#Youknowyoublackwhen all you bring to the cookout is more black

people and aluminum foil:

Type as Racial Performance on Black Twitter

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore patterns of racial performance by African Americans on Black Twitter by building on pragmatic and sociolinguistic frameworks for computer-mediated communication (CMC) analysis. Black Twitter is the unofficial name for the hub of several Black communities on the social networking platform, Twitter. Although recent literature surrounding Internet linguistics has dissected Twitter as a conversational medium, it has hardly considered the creative methods African Americans exercise to flex Black identity on the Internet. Thus, I outline the unique typographic conventions, such as hashtags and nonstandard spellings, that African Americans use for the sake of performing identity online, and this identity performance facilitates community building and social commentary on topics particularly relevant to African Americans.
I. INTRODUCTION

Jimmy: Eddie, not only is what you’re saying not true. It is wrong and disrespectful for you to discuss Rosa Parks in that way.

Eddie: Wait wait, hold up. Hold on here. Is dis da barbershop? Is dis da barbershop? Dis da barbershop. I mean we can’t talk straight in da barbershop, then where can we talk straight? We can’t talk straight nowhere else... E’rbody know there aint nobody exempt in the barbershop. Aint nobody exempt. You can talk ‘bout whoever and whatever whenever you want to in da barbershop.

—Barbershop (2002)

As characterized in this exchange from the 2002 picture starring Ice Cube, Black barbershops and beauty salons have long been considered a discursive space for freeform discussion, verbal performance, and cultural exchange within Black communities (Alexander 2003). Within recent years, social media has enabled Black folks to take barbershop banter to the digital space. Social media platforms are particularly interesting to studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for their generally informal and communal nature and for how relatively easy social media posts are to share and find (Lengel 2004). One of the most popular of these platforms, especially among Black youth, is Twitter, a networking site and microblogging platform that allows user to post messages of up to 280 characters (formerly 140¹). As of August 2017, it hosts over 328 million monthly active users, producing 500 million tweets a day (Aslam 2017).

Despite growing attention to Twitter in the linguistic literature, Black Twitter, the unofficial name given to the growing hub of Black communities on Twitter, has yet to receive such widespread attention. Until recently, Black perspectives, and more generally the perspectives of people of color, have often been neglected in CMC studies, and when they are acknowledged, they are often portrayed as suffering from a lack of technological access and economic resources as a fault of the “digital divide” (Qureshi et al. 2014; Headlam Hines et al. 2001). These studies fail to recognize that out of all Black Internet users, 28% use Twitter, compared to 20% of White Internet users (Duggan 2015). Additionally, though African Americans make up only 13.3% of the U.S. population according to 2016 census data, a 2010 study reports that African Americans made up 24% of 17 million Twitter accounts from the United States for that year (Saint 2010). While Black Americans are indeed disadvantaged by poverty and institutional racism, for example being three times more likely to be poor than whites (Bonilla-Silva 2010), the above findings indicate a highly active electronic space for Black-identifying folks. This social space exists contrary to the portrayal as victims of the digital divide. This strong presence of Black identities and the fact that race plays such an important role in molding offline perceptions (Omi and Winant 1986) prompts us to study how these perceptions translate into online spaces.

Although corporeal signifiers, primarily skin color, are often generalized as identifiers of racial and ethnic identity, such signifiers are not always immediately obvious and accessible on social media platforms like Twitter (Florini 2014). This
problem invites discussion on how Black people, particularly African Americans, communicate Black identity on Twitter. Because the primary mode of communication on Twitter is text, African Americans must type Blackness through their tweets in order to signal a common background and identity to other Black users. Although a handful of scholars have recently attempted to analyze racial performance on Black Twitter (Brock 2009; Florini 2014; Jones 2015), there is little elaboration on classifying the specific typographic categories used to mark these performances.

