

More than a Modern Day Green Book: Exploring the Online Community of Black Twitter

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The Negro Motorist Green Book was a tool used by the Black community to navigate systemic racism throughout the U.S. and around the world. Whether providing its users with safer roads to take or businesses that were welcoming to Black patrons, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* fostered pride and created a physical network of safe spaces within the Black community. Building a bridge between this artifact which served Black people for thirty years and the current moment, we explore Black Twitter as an online space where the Black community navigates identity, activism, racism, and more. Through interviews with people who engage with Black Twitter, we surface the benefits (such as community building, empowerment, and activism) and challenges (like dealing with racism, appropriation, and outsiders) on the platform, juxtaposing the *Green Book* as a historical artifact and Black Twitter as its contemporary counterpart. Equipped with these insights, we make suggestions including audience segmentation, privacy controls, and involving historically disenfranchised perspectives into the technological design process. These proposals have implications for the design of technologies that would serve Black communities by amplifying Black voices and bolstering work toward justice.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; **Computer supported cooperative work**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Twitter, Black Twitter, Online Communities

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1 INTRODUCTION

Victor Green, a U.S. postal worker living in Harlem, published the first edition of *The Negro Motorist Green Book* in 1936, a fifteen page guide listing travel accommodations and businesses in metropolitan New York City [98, 103]. Green delivered mail in New Jersey and frequently drove South to visit his wife's family in Virginia, exposing him to America's landscape and providing him the opportunity to map it for himself. Modeling his publication after similar guides for Jewish travelers [92], the *Green Book* quickly became one of the best resources for surviving and navigating

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1930s America while Black. Preceded by *Hackley and Harrison's Hotel and Apartment Guide for Colored Travelers* and contemporary to *The Travelguide* and *Grayson's Guide*, the *Green Book* helped Black readers actively resist discrimination and real threats of violence through the construction and maintenance of counter-spaces and underground networks [1, 82, 89]. Furthermore, it highlights how Black Americans developed alternative landscapes to live within a racist and segregated nation.

Today, people often use social media to seek out information and find community, resources, and strategies for staying safe. A prime example of this takes place on Twitter, where Black users coalesce around culture, art and entertainment, business, and social issues in a community commonly referred to as “Black Twitter” [11]. In this paper, we describe findings from an interview study with this community’s participants, through which we observe that Black Twitter operates as a kind of *Green Book* of the twenty-first century. It provides a mechanism for users to share and find information, whether about staying safe or calls to action against anti-Black racism. We describe how Black Twitter, like the *Green Book*, responds to the shifting landscape of racism, creating a community-based network of resistance, economic empowerment, and Black joy. Similar to its twentieth-century counterparts, Black Twitter also documents and replies to the experience of being Black, answering W.E.B. Du Bois’ question to the Black community of his time of “How does it feel to be a problem?” [54] as seen through the proliferation of #_____whileBlack tweets. In this paper, we will describe how Black Twitter benefits the Black community, as well as the challenges that might serve as barriers to these benefits, and explore how Twitter and other platforms might support and bolster marginalized communities through their joys and sorrows.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 The Negro Motorist Green Book

In 1936, using his own experiences and recommendations from others in his postal service union, Victor Green published the first edition of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, focusing on listings in the New York metropolitan area [98, 103]. Green was a Black postal carrier from Harlem who would often travel by car to visit his wife’s family in Virginia. Postal workers, like Pullman porters, were in unique positions as their work depended on travel, exposing them to America’s landscape that many in the Black community were unable to experience for themselves. Two of the authors perused digital copies of the *Green Book* from the New York Public Library Digital Archive, for example [90, 91, 93]. Published between 1936 and 1966, the *Green Book* acted as a site of resistance, of community, and as a gateway to joy and leisure. Over time, the *Green Book* came to cover the North, East, South, and West of the United States along with international destinations such as Canada, the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Listing Black-owned and verified businesses willing to accommodate Black Americans, the *Green Book* acted as a safety net and guide to an invisible America. Covering venues from hotels to state parks, restaurants to nightclubs, barbershops, beauty shops, and eventually amusement parks, travel guides like the *Green Book* not only provided a road map to segregated America and ways to revel in recreation but also left behind a historical repository of the “meaning of being Black” at a specific phase of the “problem.” Each category within its directory reveals facets of navigating America while Black.

The *Green Book* was more than a list of businesses and provided several indispensable benefits to the Black community. First, in listing safe places for Black people to travel and stay, the *Green Book* responded to the shifting racial geography of the United States, capturing the nuances of segregation and Jim Crow. Listings in the *Green Book* both covered Black-owned businesses and residences in predominantly Black districts as well as guided readers to Black-friendly oases across a hostile American landscape. Thus, the silences and absences of the *Green Book* spoke as loudly as the included entries, helping Black motorists find refuge in what was often a precarious landscape.

Secondly, the *Green Book's* directory of Black businesses facilitated support for Black entrepreneurs, labor, and dollars. Rather than face the indignities of entering businesses through the back, eating in the kitchen, or being denied service altogether, the *Green Book* enabled Black motorists and families to support businesses that welcomed them. Thirdly, although the *Green Book* tended to shy away from being overtly political, it facilitated grassroots mobilization and networking during the Civil Rights Movement. Rarely did the *Green Book* make blatantly political statements, but by giving the Black middle-class alternatives to segregated sites of consumption, it helped bolster the effectiveness of economic boycotts and nonviolent sit-ins.

While the *Green Book* was dubbed the Bible of Black travel, it had its fair share of challenges, most notably its inherent limitation in scope. Firstly, the more geographic locations the *Green Book* included, the fewer listings could be incorporated. Early iterations of the *Green Book* presented its readers with options that enabled them to meet a vast array of needs. In addition to hotels, lodges, and restaurants, the guide listed liquor stores, barbershops, hair salons, pharmacies, and the like. As Green's book became more national and international in scope, however, listing subjects narrowed, emphasizing travel essentials like hotels, motels, and resorts. Additionally, published annually, the *Green Book* was unable to list every possible business. Early on, Green began soliciting recommendations from his users. Although Green's book could only be updated once a year, this allowed the guide to incorporate lesser known facilities and personal offerings. Moreover, the *Green Book* could not advise readers on the dangers of walking while Black or simply being Black in the era of Jim Crow. For all its information, the *Green Book* could not fully shield its readers from the realities of race or warn them in advance. These challenges did not limit the *Green Book's* efficacy, yet they underscore the limitations of a print publication.

Green hoped his guide could remedy the difficulties and indignities Black Americans faced while traveling, but these issues did not cease after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination based on race, religion, color, sex, or national origin. The fall of legalized Jim Crow rendered the guide to be considered unnecessary, yet problems persist in new forms. In the present day, the American landscape is simultaneously racialized and race-neutral. Though often interpreted as invisible or ignored due to the lack of tangible markers, the geography of race remains salient whether it be the signs and placards of the Jim Crow South, the "No Negroes After Dark" posts throughout the Mid and Far West, or explicit zoning and housing laws in the North.

Many goals of the *Green Book*, e.g. in sharing information within a community, are echoed today in online communities like Black Twitter. This paper suggests that as America reconfigures the color line, like the *Green Book*, Black Twitter responds to the shifting landscape of racism, creating a community-based network of resistance, economic empowerment, and Black joy. Black Twitter is more than a digital crucible in which Black identity is forged and enacted. Similar to its twentieth-century counterparts, Black Twitter also documents racism, speaks to the experience of being Black, and provides alternative landscapes for marginalized communities.

2.2 Related Work

Black Twitter shares characteristics with other online communities for marginalized groups, including groups coalesced around an identity and a particular self presentation [40]. The Black Twitter community centers concerns around race and racism in the context of people's interactions in society and with technology. Here, we situate Black Twitter within the previous literature in these spaces.

