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Definitions of Blackness and what are deemed as accurate portrayals of Blackness have changed over time. Connections to Blackness have been linked to biological, social, cultural, and phenotypical means that construct strict boundaries around how race functions in American society. Therefore, when racial boundaries are presumably crossed, understandings of race and how they function are questioned. Guided by symbolic interactionism, this study explored racial performances and indicators of Black racial authenticity on Black Twitter, a socially discursive space. Specifically, a qualitative content analysis of tweets regarding Rachel Dolezal, whose controversial racial passing for a Black woman led to conversations about racial boundaries among African Americans through the #AskRachel hashtag, was conducted. This study explores discursive performances of Blackness and the boundaries of racial authenticity as expressed on Black Twitter. The findings indicate the emergence of popular culture, sociocultural products, socialization agents & community structures, and positive & negative appraisals were the domains. With the rise of Twitter as a common discursive space within the Black community, there is potential for it to become a more prominent socialization sphere. This thesis discusses the findings and their present and future implications for Blackness and its understandings. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future directions for the field are discussed.

#ASKRACHEL: SIGNIFYING PERFORMANCES AND BLACK RACIAL

AUTHENTICITY ON BLACK TWITTER

by

Ashley G. Evans

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Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

_____
Committee Co-Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by ASHLEY G. EVANS has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair_____

Committee Co-Chair_____

Committee Member_____

_____
Date of Acceptance by Committee

_____
Date of Final Oral Examination

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Blackness is simultaneously a label, a group, a culture, a community, and an identity that varies between individuals, groups, and communities. Black people are a diverse group with different life experiences that shape their outcomes, interpretations, and overall perspectives toward life. Blackness has been understood as an awareness of one's history, a shared experience, and a comfort in one's current skin with an idealized hope for the future" (L'Pree, 2017). Because of social and cultural evolutions across time, Blackness has broken boundaries that showcase its cultural significance and multifaceted nature. Therefore, it is difficult to place Blackness in a box to determine what it is and how it operates through a static interpretation. However, more work must be done to explore the dynamic and nuanced nature of Blackness (i.e., what Black experiences involve and what they represent).

There have always been boundaries constructed around race in America that define the lines on who belongs and who does not within various social groups that are constantly changing (White, Klein & Martin, 2002). Racial and ethnic identity is defined as the significance and meaning that individuals ascribe to ethnicity and race that also influence how they see themselves (Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Helms (1990) defines racial identity as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group"

(p. 3). It is important to understand that because of the ever-changing boundaries constructed around race, boundaries are defined differently in varying local contexts. Sociocultural contexts manage the boundaries around what the collective identity of Blackness is, and what it is not. Nevertheless, individuals have crossed boundaries constructed around race through racial performances typically to gain access to a better quality of life (Ginsberg, 1996) or as an act of mimicry (Lahiri, 2003). These sorts of transgressions have disrupted the sociocultural milieu within society and not only cause individuals to ask questions but also engage with their own emotions and understandings regarding race and the status quo.

When the internet rose as a more present and accessible feature in the everyday lives of Americans, so did the desire to connect with one another online. Some of the earliest Black social spheres include sites like The Drum (started in 1988), Melanet (started in 1989), The City of Elam Network (started in 1994) and Net Noir (started in 1995) were commonly centered around African American services, culture, news, politics, and economics (Eglash and Bleecker, 2001). Eglash and Bleecker (2001) cite these early Black web networks as evidence of the social power that can be cultivated online and strengthen Black community ties. Still, the literature surrounding present Black discourse on social networking sites remains limited.

In a society where our interactions with others are becoming more commonly mediated through virtual means, such as social media spaces, it is important to explore racial performances and racial authenticity within this context. Ideas about contemporary technology, such as the internet, were once considered value-neutral, neglecting the

actions and beliefs behind designer's technological practices (Pacey, 1985). The creation

of online contexts, such as social networking sites, oppose this idea as they have been

found to be "a reflection of everyday life" (boyd, 2011, p. 35). Interactions on social

networking sites have the potential to influence the development of individual's identities

because of the use of it as a platform for discourse and engagement (Chan, 2017).

One of the settings in which people are constantly engaging in discourse

surrounding their identity and sense of belonging is through social networking sites such

as Twitter. Twitter, specifically Black Twitter, is a place where African Americans are

having similar discussions around Black identity while working to maintain relationships

and sense of community with one another as they always have in settings like churches,

barber shops, and beauty salons (Brock, 2009). Through social networking sites,

individuals are connecting with one another through discursive means and exchanging

racial messages used to make meaning of their lives (Chan, 2017). Although, Black

Twitter relies on discursive practices founded outside of and even before the existence of

Twitter, the use of a discursive space in this manner is new. It is important to understand

how African Americans perform or communicate Blackness in a way that legitimizes

their belonging and acceptance not only into Black Twitter, but as an authentic Black

person.

The aim of this study is to examine how Black Twitter users conveyed meanings

of Black racial authenticity and racial performance through tweets in response to Rachel

Dolezal's perceived racial transgressions (i.e., passing for black). Using a symbolic

interactionism framework, the research questions addressed are:

1. What meanings of Blackness are expressed or performed by Black Twitter users in response tweets to #AskRachel?

2. What do #AskRachel tweets identify as indicators of Black racial authenticity?

CHAPTER II

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Symbolic interactionism, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study, focuses on how individuals create, exchange, and assign meaning to tangible and abstract objects and interact with those objects based on the meanings that have been assigned to them. The discursive nature of Twitter, its imposed brevity of communication, and the absence of characteristics typical of face to face interaction make Twitter a unique context in understanding communication and socialization practices. Black Twitter users utilize discourse incorporating aspects of language, experiences, and other symbols to communicate meanings associated with Blackness. This chapter discusses the core tenets of symbolic interactionism that frame this study. In addition, Black racial authenticity, racial performances, and Black Twitter are also discussed as components of how Blackness is constructed, understood, and performed.