Therefore, I will show that African American Twitter users exercise various typographic conventions in their tweets, and I will argue that these conventions are employed to perform African American identity online. This racial performance is primarily achieved through displays of Signifyin' encoded into these typographic conventions. Popularized by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Signifyin' refers to a practice in African American culture that exercises figurative language and wordplay elicited by Black oral traditions to subvert literal meaning for contextualized meaning. As I will discuss further in 3.2, The oral traditions that commonly evoke Signifyin are typically and interchangeably referred to as roasting, woofing, dissing, playing the dozens, and more recently rapping, among others (Gates Jr. 1989; Rickford 1999; Jackson 2004).

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2 Although typography traditionally refers to the art of designing and arranging written characters, I adopt this definition to highlight the various creative and graphic styles that people on the Internet use for complexity in typed communication.
On Twitter, one type of these Signifyin’ methods is using nonstandard orthographic conventions and spellings of English that attempt to emulate syntactic and phonological features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Hashtags make up another of these conventions, which are used to organize conversation topics, games, and memes that facilitate social commentary and group solidarity. Additionally, established typing conventions, such as character repetition, case-shifting, emoticons, and others, lend prosodic and paralinguistic features to contextualize a tweet’s affect, setting, actions, and gestures to aid in Signifyin’, and thus, identity performance. African American users utilize these conventions to contribute to a growing online space that revolves around their identity.

II. BACKGROUND

2.1 Twitter User Interface and Functions

Unlike social networking sites like Facebook, which initially requires accounts to have friended each other, Twitter accounts are public by default, encouraging users to tweet openly so that anyone may access and potentially respond to someone else’s tweets. For instance, an average person could tweet to celebrity, and vice-versa. Twitter organizes tweets into a timeline of most to least recent and allows users to follow other users to see their most up-to-date timelines. Hashtags, as discussed further in 2.4, create hyperlinks to phrases initiated with ‘#’. People may also direct a message at a certain user, using the ‘@’ symbol followed by the receiver’s account
name, as demonstrated in Figure 1. Additional functions include replying to someone else’s tweet, making a retweet, which is a copy of someone else’s tweet and is marked by the abbreviation, “RT”, liking a tweet, and sending a user a direct message privately. All of these actions are indicated from left to right respectively in Figure 1. Tweets may also contain embedded images and videos and URL links.

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

*Figure 1: Tweet to @JordanPeele*

### 2.2 Demographics within Black Twitter

73% of African American Internet users use a social media platform, but that statistic rises to 96% for African Americans between 18 and 29 (Smith 2014). From that 18-29 year-old group, 40% use Twitter. Additionally, cell phone use among African Americans is particularly high, with 92% of Black adults owning a cell phone. For African Americans aged 65 and older, only 45% use the Internet, but 77% use cell phones.

More than just being confined to a singular identity, Black Twitter is a large collective of various Black identities and experiences, meaning that there is no single or monolithic way of engaging Blackness on Twitter. In my analysis, I interpret “Black Twitter” as a term to distinguish Black users of Twitter from the generalized and color-blind Internet user that previous scholars have assumed, which is often white until proven otherwise (Bonilla-Silva 2010). Therein, Black
Twitter hosts subcultures that reflect a variety of interest and occupations. As characterized in a video by *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*, “Black Twitter is just as complicated and nuanced as the Black community itself. Like within Black Twitter you still have intellectual Twitter, academic Twitter, hotep Twitter... and of course you got the Beyhive³.”

### 2.3 Computer-Mediated Communication as Speech Acts

There is much debate on whether CMC more closely resembles spoken language or written language. David Crystal (2006) outlines key differences between linguistic and physical limitations of spoken language and written language as they apply to CMC, or *Netspeak* as Crystal calls it. *(Table 1).* In summary, Crystal illustrates that spoken language is “time-bound, dynamic, transient”, while written language is “space-bound, static, and permanent” (28–30).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1: Differences between Spoken and Written Language based on <em>(Crystal 2006)</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spoken Language</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants are (usually) spatially immediate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Production and reception are temporally immediate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

