black Twitter community. In the case of the hashtags, I posit that as each individual drag/campaign is discursively attached to Black Twitter,

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¹⁸ Link to a tweet reading: “YALL [LINK to video of rapper responsible for Ben Carson Rap]”
¹⁹ Link to tweet reading: “Another Iowa teacher told a lack kid in HS to say ‘yes sir, master’ to him. Still Employed.”
¹⁰ Link to photoset similar to photoset (A): capture of racist tweet, facebook profile page of author, workplace of author
they also become indirectly attached to each other, creating a single aggregative discourse on racial relations. This substantiates Bonilla & Rosa’s claim about the aggregate effect of #Ferguson campaigns, and requires further analysis. Black Twitter as a concept also gains power in discourse with the addition of each drag as it builds a community narrative of successful anti-racist activism. The success and power of #BlackTwitter may even be another central attribute that is in turn used as a constructive strategy:

(18) #BlackTwitter is an Army, better yet a Navy…

(19) Poor Child, don’t you know #BlackTwitter is undefeated?

The interaction between blacktags, drags, and #BlackTwitter could easily fill another paper. However, a cursory observation seems worth paying attention to.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have shown that the #BlackTwitter stream is used as a site for the discursive construction of Black Twitter as an imagined community. The salient constructive strategies detailed above show us that Black Twitter, despite being a permeable, amorphous network, is imagined as a unified body with shared attributes and attitudes. Blackness is coded in these shared attitudes through negative stance-taking against white people, and against white and/or racist depictions of Black culture. The use of intertextuality is key in the identification and judgement of racist voices. Lastly, the common practice of the drag was shown to be central to the Black Twitter identity as well as a tool to position the community as oppositional to racially oppressive forces.

These findings present a myriad of exciting options for future research. The first and more obvious is simple expansion of the corpus to see whether these patterns hold up over time. Expansion in the parameters of the corpus to include syntactically excluded instances of the
#BlackTwitter would also be relevant. Thematicallly, the role of intertextuality of different voices
and different hashtags seems to be a fruitful area for future analysis. And lastly, I would
recommend that any interested researcher should apply similar frameworks to other lasting
Twitter communities. Examinations of groups explicitly coded as white or oppositional to
#BlackTwitter, such as #AllLivesMatter, would be especially relevant.

The findings presented in this paper are not meant to define a community or racial
identity: the discourse found on #BlackTwitter is only a tiny facet of the complicated web of
people, practices, narratives, discourses, etc. that make up Black Twitter. Instead it was my hope
to demonstrate that online speakers can indeed use hashtags for complex group identity work. I
also wished to add to the literature complicating the nature of online race scholarship. In the
future I hope more and more discourse analysts turn their attention to the ever-growing
opportunity for activism, community, and identity-building that is afforded by computer
mediated discourse.