2.2.1 Online Communities for Marginalized Groups. Online communities have long been important social spaces where community members can find support and social interaction [65], including

people who are part of vulnerable and marginalized communities: for example, trans and/or non-binary communities [14, 47], communities for persons who are LGBTQ+ [24, 59], communities living outside (e.g. unhoused populations) [62, 63, 110, 113], senior/elderly communities [50, 112], and communities for persons living with disabilities (PWD) [37, 38, 55, 74, 99, 115]. In these spaces, group identity can be very important [102], as well as safety [85, 100] and privacy [25, 47], yet platforms don't always have what communities need [19, 20, 25, 85, 100, 114].

Online communities can also be a useful way for people to find safe spaces to seek and share information. For example, research has explored how transgender people were able to find and share resources, build community, help meet mental health needs, and share their experiences with each other while freely exploring and expressing their identity in online communities [47, 52]. Marginalized communities online can also foster spaces where sensemaking about experiences and harms can take place [68]. Researchers have also explored how marginalized communities such as Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) use decolonizing tactics on Reddit such as reclaiming space and recording collective memory to foster collective resilience [21].

For minorities living in rural areas without much support, online spaces can be especially important. In this type of situation, online spaces might be the only way for minorities in rural areas to connect and interact with members of their community. For example, research has shown that the Internet has been critically important for bridging ties among LGBTQ+ youth who live in the rural United States or other areas where they may not know other LGBTQ+ people [24, 43]. In rural America, whether due to discrimination, hate crimes, and/or familial beliefs, LGBTQ+ youth are sometimes restricted in their capacity to reveal their sexual orientation [43, 49]. Although LGBTQ+ youth struggle with very real safety and security concerns, including the possible loss of economic support of their parents or caretakers, they can find respite through online connections.

However, there are also challenges to privacy and safety for marginalized or vulnerable communities in online spaces [25, 85]. Though the presence of and building ties to community members online empowers, research evidence also shows that online spaces are open to intrusion by outsiders who disrupt people's sense of safety [47]. Sometimes, outsiders disrupt users from making ties of belonging in public spaces. Outsiders are known to appropriate the culture, including language, intellectual property and creative works of marginalized communities [39], especially when the community is subject to the gaze of hostile or the performative allyship of outsiders [18, 39].

On top of these concerns, platforms can easily infer the personal data of marginalized users through their participation, such as their protected demographic attributes. Platforms have misused personal data to, among other things, exclude persons from economic opportunities [3, 64], such as jobs, housing, or from obtaining personal or business loans. Such uses of personal data are counter-opposed to the idea of the *Green Book*, where information was shared to keep the Black community safe, to uplift, support and make visible, and to raise awareness of Black-owned businesses. Online, however, the Black community's data is extracted and not returned by profitable technology companies. These companies want to learn how to target, and sometimes exclude, marginalized communities [2, 5]. Also along these lines, access to the data is not equal, and how a community's data is valued economically differs for marginalized groups [6]. For example, in the United States, all else equal, Black and Hispanic buyers are more often charged higher interest rates on home loans compared to white buyers [27]. These trends harken to the economic impacts of structural racism that has been enacted by the U.S. government [83], institutions and practices. In this and other ways, research shows that online communities are not thereby separable from the business models and economic logics (e.g., the values and assumptions of capitalism) that operate the digital spaces where community takes place, including on Twitter. These economic logics disrupt the power of marginalized folks, while at the same time, digital platforms, owned by mega-corporations, market themselves as mechanisms that make space for and empower communities [18].

2.2.2 Race and Racism in HCI. Race and racism are increasingly the focus of inquiries in Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research. Scholars have shown that individuals, groups of people, institutions and larger systems of power can perpetrate racism and defined racism in three parts, “1) one group believes itself to be superior, 2) the group that believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out racist oppressive behavior, and 3) racism affects multiple racial and ethnic groups” [105]. Additionally researchers like Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al. contribute critical race theory as being a lens for HCI, as well as a call to action; critical race theory is “...a framework to challenge the deep-rooted philosophical, legal, systemic, and practical causes of racism” and they define racism as “...attitudes, actions, and institutions which contribute to relative disadvantages for members of racial groups with comparatively less power” [72].

Social technologies can also help people cope with interpersonal racism. The research building around this conversation includes the omnipresent racism found in technology alongside requests that HCI research incorporates justice and equity frameworks [105]. Multiple scholars have critiqued HCI and CSCW for the dearth of research focusing on racial minorities [72, 105], which in part inspires us as researchers to carry on in this project. Hankerson et al. also make the case for gendered and politicized artifacts, as well as one for racialized technology and technology creators actually possessing and perpetrating racial bias. Here, they use Friedman and Nissenbaum’s definition of bias: “...computer systems that systematically and unfairly discriminate against certain individuals or groups of individuals in favor of others” [48]. Hankerson et al. also point out that, as of 2016, the ACM Digital Library yielded six results for the search term “racism” [48], a number that had tripled by October 2019 [105]. As of February 2021, the number of results in the ACM Digital Library is 679. However, there is still much ground to cover and room for growth. For example, how might we consider Black Twitter’s intersection with ongoing conversations around race and technology in CSCW?

2.2.3 Black Twitter. André Brock defines Black Twitter as an online gathering in which its members identify as Black, create culturally relevant content, share information, and utilize the affordances of Twitter to engage in Black discourse, grow social affinities, and share commonalities of Black culture [10, 11]. While non-Black people at times also participate with Black Twitter, Brock notes that to do so necessitates a strong understanding of Black culture, shared experiences, and digital practices [11].

People who use Black Twitter see it as a community wherein public/private conversations and social movements take place [15]. Scholars have compared Black Twitter to a counterpublic which is a space of conversation populated by marginalized people. They use the space to counter dominant discourse and oppose stereotypical and “out of pocket” understandings of who they are [42, 53]. Black Twitter is also a space for Black identity to be explored through, for example, co-viewing and second screening shows like *How to Get Away with Murder* that facilitate discourse on Black womanhood [108]. The tapestry of linguistic, technological, and cultural aspects of Black Twitter situated within the context of Twitter affords a new and contemporary outlet for rejecting and critiquing aspects of humanity that have historically and systematically dehumanized Black people [78]. Black Twitter also critiques and redirects mainstream media by providing alternative narratives and calling out lapses and negative portrayals in traditional media [66, 67]. The Black Twitter community is one in which Blacktags (hashtags relating to Black people/identity), Black linguistic practices such as “signifyin” (an aspect of Black oral tradition in which multiple meanings exist through word play and misdirection), and a priority of issues related to race and racism (in particular those that primarily affect Black Americans) abound [34, 60, 86, 97]. In addition, the use of African American Vernacular English or AAVE (a dialect spoken by some African Americans) within Black Twitter solidifies an example of the digital manifestation of Black identity and Black

cultural performance online [10]. Though Black Twitter is occasionally used as an example of an online community in computer science literature (as represented by ACM publications) [17, 23, 95], there is much more to explore in detail.

2.2.4 Social Media and Self Presentation. Understanding how online groups identify, including through computer-mediated communication (CMC) [79], is a long-standing interest in human-computer interaction [71], and social media is a space in which identity and self-presentation are expressly affected by the medium [96]. Twitter in particular is a platform where identity intersects with design in terms of authenticity, imagined audience, and context collapse [70].

Dialogue and culture also play an important role in community development [79], and in some societies, these interactions are assumed to build an individual's sense of identity through reciprocal or interdependent cultural activities [96]. Moreover, through the process of impression management or saving face, people present themselves differently on social media depending on their expectations over the perceived audience [96]. These presentations of the self through various interactions on different mediums also produce common perceptions of systemic aspects of a culture [79]. For example, sharing experiences of racism while living in America leads people to associate with groups. However, communities are not homogeneous entities or necessarily established along demographic dimensions. People define themselves through communicative interactions, and through communication develop and present themselves and these interactions, people build a sense of self and belonging to others, e.g. community [79]. Of special interest to our work is how dialogue helps Black Twitter users define where and how the community takes place on social media.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Positionality

We set out to conduct an exploratory study of Black Twitter, with an eye toward benefits, challenges, technical affordances, and connections to the goals of the *Green Book*. First, with respect to the positionality of the people conducting this research, the first and third authors identify as Black women at predominately white institutions, and the remaining authors are white and acknowledge their white privilege. Additional intersectional positions and stigmatized identities are also represented for some authors.