Symbolic Interactionism

With the consideration of socialization agents as an important factor in conferring one's Blackness, symbolic interactionism works as the basis of my theoretical framework. Symbolic interactionism underlines various constructs as sources of meaning making that individuals within a society use to validate concrete and abstract things such as Blackness. This theory takes the perspective that society precedes the individual (White, Klein, and Martin, 2002, p. 96). This perspective emphasizes the importance of

socialization within an individual's life and experiences. For symbols to exist, societies

and individuals within societies must assign meanings to various things including words,

objects, and ideas. An individual can only begin to make meaning and place value on

objects or events once that meaning has been established within an interaction between

others within their society. This theory also prioritizes society through that assumption

that individuals are not born with a sense of self and mind but develop their self-concept

and identity through social interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

Symbolic interactionism assumes that individuals and social groups are

influenced by larger cultural and societal processes. This acknowledges that the meanings

placed on social and cultural representations does not happen in a vacuum. It is through

social interaction in everyday situations that individuals work out the details of social

structure. This assumption further acknowledges that the understanding of how society

operates, and the meanings ascribed to things, are not worked out for an individual during

one singular time period. Social situations are influenced by the individuals current

understanding of things through aspects like their attitudes.

Moreover, social structure has the ability to change on a consistent basis and

everyday individuals may find out new details about how the structure operates which

may change their perspective. To contribute towards the construction of social realities,

individuals must participate in the environments they contend (Erickson, 1995).

In symbolic interactionism, identities are interpreted as the meanings individuals

ascribe to a role (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 145). Racial identity in particular has been

understood as the symbols, language, culture, and group experiences that represent what

it means to be Black to an individual (Asante et al., 2016). Therefore, before an individual can act or perform what Blackness is, they have to have an understanding and knowledge of what it means to be Black that is dispersed through messages and socialization practices that is rendered by family, peers, and society. Race in itself is a construct separate from the individual that is socially and historically informed by meanings and events that are likely to precede the existence of the individual (White et al., 2002). While racial identity has collectively been described as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms, 1990, p. 3) emphasis is still placed on the individual's perception of what it means to be Black rather than society's view of what it means to be Black. Tweets from Black Twitter users reveal that Blackness is more than heritage or even observable features, it is a social and cultural connection that aligns individuals with a sense of peoplehood and experience.

It is important to note that the construction of self and identity are viewed differently within symbolic interactionism. The self is defined subjectively and objectively within an individual. When considering the self, individuals are the actors behind their own behavior and other seemingly respond (White Klein, and Martin, 2002, p. 97). On the other hand, identity and categorization of one into a social group is able to be defined by the individual as well others who place them into categories based on how an individual present's oneself. In summation, while the self is constructed solely by the individual, identity maybe constructed by the self but it is also evaluated and assigned by others through social relations.

Culture closely relates to these topics because of its inclusion of values, beliefs, policies, and procedures, but it does not determine or essentialize an individual's behaviors and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behavior just because they self-select or are perceived as members of a certain group (Spencer-Oatey, 2008). While racial identity can inform an individual's behavior and performances, it cannot completely determine an individual's racial authenticity. This is because identity is an internalized process while racial authenticity is an external process that involves judgement from others (DaCosta, 2003). Racial performances have been interpreted as behaviors that are meant to signify or manage impressions of racial authenticity through cultural knowledge and competence (Florini, 2013). However, actions and behaviors are not determinants of an individual's identity.

Racial Performances

Racial performances deemphasize race as an essentialized aspect of human existence and instead emphasize associations of race through behaviors to portray authenticity (Nowatzki, 2007). Racial performances are often viewed through instances of acting White (Maragh, 2017) or non-white (Nowatzki, 2010) to suggest racial identity can be assessed through one's actions and interactions. Racial performances operate as "ingroup maintenance strategies," (Maragh, 2017, p. 595) or boundaries, around what embodies aspects such as Blackness. The act of performing Blackness does not outright symbolize inauthenticity. However, limited understandings and portrayals of Blackness also propel stereotypes forward and opportunities for appropriation that are typical harmful to those within a racial group (Johnson, 2003).

Examples of racial performances include signifyin' and passing. Florini (2013) describes signifyin' as "genre of linguistic performance that allows for the communication of multiple levels of meaning simultaneously, most frequently involving wordplay and misdirection" (p. 224). Passing is the act of "a non-white person successfully pretending to be a white person...by performing what others consider to be 'white'" (Nawatski, 2007, p. 116). Nawatski (2007) argues that embodying Whiteness is not about biological or phenotypical means, but by performing Whiteness in a way that "one is not seen as an imposter" (p. 116).

Racial performance on Twitter has been interpreted as an act of "signifyin" that lends itself to racial authenticity (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Stevens & Maurantonio, 2017). Signifyin is a culturally based discursive based practice and performances. These performances may be characterized by: rejection of those that "act better than" other Black people, pressure to talk about Black related current events, expectations of Twitter followers to already have knowledge of Black American cultural happenings and exchanges, and the avoidance of certain subjects to protect oneself from ostracism (Maragh, 2018). Signifyin on Twitter have also been linked to language and wordplay, cultural practices, and primary knowledge of an African American experience (Florini, 2013).

Black people have used Twitter as a platform to engage in discourse surrounding Black American life that portray oral traditions of "playing the dozens" or signifyin' (Brock, 2012) through tags such as #ThanksgivingWithBlackFamilies that represent knowledge of cultural happenings and exchanges (Overby, 2019). Black Twitter has

helped propel social movements forward, such as ones that address police violence towards against African Americans, through tags like #BlackLivesMatter, #Ferguson, #SayHerName, and #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (Overby, 2019).

