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As Seen on Twitter: African-American Rhetorical Traditions Gone Viral

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As Seen On Twitter: African-American Rhetorical Traditions Gone Viral

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

This communication research study identifies the presence of the African-American rhetorical traditions of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing used in communication on the online social media network, Twitter. The objective of this study is to provide insight into the culture and community of Twitter. Additionally, the research demonstrates how traditional oral rhetorical traditions survive in the digital world. Over a 15-day period, tweets were collected by the author using a computer screenshot feature. Using a coding rubric, three coders, including the author, coded the collected tweets for the four rhetorical traditions. Resulting from this procedure, the coders concluded the presence of all four African-American rhetorical traditions used by Tweepsters, as well as evolved forms of certain traditions. These findings provide evidence of a distinct Twitter community and prompt further research on the transfer of traditional oral rhetoric from offline communities to online communities.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Purpose

The oral tradition has been at the core of African-American culture for generations. According to Dr. Geneva Smitherman (1977), the oral tradition has helped African Americans overcome obstacles and preserve culture (p. 73). As a result, the tradition has historically been more of a performance in the African-American community. Presently, communication through online social networking sites has become a tradition of its own. Since its 2006 launch, Twitter has grown as a destination for Internet users to find and share real-time information with people around the world. In 2011, 25% of online African Americans used Twitter, with one in ten visiting the site on a typical day (Smith, 2011).

Taking into account the significance of oral traditions in the African-American community and African Americans' frequent engagement with Twitter, very few studies have researched the influence of social media on cultural rhetorical traditions passed down orally through generations. This thesis paper seeks to identify the presence of African-American rhetorical traditions on Twitter. One central research question is posed: What African-American rhetorical traditions can be identified on Twitter and what are its implications to the culture and community of Twitter?

The thesis begins with a review of literature in Chapter 1. The first section of the literature review provides the history of Twitter, its basic structure, and its evolving and influential role on American culture. The second section presents an extensive history of African-American language and its connection to the African-American community. The following section outlines the rhetorical traditions of African-American language, with examples of traditions in modern use. The final section of the review presents recent

research on race and the Internet, with a focus on racial cyberhate, the online presentation of race, racial digital divides, and dialogues and interpretations of race online. The literature review is evidence of the lack of research on racial rhetorical traditions in real-time online communication environments. This thesis provides a new area of research for the communication discipline.

The research methods and design of this study are outlined in Chapter 2. A content analysis method is used to examine public tweets on Twitter from a selection of random trending topics in the United States. Tweets are monitored and collected for 15 days, and in Chapter 3, the data findings are presented. Chapter 4 critiques and interprets the data using Speech Community Theory. This theory provides an interpretation of the findings in relation to the medium of Twitter. Chapter 5 concludes the thesis with discussion and implications for future research.

Literature Review

The Twitter Community

Twitter is a social networking and messaging service launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, and Biz Stone. The site is a real-time information network, likened to instant messaging where users communicate messages using a maximum of 140 characters (“*Twitter*”). Originally called “*Twittr*,” the site acquired the name “*Twitter*” after developers discovered the word “*Twitter*,” defined as “a short burst of inconsequential information,” and “chirps from birds” (Sarno, 2009). From 2007 through 2009, the site went from 5,000 tweets per day, to 300,000 tweets per day, to 35 million tweets per day, consecutively (Weil, 2010). By February 2010, Twitter users were sending 50 million tweets per day (Weil, 2010), and by March 2011, the site had 140 million tweets a day (Stone, 2011).

Yearly reviews of Twitter show that usage spikes during special events. Examples of this are found in the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards, the execution of Troy Davis, and the end of the FIFA Women’s World Cup (“Year In Review,” 2011). Users can share photographs through Twitter, as well as news articles online from other sites through a “Tweet Button” (Twitter, 2010). Additionally, Twitter is accessible on many mobile phones through phone applications, allowing users mobile access to the site. The following section details the communicative features of Twitter pertinent to this thesis.

Features: The structure and language of Twitter. “Tweets” is the term used to describe the short bouts of information Twitter users present instantly on Twitter. Twitter is a network of Twitter users, or Tweeters, who have the ability to view other Tweeters’ tweets either through viewing their profile page, if it is made public, or by requesting to “follow” the Tweeter. When the latter action is taken, the Tweeter who was followed is categorized as

“following” and the user who followed is categorized as a “follower” of the Tweeter. Consequently, Twitter is a network of followers of tweets. The Tweeter’s profile page allows them to post a profile picture/avatar, provide their geographical location, display a personal website address, and provide their name and a brief biography.

Also located on the profile page is a personal timeline, displaying Tweeter’s personal tweets and sometimes tweets from others. When a Tweeter shares a tweet from another user it’s called a “Retweet” (designated as “RT”), and these tweets are displayed on the Tweeter’s personal timeline. In addition to personal timelines, there are two other types of timelines: a timeline that displays the tweets of the Tweeter and their followers and a public timeline displaying tweets from other Tweepers whose Twitter pages are public. The personal tweets of public Tweepers are viewable to the public, including Internet users who aren’t registered members of Twitter. The timelines offered on Twitter are live and display Tweepers’ tweets synchronously. The public timeline is the source used for this thesis.

Every Tweeter creates a user name upon registry to the website and is identified by their user name. Tweepers are able to interact directly with others by mentioning them. This is indicated by the user using the “@” symbol before another Tweeter’s user name in their tweet. Tweepers reply to others by mentioning them, as well. Also characteristic of the Twitter timelines are trending topics. Trending topics are tweeted words or phrases, designated with hashtags (“#”). When these “hashtagged” tweets are tweeted by enough Tweepers they become trending topics that can trend regionally, nationally, and/or worldwide. Trending topics are listed on the site and are viewable by all Tweepers, including non-Twitter users, regardless of location. Trending topics range in variety and have included sayings, current news, names of people, television shows, and movies. Twitter offers a

glossary of frequently used Twitter lingo and vocabulary (See Appendix).

Demographics of Twitter. The 2010 (Smith) and 2011 (Smith) reports from the Pew Research Center provide Twitter demographic information. Using data from the Pew Internet Project's November 2010 tracking survey, the 2010 report indicates 8% of the 2,257 adult American Internet users surveyed were Tweepers. Common characteristics of highly active Twitter users in the survey were young, African American and Latino, urban, women, and college educated. Both the 2010 and 2011 reports present Twitter usage data for Whites (non-Hispanic), Blacks (non-Hispanic), and Hispanics. The 2010 report shows that 5% of White, 13% of Black, and 18% of Hispanic adult Internet users surveyed used Twitter.