3.2 Twitter Data Analysis

To inform our interview protocol, we both reviewed previous literature on Black Twitter (as described above) and analyzed a small sample ($n = 1,000$) of tweets to get a sense of the specific content on Black Twitter. To learn about the salient conversations taking place on Black Twitter, we collected 75,012 tweets from Twitter in April and May 2020. We searched the Twitter API and retrieve tweets containing hashtags connected to Black Twitter conversations (e.g., #BlackTwitter, #BlackLivesMatter). We also collected tweets containing the phrase “while Black.” “While Black” phrases call out or refer to how Black people are criminalized while doing everyday lawful activities like driving an automobile [33, 46, 75]. Finally, the first wave of the 2019 coronavirus pandemic struck the United States during our data collection efforts; during this time, we noticed the hashtag “#COVIDWhileBlack” emerged in the data and added the hashtag to our API search and data request to assess pandemic issues reported by the Black Twitter.

To construct a sample of tweets to analyze conversation themes, we wrote a Python script to randomly select 1,000 tweets. The purpose of the Twitter data analysis was to identify important questions and to construct guidelines for the semi-structured interviews. To identify principal themes from the data, three authors conducted a round of independent open coding, then met to

discuss themes. Then, the three authors annotated the remainder of the data and wrote memos based on those themes to inform the interview questions. Our primary codes for annotation included the following themes: social justice, information sharing, community/empowerment/uplift, politics, identity, business, health, and humor. We used these questions in an interview protocol to guide a series of interviews we conducted with users who consider themselves part of Black Twitter.

3.3 Interviews

In total, the first author conducted 18 semi-structured interviews between August and September 2020 (see Table 1). Interview participants were recruited by tweeting about the study to the hashtag #BlackTwitter. A recruitment questionnaire was tweeted out using the hashtag #BlackTwitter that included the questions “Do you use the social media platform Twitter?” and “Are you familiar with Black Twitter?” If respondents answered yes to both these two questions, we reached out to schedule an interview. Snowball sampling was also used. We asked participants to share information about the study with people they thought would be a good fit for the interview. Twenty-four people responded to the questionnaire, all of whom answered yes to both questions. However, six respondents failed to schedule or keep an interview. Two pilot interviews were conducted to ascertain an estimate of the length of the interviews and to refine our questions. As interviews were conducted, additional questions were included in the protocol to aid the discussions.

The age of participants ranged from 24 to 53 years old, and 17 identified themselves as female and 1 identified as male. We recognize that the gender composition of our participants is skewed. According to Pew Research in 2019, 48% of people on Twitter identified as women [111]. However, of the 10% of people on Twitter who were the most prolific tweeters (creating 80% of tweets), 65% of them identified as women [56]. The available information for demographics on people who use Twitter is not granular enough to distill the numbers for Black women, men, and non-binary people. Nonetheless, a majority of women participated in our interviews, which may impact the overall representativeness of our findings. We also asked participants what race they identified with, and these self-described identities included: Kenyan Black American (1), Chinese Asian American (1), Black Afro-Caribbean (1), Black-African (2), Black African-American (1), African-American (1), Nigerian American (1), Black British (1), Black American U.S. slave ancestry (1), and Black (8). Sixteen participants are located in the United States and two in England.

We constructed the interview questions based on prior work on Black Twitter, as well as findings from our analysis of tweets. We also wanted to know how familiar participants were with the *Green Book* and how they saw it in relation to Black Twitter. Interviews started off by asking participants about their familiarity with Black Twitter. Questions then moved into whether or not participants felt like such a community could take place within another platform or if there are similar communities within other platforms that already exist. We went on to ask participants about why and how they use Black Twitter and possible functionalities they felt could help to improve the online community. Participants were also asked if they knew of the *Green Book* and whether they thought Black Twitter was similar to it. At the end of each interview, if they felt comfortable sharing, we asked participants for demographic information. See Appendix A for the full Interview Protocol. Participants were compensated with a \$20 Amazon gift card and interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes.

Following transcription, we conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data [8], beginning with three of the authors conducting independent open coding, then all authors discussing shared themes and collaboratively working to combine and collapse codes into overarching themes. Researchers then revisited the interview transcripts to determine how these themes support the data, and then defined these themes and identified the most representative supporting evidence and meaningful contributions from the interview data.

Table 1. Demographics for Interview Participants

Participants	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Location
1	24	Kenyan Black American	Female	USA
2	25	Chinese, Asian American	Female	USA
3	31	Black - African American - Afro Caribbean	Female	USA
4	27	Black - African	Female	USA
5	38	Black	Cisgender Woman	USA
6	53	African American	Female	USA
7	29	Black	Female	USA
8	30	Black	Female	USA
9	31	Black	Female	USA
10	28	Black - African American	Female	USA
11	28	Black	Female	USA
12	28	Black	Female	USA
13	36	Black - British	Female	England
14	27	Black	Female	USA
15	24	Nigerian American	Female, Cisgender	USA
16	28	Black American U.S. slave ancestry	Male	USA
17	30	Black	Woman	USA
18	34	Black - African	Female	England

4 FINDINGS

The *Green Book* was a lifeline for Black travelers in the United States and abroad. The *Green Book* was also beneficial to Black communities of the time by helping them to find amenable accommodations and places to patronize. In our discussions, participants described similar benefits of Black Twitter in terms of building a network of community across space and time, sharing and seeking information, and engaging in activism. However, they also noted a number of challenges that limited how much these factors would benefit the Black community.

4.1 Benefits of Black Twitter

I think of like just Black people on Twitter communing to like kiki,¹ just to laugh, just to talk, just to spread information to each other. (P10)

Participants gave insights into the many ways that Black Twitter benefited their lives personally as well as the Black community generally, including themes of community building, safety, information sharing and seeking, empowerment, and activism.

4.1.1 Community Building. When asked to define what Black Twitter is, many participants frequently used the word “community.” They described Black Twitter as a space where the Black community could find humor, grieve together, share information, empower each other, and organize collective action. They also saw this space as different from the rest of Twitter or other online social platforms.

Yeah, it’s really a community, honestly. That’s how it feels. It feels like a community where someone on Twitter is just like, here’s some articles, here’s some tweets about

¹“Kiki (alternately kiking or a ki) is a term which grew out of Black American gay social culture, and is loosely defined as a gathering of friends for the purpose of gossiping and chit-chat.” (Kiki (social gathering), Wikipedia.)

random things, but when you go to Black Twitter, it's like, hey family, what's up, you know? (P8)

In early work on online community-building, Pape et al. outlined two characteristics of how communities are built online. The first was the development of a collective identity within the group and the second was common practices shared within the group [73]. Participants often remarked on how various aspects of Black identity were shared and how shared experiences were discussed on Black Twitter. For example, participants talked about activities such as live-tweeting during Swizz Beatz and Timberland's Verzuz battle series (where artists pair up live and compete to decide who has the better catalog [58]) or live-tweeting television shows or movies as examples of what brought people to Black Twitter and why they engaged. These moments of togetherness, whether engaging in political activism or just having a kiki while watching the TV show *Scandal* at the same time, resulted in *community building* with overall positive outcomes, particularly for members who might not have that community elsewhere.

For example, some participants were living in predominantly white areas with few opportunities to connect in person with other Black people until they pursued friendships through Black Twitter, where participants could relate to one another regardless of whether or not they personally knew the other person tweeting. This is just one of many examples providing evidence into how online communities can serve as spaces where marginalized communities can connect with each other [24, 52].

It's almost that same sense of community. Like when you show up to a family reunion and it could be somebody that you've never seen before, but obviously the fact that they're there is like, this must be my cousin. So it's kind of the same thing with Black Twitter. (P12)

The ability to connect and feel seen and heard creates a community that spans across digital space and can lead to feelings of belonging, which can be important to crafting a communal identity as Pape et al. outlined.