Transgressing Blackness: Why Rachel Dolezal Matters. In an interview with KXLY news station on June 11, 2015, former Spokane, Washington NAACP chapter president, Rachel Dolezal was prompted by reporter Jeff Humphrey with a picture of a White man who Dolezal affirmed was her father and then asked, "Are you African American?" which Dolezal responded "I don't understand the question" and did not provide a clear answer regarding her African American heritage. For years, Dolezal had been presenting herself as a biracial woman with an African American father until her parents "outted" her after learning of her claims of being a victim of race-related hate crimes (Selle & Dolan, 2015). The following day, June 12th, media coverage and discourse surrounding Dolezal's racial identity were heightened and reports of more than 385,000 tweets surrounded the hashtag #AskRachel on that day alone (Mooney, 2015). #AskRachel questions, critiques, and humorizes Dolezal's "passing" as a Black woman into a play of symbols, language, culture, and group experiences (Asante, Sekimoto, and Brown, 2016) interpreted through Black Twitter user's racial performance and judgement of Dolezal's racial authenticity.

Figure 1. Dolezal Comparison

Dolezal's "passing" as Black woman was a shocking event that attracted world-wide attention. But, the long standing controversary surrounding the topics centers on Dolezal's Black racial identity as a transgressive act. Studies have even regarded it as an act of identity theft (Stevens & Maurantonio, 2018). However, there is a long-standing history of the boundaries of Blackness and Whiteness being crossed to gain a better quality of life (Ginsberg, 1996) or as an act of minstrelsy (Lahiri, 2003). In the same way there are those who negatively critique minstrelsy (Roediger, 1991; Lott, 1993) or support it as a culturally critical art form (Mahar, 1988; Cockrell, 1997), there are those who support Dolezal's claim to Blackness and those who are vehemently against it. However, the focus of this study is not to validate or invalidate Dolezal's Black identity

claims. It is instead to uncover how Black Twitter users interpret Dolezal's claims and utilize evaluative tools to measure the present bounds of Blackness.

Dolezal is a real-life example of how Blackness is constructed, judged, and legitimized. Dolezal positioned herself close to Blackness through various actions and interactions including: her leadership with the Spokane NAACP chapter, attending a historically Black institution, Howard University, marrying a Black man, raising three Black sons, changing her appearance by darkening her skin with makeup, and styling her hair with products marketed towards Black people, perming her naturally straight hair, and utilizing hairstyles such as braids and crotchets (Nashrulla, 2015). Dolezal's actions have been interpreted as intentional performances geared towards upholding her Black racial identity. Her identity and racial performances have been authenticated by those who credit her advocacy in the Black community as helpful and identity as a personal matter. However, Dolezal's identity and racial performances have also been considering as acts of cultural appropriation, disrespectful, and an exercise of her privilege as a white person. Still, Dolezal's identity and presentation say a lot about the complexities of race and how it functions in a racialized society.

Black Racial Authenticity

Scholars across social science disciplines have understood authenticity in various ways depending on how they choose to draw understandings of authenticity's source (Weninger & Williams, 2017). Authenticity has been related to the self and personal identity as a "social psychological phenomenon (Vannini and Franzese, 2008, p. 1621). Weninger and Williams (2017) differentiate social authenticity from self-authenticity as a

"phenomenological experience of self" (p. 171) and in turn position authenticity as a concept more concerned with evaluations of how people utilize their social identities. The scholarship framed by symbolic interactionism related to authenticity typically focuses on sources of authenticity from a rational or interpretive approach. Rational approaches delve into how individuals remain consistent or true to oneself. However, interpretative approaches "do not assume authenticity to be a natural quality of individuals…rather as something that is cultural defined and/or situationally negotiated. (Weninger & Williams, 2017). Within this study, Black racial authenticity is theorized from an interpretative approach. Black Twitter users situationally evaluate Rachel Dolezal's authenticity utilizing their own sociocultural tool kit.

Social authenticity is validated through a process in which individuals construct boundaries around the identities of themselves and others. Racial authenticity is a process of judgement about an individual's performance of Blackness from the perspective of others. Racial authenticity has been referred to as, "what is socially constructed and accepted as signifying racial identity" (Harris, 2019). However, individuals utilize their own evaluative criteria to mark what they believe is an authentic or appropriate representation of Blackness. Black racial authenticity has been conflated as a sociocultural marker that is determined by internal means related to an individual's identity. However, Black racial authenticity is only reflective of sociocultural influences that have meaning to the judge or judges.

Because racial authenticity is based on judgement from others, one might be expected to engage and perform in a certain way to connect and confer with who they are

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(Harris, 2019; Norwood, 2004). There are various beliefs of what it means to embody Blackness. In the past, authenticity has prioritized physical or more intimate interactions such as: school performance, recreational activities, phenotype, language, dancing, fashion style, political standing, and racial dating preferences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Johnson, 2003; Leong, 2010; Norwood, 2004). Although measuring racial authenticity is likely to vary based on an individual's ideology of how Black people should act, think, or be, the problem is there is a lack of knowledge on what markers to look for that indicate someone's "realness" or level of racial authenticity.

One's racial identity may inform what is deemed as a racially authentic marker but cannot define Blackness as a societal whole or as a collective identity. Racial authenticity has also been defined in relation to racial identity:

> One's racial identity is a somewhat internalized process, whereas racial authenticity is a mostly external process whereby individuals use peoples' external signifiers, such as phenotype, cultural knowledge, and behavior, to assess if those persons authentically embody the internal racial identity they (are perceived to) claim. (DaCosta, 2003 as cited in Harris, 2019).

Nguyen & Koontz Anthony (2014) understand racial authenticity as "a cultural resource legitimized through ideologies, actions, and interactions" (p. 770). Even further, the authors found that literature focusing on racial authenticity tends to concentrate on dimensions of commodifying realness and legitimizing membership. Legitimating membership involves individuals' ideas of what authentic blackness is in conjunction with the expectations and judgement of others (Khanna, 2011).

