

# Reclaiming Racial Authenticity through Tweets, Hashtags, and Images

**Michael R. Williams**

Department of Human Relations, The University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK  
mrwilliams@ou.edu

Black men often navigate society with inconsistent control of their image and ideologies of masculinity. The underpinning of masculinity has established a rigid caste that alienates marginalized gendered performances and presentations within this exclusive club. Till now, with decades of advancements regarding the scope of technology, Black men regained control of their masculine imagery and identity by utilizing social media. This

article examines how five Black men utilized Twitter to connect with online communities to reclaim their racial identity by utilizing hashtags, images, and tweets.

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**F**or centuries, Black men have navigated a tumultuous journey to challenge, reject, or accept the societal norms of race and masculinity. In more recent times, Black racial identity has been understood as “emerging evolving, and complex” (Hecht & Ribeau, 1991, p.503; Sullivan & Plattenburg, 2017). Still, the historical narrative of Black men in print media has limited Black male bodies to superior athletic ability, musical talents, hypersexual bodies, and ongoing illegal drug transactions. Furthermore, visual self-presentation of Black males online are hyper visible and stereotypical representations of African Americans and traditional gender identity constructions (Siibak, 2010; Williams, 2019). Yet, the liberating practice of tweeting, hashtagging and posting images explores and expands the formally restrictive practice of racial authenticity in print and digital mediums. This practice can be viewed as curated social media content provides a means of racial self-expression, racial group belonging, and solidarity (Chan, 2017). Nonetheless, the United State racial scaffolding has consistently positioned people of color, particularly African Americans to lack cultural

capital to author their own narrative. The research presented in this article is aimed to expose one way Black men are utilizing Twitter to reclaim and reimagine their racial identity to defy previous deficit narratives. This article outlines the establishment of racial, masculine, and digital identity for Black men then announces how participants went to Twitter to reclaim their racial authenticity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The trivial conception of racial authenticity for Black men begins with a firm foundational understanding of *Cool Pose* coupled with Black Identity Development (Jackson, 2001). Majors and Billson (1989) coined the term *Cool Pose* to articulate Black men “ritualized” performances of masculinity that involve style, speech, and physical posturing. *Cool Pose* has a dual meaning; first, the stylized mannerism that many Black males employ to convey social competence as a sense of racial-ethnic pride. Secondly, *Cool Pose* masks itself as an excellent coping mechanism for many Black men to counter social inequality (Wright, 2009; Williams 2019). This article further investigates the first meaning of *Cool Pose* to identify the social pressures faced by Black men that frequently force them to cope externally and how Twitter utilization can insert itself as an additional coping mechanism. The complex positioning of *Cool Pose* elicits a mask for Black men to discreetly hide behind in moments of inferiority based on social, gender, and racial standings. Since the inception of *Cool Pose*, various scholars (Hall, 2009; Jackson, 2018; Unnervet & Chouhy, 2021) have illuded to this posturing as a physical manifestation of discomfort. Rather, this new angle direct *Cool Pose* to the linguistic narrative.

### Black Identity Development

Black Identity Development (Jackson, 2001) serves as a framework to introduce stages of consciousness that African Americans tend to follow in development of their racial/Black identity (Jackson, 2012). As one specific tenet of Cool Pose examines the racial strains that Black men experience, it is pivotal to introduce and secure a firm understanding of racial identity development. Throughout the evolution of racial optics, several other theorists have transformed Black Identity Development since its inception in 1970. Most notably would be Cross’ Nigresence Model of Black Identity Development (see Cross et al., 1991; Vandiver et al., 2001). While the Cross model centers the experiences of

African Americans in direct relations to racism and the Civil Rights Movement, it was important to illustrate a framework that identifies the possibility of interracial birth. Conversely, Jackson (2001) utilizes influences of Black culture to promote racial understanding and thus is not solely a consequence of racism (Jackson, 2012). This framework in particular examines how Blackness exists within society and the manifestations of individuals navigating multiracial environments. In spite of that, both frameworks reveal similar linear progressions with the descriptions showing the greatest difference. Jackson (2001) stages are naïve, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization.

**Stage One** - Naïve, Children become aware of physical differences and the cultural differences between themselves and others. Often times, children might display curiosity about these differences but have not learned value differences over others.

**Stage Two** – Acceptance, an individual recognizes many of the internalized messages about being Black in the United States.