And it's kinda like a community where, you know, it's not like a secret code, but like you just, if you know, and so that's something that distinguishes it for me. (P15)

Black Twitter exists as an open secret on Twitter just as *The Negro Motorist Green Book* operated in plain site to those who knew where to find it. For those in the know, both then and now, there lies a community and a network of people with which to engage, share, and connect.

4.1.2 Safety. "Safety" online has a number of different definitions in existing literature, though as a concept it is often defined contextually, and it is appropriate to allow users of a particular platform or members of a particular community to define for themselves what it means to be "safe" [81]. For example, Scheuerman et al. define a "safe space" as both "a degree of escape from physical, verbal, and emotional harm" and "sites for exchanging ideas and organizing collective activism" for transgender technology users [85].

Sutherland's study of Black travel social media communities (three anonymized Facebook groups for Black travelers and Twitter communities which collect around hashtags such as #traveling-whileBlack [traveling while Black]) found that both possess "tips for safety and preparedness" and the latter are "designed as safe spaces, allowing Black travelers to ask questions in an environment free from judgment and oppression as well as from potential violence and danger" [101]. We heard about similar experiences from our participants on Black Twitter.

Several participants thought of Black Twitter as a safe space. Black Twitter is a place where people can be accepted, fit in, discuss any topic, and share in the Black experience. As P9 put it:

It's safe because you can discuss the breadth of topics. And so when you can have that, just like range to me, that, that feels safe, right. You're not limited to, all right, this is only where we can crack jokes and drop funny means, right? Like in the same space, we can have a call to action and galvanize. Like I think that that feels safe to me. (P9)

This freedom of expression was also noted by P1:

I think the safety in the Black community is freedom for a variety of expressions. I think that freedom is part of the safety. You're welcome here. You're a part of us, that validation that happens. (P1)

P15 believed Black Twitter to be a safe space and defined for themselves a safe space as:

Any space I can be in where I can just like, feel comfortable being myself and, you know, not have to code switch, which, you know, hides parts of my identity. I feel like I fit in. (P15)

The way that people who use Black Twitter can talk to each other and be their authentic selves while doing so aids in the feeling of safety that participants expressed.

4.1.3 Information sharing/seeking. People on Black Twitter seek and share information on a plethora of topics. They request and provide recommendations for everything from nail technicians and hair braiders to therapists. For instance, P7 described how and why someone could go to Black Twitter and what type of information they could gather:

You can go on there and say, hey, could you, could anybody recommend a Black, I don't know, therapists, et cetera for X location or, hey, I'm traveling to Philadelphia and I want to eat at all Black owned places. Can you rec you know, like you can query that way. (P7)

One subcategory of information sharing/gathering is the sharing and gathering of information about Black businesses. Whereas *The Negro Motorist Green Book* collected and vetted businesses amenable to Black travelers, Black Twitter personalizes and individualizes the experience through tailored recommendations to specific requests. Users often times also gain recommendations through others who share their personal experiences for others to benefit from. Participants discussed Black Twitter as a place where Black businesses could have a platform and potential patrons could swap recommendations and reviews. P10 saw "Black businesses being amplified all the time" and found Black Twitter as a space for "word of mouth reviews" and "amplify[ing] people in our community for things." Black Twitter users could retweet to support Black businesses as well as of course patron them. P11 captures the experience thusly:

Twitter is really great for me because I hear about a lot of Black owned businesses that I wouldn't have otherwise known about...I've found a ton of Black owned vineyards. I've had friends who, you know, found like Black owned laundry detergent and Black owned toothbrushes. I just ordered some like Black owned honey from these Black beekeepers. (P11)

Just as people in the Black community had turned to the *Green Book* for decades to seek such information, today those recommendations and more are just a tweet away. People pose questions to Black Twitter to get opinions and suggestions. Health issues, job searches, real time on the ground news during protests, and more are sought and shared within Black Twitter. Over 15% of the tweets we reviewed specifically mentioned COVID-19, for example. Participants shared that responses on Black Twitter were abundant and swift, making it an ideal place to seek information.

4.1.4 Warning People about Racism. While the Black experience in the United States and across the world is unique to each individual, there can be shared experiences of racism. The need to

express these incidents as well as seek a response, retribution, or justice is one reason why so many take advantage of a platform like Black Twitter to help spread and amplify their story.

Research conducted through the Coping After Racist Experiences (C.A.R.E.) project outlined the support-seeking and sense-making that occurs after a racist incident. Directly related to Black Twitter is their finding that “targets of racism engage in a cyclical process of finding and curating trusted communities and individuals (people who “get it”) with whom to share their experiences” [105]. Black Twitter is such a community and was characterized by some participants as a space within which people can warn each other about racist incidents and racist establishments. For example, P17 expressed how incidents at establishments are shared and addressed on Black Twitter.

People put out information about, you know, Black owned businesses or the opposite end of that spectrum, like places to avoid. Places and spaces where Black people are not welcome get kind of highlighted in that space as well. So I think it could be argued that it’s an electronic version of the *Green Book*. (P17)

According to the Oxford Dictionary, to “call out” someone means to “draw critical attention to someone’s unacceptable actions or behavior.” Often, warning people about racist incidents occurring with a business entails calling them out for their racism and warning others to stay away. P11 explained the process of calling out businesses on Black Twitter:

Twitter is used a lot to call out businesses who have exhibited racism or like has, have had workers who showed racism or have done racist things. Someone will sort of like call them out and then Black people will swarm and get on their Google reviews or like Yelp or whatever, just so people know, you know, to not go here just because they’re right. And to me that’s very helpful. (P11)

Whether it was a story accompanied with video or textual accounts, people using Black Twitter could both share their experiences and be heard and also hopefully help others avoid the same fate. Petitions get started to support victims and bring assailants to justice, businesses get reviewed en masse warning people of their racist practices, victims feel heard and validated in their experience, and more occur when these stories are shared in Black Twitter.

While *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was more indirect and subtle about its role in mitigating racist incidences, from its slogan “vacation without aggravation” to articles that explain a Black person’s rights in different states, it still functioned as a guide to navigating spaces in an effort to avoid interpersonal racism.

4.1.5 Empowerment. Empowerment through technology is a common theme in HCI scholarship. In their exploration of how this concept plays out across HCI, Schneider et al. invoked Zimmerman’s definition of empowerment as “a process in which people gain understanding and control over personal, social, economic, or political forces in order to take action to better their lives” [87]. Moreover, empowerment is undergirded by power: *power to* do something and *power over* wherein an entity or individual has the ability to cause another entity or individual to do something they would not have done otherwise [87]. Seberger et al. build upon this understanding of empowerment in regard to technology by positing that *power to* often manifests as *capability* whereas *power over* brings into relief the imbalances of power and constricts the contexts within which an individual has *power to* act [94]. On the other side of empowerment is digital resignation which sets in when feelings of powerlessness are rooted in one’s ability or seeming lack thereof to control personal technological outcomes [22]. Such powerlessness can be mitigated by collective action.

In regard to Black Twitter, there is an empowerment that propels a *power to* do for people who use Black Twitter and in some cases supports *power over* adversaries. Participants expressed multiple ways in which engaging with Black Twitter was empowering and uplifting. For example, as P10

was preparing to apply to school, they found an account on Twitter geared towards Black people that sent her a free GRE book and also discovered other Black academics who encouraged her:

There was one account that actually sent me a GRE book for free. Like what a nice message, like, you know, good luck woopy woop woop. And I found like other Black academics on there. I learned that you can negotiate like PhD stipends on Black Twitter. And then when I got in, it's like, you know, I just tweeted about it and it was just like, all these people like, Oh, congrats, seriously. So proud of you, you know, you're gonna kill it. And I'm not saying that only exists on Black Twitter, but I think by and large, like that's just the spirit of us in general. (P10)

Encouragement and celebrations for achievements and academic or professional goals surfaced within several accounts from participants. P12 recounts celebrating the success of others on Black Twitter.