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Overall, assertions of authenticity are complex and "arbitrary" (Bettie, 2014) and therefore tend to apply stereotypical or "White" ideals to judgements of Blackness and assert racial identity essential to one's being (Johnson, 2003; Maragh, 2018; Nguyen, Koontz Anthony, 2014). These assertions are based on knowledge that race itself is not a real or a biological entity, so acting or thinking a certain way will not lead to unlocking or ultimately embodying Blackness. "We are in a post-Black era where the number of ways of being Black is infinite. Where the possibilities for an authentic Black identity are boundless" (Touré, 2011, p. 20). Although it is arguable that America is presently a post-racial society, this quote supports the notion that African Americans are not a monolithic group and the bounds of Blackness are relatively less restricted. It is important that race is continuously regarded as a non-essentialized construct that represents the complexities of American life.

Black Twitter as a Discursive and Dialogic Community

Twitter was created in March 2006 and is a public American microblogging and social networking service on which users post and interact with messages known as "tweets". Tweets were originally restricted to 140 characters but was doubled to 280 in November 2017. Tweets can visuals and graphics such as photos, GIF's, and videos. Users can post, like, and retweet tweets, but unregistered users can only read them. Registered users can engage in these functions as well as "follow" other users, a process of subscribing to an individual's tweets. Differing from other social sites, following a user is not the same as "friending" a user. However, individuals have the ability to "follow back" to maintain a mutual relationship. Additionally, users have the ability to

manage their pages publicly or privately to restrict how individuals interact and view their tweets. Users can also keep up with global conversations and manage their interactions through the use of hashtags. Hashtags are described as a way to "index keywords or topics on Twitter…and allows people to easily follow topics they are interested in" (Twitter).

Black Twitter is described as "a collective of active, primarily African-American Twitter users who have created a virtual community ... [and are] proving adept at bringing about a wide range of sociopolitical changes" (Feminista Jones, 2013). Meredith Clark also describes, "Black Twitter" as a network of culturally connected communicators using the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities. "It's the culture that we grew up with. It's the culture that we experienced in our lives and school, in the workplace, with entertainment – and you see conversations coalesce around specific cultural moments. I always explain to people that Black Twitter doesn't have a gateway, a secret knock. It's not a separate platform. It's all in the way that people use the platform to draw attention to issues of concern to black communities" (Davidson, 2018).

One of the earliest acknowledgments of how Black people use Twitter is from Choire Sicha (2009), a writer who expressed his fascination with "Late Night Black People Twitter." In his observation, Black People Twitter was active all the time and discourse typically happened through the use of hashtags. Farhad Manjoo (2010) dug deeper into how Black people used Twitter driven by his following of the development of the hashtag #wordsthatleadtotrouble. He identifies hashtags started by and engaged with

primarily by Black people as #blacktags and questions, "What is it about the way black people use Twitter that makes their conversations so popular?"

Foucault (1972) recognized discourse as a process utilized to construct symbolic representations of knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment (Hall, 1997). Through discourse, the ideas contained within our minds are communicated to construct boundaries around the function of particular topics. The strength of Foucault's understanding of discourse as system of symbols working together is the acknowledgement that discourse, representation, knowledge and 'truth' are all historically informed. Moreover, those who are able to control narratives, or discourse, are also able to control the dissemination of knowledge and ultimately hold power in determining what is true and what is not (Foucault, 1972).

Chan (2017) found that racial identities are also influenced by communication on social media which makes it understandable why Black people utilize Twitter to understand their positionality in America as boundaries around Blackness have shifted and even become "boundless" (Touré, 2011). One of the most important functions of communication is to express identity (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003) emphasizing why users on Twitter find themselves expressing or performing their ideas of Blackness or judging others displays of authenticity. Reflections and analyzation around public discourse of Dolezal's racial identity may present valuable information about the complexities of Blackness and how they are being worked out in public discursive spaces.

#AskRachel: Hashtags as Signifiers. The relevance of hashtags lies in its ability

to maintain conversation and connect people. Brendan Meedler describes Black people's

use of hashtags as more of an "instant messenger" rather than a public statement tool

(Manjoo, 2009). Through the use of hashtags, Twitter users are able to engage in a digital

community constituted of people with similar experiences, sometimes interests, who are

concerned with the same topics and issues. Clark (2014) believes Black Twitter users

utilize hashtags to "test their opinions with the assurance they are being shared within a

space where fundamental values are still agreed upon" (p. 105). Brock (2009) describes

Black people's use of the internet as another context for public discussion that typically

has happened in "Black-owned barbershops and beauty salons." This sentiment

highlights that discourse around Black topics and issues have always been happening on

a regular basis, however these conversations are now more instantaneous and accessible,

even to outsiders. (Brock, 2009).

Hashtags, particularly #AskRachel, operate as vehicles that localize beliefs,

attitudes, and other symbols of significance that usually contextualize an event or even an

idea. Users are able to engage in conversation through hashtags that aim to organize and

inform others on the meanings of events and how others are responding to them.

Essentially, hashtags help communicate social norms and the definition of a situation, all

important aspects in assigning and acquiring meaning. Through #AskRachel, Black

Twitter participants shared experiences, graphics, and commentary on what they believe

a Black experience looks and implies if Dolezal is Black, she would indeed know.

The aim of this study is to examine how Black Twitter users conveyed meanings of Black racial authenticity and racial performance through tweets in response to Rachel Dolezal's perceived racial transgressions (i.e., passing for black). Using a symbolic interactionism framework, the research questions addressed are:

1. What meanings of Blackness are expressed or performed by Black Twitter users in response tweets to #AskRachel?

2. What do #AskRachel tweets identify as indicators of Black racial authenticity?

CHAPTER III

METHODS

A qualitative content analysis of tweets, a form of textual analysis, was conducted

with tweets from the #AskRachel hashtag. Textual analysis is a relevant and beneficial

tool in qualitative research because it attempts "to try and obtain a sense of the ways in

which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around

them" (McKee, 2001, p.1). Hsieh & Shannon (2005) define qualitative content analysis

"as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through

the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p.