³ The collective, and sometimes pejorative, name for singer Beyoncé’s fandom
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highly contextual</th>
<th>Highly static</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usually informal</td>
<td>Usually formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usually used for social interaction</td>
<td>Usually used for recording facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utterances are immediately correctable</td>
<td>Writing is only correctable through the process of editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuance is achieved through prosody and paralanguage</td>
<td>Nuanced is achieved through graphic conventions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Crystal delineates that CMC behavior depends on the nature of the platform it is communicated on. In general, CMC exhibits some characteristics of writing, such as participants being most always spatially distant. However, websites used for blogs, publishing, data-basing, advertising, and similar functions are very much like written language in the way that they present and record (typically factual or persuasive) information in a formal manner with little stylistic variation. Moreover, writers for these types of platforms are generally temporally distant from their readers, and their content can only be changed after they have been edited and republished. On the other side of this spectrum, instant messaging, chatrooms, and emails more closely resemble a spoken conversation because the communication is time-governed, in the sense that an immediate response is expected and often demanded, transient, in that messages can be deleted or lost in the stream of messages, and the format is generally informal and context-governed. Stylistic variation tends to vary based on the range of platforms, with some offering more
variation than others. However, in general, platforms that lean toward speech tend to feature more stylistic variation.

Some drawbacks to the platforms leaning toward speech that distinguish them from true speech are that they are generally incapable of instantaneous feedback, as in an email or IM can’t be edited right after it has been sent. More specifically, in speech acts, the interlocutor is directly present, so addendums to a previous utterance can be made instantly to correct any false impressions. With CMC, however, this process occurs somewhat slower, because the typer must recognize the mistake, re-type the message, and let enough time for the addressee to receive it. Additionally, although responses are generally expected to be immediate, CMC on these platforms follows a much slower rhythm than face to face (f2f) conversation, as in a text message can be read and replied to days or even weeks after it was originally sent. Moreover, CMC lack two key elements in attaching nuance to utterances: prosody and paralanguage.

Prosody refers to pitch, tone, loudness, speed, rhythm, and all the phonological elements that lend nuance to an utterance outside of what is actually said, while paralanguage deals with physical features like facial expression, gesture, body posture, and body positioning that contribute context to an utterance. Though these elements are basically absent in traditional writing, CMC users have attempted to emulate these characteristics of speech through creative displays of typed characters. As demonstrated in (1) and (2), these tweets feature numerous graphic conventions not typical in written language. These conventions include but
are not limited to capitalization for loudness (Wilkstrom 2014), asterisked/parenthetical cues for gesture and action (e.g. "*wallet cries*" in (2)), vowel and word-initial consonant repetition for prosodic lengthening (Abramson and Goldinger 1997), and addition of emoji/emoticon for communicating gesture and facial expression (Barger et al. 2017; Abdullah 2013).

1. GLOOMY IS NOT MY THINGY YOOOO. 😢😢😢 ssup everyones?! Let's talkkk!

2. I'm tired but I need to go out and buy a camera... *wallet cries* :(  

Despite possessing qualities of both speech and writing to varying degrees, Crystal concludes that CMC itself is something entirely distinguishable from either form, constituting a “third medium” (52). On the other hand, Crystal concedes that traditional pragmatic frameworks can be applied to studies on CMC, albeit with limitations (i.e. flaming, spoofing, lurking, trolling, lag, typos, spam). As I will discuss further in my Analytic Framework in 3.2, Wilkstrom (2014) demonstrates that such a traditional speech act framework may be applied to analysis of tweets, and typed communication on the Internet in general.

2.4 Twitter Hashtags as Conversational Devices

One of the most popular functions of Twitter is the hashtag. Tagged messages usually contain a word or phrase, which is preceded by the hash symbol (#), that then allows users to link their own tweets to a timeline of tweets that contain the same tagged phrase. Furthermore, trending hashtags, popular hashtags being used
at a given moment, can be observed on a user’s timeline and are featured based on a user’s interests. Figure 2 demonstrates a user’s personal timeline with a trending topics section featuring prominent hashtags, while Figure 3 demonstrates a user using a hashtag in a tweet.