Using separate data from two Omnibus Surveys, the 2010 report concluded that the percentage of Tweepers who used Twitter frequently and those who rarely or never used the site were comparable in numbers. Using the same survey data, the report determined that Twitter users tweeted about a wide range of content, including personal updates, work updates, links to news stories, general life observations, retweets of others, direct messages, photos, videos, and location information. Out of the Tweepers surveyed, 72% of them said they tweeted about their personal life, activities, or interests. These types of tweets were the most commonly posted among the aforementioned categories. These kinds of personal tweets were also the most frequently tweeted about, with 19% of the Tweepers posting personal updates once a day or more. During Twitter's beginning years, a study by Java et al. (2007) found Tweepers mainly used the site for daily chatter, conversations, sharing information/URLs, and reporting news. They also found three main categories of Tweepers: information sources, friends, and information seekers.

The findings of the 2011 Pew Research Center report vary from that of the 2010 Pew

Research Center report. From a survey of 2,277 adult American Internet users, this report (Smith, 2011) identified 13% of the users as Tweeters. This is a significant increase from the 8% identified as Twitter users in the 2010 report (Smith, 2010). Also unlike the previous report, the researcher(s) posed a follow-up question asking cell phone-owning Tweeters if they accessed Twitter on their phones. The report concluded that 54% of the survey sample used Twitter on their mobile phones. Regarding race, the 2011 report showed an increase in the gap of Twitter usage among African Americans, Latinos, and Whites. The report showed 9% of Whites (non-Hispanic), 25% of Blacks (non-Hispanic), and 19% of Hispanics sampled used Twitter. The Twitter adoption gap among African Americans and Whites increased from 8 percentage points to 16 percentage points from the 2010 report (Smith, 2010) to the 2011 report (Smith, 2011). A study of Twitter adoption by Hargittai and Litt (2011) suggests that Twitter's popularity as a source for entertainment and celebrity news is a strong predictor of high adoption by young African Americans.

Twitter adoption among young adult (18-24) Twitter users remained stable from the 2010 report to the 2011 report, but usage among 25-44-year-olds increased at the time of the 2011 report. This increase in age of Tweeters was illustrated in the 2011 report findings showing that 19% of 25-34-year-olds and 14% of 35-44-year-olds used Twitter out of the 2,277 adult Internet users surveyed. From the 2010 report to the 2011 report, there was a 10-percentage point increase in 25-34-year-olds and a 6-percentage point increase in 35-44-year-olds using Twitter.

Twitter's influence on American culture. Twitter is increasingly growing as a major social and cultural influence in the U.S. In March of 2012, Twitter boasted 140 million active users (Twitter, 2012). The site holds memberships from celebrities, artists,

professional athletes, politicians, news reporters and news outlets, community and religious leaders, media gurus, and even the President of the United States, among others. The Twitter network is described as a personal newswire, presenting real news and personal opinions in real-time. Celebrities use the site to become more intimate with fans, communicating with them and providing them with an intimate look into their lives (Wortham, 2009). In 2011, President Barack Obama utilized the site to answer questions from people across the country in what his administration called a “Twitter Town Hall” (Cilliza, 2011), and in early 2012, First Lady Michelle Obama joined the site (Jennings, 2012).

Tweeters also use Twitter for activism. The 2011 Occupy Wall Street Protests gained popularity through the Twitter network. The New York protest obtained its own hashtag (“#OccupyWallStreet”) in July of 2011 and grew in popularity among influential people and organizations days after (Orcutt, 2011). The 2011 execution of Troy Davis, an African-American Georgia man convicted of murder of a police officer, gained extensive attention on Twitter, with Tweeters expressing their thoughts and opinions as well as urging other Tweeters to take action against the execution by contacting government representatives (Eversley, 2011). As a result of events like these, Twitter activism has gained popularity.

In addition to these many uses of Twitter, the network is populated by a variety of different businesses as well as local and federal government representation. Some businesses use Twitter to communicate directly with their customers. As a result, Twitter has served as a modern day customer service tool (Swartz, 2009). Businesses and organizations use Twitter as an “electronic word of mouth,” where they gain real time insight on customers’ opinions on brands (Jansen et al., 2009).

Twitter is a way for people to connect, a tool for activism, a source for news, and a

political and customer service tool, among other things. In these ways, Twitter represents ideals and values of different populations of people. Consequently, the Twitter trending topics that trend regionally, nationally, and worldwide represent demographics and cultures of people. For this reason, a lot can be learned about different cultures from studying trending topics and observing what and how people communicate about them.

African-American Language and Community

History. African-American dialect is extensively related to community and culture. The origin of today's African-American dialect is traced to Africa. According to Dr. Geneva Smitherman (1977), "Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America" ("Talkin and Testifyin'," p. 2). During the Mid-Atlantic slave trade, colonizers enslaved Africans from different tribes. As a result, many of these Africans spoke different languages and had to develop a pidgin language in order to communicate with one another. This pidgin or Black English Creole was a mixture of the Africans' native tongues and English. The more they assimilated to White American culture, the less African the pidgin language became, in what Smitherman calls a push-pull syndrome. The push-pull syndrome describes African Americans simultaneous assimilation and dissimilation from White American culture. This effect is identified in African-American dialect today in the retention of basic structural language rules characteristic of African languages. For enslaved Africans, linguistic competence in White English became a survival mechanism as well as a designation of status, as many freed slaves were competent in White English.

Presently, one community of African Americans has retained more elements of African language and culture than any other: the Gullah. The Gullah people live in coastal

regions and sea islands of South Carolina and Georgia and historically lived in geographical and social isolation from others, which has helped them to retain their Africanized language. The Gullah are direct descendants of enslaved Africans and serve as a present-day example of the pidgin language and early African-American language. One theory about the Gullah language claims that some of the Gullah ancestors must have known the English-based creole language prior to leaving Africa. As a result, the pidgin language of some of the Gullah ancestors served as an example to other enslaved Africans on the American plantations. This theory attributes the prior knowledge of the pidgin from the British domination in West Africa that forced West Africans to adjust their language to communicate with the British traders. Joseph Opala (“The Gullah”) draws the connection between the West African creole language developed during this time to other English creole languages of today found in Africa and the Caribbean. In more recent years, many Gullah people have moved away from the region to pursue outside opportunities, but some still remain today. The Gullah community retained its Africanized language through slavery, the Civil War, and the emancipation of slaves, but today, with the influence of the media, the community is no longer as isolated. The history of the Gullah demonstrates the early origins of African-American language more commonly practiced in the United States today.