1278). Qualitative content analysis specifically aims to uncover the meanings behind

messages (Frey, Botan, and Kreps, 1999). This analysis was used to discuss the meaning

of key words, phrases, and other visual representations of significance (photos, gifs, etc.)

that symbolize the ways in which individuals believe Blackness is expressed, performed,

or indicate a level of racial authenticity.

Tweets from #AskRachel, were analyzed from the dates of June 12th, June 13th,

and June 14th, 2015. This tag specifically organizes and calls for an explanation to make

sense of Dolezal's actions through a set flow of interaction. It was a popular tag with

more than 385,000 tweets reported to have been archived through the tag #AskRachel on

June 12th, 2015 alone (Mooney, 2015). The function of the tag was also

to attract conversations around what it means to be Black in contemporary times where the use of cultural knowledge, competence, and even humor, is used to test and confer Black authenticity as opposed to the hashtag #RachelDolezal which likely contains general tweets across time concerning Dolezal. In an effort to show relevance within the Black Twitter community, tweets analyzed were primarily be collected from the "top" tweets tab as opposed to the "latest" tweets tab because tweets characterized by high levels of interaction (retweets, likes, and comments) are typically shown within this tab. Historical tweet data from the tag #AskRachel, was collected using Twitter's advanced search engine function in conjunction with an advanced web scraper created by WebScraper.io utilized to export and organize tweets.

Because of the topic's cultural relevance and popularity as a Black Twitter topic (Barksdale, 2015; Flake, 2017; Kent & Harrison, 2019; King, 2015; Staggers, 2015), users engaged within the tag will be considered members of Black Twitter. From the original data scraped on June 12th, 13th, and 14th, 1168 tweets were pulled from the top tweets tab. In an effort to show relevance within the Black Twitter community, tweets analyzed were collected from the "top" tweets tab as opposed to the "latest" tweets tab because tweets characterized by high levels of interaction (retweets, likes, and comments) are typically shown within this tab. The top 375 tweets with the most retweets were initially chosen to analyze. Tweets that did not showcase racial performances through questions and critiques posed towards Dolezal or evaluations of Black racial authenticity were not considered resulting in a total sample of 325 tweets.

A qualitative analysis strategy presented by Creswell (2003) served as a basis for the plan of analysis. To begin my data analysis process, I first began with coding development. I composed a list of preliminary codes that I believed would reflect previous codes presented by Stevens & Maurantonio (2018) as well as experiences from my own participation on Twitter and initial readings of the literature. Although many of the codes utilized were established before the official coding process began, other codes emerged following the initial reading of tweets.

First, tweets were generally read through to gain a sense of meaning and understanding of the flow of interaction surrounding the hashtag. Research questions guided the coding process. Tweets were analyzed for indicators, or questions, directed towards Dolezal, the nature in which authenticity is being judged, and how racial authenticity was expressed or performed by users. Tweets were coded by individual coders into specific categories. Tweets were coded for meanings characterized by specific themes. Following individual coding, meetings were held to acknowledge and resolve any coding discrepancies amongst coders. Finally, coded tweets were organized and merged into larger themes that captured the racial performances or judgements of racial authenticity exhibited through #AskRachel. Once themes were created and organized, they were evaluated quantitatively to showcase frequency and percentages of the total sample. This was done by calculating the total number of tweets within each category and is showcased within tables located within Appendix A. Those codes included themes of relation to another marginalized group's experience, positive & negative appraisals, or comparisons of mimicry.

Tweets were officially examined and coded by the author as well as a team of undergraduate students who identify as African American and are also Black Twitter participants, or at least aware of Black Twitter and its functions. Interrater reliability was established at 86%. The process of coding tweets was guided by the question, What is the content of the tweet reflecting a knowledge or lack of knowledge of? Coding team members were asked to code the entire content of the tweet including text and images. If it was thought that a tweet reflected more than one code, codes were listed in order of primary importance that reflect the main purpose for the content of the tweet. Coders were also asked to indicate where the structure of tweets was primarily focused on text, a graphic, or a combination of both that work together to provide reference and knowledge to portray a racial performance or evaluate the racial authenticity of Dolezal.

To combat ethical concerns of "lurking," suggestions made by Grincheva (2017) were followed. Lurking suggests an "invisible presence" that is a one-way or researcher dominated relationship that exploits or appropriates participants actions for research purposes (Heath, Koch, Ley & Montoya, 1999). Therefore, participants Twitter names, handles, and profile pictures that portray personal information about users are excluded and participants that are referenced are given pseudonyms. This method is not meant to exclude or discredit user's contributions towards conversation, instead it is meant to protect their identity. Although this study would be considered non-obtrusive research and complies with Twitter's privacy policy, it must be acknowledged that the selected participants are not aware of who exactly has access to their content despite the fact they may be aware that they have the ability to be observed by anyone at any time.

Additionally, screenshots of tweets included in the results section exclude the Twitter names and handles of users. Moreover, considering Black populations history and mistrust of academic and research institutions (Scharff et al., 2010), it is of primary importance to protect participants from scrutiny or threats to their physical, emotional, or mental well-being.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores boundaries constructed around Blackness by Black Twitter users prompted by Rachel Dolezal's racial and ethnic identity as a social and cultural transgression. Through analysis of the hashtag #AskRachel, social and cultural markers are investigated to examine meanings associated with Blackness and indicators of Black racial authenticity. I interpret the findings of this study as evidence that Blackness represents knowledge, discourse, socialization practices, and sociocultural context that largely precede Twitter's existence. This study aims to bridge cultural studies based in humanities and social sciences and adds to literature surrounding identity, race, and culture and how it is presently being negotiated and understood, particularly in online spaces.