Figure 2: User Timeline and Trending Topics

Figure 3: Tweet Featuring Hashtags

4All personal Twitter accounts have been kept anonymous for the purposes of this thesis, excluding official accounts of celebrities, public organizations, publications, and companies.
Hashtags were initially conceived to be an organizational tool. In a *WIRED* article titled “An Oral History of Hashtags” (2017), one of the earliest proponents of the hashtag function on Twitter, Chris Messina, said, “... the hashtag became the lingua franca for labeling content on both platforms [Twitter and Instagram]”. However, in a 2010 study, Huang and colleagues distinguish tagging on Twitter from the organizational use of tagging on the (now defunct) website Delicious, which can then be applied to similar cataloging platforms like Pinterest. They conclude that “users add tags to their messages in Twitter to join discussions on existing topics”. This conclusion suggests that hashtags can be analyzed as conversational devices rather than organizational tools.

**III. DATA COLLECTION**

**3.1 Methodology**

To collect data from Twitter, I used three methods. First, from August to November 2017, I observed and archived tweets from my person timeline that I found relevant to Black Twitter or that featured relevant typographic conventions. For the other two methods, I used a combination of Twitter's advanced search function and a collection of monthly Twitter data from Archive.org spanning 2012 to 2017 to search for tweets containing words and phrases that had linguistic, social, or cultural relevance to African Americans in particular. Given the vast popularity of various hashtags on Black Twitter, I not only searched for phrases but also tweets containing particular hashtags. Each file from Archive.org contained roughly
380 million tweets from a month’s worth of data, so to decompress and filter these large files of data, I imported them into Terminal using Python commands to search tweets containing specific words or phrases, as discussed below.

To search for linguistically relevant tweets, I referenced my knowledge both as a native speaker of AAVE and user on the Internet while I additionally looked for existing literature on AAVE orthographic conventions used on the Internet and then searched for tweets containing such conventions, with the caveat that not all Black Twitters users speak or type in AAVE. Attempts at AAVE orthography typically try to match the syntactic and phonological features of AAVE. Because AAVE encompasses many speakers from many regions in the United States (Jones 2015), there is a substantial amount of variation in orthographic conventions among regions. Furthermore, the fact that AAVE lacks a formal orthography, due to a history of stigmatization, also contributes to regional variations. Jones maps these variations in orthographic conventions used by AAVE speakers to regions they are predominantly used on Twitter, using the platform’s geotag function to determine location.

For the purposes of this study, I selected some of these orthographic conventions and compiled them into a list. While not comprehensive of all the searches I ran, Table 2 shows a general collection of AAVE terms that I referenced from Jones, my mental lexicon, and my observations on how frequently I noticed certain lexical items used within AAVE circles on the Internet. For the most part, I avoided searches for slang terms, like thot and bruh, and phrases like nomesain
(‘Know what I’m saying’). As Jones indicates, these terms have been largely appropriated and assimilated into White mainstream speech (Standard American English), or used by whites to mock AAVE (411). However, I considered words like sister, brother, nigga, and cuh, because they generally act as terms of endearment and social structuring within Black communities.

For creating this search guide, I also considered syntactic qualities unique to AAVE. John B. Rickord delineates several of these linguistic constructions as in:

- Copulation deletion: He tall (6)
- Negative concord: He don’ do nothin’ (8)
- Question formation without subject-auxiliary verb inversion: Why I can’t play? (8)

While some constructions like the quotative, “be like”, are found in other varieties of English, this particular construction is predominant among urban Black youth (Cukor-Avila 1999). In one study on Black Philadelphian speech, 10 Black participants of the 14 participants overall used “be like” 67% of the time, far more than other quotatives used like “say” and “go”.