African-American Rhetorical Traditions

Characteristics and types. Geneva Smitherman (1977) provides detailed descriptions of the characteristics of African-American semantics and modes of discourse that will be discussed in this section. Smitherman (1977) describes African-American semantics as having multiple meanings and associations in comparison to the same words used in White English. These words in English are said to have both a White meaning and

an African American meaning (p. 59). Because African-American semantics is highly context-bound, in order to get the meaning of some African-American English words, the context it is being used in must be taken into account. Some examples of words with this double-edged meaning include words that are traditionally solely viewed as negative in White English, such as “bad,” as well as profanity, which can be used positively or simply as a filler in speech. The “n-word” is a culturally and historically significant word in America that demonstrates the two-fold association of words in American English. Historically, White Americans have used the “n-word” derogatorily, whereas African Americans adopted a different adaptation of the word that has been used more as a term of endearment among African Americans. At the same time, the “n-word” can be a way of communicating disapproval or simply identifying other African Americans in African-American English.

Another characteristic of African-American semantics is its use mainly by African Americans to describe physical characteristics or to label Whites. These are words that are culturally rooted in African-American culture and may not be culturally acceptable for Whites to use. Or Whites may not be completely privy to understanding these words unless educated by African Americans. Some of the words characteristic of the physical that are mentioned by Smitherman (1977) include *kitchen*, *nappy*, *process*, *saddity*, *silks and pink toes*, *ashy*, and *the man*. Some of these terms may be viewed as outdated. Along with African-American semantics labeling and descriptive characteristics, it is also discourse that has gained popularity in mainstream America. This characteristic of African-American language is identified more in this paper, where African-American language is illustrated by the masses on Twitter. Associated with this aspect of African-American language is its dynamism, or ability to rapidly change. Often times the popularity of African American

word use decreases in the African-American community once the word hits the mainstream. This results in new words, or adaptations of words. The last two characteristics of African-American semantics, as described by Smitherman (1977), are its highly metaphorical and imagistic nature and its fluid social and generational boundaries. The former alludes to the metaphorical and poetic ways African-American language describes ordinary events, and the latter describes the immediate understanding of African-American terms because of the use and encounter of African-American semantics by African Americans in all walks of life at one point or another.

There are four common categories or types of African-American discourse: call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing. The call-response discourse is a popular tradition of the “Black church” where the ongoing communicative interaction or conversation between the preacher (caller) and congregation (responders) shapes the church experience and helps develop or birth the sermonic message. Smitherman (1977) defines the call-response discourse as “spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker’s statements are punctuated by expressions from the listener” (p. 104). This dichotomy between the caller and responder creates a harmonic relationship that is African in nature. Some examples of call-response include co-signing, encouraging, repetition, and completing (p. 107).

Discourse that is signification refers to the “verbal art of insult” between people. This joking-type discourse is sometimes used for fun and sometimes used to communicate a message. These differences are labeled as light signification and heavy signification, respectively. General characteristics of signification include indirection, circumlocution, metaphorical-imagistics, humorous, ironic, rhythmic fluency and sound, teacher-like,

directed at person(s) present in the context, punning, play on words, and unexpected. The third type of African-American discourse, tonal semantics, is described as “the use of voice rhythm and vocal inflection to convey meaning in black communication” (p. 134). Linked to West African languages that are tonal, this African American discourse has “songified patterns.” This type of discourse is used to create balance and harmony as well as meaning, which is drawn from the message, the tone, the communicator, the receiver, and the context.

The last African-American discourse type, narrative sequencing, refers to story-telling. Story-telling is a prominent tradition in African-American culture and has African origins. This discourse is described as a rhetorical strategy used to explain and persuade. This discourse can be identified in every day African-American communication and is further explained in the next section. These four modes of African-American discourse are further identified and described in this paper’s analysis of Twitter-talk.

In addition to the “Black church,” these rhetorical traditions have been examined in rap music and Hip Hop culture (Kopano, 2002; Dawkins, 1998). Metaphors, similes, double entendres, and vernacular English are characteristic of Hip Hop music, which develops the African-American community. Reminiscent of African culture, Hip Hop is used for discourse about social issues, teaching, and community building. Additionally, Hip Hop counters the status quo, or the master narrative of society through its use of African linguistic styles. In Hip Hop, harmony and unity are created through the performance of the music. Collective participation is garnered from the deejay, the emcee, and the audience. Rap music’s use of double entendre helps maintain its exclusivity among community members, and resist oppression through the use of multiple word meaning unfamiliar to the oppressors. This action is reflective of African tradition.

Dawkins (1998) compares underground Hip Hop to more mainstream Hip Hop, linking underground Hip Hop to more traditional African-American rhetoric than more mainstream Hip Hop, which is reflective of the greater Eurocentric society's ideals and values. For this reason, her analysis of Hip Hop as African-American rhetoric focuses on underground Hip Hop. Although more mainstream rappers don't adopt more African-American rhetorical traditions as do underground rappers, the traditions are still present. The fact that many these rappers use nicknames is reflective of African culture where names are highly valued. The Hip Hop community places a high value on the written and spoken word, and this is what makes it so reflective and demonstrative of the rich tradition of African-American rhetoric prevalent in today's society.

Afrocentricity. Dr. Molefi Kete Asante developed the culture-centered critical method, Afrocentricity, as a way of studying African-American culture from an African perspective. Afrocentricity is an African perspective used to counter oppression and empower people of African descent. This perspective is a more appropriate and adequate perspective to take than a European perspective when studying African-American cultural artifacts. Many ideas and tenets important to the African culture make up the Afrocentric perspective. A few of these beliefs are identified in the following paragraphs.

Unity and harmony describe the collective mindset within the African culture that values community over individual. According to Asante (Brummett, 2006), Afrocentric rhetoric is used to create unity and harmony. This active use of rhetoric is found in the "traditional Black church" where call and response is often practiced by the preacher and congregation. It is this interaction that creates unity and harmony in the worship service. The value of unity and harmony is also found in other parts of culture with significance to

African Americans, such as music like jazz and Hip Hop, and in sports, such as basketball and football. Related to the tenet of unity and harmony is orality. Oral tradition is historically significant in African cultures, and this significance is evident in African-American culture today.

Afrocentricity believes in the power of spoken word over written text. Spoken word and song create a bond, or unity and harmony, between the speaker and listener, and it takes the cooperation of both parties to create the experience. This principle applies to many situations where there is a performer and an audience. In this way, the performer could be a singer, a painter, an athlete, a teacher, a student, and so on, and the audience could be anyone who interacts with the performer. Another major tenet of Afrocentricity that was described in detail in the previous section on types of traditional African-American rhetoric is signifying. The indirection quality of signifying counters oppression through the use of double meanings in language and creates a bond between people through common knowledge. While there are several tenets of Afrocentricity, these two are important to note for the purposes of this paper.