Racial performances and indicators of racial authenticity on Black Twitter revolve around themes of popular culture, sociocultural products, socialization agents & community structures, and positive & negative appraisals. The most popular performances of Blackness were made through knowledge of entertainment such as TV shows, movies, and well-known figures; references to music and musical artists (Table 1); and cultural and ethnic knowledge(s) related to family processes and dynamics (Table 3). Expressions of Blackness and evaluations of Black racial authenticity by Black

Twitter users give insight into how the boundaries of Blackness have changed or even remained the same over time

Popular Culture

Blackness is most commonly represented through shared knowledge of popular culture references and forms of entertainment such as TV shows, movies, sports, and celebrities or well-known figures (45%). Tamara asks, "*Exactly how many times have you watched "The Jacksons: An American Dream" on VH1? #AskRachel*" implying that Black people have not only seen this movie about the famous African American musical family, the Jacksons, but they've likely seen it many times. Individuals like Jamie accompanied a visual with their question towards Dolezal for specificity, "*Who's children are these? A. Shenaynay's B. Rashonda's C. Bebe's D. Lakisha's #AskRachel*" (Figure 2). This question is being asked in reference to the 1992 movie based on African American comedian Robin Harris' comedy routine about crazed youngsters known as Bébé's Kids.

Figure 2. Pop Culture Reference

Cultural referents focus on music including lyrics and artists. As Gregory asked, "*who better you call? a) marquise b) jimmy c) tyrone d) josé #AskRachel*" a reference to the song "*Tyrone*" by artist Erykah Badu. gigi asks, "*So you black? At what time exactly was Usher in his drop top cruising the streets? #askrachel*" Other users rely on who the artist is and their well-known contributions to evaluate cultural knowledge. Melody asks, "*Who is the coolest DJ in the world? A) Dj Khaled B) Dj Esco C) Dj Drama #AskRachel*." Forms of entertainment possibly hold such a grand significance in the defining of Blackness because Black experiences and Black culture are so deeply intertwined (McKnight, 2019). Through songs, movies, and television, it is possible that Black people see themselves, their experiences, or what they do and don't want their lives to be like and from there it helps construct how individuals define themselves and define what it means to be Black.

In addition, some tweets embody more than just one category. William questions, "*In 2002 what type of shoes was Nelly stepping in? A. Er force 1z B. Air force ones C. His sketchers #AskRachel*." While knowledge of Nelly's song is of primary importance to understand the reference, there is also reliance on sociocultural products such as Black vernacular to answer the question correctly. This tweet highlights the relationship between culture and socialization practices that reveal a unique Black experience. Although there is humorous undertone to many of these tweets and playing the dozens or signifyin has been acknowledged as a method of social critique on Black Twitter before (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2013; Stevens & Maurantonio, 2017), the questions and

evaluations posed by Black Twitter users is rooted in a serious negotiation of presently

defining Blackness and Black racial authenticity online.

Sociocultural Products

Subcategories of sociocultural products that were commonly represented were

cultural artifacts, Black vernacular, and community knowledge. Cultural artifacts were

often characterized by representations of food, hair, and other objects. In reference to

food, Michael asks, *"#askrachel is this the only seasoning you put in your ramen*

noodles?" which is accompanied by a photo of a seasoning packet typically found in

packages of ramen noodles. This question relies on knowledge of cooking technique used

by Black Americans to enhance the flavor of foods, particularly bland foods.

Tweets surrounding hair products, techniques, and devices were also commonly

mentioned. One tweet posed to Dolezal asks, "*What is this device used for? #AskRachel*"

and presents a photo of Marcel curling iron set that is commonly used on Black hair

particularly in beauty salons. Some users even delve into hair practices that are used to

protect and preserve Black hair. In one tweet, two pictures are presented of women in

satin wraps and bonnets and the question accompanying the tweet is posed by a user

Arial. "*Is this part of your night time regimen or nah?*" Questions like these emphasize

how Black hair and hairstyles are a of symbol of social and cultural meaning that have

long been utilized to represents aspects such as identity, spirituality, and beauty in the

Black community (Chapman, 2007).

Additionally, objects were presented as culture artifacts that represented the

resourcefulness of African Americans through the use and repurposing of items to reflect

a cultural significance. Sydney presents a photo of a toothbrush and asks, "*This is primarily used for A. Dental hygiene B. Laying down baby hair C. Cleaning Jordans #AskRachel.*" Another user Terrence asks, "*does anyone in your family have this pot. #AskRachel.*" With over 3,000 retweets and favorites, the pot presented seem to hold a particular cultural relevance with many users and their families that are engaged in the #AskRachel topic.

The use of Black vernacular is a representation of racial socialization processes that are "colored by the experiences, customs, and beliefs of Black Americans" (Stevens & Maurantonio, 2018, p. 186). Usage of Black vernacular aligns with Florini's (2013) earlier findings that constitute it as a way to portray cultural knowledge and competence. For instance, Martin asks, "*What they smell like? A. Dirt B. Grass C. Outside #AskRachel.*" The text of the tweet is accompanied by a photo of Black children playing outside in the grass. Although it may be assumed that the children would smell like dirt or grass because that's what they were playing in, reliance on cultural knowledge and experiences with socialization agents would emphasize the actual question being asked here, what is commonly said to young Black children when they return inside homes or other buildings from being outside?

Lastly, community knowledge represents references that members of a certain group, even more specific than the general Black community, would especially be able to identify because of past experiences. Community knowledge particularly addresses subcategories of college life, socially mediated community knowledge, and Black versus nonblack expectations and choices posed to Dolezal. Without knowledge or participation

in these communities, outsiders may have a hard time interpreting or understanding the significance of the tweet and reference provided. Tweets about college life referenced experiences as a Black student on a college campus, particularly at HBCUs. Lindsay asks, "*What is this line for? A) Financial aid B) Chicken Tuesday C) The StepShow D) All of the above.*" The tweet shows a long line of people waiting to get into location that implies the applicability of the photo to various contexts related to a Black experience.

Socially mediated community was the most commonly referenced form of community knowledge that relied on specific knowledge of events that occurred on Twitter or gained popularity with the help of social sites such as Twitter. Taylor asks, "*Can this Woman see? #AskRachel A. YES B. NO C. BARELY.*" Attached to the tweet is a photo of Donna Goudeau, a woman who gained popularity when an interview of her following her arrest went viral on social media and produced a cultural impact and eventually became a meme. Knowledge of this moment and its popularity is necessary in finding the humor behind the tweet and its significance.