14
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AAVE Phrase</th>
<th>Gloss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>be like</td>
<td>quotative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>been had</td>
<td>REM PST ‘have’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cuh</td>
<td>‘cousin’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>doeldo</td>
<td>‘though’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eem</td>
<td>‘even’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fo</td>
<td>“for”/”four”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finna</td>
<td>‘going to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iont</td>
<td>‘I don’t’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jawn</td>
<td>‘joint’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nigga(^5)</td>
<td>‘person’/reclamation of ‘nigger’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nun/nutn</td>
<td>‘nothing’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nawl</td>
<td>‘naw’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shawty</td>
<td>‘shorty’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sho</td>
<td>“sure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talmbout/talm bout</td>
<td>‘talking about’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tryna</td>
<td>‘trying to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yeen</td>
<td>‘you ain’t even’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^5\) Given the complex history of ‘nigga’, it is difficult to define an exact gloss.
For tweets with social and cultural significance, I followed publications that primarily promote Black perspectives like *The Root* and *AFROPUNK*, while referencing articles from these publications discussing prominent hashtags and goings-on in Black Twitter circles. For example, in a 2017 article, *The Root* discusses the growth of “#BlackTravel” (Young 2017).

Furthermore, I included only Black Twitter data from users I could detect are Black to the best of my ability from profile pictures on their accounts. Twitter’s terms of service states that all users agree to share their profiles publicly, unless a user makes their account private. Thus, all tweets below were posted publically and are currently accessible at the time of completing this thesis (December 2017).

### 3.2 Analytic Frameworks

I will use Signifyin’ theory as a framework to assess racial performance on Twitter. Gates contends that Signifyin’ reappropriates a conventionally white *signifier* for a coded Black *signified*: “The mastery of Signifyin(g) creates homo rhetoricus Africanus, allowing—through the manipulation of these classic black figures of Signification— the black person to move freely between two discursive universes” (94). Gates then traces Signifyin’ from its roots within oral traditions among West and Central African peoples who brought their cultural knowledge with them after being enslaved. As slavery and other forms of oppression continued to affect Black folks, these traditions evolved into several styles of encrypting solidarity and resistance. In modern times, Signifyin’ invokes verbal performance as
a mark of cultural competency and the ability to “construct additional context from background knowledge of the world” (Mitchell-Kernan 1999, 311). For example, (3) is a line in a game of dozens cited from a segment on *In Living Color* called “The Dirty Dozens”. Although it appears on the surface as an insult, it is actually a joke that prompts other participants to outperform the previous joke. Additionally, the punchline is yielded from an exaggeration of facts in that the addressee’s mama isn’t really short enough to pose for trophies.

3. Yo momma so short she poses for trophies.

Given the extent to which Signifyin’ relies on understanding and communicating Black cultural knowledge, performative Signifyin’ can be used to mark displays of Black identity. Sarah Florini (2014) links traditionally spoken Signifyin’ to that signified on Black Twitter. Florini argues that Signifyin’ on Black Twitter yields a space for social critique, games of ritual insult, and oral performance. These practices are based on cultural knowledge stemming from “familiarity with Black popular culture and celebrity gossip to the experiential knowledge of navigating U.S. culture as a racialized subject” (227). As I will show in IV, these findings are applicable to my analysis.

Because Signifyin’ operates on manipulating implicature, I will employ a pragmatic framework to analyze how particular typographic conventions contribute to Signifyin’. Wilkstrom (2014) observes that Twitter users exercise hashtags in
creative ways that allow for multifunctional conversational usage, Wilkstrom employs a traditional speech act framework involving the four maxims of Grice’s Cooperative Principle: Quality, Relevance, Manner and Quantity (Grice 1975). These Maxims can be summarized as implicit guidelines that govern a speaker’s assumptions during conversation and are detailed as:

- Maxim of Quality: The speaker is expected to be as truthful as possible
- Maxim of Relevance (Relation): The speaker is expected to make contributions relevant to the present interaction
- Maxim of Quantity: The speaker is expected to be sufficiently informative, saying neither too much nor too little to be properly understood.
- Maxim of Manner: The speaker is expected to be clear and orderly in their contributions.