Race and the Internet

The scarcity of literature on race and the Internet prompts research like that presented in this thesis. Recent literature on race and the Internet includes research on racial cyberhate (Bostdorff, 2009; Brown, 2009, Adams & Roscigno, 2005), the influence of race on online presentation and dialogue and interpretations of race (Byrne, 2008a; Byrne, 2008b; Kafai, Cook, & Fields, 2010; Nakamura, 2002; Nakamura, 2008), and racial digital divides (Fairlie, 2003; Fairlie, 2004; Fairlie 2005). Research explores race in different corners and spaces of the online community, from webpages and forums to social networking sites and avatars.

Although there are several unexamined areas of the influence of race on the Internet, recent studies expose the current landscape of race in the online world.

Racial cyberhate. A large amount of literature concerns the online rhetoric of White supremacists (Bostdorff, 2009; Brown, 2009, Adams & Roscigno, 2005). White supremacists have used the Internet for years to promote their messages of hate. The discourses of these groups reaffirm Whiteness by demonstrating contempt for people of other races, with recent literature focusing on African Americans (Brown, 2009). White supremacists engage in discourse that produces a racial hierarchy, positioning African Americans as an inferior race, physically, biologically, socially, and culturally to Whites. The persuasive appeals in their rhetoric position African Americans as the enemy, a threat to society and the White race. This action helps these hate groups legitimize their hate for African Americans and encourages viewers to take action to eliminate them from society.

Additionally, these supremacist groups use religion to support their beliefs and actions. This religion-backed support creates the illusion of morality in their mission. Another strong rhetorical strategy White supremacist use is the dehumanization of African Americans, because it allows them to justify their ideologies of racial hate. Included in the audience of their rhetorical messages are women and children. For women and children, they adjust the tone of their rhetoric from angry and aggressive to conversational and reasonable in order to appeal to the feminine style of communication and to be more friendly and playful with youth. Youth are targeted by the presentation of links to youth hate groups and hardcore hate music.

An analysis of a KKK website community (Bostdorff, 2009) showed the KKK targeting young children by using cartoons and providing advice on how to write reports on

their organization. Additionally, the site's rhetoric counters potential opposing forces in the children's, such as parents and other authoritative figures, by undermining their credibility in a friendly manner (Bostdorff, 2009). By using the Internet as a propaganda tool, these extremist groups are able to reach masses of people and reproduce their ideologies of hate. This kind of research presents an uglier side to the presence of race on the Internet.

Online presentation, dialogue, and interpretations. Other literature identifies the ways race is reproduced online and the ways race is talked about and interpreted (Byrne, 2008a; Byrne, 2008b; Kafai, Cook, & Fields, 2010; Nakamura, 2002; Nakamura, 2008). Byrne (2008b) analyzes racially focused websites, or what she calls "dedicated sites" and observes ways users talk about race and reproduce understandings of race. Specifically, she analyzes "Heritage and Identity" threads on three racially dedicated websites and draws the conclusion that the discussions within these threads teach youth users about race and show them how to navigate through conversations about race.

These threads support unity of racial communities and reproduce and reaffirm racial ideologies. Bryne (2008) discovered that for youth, specifically, these website threads serve as a sort of socialization tool. Another research study by Bryne (2008a), similar to the previous, identifies the presence of offline traditional Black networking traditions online. In this study she identifies discourse traditions of public discourse, community concerns, and civic engagement. Unlike in offline communication, the online presence of discourse about civic engagement did not lead to offline action. The site she examined in this research was a Black "dedicated site." This site clearly demonstrated the popularity of race-specific threads and further illustrates the reproduction of race on the Internet and its popularity for discourse on "dedicated sites." Nakamura (2002) and Nakamura (2008) cite the ways race is

reproduced through avatars on the web.

Kafai, Cook, and Fields (2010) discovered racial disparities among avatars in the virtual world, Whyville.net. This virtual world targeted youth ages 8-16 and encouraged them to play science games in which they could earn a virtual salary to buy parts for their player avatars and other items needed to fully participate in Whyville (p. 47). Kafai, Cook, and Fields (2010) surveyed articles and videos and conducted an assessment, participant observation, and document analysis to examine the role of race in the construction of avatars in Whyville (p. 47). They identified a lack of non-White avatars and bodies, making the avatars stand out from others and limiting players' representation of self online and their participation in Whyville.

Researchers also identified similarities between online challenges with avatar race and offline challenges with race in the examples of an anonymous White player dismissing racism on Whyville because they did not experience it firsthand (p. 52) and the lack of choice in matching avatar parts for players of color (p. 58). Researchers also identified racial restriction in the fact that players were automatically assigned peach-faced avatars as new users, as a result making other colors the default. Due to the request of a Whyville player, this default setting eventually changed and new users were assigned blue-faced avatars (p. 54). The research by Kafai, Cook, and Fields (2010) serves as an example of the ways race is discussed and represented in the digital world where avatars are used for representation of self.

Racial digital divide. Significant research (Fairlie, 2003; Fairlie, 2004; Fairlie, 2005) identifies a racial digital divide in access and use of computers and the Internet, and researchers have examined this racial divide. Danah Boyd (2011) examined the racial digital

divide on the social networking sites MySpace and Facebook. Her analysis of MySpace and Facebook use among American teens from the same high school demonstrates the influence of race and class. During the early stages of Facebook, a division occurred as high school teenagers transitioned from MySpace to Facebook. More African-American high school teenagers retained their membership with MySpace, while more White high school teenagers abandoned MySpace for Facebook. This finding was attributed to both race and class.

Additionally, the racial digital divide resulted from different cultural and class preferences in forms of expression, different educational endeavors, and different social implications in regard to influence from peers. These findings reveal a correlation between racial divides in schoolyards and racial divides in the online environments. The presence of the digital divide is also identified in the racial limitations of online avatars and in the racial disparities of home computer and Internet access. Fairlie (2005) identified ethnic and racial differences in home access to computers, with African Americans and Latinos less likely to have access to home computers than White (non-Latino) people, and home computer and Internet access rates were higher for Asians and lower for Native Americans than White (non-Latino) rates. Even when controlled for family income, African Americans and Latinos were less likely to own a computer or have Internet access than Whites. Even in high-income families, large disparities in computer ownership and Internet were identified between African Americans, Latinos, and Whites (non-Latino). The implications of these findings result in educational disparities among children and economic inequality.

This literature review of Twitter and its influence, African-American language and its roots in the African-American and African community, the history and characteristics of African-American rhetorical traditions, and the role of race on the Internet provides the

background knowledge necessary to understand both the significance and the language of this research paper. This information transitions the paper to the research question.