Black versus nonblack choices posed to Dolezal were typically characterized by differences in entertainment and socialization processes with others but particularly within family systems. Toni asks Dolezal to complete a reference, "*Finish the hip-hop lyric: "First things first _____" A: Im the realist B: Rest in peace Uncle Phil #AskRachel.*" Both of the answer choices presented would fulfill the lyric reference. However, choice "B" in particular is a reference to Black rapper J. Cole, while choice "A" is a reference to White rapper, Iggy Azalea making a distinction between the appropriate Black choice and nonblack choice. Furthermore, Tiana asks, "*Which picture*

describes what happens when you forget to take the chicken out before your mom gets

home? #AskRachel." The users provided photo reference attached to the tweet adds

additional context to African American family structures and the consequences behind

disobeying expectations and tasks delegated by Black parents (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Disobeying Expectations

Socialization Agents and Community Structures

Socialization agents and community structures is distinguished by the people and

places that have a role in socially defining what it means to be Black to an individual.

Socialization agents were commonly characterized as family members inside the home

but also by peers in community structures such as neighborhoods, churches, and schools.

Most of the tweets within this category fall into a subcategory of family that represents

family processes and dynamics. For example, Joshua asks, "*What do you stay out of? A.*

The Kitchen B. Yo Momma Room C. Grown Folks Business D. All the Above

#AskRachel." This tweet focuses on the physical rules and expectations of where children

are allowed to go and also the social allowances of children within the Black family that

structure boundaries around family dynamics. This finding may align with research that

has implied that in order to protect their children, Black parents implement more

restrictive parenting practices (Dixon, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Another user

Cameron states, "*When an old song comes on at a cookout what do the old folks say? A.)*

You don't know nothin bout this B.) I love this song #AskRachel." This tweet calls on

Dolezal to reflect on things said by older adults to young people that implies a difference

in familiarity with music between the age groups that is often mentioned.

The role of peers as socialization agents arose from the results. Brandon asks,

"*What is this hand used for? A. Directing traffic B. Roasting C. Attempting a firm*

handshake #AskRachel." The photo that accompanies the tweet emphasizes what kind of

hand is being used that implies the hand is being used for "roasting" or what has been

referred to as an example of playing the dozens (Abrahams, 1962) or signifyin' (Gates,

1983). Additionally, playing the dozens is often enacted between peers in neighborhoods

and schools with the inclusion of insults thrown at an individual's family member as

damage (Abrahams, 1962). The usage of wit, timing, and verbal skills has been observed

as a valued trait, particularly with young Black boys, that speaks to the oral culture of

African Americans (Lefever, 1981; Gates, 1983, 1988). The tweet provided is an example

calls on Dolezal to think of where she has seen a hand used like before and from who

(Figure 4).
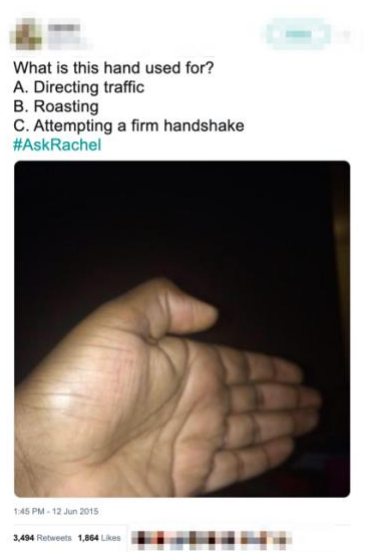
Figure 4. Playing the Dozens

Lastly, tweets surrounding interactions and dynamics at church came about. The Black church has historically played a significant role in the function of Black American life (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). Kyle asks, "*Your Pastor says he's almost finished. What does your grandmother say? A. Good B. I wanna go home C. Take your time Pastor #AskRachel.*" This tweet not only calls upon Dolezal to consider family processes in determining what her grandmother's response would be, but it also emphasizes the nature of Black church services, how long they last, and the memory of what it might feel like for an individual to provide that encouragement to the pastor under the presence of a majority restless congregation. Recalling memories, such as life in the Black church, initiates reflections of social and cultural memories that hold significance and symbolize belonging or a sense of peoplehood, such as being a member of the Black church.

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Positive and Negative Appraisals

Positive and negative judgements of Dolezal's racial authenticity were analyzed as act of mimicry or relation to another marginalized group's experience. Positive appraisals were characterized by support, acceptance, and openness from users towards considerations of Dolezal's Black racial identity. Steven states, "*She wasn't born that way, but if you let Bruce be Caitlyn, you gotta let Rachel be Shanequa, Nikishia, Keke or whoever she wanna. #AskRachel.*" In this instance, the user compares Dolezal's Black racial identity to the gender identity of celebrity Catelyn Jenner to show support towards the consideration of Dolezal's Black racial identity. Earnest questions, "*I'm a Jew who became a Christian. Does that make me trans-gentile? (cc: @VanityFair, @AnnieLeibovitz) #AskRachel.*" These aspects of identity such as gender, race, or religious affiliation are utilized to question that nature of what these affiliations mean and their impact on a person's identity. However, these various aspects of identity all have different dimensions and intersecting aspects that impact all individuals differently. Earnest's question primarily relates to the experience of Jewish people, another historically marginalized group, but humorizes the situation and the non-essential nature of his religious affiliation once again showing the salience of humor in driving this conversation forward on Twitter and keeping others engaged.

Negative appraisals were characterized by negative judgements of Dolezal's Black racial identity that showcased disgust or discomfort with the consideration. Kiana questions Dolezal, "*Blackness refers to: a) intergenerational disadvantage and systematic racial oppression b) a spray-on tan and wig #AskRachel*." This tweet refers to

Dolezal's usage of Black hairstyles and makeup to manage her appearance as a Black woman (Nashrulla, 2015). Although Dolezal physically presented in a manner that would typically express a connection to Blackness, braids and tan skin were interpreted as a negative appraisal of racially authenticity in this instance.