Like I know I will see, and I've seen this so much more on Twitter than anywhere else, and I know it's on social media, but like the idea of like somebody saying, like I just graduated, I'm the first lawyer in my family, like, and I got a full ride to do this and it could be somebody I don't know. And I celebrate, like I know like, yes, girl, I'm so glad you made it. I know your struggle. I don't know them from Adam or Eve. And I just like celebrate that. So I feel like there's that, that Black celebration is there. (P12)

There was also a participant who received support during a difficult time in her life. In her experience, the empowerment from Black Twitter helped give her power over her adversary. Here is P17's story:

I was in an abusive relationship a few years into my Twitter experience, and was subsequently being harassed on Twitter by my abuser. And like people kind of like rallied around me and insulated me in a way that probably would not have been possible without Twitter, maybe, you know, the attack wouldn't have been possible either. And a lot of the algorithms for Twitter have since been a little bit tweaked. This is before you could report tweets and stuff. But people really rallied and supported me and gave me support and strength in a way that I did not know was really possible in a virtual setting at the time. But definitely like now in hindsight, a blessing, I guess that's really beautiful. (P17)

There is a warmth and acceptance in Black Twitter that meets people in authentic ways. The empowerment from celebrating success to supporting one another through challenging experiences shares power in a vulnerable community that strives for their full humanity daily.

4.1.6 Activism. A subcategory of empowerment with our participants was activism. Today, information communications technologies (ICTs) are an important part of activism, particularly grassroots approaches, which encompass bottom-up leadership and decision by consensus [36]. However, as pointed out by Ghoshal et al., grassroots goals of inclusivity, social translucence, security, and privacy can be in tension with the creators of ICTs [36], since social movement organizing has become increasingly dependent on social computing technologies (including Twitter) that were built not for this function but with commercial interests in mind [35]. However, despite these tensions, social justice issues are not just discussed on Black Twitter, but acted upon. Calls to action abound as activists and organizers use Black Twitter as a space to galvanize support. P7 recalled calls to action amidst the swell of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020:

Kinda like around the Black lives matter movement, like a collective call to action to donate and or support in various ways. Especially like when folks were in Minnesota

protesting. I do remember there being some calls to action to donate to various organizations that will help them with bail out and stuff like that. And I have donated as a result of stuff like that happening. (P7)

Edrington and Lee studied the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter and found that the social movement uses Twitter to share information, build community, and promote action [28]. Our participants also talked about using Black Twitter to follow protests and get information so that they could participate. For example, P10 used Twitter to see where protests were locally and in other cities, and recounted that there were social accounts that said, “We’re here, don’t come here, there’s a police bus here.” Equipped with information from Black Twitter, P10 took to the streets:

Like every day it was like, you know, more people, more people, they need to swap people out and I’m seeing where the people were on the ground and what they needed. I was like, alright, my class is over for the week. Like it’s time to go get active. And I know because I’ve been watching Twitter, I know what’s happening is different than what they’re reporting on the news because I’m watching what’s happening on Twitter. And I’m seeing that they’re lying about what they’re doing because people are out there recording it. And I know when I go to take, you know, a gas mask, bring water for people, like I know what to do. (P10)

There was also mention from participants of civic engagement being encouraged, such as calls to vote and to reach out to politicians for various causes. Black Twitter helped to raise money for bail and donations to organizations, get petitions signed, and helped get protesters safely out to the streets. The advantage of activism on Black Twitter is a powerful one and undergirds the aforementioned benefits.

4.2 Challenges of Black Twitter

As incredible and life-giving as Black Twitter can be as described by our participants, it is not always a kiki. Participants described multiple challenges within and against Black Twitter such as lack of safety, outsiders, content stealing and appropriation, being called out, and racism. Here we will expand upon each challenge further.

4.2.1 Safety. In the previous section we described ways in which participants see Black Twitter as a safe space. However, participants rarely gave a clear yes or no to this question. For example, as one participant noted, this answer might be different in terms of safe *for whom*:

I think it depends on your definition of safe and I think it depends on who it’s safe for and when it’s safe and who would be labeled as a victim...I think it is safe in that people are able to exchange ideas and information and that kind of thing, but, it hasn’t completely isolated me from attacks or racism sometimes or other negative and harmful violence that you might experience. (P17)

There is also the question of safety *from whom*. For people who engage with Black Twitter, policies around harassment and hate speech are not robust enough, nor do they seem to be applied equitably despite attempts at addressing concerns over the past few years. However, these are known issues for Twitter as a whole, as well as social media more generally.

Blackwell et al. define online harassment as “a wide variety of abusive behaviors online, including but not limited to flaming (or the use of inflammatory language, name calling, or insults); doxing (or the public release of personally identifiable information, such as a home address or phone number); impersonation (or the use of another person’s name or likeness without their consent); and public shaming (or visible humiliation intended to damage a person’s reputation). These tactics are often employed concurrently, particularly when many individuals, acting collectively, target just one

individual (sometimes referred to as “dogpiling”) [7]. We also know that people from protected groups (e.g., based on gender, sex, race, religion, or disability) are more likely to be the targets of harassment on social media; as pointed out by Schoenebeck et al., “online harassment then perpetuates and magnifies the injustices they are already experiencing in their lives” [88].

In addition to noting how harassment disproportionately impacts their community, participants also felt that Twitter’s policies did not do enough to protect them while simultaneously unfairly targeting content from Black users:

Tom from MySpace would never like do this kind of thing, but then you’ve got like, people will ask him like, Jack, why aren’t you like checking the racist profiles and stuff that are on here. But like there are Black accounts constantly being thrown in Twitter jail. (P12)

The algorithm leans heavily on, basically invading marginalized groups for very little things. And, you know, they have whole Nazis and white supremacists on that tweeting away still very disgusting things. (P16)

Many participants were torn about the distinction of Black Twitter as a safe space and often offered a caveat about the perils of public space on the internet and that fact endangering Black Twitter as a space. Other users, not part of the Black Twitter community, can steal content, make disparaging, harassing, or hateful comments, and generally act as an antagonizing presence. As P9 points out, it is often the “outsider” who poses a threat to Black Twitter:

The unsafe part is just to me, general internet, right? Like at the end of the day, you have to be mindful of what you post on the internet. So there are moments where I’m like, yeah, I might have opinions. I might see my opinion reflected in a thread, but I can’t engage with it perhaps in the full, like, transparent way I would like to just because it’s not going to be someone from Black Twitter, who’s going to run with it. It’s going to be an outsider who’s going to leverage that. (P9)

4.2.2 *Outsiders.*

With all Black communities, you got the voyeurs...people looking in to see what a Black community looks like, what Black exchange looks like. And I think that’s where the problem lies. (P5)

Participants often depicted outsiders as outside of the shared Black experience. Six of the eighteen participants said anyone who was not Black was an outsider while two participants who both identified as Black considered themselves outsiders for not engaging with Black Twitter content as much as others. Just as the Black community is a tapestry of individuals who at times can share experiences, it is possible to measure oneself against the community and feel as though one is lacking in some capacity. This could be motivated entirely internally or from external exchanges. Outsiders might also include intentional voyeurs such as journalists, law enforcement, or researchers.