Research question. Evidenced from the literature, the history and prevalence of African-American rhetorical traditions in society provide significant information about culture and community. The presence of these traditions on Twitter could provide similar insight, as social networking sites grow as a medium for communication. Some research has begun to examine the relationship between offline and online communication, but still, little research has been conducted on the presence of race in online communities, and even fewer studies have examined racial and cultural rhetorical traditions online. This paper seeks to identify the presence of the African-American rhetorical traditions of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing in the real-time online community of Twitter and its role in the online community.

Chapter 2: Methods

Data were collected on Twitter for 15 consecutive days for two hours a day in February of 2012. I selected national trending topics at random for observation during this period. Approximately five national trending topics were observed per data collection session. I collected public tweets by taking computer screenshots (see Figure 1) of a live stream of tweets under a given national trending topic, and each trending topic was examined for 24 minutes. I repeated this method manually for two hours for 15 consecutive days. The time allotted for data collection provided a significant amount of data to analyze, so this method of collection was the most feasible for monitoring different national trending topics in the absence of an automatic tweet monitoring system.

Following this data collection procedure, I performed a content analysis using the data. Specifically, I conducted a conceptual analysis of the tweets in order to detect occurrences of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing. This method allowed me and two other coders to determine the frequency of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing in the collection of tweets. The following paragraphs provide an operational definition and real Twitter example from the data of each rhetorical tradition. The real Twitter names are not used in the examples.

Call-response is defined as the interaction between two or more Tweeters where a response tweet that is characteristic of African-American discourse is used to co-sign, encourage, repeat, or complete an original tweet. One Tweeter takes on the position of the author of a tweeted statement, and the other(s) take the position of co-author(s) to the original tweet. In this study, co-signing refers to the co-author(s) agreeing or affirming with the author with a word or short phrase that is characteristic of African-American discourse. The

practice of encouraging refers to the use of prompting/urging words or phrases characteristic of African-American discourse by co-author(s) to the author to continue or elaborate on their tweet. Repetition refers to the co-author(s) identical use of the author's words or phrases to show agreement. These repeating words are words that are popular in African-American discourse. Last, completing refers to the co-author(s) finishing a phrase or statement with a popular word or phrase often used in African-American discourse.

Provided below are examples of each of these sub-categorizations of call-response as well as a list of some responses popular in African-American discourse that may be found on Twitter. Some of these examples are from the study data and some are not. The Twitter names are omitted from the real examples:

Co-signing: (Taken from February 28, 2012 data)

@person2: Yes!!! RT @person1: I'm juiced @person3 made #XXLfreshmen2012

Encouraging:

@person2: Preach! RT @person1: The Lord is good!

Repetition: (Taken from February 28, 2012 data)

@person2: Hell yeah! RT @person1: Hell yeah @person3 is the first lady to be on the #XXLfreshmen2012 congrats! She's gonna blow up!

Completer: (Taken from February 28, 2012 data)

@person1: YES! && its the people who talk to you the LEAST RT "@person2: #TheThingsIHateMost people who use you for your car -.- #imnotstupid

Common Responses for Call-Response:

Amen!, Preach!, True!, Tell it!, Word!, For real!, This!, Truth!, Yes!

For this study, we conceptualize signification slightly differently than Smitherman (1977), in that indications of signifying are evidenced when a Tweeter humorously insults another Tweeter or a person not on Twitter. Additionally, the insult can be directed to a general group of people/population. For this study, I define signification further as humorous insults that some times use a play on words and do not warrant a comeback. The African-American discourse component of this type of signification is found in the frequent symbolic play in words and the comedic but personal insults given. The following is an example taken from February 23, 2012 data. This example finds humor in people prioritizing the purchase of Nike Foamposite shoes over their personal responsibilities:

@person1: Got 4 Kids with 3 different baby Mothers, Running Late on that Child Support... #ButYouGotThemFoamsThough

Tonal semantics refers to the indicated inflection of tone through the use of punctuation or capitalization to passionately convey opinions, faith, inspiration, or activism. Tonal semantics refers to the use of repetition, alliterative word play, and rhyme. When used in a sacred context, tweets will be faith and inspiration based, and when in a secular context, they take on a variety of forms. The following is an example of this tradition on Twitter observed on February 23, 2012:

@person1: #DoNOTbother tryna talk to me if you got 1 OR MORE baby mamas!,no JOB,not WORKING or enrolled in somebodys COLLEGE,still walk around SAGGING

The last traditional African-American rhetorical tradition we identify is narrative sequencing. Narrative sequencing in the context of this study refers to the telling of a personal story, testimony, or journey. These tweets deal with past events and experiences and can provide insight into social conditions. Additionally, these tweets are often tweeted in

order to inform or persuade of a point. The following are examples of the tradition on Twitter taken from data on February 22, 2012:

@person1: #BackWhenIWAsAKid all i needed was a durag, BBQ sunflower seeds, BlueBerry C&C, and someone to yell CAR!!! When we played football

@person1: #BackWhenIWAsAKid getting pregnant was not a fashion statement. What happened to kids of today

Analyzing tweets collected over 15 days allowed us to identify the presence of these traditions on Twitter, as well as identify the most and least prevalent traditions during the period. The full category theme for these traditions is presented in Chapter 3. The coding of the data included two others and myself. The two other coders were also graduate students in the Communication Department at the same institution. The coders underwent a one-day coding orientation, where they were presented definitions and descriptions of the four rhetorical traditions, as well as examples of tweets and criteria for coding. During the session, coders worked together with me to code a sample of tweets and then coded a selection of tweets individually. A review of the codes followed to check the accuracy. Three days later, the coders were provided 16 random computer screen shots of real tweets that were collected during the 15-day observation. The coders were directed to code the tweets individually and submit their codes to me in order to verify the coding scheme established during the coder orientation.

After coders submitted their codes, I provided the coders with a CD of real tweet data that were collected during my 15-day observation. The coders and I coded five days' worth of tweets collected through computer screenshots. The coders were provided a table to record the frequency of tweets they identified as one of more of the four traditional African-

American rhetorical traditions. Tweets could be coded for more than one rhetorical tradition. Last, I collected the frequency tables from the coders for a final comparison of the data taken together. Speech Community Theory was applied to the findings of this thematic analysis of the Twitter text and is explained further in Chapter 4.

