Community + Culture features practitioner perspectives on designing technologies for and with communities. We highlight compelling projects and provocative points of view that speak to both community technology practice and the interaction design field as a whole. — Sheena Erete, Editor

Black Twitter Is Gold

Why This Online Community Is Worthy of Study and How to Do So Respectfully

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Black people have been a part of cyberspace since the AfroNet and bulletin-board-network communities in the early 1990s [1]. Initially, Internet studies of Black people online were mainly focused on deficit models, in which Black people's lack of access to computers or the Internet were the main components of the digital divide [2]. However, scholars also found that Black people were more active on mobile devices and initially were some of the heaviest users in social media spaces like Twitter in 2009 [2]. While technology adoption has shifted over time to be more evenly distributed across groups of people, an even more uplifting picture is being painted by research and scholarship that sees the adoption and appropriation of technologies in the digital space by Black people as rich and worthy of inquiry.

One example of Black people adopting and appropriating an online offering is Black Twitter. André Brock first wrote about Black Twitter in 2012, where he discussed the origins of the term *Black Twitter*, which is often attributed to Choire Sicha's 2009 article "What Were Black People Talking About on Twitter Last Night?" [2]. Brock, however, points out that Anil Dash's 2008 blog post "Yo' Mama's So Fat" and Chris Wilson's 2009 "uknowurblack" post for *The Root* both predate Sicha's article. Those posts also discussed how Black people on Twitter are distinct from other groups on the platform. First, unless you are a part of the conversations

happening on Black Twitter, you would only discover them through the trending topics page as hashtags in discussions gained popularity on the platform. Second, present in the conversations of Black people on Twitter are Black oral traditions such as "playing the dozens," which is a form of "signifyin'" defined as "a game of insult that specifically targets participants' mothers" that employs "the ritualized formula: Yo' momma so X that Y" such as "Yo' momma so old, she went to middle school with Jesus" [3]. African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), a dialect spoken by a number of Black people in the U.S., and related African-American oral traditions are present within Black Twitter, making it a rich landscape and snapshot of the ever-evolving nature of Black linguistic culture [3]. In addition to outlining the linguistic offerings of the community, Brock defines Black Twitter as "an online gathering" of Black people who use Twitter to engage in Black cultural discourse and create social ties. Brock analyzes Black Twitter as a technical artifact, a practice, and a set of beliefs

across in- and out-groups in terms of race, as well as race and technology.

Brock is not alone in examining Black Twitter. It has been explored by sociologists, as well as media studies and cultural studies scholars and linguists, but people within the human-computer interaction (HCI) research community have yet to embrace it as a research site. Beyond a brief mention in a publication, Black Twitter has not yet been the focus of a dedicated research paper. Exploring the affordances that support and hinder this community, discovering the struggles that the community faces and overcomes, and revealing design choices that either help people thrive or fall short for those who engage with them are just a few of the many ways in which researchers can learn from Black Twitter.

In an effort to explore what can be gleaned from Black Twitter, I interviewed 18 people who self-identified as people who use Twitter and are familiar with Black Twitter. During the course of these conversations, I explored how people discovered and defined Black Twitter. Several started by adding Black friends during college; Historically Black Colleges and Universities' (HBCU) student networks have proliferated on Twitter, connecting Black students across institutions. Others followed "meme" accounts and added people suggested by Twitter. As far as defining Black Twitter, many people found a specific definition elusive, but the most common term across all the interviews for describing Black Twitter was *community*. The second most used word to describe Black Twitter

Insights

- When studying Black people in the digital space, there is no need to use a deficit model to frame your inquiry.
- Black Twitter is a viable and rich site for HCI research.
- Researchers should learn about the Black Twitter community and be clear on who they are as researchers and why they want to study the community before diving into research.

was *humor* or *funny*. Throughout the interviews, several people mentioned jokes and humorous content as an integral part of Black Twitter. The topics that participants identified as part of Black Twitter ranged from sports and entertainment to politics and social justice issues. When asked to recount an occasion when racism was discussed on Black Twitter, one person interviewed quipped, “Oof, just one?” Due to the interviews taking place during the late summer of 2020, many people interviewed were able to recount recent experiences on Black Twitter where personal stories of racism or comments about a racist incident were expressed.

We also talked about whether a community similar to Black Twitter existed on other platforms. While some people pointed out that Black Twitter content gets reposted on Facebook and Instagram accounts, only a few could point to any communities similar to Black Twitter. One person referred to a Black Twitter subreddit (another example of Black Twitter content being reposted on another platform); another mentioned groups on WhatsApp as platforms outside of Twitter that host Black online communities. There seemed to be something special and unique about Twitter that fostered the unique community of Black Twitter. However, during the course of research, information about Black LinkedIn began making the news, as Black people using the platform began gaining attention for calling out workplace racial discrimination and calling foul when Black people’s or their allies’ posts were taken down or their accounts were frozen [4]. Some of the benefits and challenges of Black Twitter seemed to also be reflected in Black LinkedIn. The benefits include community building and empowerment, as Black people on both platforms share their successes and celebrate one another; the challenges of Black people outside of the Black online

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community and dealing with racism are also present in both communities.