The most frequent portrayals of negative appraisals were represented through mimicry. While intended to be humorous or entertaining, tweets characterized by mimicry were interpreted as representations of Black and White racial lines being crossed. Stan states, "*I'm not finna play with yall. Too funny!*" and provides a graphic for reference (Figure 5). Tweets marked as forms of mimicry often were centered around a visual with texts attached to the tweet. Tweets coded as acts of mimicry typically did not pose any questions towards Dolezal but instead only commentary that interpreted the visual as humorous or an act of playing the dozens.

Figure 5. Mimicry

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the field of human development and family studies by analyzing how sociocultural aspects impact how individuals perform and express Blackness as well as its impact on interpersonal interactions, particularly with how racially authentic an individual is perceived to be by others. From these findings, it can be argued that meanings associated with Blackness and indicators of Black racial authenticity primarily reflect social and cultural aspects rather than physical or biological traits, particularly in online spaces. The social and cultural knowledge relied on precedes the founding of Twitter but with the presence of Twitter as a new discursive space, there is a potential for socially mediated discursive networks to become more prominent socialization contexts. Like past studies, this study performs a qualitative content analysis of tweets to gather meanings and sociohistorical connections to Blackness and how it has developed over time.

The findings of this study show that expressions of Blackness are not always meant to portray an individual's own sense of Blackness but instead may be a discursive mechanism to keep the conversation around how Blackness is culturally understood presently. This finding has been the foundation of arguments constructed around the relevance of minstrelsy (Mahar, 1988; Cockrell, 1997) and its necessity in pushing the racial boundaries in America. However, the findings show that it is possible to have

conversations around this topic without social and cultural insensitivity and with Black people being the primary definers of Blackness and judges of Black racial authenticity. Humor has particular relevance in society by pushing complex conversations along, but there is still a seriousness behind understanding why and how Blackness and Black people are regarded in society.

Evidence of socially mediated community knowledge emphasizes the importance of virtual discursive spaces presently in understanding cultural references and humor. This case study of Rachel Dolezal and #AskRachel in itself is proof. As stated before, tweets surrounding Dolezal's Black racial identity produced 385,000 tweets alone on June 12, 2015 (Mooney, 2015). Dolezal's popularity and existence as a recognizable cultural figure was influenced by the use of the #AskRachel hashtag that highlights Black Twitter's impact and power in controlling cultural conversations.

The findings of the study are not generalizable mainly due to the study's limited sample size and specific focus on #AskRachel. Although it provides further clarity and support of how racial performances and racially authentic markers are interpreted and evaluated on Black Twitter, this study lacks in depth analyzation of attitudes and beliefs from users engaged in the #AskRachel hashtag that might further suggest how racial performances relate to Black racial authenticity and racial identity development. A closer look into how Blackness is evaluated and validated in digital spaces, such as Twitter, might provide further insight into how the boundaries of Blackness and understandings of Black racial identity are changing.

Additionally, this study adds support for the consideration of social networking sites as socialization contexts or stages of performance and impression management. Although there may be an idea that sites like Twitter are not a mere replica of embodied realities, the results presented within this study and past studies (boyd, 2011; Brock, 2009; Florini, 2013; Stevens & Maurantonio, 2018) show that virtual interactions in social networking sites and everyday life intersect with each other. Indeed, these reflections say even more about the oral culture and history of public discourse particularly within Black American communities. #AskRachel provides evidence of Black people's desire to manage the boundaries of Blackness and how it is defined beyond biological or phenotypical means. These results associate authentic Blackness and a sense of peoplehood with sociocultural knowledge and competence that is typically learned through interactions and experiences. Through public discourse on Twitter, Black people continuously show their desire to plead their own cause (Cornish & Russwurm, 1827).

Though this study contributes valuable information to the field, consideration of future directions would progress the topic even further. A future study that analyzes socialization processes on Twitter would be beneficial. It would be valuable to understand how Twitter users become members of Black Twitter and if a sense of belonging and membership is gained over time, or already established because of offline connections. Because of the structure of Twitter's platform, it would also be helpful to investigate how users express Blackness via social networking sites and how it does or does not align with how socialization typically unfolds through face to face interactions.

The public discourse had by Black Twitter users concerning specific examples of memory, identity, experiences, and language through #AskRachel suggests social and cultural knowledge to be an important aspect in one's connection and sense of belonging Blackness. This conclusion supports Blackness as a sociocultural construction rather than an essentialized aspect solely supported by biological or phenotypical means. This instance of analyzing performances for symbolic meaning and indicators of Black racial authenticity reveal that the boundaries of Blackness have indeed continued to shift over time and its intersection with virtual spaces, such as Twitter, showcase the complexities and various representations of a Black experience. Contemporary explanations of race and its functions in research and real-world contexts would benefit from this conclusion and help provide meaning to the arbitrary nature of race specifically in American society.

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Table 1. Frequencies and Percentages of Total Tweets

Tweets	*Popular Culture*	*Sociocultural Products*	*Socialization Agents & Community Structures*	*Positive & Negative Appraisals*
Frequency (N=325)	45.5% (*n=148*)	30.8% (*n=100*)	16% (*n=52*)	7.7% (*n=25*)

Table 2. Frequencies and Percentages of Sociocultural Products

Sociocultural products	*Black Vernacular*	*Community knowledge*	*Cultural artifacts*	*Other*
Frequency (n=100)	31% (*n=31*)	19% (*n=19*)	48% (*n=48*)	1% (*n=1*)

Table 3. Frequencies and Percentages of Socialization Agents & Community

Structures

Socialization Agents & Community Structures	*Family*	*Peer to Peer*	*Neighborhood*	*Church*	*Other*
Frequency (n=52)	73% (*n=38*)	9.6% (*n=5*)	1.9% (*n=1*)	13.5% (*n=7*)	1.9% (n=1)