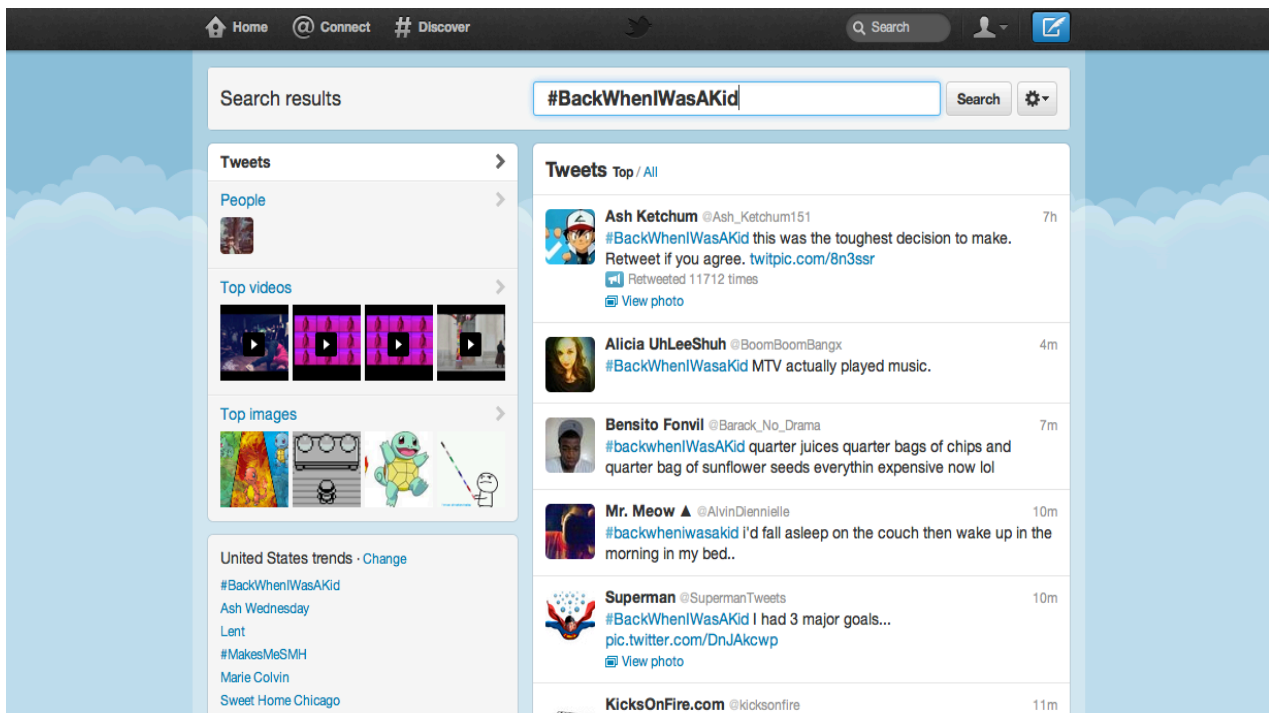


Figure 1. First screenshot taken on February 22

Chapter 3: Data

Over 15 days, a total of 2, 893 screen shots (see Table 2) of tweets were taken, collected, and examined for the rhetorical traditions of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing, as outlined in Chapter 2. Tweets corresponding to United States trending topics were the focus, and every day trending topics were examined for 24 minutes each. Table 1 represents the frequency of rhetorical traditions identified. This table presents the frequency of rhetorical traditions identified, as well as the totals of each tradition. The rhetorical tradition most recognized over the total 15 days was tonal semantics, followed by signification, narrative sequencing and lastly, call-response. A total of 705 tweets were identified as tonal semantic, 546 as signification, 368 as narrative sequencing, and 181 call-response. Table 2 presents the number of computer screen shots taken each day, and Table 3 presents the national trending topics the collected tweets correspond with. In the following paragraph, the data tables are explained further.

The first day of data collection was February 22, and a total of 239 screenshots were used for coding (Table 2). The coder assigned to Table 1, identified 10 call-response, 25 signification, 25 tonal semantics, and 59 narrative sequencing tweets tweeted within the 239 Twitter screenshots taken. Also, the 239 screenshots captured the trending topics of “#BackWhenIWasAKid,” “#AshWednesday,” “#MarieColvin,” “#Lent,” and “#MakesMeSMH.” These trending topics were present during the time of the collection of screenshots and are related to the tweets where rhetorical traditions were identified by the coder. Taken together, Table 2 represents the number of screenshots coders examined for rhetorical traditions, and Table 1 represents the coders’ findings of rhetorical traditions. Table 3 provides insight on the national trending topics occurring on each of the days tweets

were collected. Making note of national trending topics is useful because a connection is likely to be found between the topics and the rhetorical traditions identified any given day. For instance, on February 22, “#Lent” and “#AshWednesday” were a trending topics, so it may be expected to observe high frequencies of call-response, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing, because of these traditions prevalence within the “Black church.” Also, on February 22 is the trending topic, “#BackWhenIWasaKid.” This trending topic, along with others (February 23- #myfirstjob, March 3- #FirstTimeISmoked, March 4- #SomethingILearnedLongAgo) may encourage Tweeters to recall past experiences and could lead to tweets using the story-like rhetorical tradition of narrative sequencing.

The data from February 26 show high frequencies of signifying and tonal semantic tweets. Table 3 reveals there was a trending topic relating to race in “#Blackmomscatchphrase.” Because of the prevalence of signification and tonal semantics rhetoric use within the African-American community, it is not unusual that high frequencies of these types of tweets were identified on a day an African American related trending topic was present. On February 29 and March 1, there are also African American related trending topics (#classicblackmovie and #BlackPeopleYouTubeSearches, respectively) and higher frequencies of tonal semantic tweets identified. Contrary to this, the frequency of signifying tweets was not much higher than the other types of rhetoric identified. As a result, it cannot be concluded that African American related trending topics result in high frequencies of tweets using call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing.

A similar connection between trending topics and rhetorical tradition is seen in trending topics that rely on humor, such as “#ButYouGotThemFoamsThough,” from February 23, and “#IfChrisBrownWasOurTeach,” from March 3. Signifying tweets could be

linked to these topics. In conclusion, the purpose of displaying the trending topics in Table 3 is to provide a reference for the frequencies of rhetorical traditions identified in Table 1.

Table 3 provides some insight into the results of Table 1, but we cannot conclude that there is a cause-effect relationship between identified tweeted traditions and racial trending topics with this study. In the following chapter, Speech Community Theory is applied to critique the presence of these rhetorical traditions on Twitter.