Since speech requires context and background knowledge, speakers may rely heavily on the Cooperative Principle to govern conversation. On the other hand, these Maxims are not always observed during conversation, and are often broken. When a speaker intentionally and purposely disrupts a Maxim, flouting occurs. For instance, a speaker may flout the Maxim of Quality for sarcastic effect. Wilkstrom cites these maxims as well as Searle’s concept of illocutionary force (Searle 1969) as a basis for categorizing communicative functions for hashtags. Although these categories are not definitive and do overlap, they may generally be classified as in
Table 3 below. For my purposes, I will not discuss each function, but rather only functions that I observe to have relevance to racial performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topic tags</strong></td>
<td>Integrate tweets into a conversation on a given topic</td>
<td>Today’s #TED talk, from #TEDxDU: Mind your matter! Kim Gorgens on brain injury <a href="http://on.ted.com/8ia6">http://on.ted.com/8ia6</a> (132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hashtag games</strong></td>
<td>Mark participation in an ongoing communal game, usually based on wordplay</td>
<td>America’s Next Top Insurance Adjuster #DullRealityShows (135)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meta-comments</strong></td>
<td>Comment on the main content of a tweet</td>
<td>#statement: I’m cooler than you (136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parenthetical explanation and addition</strong></td>
<td>Contribute explanation or additional details to the main content of a tweet</td>
<td>I am being held hostage by this Q.#stillplayingscrabble (138)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotive usage</strong></td>
<td>Contributes emotionally expressive force to the main content of a tweet</td>
<td>Don’t feel like walking...but ill make it #sigh (140)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphatic usage</strong></td>
<td>Contribute emphasis, usually similar to prosodic emphasis</td>
<td>#why oh why is this guy #kissing a #fucking #RACOON !!!! #nooooooooooo (143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humorous and playful usage</strong></td>
<td>Make jokes and playful manipulation of hashtags as a typographic character</td>
<td>#HowToGetBlocked #Put #Hash #Marks #On #Random #Words, #Booty #Legs #Hamburgers #Chicken #Sofas #Pillows #ESPN #Grease #Twizzlers (146)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Memes and popular culture references</strong></td>
<td>Typographically mark an established cliché phrase</td>
<td>Finally have a few hours for writing. Here I go. #nano #nevergonnagiveyouup#nevergonnaletyoudown (147)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IV. DISCUSSION

Given the qualitative nature of this analysis, I found it necessary to mark tweets as performing Black identity on a case by case basis. Although I did not set out to provide definitive findings on how frequently a given number of conventions are used on Black Twitter, the present findings heuristically represent their prevalence at the time that I archived them. Considering Wilkstrom’s categorical functions, I observed that much of the hashtags that pragmatically contribute to Black identity performance can generally be classified as either topic tags or game markers, with each function having significantly different pragmatic behavior. I also chose to include memes and pop culture references into the topic tag category, since both are quite similar in how they achieve racial performance. Moreover, tweets lacking hashtags tend to have a pragmatic function distinct from tweets that do contain hashtags.

4.1 Topic Tags

I observed that topic tags elicited on Black Twitter range from discussing Black pop culture and celebrity gossip to critique of social issues. For the most part, topic tags that I found tend to conform to all Maxims, with one notable exception of flouting in (9). (4) and (5) reflect various instances of topicalizing African American customs and cultural knowledge. More specifically, in order for (4) to maintain the Cooperative Principle, bringing only people and aluminum foil to a Black cookout...
must be recognized as a cultural expectation for African Americans. Likewise, it must be recognized that the television shows listed in (5) were a significant cultural experience of growing up black, at least in 1990’s when most of these programs aired, since these shows featured predominantly Black casts.

4. #youknowyoublack when all u bring to a cookout is more black ppl and aluminum foil

5. #GrowingUpBlack we had shows like, Moesha, Kenan and Kel, Sister Sister, and Fresh prince of bel air.

Other topic tags elicit social commentary and critique by recognizing the fact that navigating racism and other problems are part of the African American experience. (6) provides visibility to Black artists that work in heavily underrepresented fields.

6. I'm finding so many cool artists in the #drawingwhileblack tag, I had to join in. Hi I'm Laura I hang out and paint weird dogs.