Overwhelmingly, participants described outsiders as people who could not relate to the content of Black Twitter which was Black culture. Some participants noted that bigots, racists, and bots were assuredly outsiders, as well as people those who might be surveilling the community, like as P15 noted, “the FBI or whatever, CIA” actively tracking Black activists, and added:

Because I’ve seen like bots, not even bots, they’re not automated, but they’re just like people who have impersonated Black people on Twitter. They obviously have to do a bit of studying on Black Twitter, just like Black customs or stuff in general. (P15)

Prior work has highlighted concerns with police monitoring social media, even for crime prevention, including concerns about privacy, government surveillance, and possible abuses of power;

moreover, they found that these concerns are amplified for Black communities and those with low levels of trust in the police [57]. Our participants specifically expressed concerns about law enforcement infiltrating Black Twitter to seek out activists and protesters. P11 described the sense of being watched and searched for from within Black Twitter by law enforcement:

You see stories about people trying to monitor organizations for protests and people who, you know, may be figures and trying to lead grassroots organizations and trying to target them or get information on them. (P11)

Another example of perceptions of being “watched” included researchers who collect data from Twitter, which is common as a research method in a variety of fields, though particularly for computer science or social science research questions [32]. For example, a participant mentioned hearing about a specific researcher who collected tweets with the #BlackintheIvory [Black in the Ivory] hashtag:

I’ve seen researchers absolutely with like the Black in the Ivory hashtag. There was one white researcher that was like, hey, I compiled all the tweets. If you’re interested in looking at the data DM me and everybody was like, this isn’t your data friend, like, who told you to do this? (P10)

In this case the sense of being watched by outsiders was also coupled with the idea of taking content from the community. More broadly, participants discussed this in terms of outsiders who stole content for their sites to drive clicks. In the following section, we will further explore how outsiders are taking content and what they are doing with their “stolen” piece of Black Twitter.

4.2.3 *Appropriation, Stealing, and Culture Vultures.*

I would say that Black Twitter is less like Black people and more like Black culture. I think it’s harder to find the distinction there because Black culture is appropriated by a lot of different aspects and communities. (P2)

In terms of Black Twitter’s negative aspects, the most common problem participants mentioned was stolen content. Whether asking about what did not work with Twitter or about ethical dilemmas within Black Twitter, participants across the study pointed to the rampant act of stealing content. Tweets from Twitter can be embedded as content on other sites either through screenshots, direct links, or code. What will begin on Black Twitter might travel to other social media sites such as Instagram or TikTok. Participants described “culture vultures” such as BuzzFeed picking up tweets for their websites. Often, content will be taken without credit given to the original poster.

I know that there’ve been some cases where a popular saying from Black Twitter has been put into the mainstream and also sometimes even attempted to be monetized, even though a celebrity or a rapper or artists were the first person to say this. I know like with ‘on fleek,’ that was a really big thing that happened because it was just used everywhere and she didn’t really get paid for it. That’s a major ethical issue that I see...basically not attributing these thoughts and ideas to the original creators within Black Twitter. (P15)

All of these instances fall into the incendiary tradition of stealing content from the Black community offline and repackaging it for someone else’s profit. P11 explained this phenomenon poignantly, and how it dovetails with issues of cultural appropriation. In one example shared, Black content creators and fashion designers have had to call out celebrities for stealing their designs. In another, Black users express frustration toward the theft of entertainment such as the Renegade dance being stolen from a young Black creator. P11 describes the long history of content being stolen from Black people without restitution or respect of authorship.

I think just because there's at least from what I can see, just such a long history of Black people's ideas, their songs, their stories, their contributions being stolen and remarketed by a white person. I think people are more sensitive to things like that. Just because it's been happening for hundreds of years, Black people's whole interventions that revolutionized the way that we do things. A lot of them are credited to white people and that's wild. And I think people are more sensitive to outsiders and things like that. (P11)

P11 goes on to respond to the diminutive response that some people have to Black culture being stolen.

I see a lot of white people say, oh, it's just a dance, oh, it's just a tweet. The tweet that you stole is indicative of hundreds of years of this shit happening in the country. It's not just a tweet. It's not just the hairstyle, it's not just any of that. It's literally just another thing upon things upon things that have been stolen, monetized, reprogrammed, rebranded, from Black people that could have actually put the creator or the inventor, whoever in a good space, but instead of crediting them instead of giving them their props or giving them the money or the recognition they deserve, you just decided to research it and steal it instead, because that's what y'all do. (P11)

Cultural appropriation has been happening to the Black community for centuries [104]. Stories of blues, jazz, rock and roll and other music being stolen by white musicians is just one of many examples of "white performers obtaining economic and artistic benefits at the expense of minority innovators" [45]. One of the most sampled pieces of music known as the "Amen Break" is a drum solo played by the late Gregory "G.C." Coleman who passed in 2006 homeless and had not received any royalties [12]. P11 concluded with how this trend continues online.

Black Twitter is Black Twitter. It doesn't have to be emulated. Doesn't have to be stolen...It seems weird when you see the TikToks of a white person talking like they don't talk in real life or stealing a dance that they obviously did not make up themselves... And that's kind of where I think people have the problem with outsiders on Twitter. If you can't just be an observer and take what you like and listen to it, consume it, patron the business, retweet it, whatever, if you can't just do that, then whatever else you're doing is overboard. (P11)

Black culture is appropriated across many aspects of society including across platforms. P2 recounts a story of such an incident:

So Charli D'Amelio's super famous on TikTok, probably like the most followed TikTok person. And she got famous off doing the Renegade dance, which was created by a Black woman, a Black child, and she has a Twitter and she has a following, but it's nowhere near the same as Charli's. (P2)

Another form of appropriation that participants mentioned is digital Blackface. Coined by Joshua Lumpkin Green in his 2006 Master's Thesis entitled *Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Image*, digital Blackface occurs when non-Black people use reaction GIFs and images of Black people, in particular Black women, as part of their online presentation [44]. P16 recognized this phenomenon as an issue:

A lot of non-Black folks, especially non-Black LGBTQ folks will use like Black GIFs and Black images of women as memes and stuff like that. It's become so normalized on Twitter that it's just gone unchecked. But for a while, especially back in like 2016, 2017, people were saying, Hey, like don't use clips of Black women. Like, you know,

that is an element of Blackface. You shouldn't do that. And so I that's kind of flown out the window. People don't really care anymore. (P16)

Dances, jokes, catch phrases and more are plucked from Black Twitter and often mimicked by non-Black creators who go viral on content that they did not create. Yet again, the money and attention do not find their way back to the original content creators. This phenomenon also often implicates entities beyond individuals—for example, entire platforms such as BuzzFeed.

Buzzfeed, if we're thinking about media, is notorious for watching Black Twitter and then regurgitating the insight and information that Black Twitter produces and then monetizing it. (P17)

When websites like BuzzFeed take content from Black Twitter to drive traffic to their site, participants consider them "culture vultures":

And then of course the culture vulture stuff, you see these big headlines and like BuzzFeed...any of these big blogs that are basically taking the ideas from Black Twitter and using them to drive traffic to their sites or whatever it is. (P10)

Participants described how the ideas and creativity thriving on Black Twitter are siphoned away and monetized for a different audience. More often than not, the money does not find its way back to the creators and owners of the content, similar to historical instances of appropriation. Given this level of concern over theft from Black Twitter, there were also thoughts about the reasons behind and possible solutions to this problem:

How do you prevent culture vultures from taking those ideas? ...if you read the user agreements with Twitter, it's like, basically anything that you post, belongs to Twitter now. And it's like, how do you keep that content? How do you keep that creativity in a way where it can still be appreciated, but you keep that ownership of it within Black Twitter? The people who are coming up with this stuff that honestly has led to cultural shifts, different corporations on a large scale are literally directly advertising towards Black Twitter. And so how do you harness that power in a way where you're only using Twitter as a platform and not Twitter is using this as a new machine of making more money. (P12)

Can culture be appreciated without appropriation? Can it be defined without limiting those whose community creates said culture? As noted by the participants, the issue of distancing innovation, creativity, revenue, and ownership away from Black communities is nothing new. From jazz and tap dancing to hip hop and breakdancing, Black culture has defined cultural trends over and over again. Even in the negative from vaudevillian minstrelsy to digital Blackface, Black culture and cultural stereotypes have fueled the development of non-Black cultures, communities, and identities [13]. With the popularity of Twitter as a platform, Black Twitter as an innovative online community, and the unending corporate monetization of Black culture, Black Twitter serves as an essential stage for discussions on whether or not Black culture is proprietary to Black people. Furthermore, although non-Black communities have always engaged and participated in Black culture, it raises ethical questions of authorship and opportunity that are often stripped from Black creators.

4.2.4 Being Called Out. Calling out on Black Twitter happens from without and within. Several participants talk about Black Twitter calling out people or businesses outside of the community and others express fears of being called out by Black Twitter. Though some call-outs are perceived as positive (e.g., calling out racists), participants also noted call-outs that happen *inside* the community and these may or may not be good for the community.