Table 1

Frequency of African-American Rhetorical Traditions

Date	Call-response	Signification	Tonal Semantics	Narrative Sequencing
February 22	10	25	25	59
February 23	11	95	96	40
February 24	22	90	43	6
February 25	41	83	48	2
February 26	21	63	97	7
February 27	5	15	70	15
February 28	13	17	90	13
February 29	16	20	75	15
March 1	19	18	84	12
March 2	13	22	60	19
March 3	5	51	6	9
March 4	2	0	4	169
March 5	3	40	0	0
March 6	0	8	1	2
March 7	0	0	1	0
Total	181	547	700	368

Table 2

Frequency of Computer Screen Shots of Tweets

Date	Number of Screenshots
February 22	239
February 23	218
February 24	183
February 25	185
February 26	138
February 27	203
February 28	229
February 29	234
March 1	141
March 2	206
March 3	203
March 4	206
March 5	203
March 6	195
March 7	110
Total	2,893

Table 3

United States Trending Topics Per Day

Date	Trending Topics
February 22	#BackWhenIWasAKid, #AshWednesday #MarieColvin, #Lent, #MakesMeSMH
February 23	#myfirstjob, #doNOTbother, #INeverUnderstood, #CrabsAreHere, #ButYouGotThemFoamsThough
February 24	#DamnJ.Cole, #KHart, #DrakeSongsILove, #SongzILove, #JColeSongsILove
February 25	#WeezyF.BabyandtheF, #BestMBLyrics, #KennySmith, #TonyParker, #K.Love
February 26	#ThingsPeopleHaveToStopDoing, #Blackmomscatchphrase, #MissyPyle, #BrianAtwood, #ViolaDavis
February 27	#ChardonHighSchool, #myweakness, #OneThingYouShouldntDo, #IBetSomebodyOnMyTL, #MomTip
February 28	#XXLFreshmen2012, #IWannaGiveAShoutoutTo, #TheThingsIHateMost, #historicaltwitternames, #IHOP
February 29	#DavyJones, #BadFirstDateQuestions, #classicblackmovie, #ANTM, #ThingsFakePeopleDo
March 1	#dml2012, #AndrewBreitbart, #ItsTimeForYouToRealize, #BlackPeopleYouTubeSearches, #HappyBirthdayKidrauhl
March 2	#WhyYoPolo, #SinceImBeingHonest, #1ThingAboutMyself, #HappyBirthdayDr.Seuss
March 3	#WhyShouldI, #IfChrisBrownWasOurTeacher, #FirstTimeISmoked, #OneYearWhoSays, #HappyPlatypusDay
March 4	#SomethingILearnedLongAgo, #10BeautifulPeopleIFollow, #RatchetWordDefinitions, #MajorTurnOn, #Top100FemaleLies
March 5	#First20SongsOnShuffle, #SometimesYouHaveTo, #SongsThatWillAlwaysBump, #Lumidee, #watic
March 6	#ThingsThatMakeMeLOL, #themainetour, #StopKony, #FamousLies, #DemiLovato
March 7	#StopKony, #ILoveWhenYou, #IfIHadThePower, #LionelMessi, #InvisibleChildren

Note. For two hours per day, United States trending topics were examined.

Chapter 4: Critique

The purpose of this research study was to observe traditional African-American rhetoric on Twitter and identify implications of the language to the culture and community of Twitter. All four rhetorical traditions were identified on Twitter and reveal a lot about Twitter as a community. These findings reveal Twitter as a speech community where members, sometimes independent of race, apply traditional African-American rhetoric to communicate. Orbe and Harris (2008) describe a speech community as a population of people who share the same goals and styles of communication that are distinct from those outside of the community (p. 111). In the context of Speech Community Theory, speech codes are “socially constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (p. 112).

Nancy Baym (2008) links community to habitual and unconscious practices people share (p. 77). Additionally, she applies speech community to digitally mediated groups. Baym describes online speech communities: “Groups share insider lingo including acronyms, vocabulary words, genres, styles, and forms of play” (p. 77). For instance, the reply sign (“@”) is a distinct communicative feature of Twitter that may be largely misunderstood outside of the Twitter community. Although used in an online community, tweets are likened to real speech patterns or utterances, thus making Twitter an online speech community. Like any speech community, it takes a new member time to get acclimated to the speech codes of Twitter, and the Twitter Glossary (see Appendix) helps new members understand the meaning of certain communicative speech codes. Although call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing are identified on Twitter, their forms are different than they would be in an offline community context, and the medium may have

influenced the frequency of identification of certain traditions.

On Twitter, the rhetorical traditions were typed, thus taking on a different form than the offline oral rhetoric. For the call-response tradition, the retweet function was used in addition to call-response related words that co-signed, encouraged, repeated, or completed the original tweet. Twitter's retweet function may have played a part in the low number of call-response rhetoric identified, because Tweeters could opt to simply retweet a tweet to demonstrate a call-response type of agreement, whereas in offline communication the application of call-response is more restrictive. Signification was sometimes prompted by trending topics. On March 3, one of the trending topics that day was “#IfChrisBrownWasOurTeacher”. Many Tweeters used the trending topic to joke about R&B and Pop musician, Chris Brown, often referring to his highly publicized incident of domestic violence with pop singer Rihanna (Duke & Rowlands, 2009).

Like signification, narrative sequencing was, at times, prompted by trending topics. On March 4, the trending topic “#SomethingILearnedLongAgo” prompted many Tweeters to use narrative sequencing. Table 1 displays a high frequency of tweets identified as narrative sequencing on that day. Tonal semantics was the most identified rhetorical tradition within the 15 days worth of Twitter data. Unlike oral communication where tonal semantics is identified in vocal inflection, tonal semantics on Twitter was identified through inflection in punctuation or a combination between capitalized letters and exclamation points. The high frequency of tonal semantics may be the result of the restrictions in online communication. Tweeters must rely on their computer keyboards and the Twitter features in order to communicate their message. The use of punctuation is one way to convey meaning where there is a lack of other context clues in Twitter communication, as compared to offline

communication. Furthermore, the 140-character restriction for tweets may have also encouraged Tweeters to rely on tonal semantics in order to convey meaning more concisely and effectively. Due to the online context of the communication, the traditional African-American rhetorical traditions observed were adapted for the online Twitter community.