Another benefit experienced by people who engage with Black Twitter includes information sharing and seeking, by which people on Black Twitter ask about everything from hair braiders to therapists, in some cases narrowing their inquiries by location to get recommendations. For some people interviewed who live in predominantly white locations, Black Twitter became a lifeline for finding Black friends, access to Black-owned businesses, and much more. An additional benefit brought into relief due to the conversations I had with people familiar with Black Twitter was the activism that people were able to participate in through the community. Calls to action, including raising money or awareness or getting signatures for petitions, abound. Drives to get people involved with social justice issues or to participate in politics through registering to vote allowed people who engaged with Black Twitter to be informed and act on the pressing issues in the Black Twitter community.

Moreover, challenges on Black Twitter existed beyond just dealing with outsiders and racism. Alongside contending with onlookers and malefactors, issues of safety surfaced

around harassment and abuse on Twitter. Some people I interviewed spoke about a seemingly double standard that existed between Black people using language that was part of AAVE having their accounts suspended or content removed while white supremacists would use all manner of offensive language ostensibly without repercussions. Another challenge revealed about Black Twitter involves being called out. While getting called out, or “canceled,” by Black Twitter often happens to people or brands outside of the community, people I interviewed voiced fear about being called out themselves. Communicating textually within a confined space like Twitter does not always leave room for nuance, subtlety, or grace. The fear or concern of tweeting “out of pocket” content and having the experience of being called out left some people hesitant to post or engage with Black Twitter fully.

The ethical issue found most often within the context of Black Twitter by the people I interviewed was the appropriation and stealing of Black Twitter content. Several respondents noted that the phenomenon was also happening on other platforms such as TikTok, where Black creators have their content stolen by a white creator, who then gets more engagement and

in some cases profit from the content. Jimmy Fallon recently contended with this exact issue by inviting white TikTok creator Addison Rae onto his show. Rae performed several dances originally created by Black TikTok creators. Fallon responded to the backlash by inviting several Black TikTok creators onto his show a few days later, but the phenomenon of Black content being appropriated continues to proliferate. Just as aspects of Black culture have been stolen and appropriated offline for generations, so has the practice transferred to the digital space, leaving Black content creators susceptible to exploitation.

There is so much to learn from Black Twitter. However, in focusing on a marginalized community, researchers would do well to consider the ethics involved in studying Black people on Twitter through this community. Amy Bruckman defines ethical research in any field as inquiry that “balances potential benefits and potential harms” [5]. Bruckman also outlines three risks that researchers must mitigate during their scholarly pursuits. The first is a risk of harming the research participants. The second risk is disturbing the environment being researched. The third and final risk involves the researcher’s institution contending with the consequences of an ethical lapse. In the context of Black Twitter, the first two risks could occur in a number of scenarios. Harm could come to contributors of Black Twitter who are featured in research and are not properly anonymized, which may expose accounts unprepared for such attention. There could also be harm to Black Twitter content creators whose contributions are not attributed in the research, even though they would prefer them to be. Essentially and ideally, researchers who plan to quote Black Twitter content, or content from other marginalized online communities, could consider asking participants whether and how they prefer to be attributed in the research output. As for the risk of disturbing environments, researchers could alter the direction and tone of comments sections by participating as researchers in Black Twitter content as outsiders. For the

uninitiated, trying to engage with the community as an outsider may be an uphill climb. The people I interviewed overwhelmingly defined outsiders of Black Twitter as people who were not Black. Some also pointed to outsiders as white people who want to come into Black Twitter and just share their opinion or who do not use their privilege to address the plight of Black people. The third risk, to the institution, is the possibility that a researcher gets called out by Black Twitter and the backlash reflects poorly on their institution.

When asked about researchers researching Black Twitter, people who engage with the online community expressed several thoughts that they want scholars to consider throughout the research process. Some respondents pointed out that researchers were coming into the space without understanding Black culture or language, or without familiarity with Black Twitter writ large. Part of Brock’s definition of Black Twitter involves being knowledgeable about Black culture and non-Black people being “invited to the cookout” online. Being an informed and responsible researcher of Black Twitter or other marginalized online communities requires respect for the community of inquiry and a willingness to understand and learn about the various people who make up that community. Making a misstep is a strong possibility, but how you respond is almost as important as how you messed up. One person I interviewed shared a story about a researcher who had scraped data from the #BlackintheIvory hashtag. When the researcher asked whether anyone else wanted the data, the response was essentially “That is not your data, friend,” and people who had engaged with the hashtag responded strongly against the researcher and their actions.

Researchers who do not identify as Black or African American can start with looking within, and would benefit from a reflexive exercise that uncovers who they are, what motivates their research, and why they want to study this particular group. When pursuing research with Black Twitter or other marginalized online communities with whom you

do not identify, it is important to ask yourself whether you need to be the one doing the research. Can you partner with or invite another scholar into your research who does share identities with the online community you are interested in researching?

Overall, conducting research within the community of Black Twitter bears many intellectual fruits. Many disciplines have learned from Black Twitter—the HCI community can do so as well. While it is important to approach such research with a marginalized online community by discerning how to mitigate harms and maximize benefits, it is also important as researchers to respectfully and rigorously study these communities. Being reflexive and thoughtful throughout the research process will yield better findings and more receptive participants. One person I interviewed described Black Twitter simply as gold. Just like any precious metal, we would do well to use it wisely and justly.

ENDNOTES

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