One of the most notable of these social critique topic tags is “#BlackLivesMatter”, which started as a declaration of protest against unjust murders of Black civilians, starting with Treyvon Martin. Though (7) is cooperatively sound, (8) flouts the Maxim of Quality by sarcastically disregarding
racism as a cause of anti-Black violence, leading us to the further assumption that the typer may be layering on a mocking nuance to those who deny that racism is a problem for Black Americans.

7. #BlackLivesMatter still seeking #justice for #Trayvon Martin [link to Instagram post]

8. Several black churches burned. At least we can rule out racism.

    #BlackLivesMatter

Thus, the tagged phrase serves in (8) as a reminder of the injustices against Black people, contrasting the sarcastic tone of the tweet.

4.2 Hashtag Games

Unlike topic tags, hashtag games are centralized on a set form of wordplay or stylistic construction that the tagged phrase introduces. Hashtag games on Black Twitter, however, possess multifaceted functions beyond only sharing clever wordplay. For instance, one variety of Black Twitter game organizes group solidarity by creating phrases that invoke Black cultural knowledge and experience, as demonstrated in (9) and (10) below:

9. When you walk into a cookout and everyone is having civilized conversation #blackplottwist
10. first 👏 of 👏 all 👏: 10 ways to clap your way through an argument #BlackBuzzfeed

The objective of “#blackplottwist” appears to create or express scenarios that are unexpected and surprising to Black cultural norms. Therefore, in order for the Maxim of Relevance to be observed in (9), “civilized conversation” at a Black cookout would have to be paradoxical to expected cookout behavior. Assuming that the user who posted (9) knows that Black cookouts are generally informal and crass indicates that they have the requisite knowledge of African American cultural experience to form such a paradox. (10) simulates this technique by inferring that the user is aware that clapping hands, as illustrated by the infixed clapping emoji, are considered an emphatic non-verbal cue commonly (and stereotypically) assigned to Black women.

Furthermore, hashtag games that invoke verbal performance and ritual insult are used to mark displays of high cultural competency. Like the dozens in (3), these games champion insult not as conflict but as indication of verbal dexterity. Since celebrities are often made targets of insult, (11) demonstrates a communal game in which hip hop artist Drake is roasted for his polite character and melancholic style of rap, inciting others to outperform the previous roast.

11. #drakethetypeofnigga to go to the strip club only for the wings
12. #Drakepunchlines Yo girlfriend wanna ride... taxi... so now we headed to my pad... maxi. (Florini, 2014, 227)

As the typer from (11) roasts Drake by exaggerating his immaculate persona, (12) goes as far to mimic Drake’s unique rapping style characterized by mixed metaphor and prosodic pauses. Moreover, participants in (11) and (12) would have to be familiar with Drake’s celebrity persona, songs and lyrical construction in order to assert this cultural competency as a part of Black Twitter. Although hip hop has many followers from across various racial and ethnic background, the culture is still very much in rooted in African American experience (Perry 2004).

The hashtag, “#whitepeoplebelike”, structures a game in which Black users mock experienced or hypothetical racism from White people, commonly codeswitching into a standard orthographic style to mimic the Standard American English characteristic of white people.

13. “Why did slavery even happen, black people are lit” #whitepeoplebelike

14. There’s only one thing worst than being a nigger &&&&&& that’s being a nigger #whitepeoplebelike

The standard white-sounding paraphrastic contrasts the “be like” within the hashtag. Furthermore, the two tweets flout the Maxim of Quality by being overtly sarcastic and exaggerated while using standard orthography to mock racists. In the
case of (13), the unidentified white voice is intentionally oblivious to the fact that slavery has no relation to Black people being “lit”. In (14), mock Whiteness is heightened by the inclusion of the rhotic “or” in “nigger”, which is considered a slur against Black people. In AAVE, rhotic sounds are usually dropped, and furthermore, ‘nigga’ is typically considered a reclamation of the slur as a term of endearment. To avoid using the non-rhotic form further suggests that the quote is coming from a White racist. Additionally, the presence of such a syntactically and semantically odd construction as “worst than” illustrates the ridiculousness of racist sentiment.