Referencing African-American history where enslaved Africans were forced to develop a creolized language in order to communicate with other enslaved Africans from other tribes, the rhetoric identified on Twitter is like a “creolized” form of traditional African-American rhetoric in which Tweeters have adapted and assimilated to as a community. Further evidence of a simultaneous adaption and assimilation to the unique form of rhetoric comes from the fact this research study did not limit tweets to African American Tweeters, and Smith (2011) identifies 25% of Twitter users as African Americans. Although these possibilities cannot be proven by this research, it is evident these language patterns are elements of the culture and community of Twitter. The following chapter presents limitations of the research, improvements to the research, and directions for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This research reveals the use of the African-American rhetorical traditions of call-response, signification, tonal semantics, and narrative sequencing in communication on Twitter. This result is evidence of the survival of the traditionally oral African-American rhetoric in a digital community. Additionally, the presence of the rhetorical traditions are identified independent of the race of Tweeters and found used in non-African American related trending topics as well as African American related trending topics. This result implies Tweeters from different racial backgrounds and cultures may also use these rhetorical traditions when communicating on Twitter. Consequently, the traditional African-American rhetoric examined is not necessarily limited to African Americans within the Twitter community. In short, the rhetorical traditions are a part of the fabric of the Twitter culture and take on unique Twitter forms compared to their normative oral forms. Despite these findings, this research study is not without limitations.

The research methods used in this study were not based on an already tested method, because this kind of research had not been previously researched. Another limitation is that tweets were collected manually, without the assistance of a machine. For this reason, tweets may not have been monitored equally over time due to human error. Examples of this type of human error are found on March 1 and March 2. On March 1, the trending topic “#dml2012” was not a national trending topic, but a smaller trending topic, and on March 2, five national trending topics were not examined as in the other 14 days (see Table 3).

Along the same lines, computer screen shots did not capture the same number of tweets each picture, so this method of data collection provided limited consistency. For example, on March 5 one computer screen shot was crooked and should have been discarded

from the study, but was not. A machine to monitor and collect tweets would have eliminated this type of error and made data collection more efficient. The structure of Twitter also may have limited the scope of tweets examined in the study, because of the tendency for national trending topics to become less popular and drop off the national trending topic list while tweets associated with the trending topic were still being monitored. This fluctuation in the popularity of trending topics and the time constraints due to the allotted time set to examine each trending topic may have resulted in missing tweets offering more rhetorical traditions.

The national trending topics monitored limited the types of tweets that would be observed at times, with some prompting tweets that would offer more traditional African American rhetoric and others that did not. For instance, the trending topic “#blackmomscatchphrase” would prompt more traditional African-American rhetoric than would the trending topic “#ChardonHighSchool.” But, at the same time, rhetorical traditions were found in non-African American related trending topics as well. A final limitation of this study involves the coders. Although there were measures taken to validate the coding of data, the subjectivity of the coders threatens some of the reliability of the identified rhetorical traditions. As a result, this research study is more subjective than objective. These limitations in the research provide several areas of improvement for future research.

Future research on language patterns like that of this research would benefit greatly from a program that collects and monitors tweets associated with trending topics. Another improvement should have all tweet coders code the same tweets and compare and contrast codes to increase reliability. Future research would also benefit from examining language patterns for a longer period of time to identify significance of certain rhetorical traditions. Other research could identify different rhetorical cultural traditions on Twitter and compare

and contrast them, because Twitter has members from different cultural backgrounds that apply different rhetorical practices when communicating on Twitter.

Future research could examine rhetorical traditions of other microblogging/social networking sites and compare them. In regard to cultural rhetorical traditions, future research could focus on the ways people of specific demographics (such as races, ages, sexes, sexual orientations, etc.) communicate on microblogging/social networking sites. This type of study presents a challenge because of the anonymity of the Internet. Unlike this thesis, which focused on identifying the traditional African-American rhetorical traditions, future research could seek to identify the functions of language traditions in online social networking contexts as compared to its functions in offline contexts, like in the study by Byrne (2008).

According to a 2009 Pew Research Center study, 56% of all Americans have accessed the Internet by wireless means, with 39% of all Americans accessing the Internet using a laptop computer and 32% of all Americans using a mobile device (Horrigan, 2009). The digital divide that was once present is decreasing among African Americans and White Americans, when mobile Internet access is taken into account. While social networking sites have been popular with young adults (aged 18-29) since their beginnings, older age groups are increasingly using these sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). As Internet use increases across different populations and people begin to rely more on social networking sites to communicate, it is important for communication research to extend into these realms. It is important to study language patterns and traditions in online speech communities, because it yields data that provide insight on how online speech communities function and how they differ, relate, and/or translate to offline communities, activities, and issues. In short,

continuing this kind of research will offer new insight on the relationship between online reality and offline reality in regard to communication and culture.

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Appendix: Twitter Glossary

@

The @ sign is used to call out usernames in Tweets, like this: Hello @Twitter! When a username is preceded by the @ sign, it becomes a link to a Twitter profile.

Avatar

The personal image uploaded to your Twitter profile in the Settings tab of your account.

Bio

A short personal description of 160 characters or fewer used to define who you are on Twitter.

Follow

To follow someone on Twitter is to subscribe to their Tweets or updates on the site.

Follow Count

The numbers that reflect how many people you follow, and how many people follow you. Found on your Twitter Profile.

Follower

A follower is another Twitter user who has followed you.

Following

Your following number reflects the quantity of other Twitter users you have chosen to follow on the site.

Hashtag

The # symbol is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users.

Listed

To be included in another Twitter user's list. Listed numbers and details appear in the statistics section of your profile.

Lists

Curated groups of other Twitter users. Used to tie specific individuals into a group on your Twitter account. Displayed on the right side menu of your homepage.

Mention

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

Profile

A Twitter page displaying information about a user, as well as all the Tweets they have posted from their account.

Protected/Private Accounts

Twitter accounts are public by default. Choosing to protect your account means that your Tweets will only be seen by approved followers and will not appear in search.

Reply

A Tweet posted in reply to another user's message, usually posted by clicking the "reply" button next to their Tweet in your timeline. Always begins with @username.

Retweet (noun)

A Tweet by another user, forwarded to you by someone you follow. Often used to spread news or share valuable findings on Twitter.

Retweet (verb)

To retweet, retweeting, retweeted. The act of forwarding another user's Tweet to all of your followers. Find out more about retweets.

RT

Abbreviated version of "retweet." Placed before the retweeted text when users manually retweet a message.

Top Tweets

Tweets determined by a Twitter algorithm to be the most popular or resonant on Twitter at any given time.

Trending Topic

A subject algorithmically determined to be one of the most popular on Twitter at the moment.

Tweet (verb)

Tweet, tweeting, tweeted. The act of posting a message, often called a "Tweet", on Twitter.

Tweet (noun)

A message posted via Twitter containing 140 characters or fewer.

Tweet Button

A button anyone can add to their website. Clicking this button allows Twitter users to post a Tweet with a link to that site.

Tweeter

An account holder on Twitter who posts and reads Tweets. Also known as Twitterers

Username

Also known as a Twitter handle. Must be unique and contain fewer than 15 characters. Is used to identify you on Twitter for replies and mentions.