You need to know the references on the culture and what's being talked about, or people are going to come down hard on you if you don't. So there is like the clap

back culture. I think if you don't, if you do something stupid, people are going to say something about it. (P1)

Similarly, P3 expressed concern for a lack of grace on Black Twitter:

So I think there's not a lot of grace given to people on Black Twitter, whether one is learning or one is being attacked by somebody who has this idea that they are deemed to be very progressive and right and the only right way to see something, there's not a lot of room for nuance. (P3)

Getting called out by Black Twitter can be a powerful experience with serious repercussions. Being told you are wrong or off base by Black Twitter as a person, brand, company, celebrity, or property can result in getting "cancelled." Clark sees the term and concept of "cancel culture" as "reductive and malignant" and instead recognizes "canceling" as "an expression of agency, a choice to withdraw one's attention from someone or something whose values, (in)action, or speech are so offensive, one no longer wishes to grace them with their presence, time, and money" [16]. Canceling within Black Twitter is an avenue for expressing as a community "what we not gon' do."

4.2.5 *Racism.*

It feels like on Twitter, that any post that I've seen, if I scroll enough in the comments, it's somehow related back to race in some way. (P11)

Arguably one of the biggest challenges about Black Twitter is dealing with racism from outsiders. There are accounts, some of which are bots, that seek out digital altercations and antagonize Black Twitter participants with racist comments. When tweets attempting to share stories about racism are overrun by racist comments, it can be damaging and overwhelming. It is in these kinds of tweets where one can witness a tale of two Twitters. One is aiming to address the social justice issues of racism by sharing or exposing a racist moment and the other takes to the comments section to try and undermine and thwart the progress being made. Though prior work suggests that disclosing stigmatizing information online can result in destigmatizing [4], the experience within Black Twitter is one fraught with a duality of responses. When P9 was asked when she had seen tweets on Black Twitter about racism, her initial response was, "like not every day?" She went on to recount:

Usually when there's a video of someone getting killed and that's when you see just like direct racism over somebody, oh, they deserve this. They could have done this differently. And that's why they were killed. Like to me, that's racist, that's insensitive. And it's usually white people who have that type of commentary, especially within a Black Twitter feed, that's grieving over, you know, a tragedy that we just witnessed. (P9)

P17 expressed the tweets she saw which dealt with racism when she was interviewed in September 2020:

With the conversations around the murder of Black people at the hands of police right now, especially given the lack of consequences for doing that, this week has been especially salient and a lot of unrest that is happening in Louisville specifically, but around the country and people discussing how that is impacting them. (P17)

Even in the midst of processing and grieving the unjust murder of another Black person at the hands of an anti-Black racist society, people on Black Twitter have to deal with comments and replies remarking how disobedience killed that person or how the deceased should have done something different to stay alive.

5 DISCUSSION

To summarize our findings, people engaging with Black Twitter experience the benefits of community building, safety, information sharing/seeking, warnings about racism, empowerment, and activism while also dealing with challenges around lack of safety, outsiders, appropriation, being called out, and racism. Our findings about how integral Black culture is to the online community of Black Twitter mirrors earlier work that focused on the oral traditions within the Black community [10, 34]. In the landscape of social computing, it is imperative to understand how communities like Black Twitter function and situate that understanding within the context and history of that community. Doing so can provide insights into how to support and best facilitate this and similar communities in the digital space. For example, a study of another online community focused on racial identity (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders on Reddit) revealed how both users and platform designers can use decolonizing tactics to push back against white hegemony [21]. Here, we connect our findings to design suggestions that Twitter and other platforms might incorporate to support the ideal experience and mitigate challenges of communities like Black Twitter.

5.1 Curating Community

A number of the major challenges our participants expressed—feeling unsafe from harassment and surveillance, racism, and having content stolen—all come back to unwanted outside attention. Though participants recognized that other platforms such as Facebook have privacy options more conducive to curating one’s audience, they also noted that these platforms did not foster the same kind of community as Black Twitter. Unlike on Facebook, instead of focusing on the people you are following, Black Twitter is a community more focused on content and content sharing. Participants expressed the desire to have conversations within their community without the concern of “mixed company.”

Being able to share content and control who can and who cannot see it is a setting and design choice that affords flexibility and agency for a person using a platform to control their audience. This is an issue of context collapse wherein people who engage with Black Twitter have multiple contexts of different people and audiences which are flattened into one public audience making self-presentation choices difficult to manage [70]. Writing a tweet meant for Black Twitter knowing that outsiders may respond can affect how people who engage with Black Twitter craft their presentation of self. However, the solution to this problem is not necessarily to silo a community or to drive them to a separate platform. Prior work on LGBTQ+ communities pointed out that *discoverability* can be just as important as privacy [24]. Platforms can support the people who use them by providing privacy tools such as audience segmentation that mitigate the negative consequences of context collapse while maintaining their presence on the platform [107].

As a specific solution, some of our participants spoke of a desired feature that would allow them to create groups within the platform. This would also help to curate one’s audience. Interestingly, while authoring this paper, this feature (called “Communities”) was just being rolled out onto the Twitter platform [61]. Participants also wished they could categorize or group tweets across different themes or time frames. Ultimately, putting control over content, privacy, and organization in the hands of people using the platform could yield more satisfied and engaged experiences.

5.2 Avoiding Appropriation

Another experience people want to avoid is content theft. Overwhelmingly, participants spoke of stealing content as an issue concerning Black Twitter. Content gets picked up by other people, monetized, posted to other platforms, and goes viral without credit or remittance to the original content creator. Granted, this is just as much an issue of social norms as it is due to the affordances

of the platform. However, platforms can include design elements to deter content theft and instead give credit to the creator. For example, a design implication for a platform looking to deter content theft and celebrate original content creators could involve being able to cite original content when it gets copied, reposted, and ideally even if it is shared across platforms. If the original source and original platform are cited when content spreads, it is easier for the content creator to get credit and recognition. Just as watermarks are used to prevent the copying or use of an image without permission, having a similar design element for a social media platform's content could help foster better social norms and reduce content theft. For instance, TikTok allows users to download videos and therefore share them on other platforms, but these downloads include watermarks with the original creator's username.

5.3 Equitable Engagement

Several participants also mentioned that moderation of accounts did not seem equitable. There were participants who were called the N-word but when they reported the incident to Twitter were told that the act was not abusive. On the other hand, participants recounted knowing Black people who were banned for using the N-word within the community. Research has shown that algorithms trained to flag hate speech will mark tweets using the African American English dialect (AAE), as well as tweets by self-identified African-Americans, as hate speech more often than non-AAE or non-African-American tweets [84]. Participants also proclaimed that harassment and bullying were a common and unwelcome experience. For any platform looking to support vulnerable communities, there has to be a robust and thorough content moderation process. Additionally, platforms should implement thoughtful and intentional design to mitigate harmful experiences or misapplication of policies. Schoenebeck et al. conclude that a one size fits all approach to online moderation will privilege some groups and dissatisfy others [88]. By learning how different groups within a platform, especially the most vulnerable, prefer justice to be served and building those choices into the experience, a platform can improve the overall experience and reduce dissatisfaction.

5.4 Community and Digital Displacement

The issue of policies in particular is a type of design choice which shapes a platform's community but could also force out certain communities or community members. Prior work has shown that one reason users leave social platforms is policies that do not reflect the values of their community [30]. Twitter in particular has struggled with policy changes that were not consistently administered or effective enough over time. In 2014, The Atlantic reported on changes in the harassment policy on Twitter, though these changes focused on harassment against women during the height of GamerGate [29]. In 2017, TechCrunch reported more changes to Twitter's policies in regard to violence, hate, and abuse on the platform that were further reaching across affected groups [76]. However, according to the article, Twitter's track record for executing policies effectively was not a strong one. In 2020, TechCrunch again reported more changes to Twitter's policies including being able to tweet solely with friends and followers [77]. This design change actually speaks to a desire that interview participants expressed for preventing outsiders and harassers from infiltrating comments while tweeting. Even though Twitter has adjusted its policies over the years to better address abuse and misuse on its platform, communities like Black Twitter still find that the policies fall short.