Another interesting element of (14) is that it contains a string of ampersands “&&&&&&”. In Animation of Reported Speech on Twitter, Wilkstrom construes that letter repetition is often used to represent the sound of the delivery of an utterance, “especially vowel-lengthening, in orthographic renderings of words or non- or semi-lexical items” (89). Since ‘&’ represents the word ‘and’, the repetition is likely an indication of the vowel lengthening of [æ] in /and/. This prosodic lengthening gives “&&&&&&” an emphatic nuance to the clause, “&&&&&& that’s being a nigger”. To emphasize such a semantically weird clause suggests that the user further mocks White racists. Additionally, the user’s choice of “&” instead of just typing ‘and’ is interesting. One explanation of this is that the user could save more
characters than they would if they had typed “something like ‘aaaaaand’, due to Twitter's 140 character limit\textsuperscript{6}.

4.3 Hashtag-Absent Tweets

Tweets that didn’t have hashtags tend to have more of a personal tone compared to tagged tweets. For example, we may determine that (15) and (16) indicate instances of Black identity performance because they clearly feature AAVE orthography via “finna” and “bout to”.

15. finna write this bitch a poem.
16. Bout to go MIA till my birthday

The illocutionary point of both tweets seems to chronicle a personal thought or action rather than integrate into a thematically larger discussion. Additionally, (15) and (16) appear to follow all Maxims, unlike game tweets. In the case of (17), however, both the Maxim of Quantity and the Maxim of Manner are subtly flouted.

17. When you realize one of your friends is basically a hotep in hiding <<<<<<<<

\textsuperscript{6} These particular tweets were found before Twitter expanded its character limit to 280 characters in early November 2017.
The tweet introduces a conditional statement, but does not explicitly state the consequences of such a condition. Given the presence of “<<<<<”, also known as the less-than sign in mathematical inequality relations, I discern that the typor of (17) implies that any situation in which a friend is a hotep is less preferable than any other given situation, suggested by the lack of further information. Beyond this, leaving the situation to be explicated suggests a call and response effect, a common Black oral tradition with roots in African musical practice (Sale 1992).

Furthermore, considering the degree to which hotep culture is satirized in Black communities, being described by The Root as a “clueless parody of Afrocentricity... and obnoxiously pro-Black but anti-progress”, (17) thus indexes Black identity by providing social commentary on an aspect of cultural knowledge unique to Black communities.

Though hashtag-absent tweets are more prone to personal narrative, they aren’t completely removed from sharing social commentary or verbal performance, as discussed in (17). Instead, I postulate that the lack of a hyperlink connecting to other tweets localizes such exchanges to just a user’s own followers. Thus, when communicating with people in their immediate circle, users are more likely to post personal tweets that don’t necessitate the technical use of hashtags.

CONCLUSION
Hashtags and the subversive ways they are used in conjunction with other typographic conventions allow African American Internet users to share perspectives, games, and social commentary. Evidently, hashtags have evolved from their intended use as organizational tools to multifaceted conversational devices that people exercise creatively to express their identities. Even when hashtags are not in use, people, especially those on Black Twitter, can communicate identity and personal narrative through manipulating established typing conventions on the Internet.

These typographic conventions contribute to a growing discursive space for African Americans and Black folks overall. As Black folks acknowledge this growing presence of people with a common background on Twitter, this likely contributes to the desire to signify race online to build a community grounded in shared culture and experience, much like barbershops and beauty salons before them. Furthermore, the present findings illustrate that Blackness is not just something that is perceived through phenotypical qualities, but an ongoing performance of cultural insight and mastery.

Unfortunately, however, throughout my research I observed that several linguistic items relevant to AAVE had largely been appropriated by non-Black people using Twitter and other social networks, sometimes even to mock Black people. Though an analysis of linguistic appropriation was outside the scope of this thesis, such a topic should prompt further investigate into typed race performance.
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