Though our conversations were specifically about Black Twitter, our participants did mention other platforms. For example, the Black community on LinkedIn. While that community has seen similar benefits as Black Twitter, such as empowerment and community building, there are still challenges around outsiders and racism. As described in a New York Times article, the Black presence on LinkedIn has thrived since George Floyd was killed as Black people on LinkedIn

began to call out workplace racial discrimination, share experiences of “alienation” on the job, and post “memes, Black cultural references and linguistic panache” [69]. However, LinkedIn struggled with the burgeoning community as certain Black people and their allies on LinkedIn found their posts erased or their accounts frozen. There are also issues with commenters on posts who share anti-Black racist comments, but on LinkedIn those commenters often have their headshot, name, and place of business available. Black people expressing their full selves on LinkedIn, a space that strives to maintain a “professional” tone which historically excludes Black expressions of identity from hairstyles to African-American Vernacular English, begins to positively address double consciousness, defined in Du Bois’ 1903 *The Souls of Black Folk* [54] as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.

The New York Times piece describes how these two aspects of Black identity are approaching one authentic representation on LinkedIn: “Part of what Black LinkedIn has done is brought together Black professionals to be their authentic selves in front of their white colleagues. For many, it has been an existential relief, and may provide a blueprint for how Black employees choose to conduct themselves once the physical workplace reopens” [69]. The community of Black people on LinkedIn, just as the community of Black Twitter, have appropriated the platform to make it their own.

5.5 Black to the Future

Through our research, we saw how Black Twitter is an online community that echoes the sentiments and goals of *The Negro Motorist Green Book*. The implications of this connection build a bridge across time and expose how contemporary engagement with Black Twitter serves as an important venue for surviving and thriving within the Black Diaspora. It is important to note that while *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was created by a Black person for Black travelers, Black Twitter exists on a platform that was not created by or for members of that community. Similar to how Ghoshal et al. recognized that social movements were using social computing technologies that were not built explicitly for that purpose [35], Twitter was not built with the Black community in mind. The subsequent community of Black Twitter had to appropriate it in their own ways. As defined within HCI, appropriation is the way in which technology is adapted or repurposed to solve problems it was not intended to address, recognizing the social and technical reasons for technology adoption [41].

Often, technological innovation and futuring takes place without the participation of groups marginalized by race and class [51]. However, instead of waiting for technologies to be designed and created for a community, an alternative to appropriating existing technologies is designing and building a technology with and for that community from the beginning. Take for example Archive

of Our Own (AO3), a fanfiction site designed and built by the community members it served, mostly women and LGBTQ+ people. The values and norms of online fandom communities were taken into consideration from the beginning of the process throughout [31]. As a result, the community largely shifted to a presence on that platform over platforms previously appropriated that were not built as fanfiction archives [30].

As a provocation, what would it look like for a social platform to be built by and for Black people, taking into consideration the benefits and challenges to inform the creation of that new digital space in order to foster connectivity, survival, and a means to thrive? Given the lack of Black representation in Silicon Valley and the field of computer science as a whole, including structural inequities in computing education that continue to enact oppression [80], the suggestion that Black people should be more involved in designing and building technology is both important and challenging. One way to involve perspectives and values of the Black diaspora is to incorporate Afrofuturism into the process for designing technology. Incorporating Afrofuturism as part of a design process is a means of “importing more diverse perspectives to inform the design of more inclusive future technological solutions” [109]. Researchers have combined Afrofuturism with participatory speculative design to yield future visions and technologies that center the concerns and hopes rooted in the experiences of Black people [9, 51, 106]. With Black speculative fiction and particularly Afrofuturism as fodder for design probes alongside incorporating participatory design with Black people, researchers, designers, and technologists can engage this population to envision new online communities and other technologies.

Though the barriers impacting women in technology are not identical to those impacting other underrepresented groups (particularly when taking into account intersectional identities, e.g., Black women), it is notable that one of the outcomes of AO3 being designed and built by and for a community of mostly women is that a number of women actually learned to code in order to contribute to the platform’s development [31]. One motivation for learning technical skills is to contribute to a particular community [26]. Given adequate resources, other communities might be able to “grow their own” [31] in order to develop new technologies and contribute to the overall diversity of the tech sector. As we continue this line of research, we plan to go beyond appropriation and explore sites of Black technology design, gaining insights into how they might be better supported, encouraged, and expanded upon. Moreover, this may show how the values embedded in those designs might better inform technology design for everyone.

6 CONCLUSION

In this work, we explored tweets and interviewed people who engage with Black Twitter. While we found similarities between what people do within Black Twitter and how people used *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, we also found that the online landscape of Black Twitter allows for much more. In addition to the many benefits of Black Twitter as an online community platform, we also discovered challenges that people who use Black Twitter face. These benefits and challenges speak to possible design implications for social media platforms and digital technologies that aim to support Black people and other minority communities. We hope to center Black Twitter as an online platform worthy of research. Our next steps in research will be to explore guidelines and best practices for researching Black Twitter. Examining technology created by and for Black people can help us in an effort to uncover the values and norms of Black technology.

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A INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview. Any questions about the consent form? This interview will be semi-structured, which means that though these are the general topics of the interview, we will be asking follow-up questions as appropriate.

- (1) Twitter does not have a “groups” feature like Facebook, so how do you know you are in Black Twitter when you are using Twitter? Lists, hashtags, entire feed?
- (2) Do you think this community could exist on another platform?
- (3) Are there similar communities on other platforms?
- (4) Are there things about Twitter as a platform that don’t work well?
- (5) How would you change Twitter to make it work better for Black Twitter?
- (6) Tell me about a time when you saw racism directly engaged with on Black Twitter.
- (7) Have you ever used Twitter to inform people about racism?
- (8) Are you familiar with the Negro Motorist Green Book? If so, what do you know about it?
- (9) (Give description of the Green Book) What similarities or differences do you think exist when comparing the Green Book and Black Twitter?
- (10) How would you describe or define an “outsider” of Black Twitter?
- (11) Have you ever seen or considered the possibility that outsiders might be watching Black Twitter? e.g., law enforcement, journalists, researchers, etc.?
- (12) Have you seen people you would consider “outsiders” engaging with Black Twitter? Do you have any examples?
- (13) Have you ever considered that there might be academic papers about Black Twitter?
- (14) How would you feel about your Twitter content being quoted in an academic paper?
- (15) Would you want your username included if your Twitter content was quoted in an academic paper?
- (16) Should anyone’s tweets be quoted verbatim in a paper?
- (17) Would you feel differently about research depending on who the researcher is?
- (18) What do you think researchers should consider when talking with Black Twitter users?
- (19) Is there anything else that you can think of as an ethical issue in Black Twitter, either people who participate in Black Twitter or outsiders who use content from Black Twitter?
- (20) Tell me how you first discovered Black Twitter.
- (21) How do you define what Black Twitter is?
- (22) How is Black Twitter distinct from Twitter?
- (23) What categories do you notice in the Black Twitter conversation?
- (24) For what do you use Black Twitter?
- (25) Who are your favorite follows on Black Twitter and how do you find people to follow on Black Twitter?
- (26) Take me through a typical engagement with Black Twitter for you.
- (27) Tell me a story about a personal experience with Black Twitter that you had that was meaningful.
- (28) What are some memorable tweets from Black Twitter you can think of?
- (29) Have you ever seen a call to action on Black Twitter and if so how did you respond?
- (30) Have you ever used Black Twitter as a space to seek out information / resources? ... If so what kind of information/resources are you looking for?
- (31) Do you feel that Black Twitter is a safe space? Why or why not? What does a safe space mean to you?

I would like to get some basic information about you, but feel free to decline to answer any of these (Age, race/ethnicity, gender identity, location) Thank you again for your time. Any questions for me?

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