**Stage Three** - Resistance, the individual seeks to define his/her/their Blackness in positive terms; independent of White people, while acknowledging that some Black people or other people of color manifest White racism

**Stage Four** - Internalization, the healthy culmination from all previous stages (Acceptance, Resistance, and Redefinition) (Wijeyesinghe, & Jackson, 2012, p. 39-45)

The Naïve stage starts during early childhood or from birth to age three, at this point there is little to no social awareness of race. Beyond this age, children are exposed to instances at home, in school or within their community to shape the identity experience of Blackness (Jackson, 2012). In fact, the exposure during the naïve stage correlates to the acceptance stage and the adoption of ideology of their own racial group with the awareness of others. Black children might succumb to the negative overt messages of Black means being less than and Whiteness equals superiority or normalcy, beauty, importance, and power (Jackson, 2012). Next, as the previous stages builds, resistance recognizes racism as a complex entity. The culmination of this stage overshadows the explicit focus on Black culture and become consumed with anger from various manifestations of racism and loses the appreciation of Black culture. At the point of redefinition, a Black person is in constant

search for developing relationship with fellow Black people who are at the same stage of consciousness. Unlike the Acceptance stage that focuses on the approval of White people/institutions or the Resistance stage that is dependent on the rejection of Blackness and White is the focus, a successful integration of the Redefinition stage is where one fully embraces Black culture (Jackson, 2012). During the final stage of internalization, the culmination of all previous stages is fully intertwined into a multicultural perspective that is inclusive of many cultural differences. Further investigation of this phenomena unpacks how Black men navigate their Black experience online, as Black men who identified outside the spectrum of heteronormative activity. These stages coupled together in this research uncovered dual threats. The next section introduces Twitter as a medium to host authentic conversations regarding racial identity development.

### **Twitter**

Twitter debuted in 2006 as a new raw authentic form of blogging and instant status updates. The combination of Facebook-like status updates, and clever 280 character posting restriction, Twitter reinvented how audience members engaged in digital conversations (Stroller, 2013). Ben-Lhachemi and Nfaoui (2018) reported that Twitter has over 313 million active accounts and over 1 billion unique visits to sites with embedded links or hashtags. Twitter was described by Purohit et al. (2013) as a microblogging platform that acts as a medium of information where users can post, repost, or like tweets from other users (Ahmed et al., 2017). As seen in Figure 1, this common practice of public communication is initiated by the '@reply' (including the @ sign and the profile name). In addition, this public medium also provides private measures and restrictions for user's communication as Twitter allows users to send discreet messages to people they follow through direct messages (DMs). Finally, the service is now also seen as an important tool for circulating "real-time" news and events (the practice of hashtagging plays a central role here) (Dwyer & Fraser, 2016, p. 81).

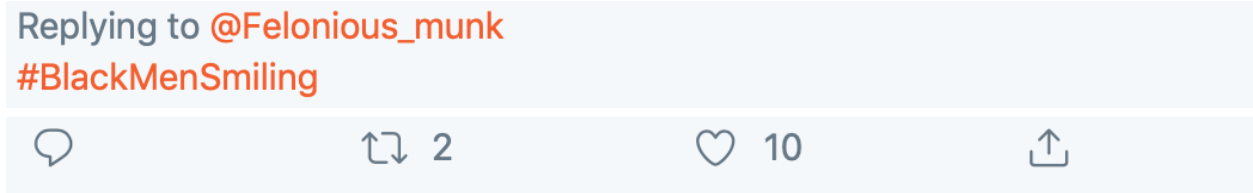


Figure 1. A tweet with the hashtag #BlackMenSmiling with the comment, retweet, like, and share icons

## Hashtags

Starting from the birth as a “pound sign,” the hashtag has grown immensely in success. In 2007, the originator Chris Messina took the same concept from internet forums and launched the catalyst for ongoing recorded conversations via Twitter (Jackson et al., 2020). The hash (#) symbol followed by the word (e.g., #Black) or expression (e.g., #BlackMenSmiling or #AmIManEnough) creates a digital catalog of all tweets on a particular topic that can be found on Twitter (Dwyer & Fraser, 2016). This registry of tweets and images curates notable moments that can alter the visibility of Black men, one moment happened when #BlackMenSmiling went viral. On February 2, 2018, @Felonious\_Munk tweeted “Today let’s share some pics of #BlackMenSmiling. Like big goofy smiles. Happy (even if just for a moment) with life smiles.” (Figure 2) (Williams, 2019).

In as much, the same usage of hashtags can be a consistent reminder of the vicious harm experienced such as #BeforeYouWatch (the shooting of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald); #TrayvonMartin (the killing of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin); and one hashtag that was mentioned multiple times #IfTheyGunnedMeDown (the killing of 18-year-old Michael Brown Jr). The thousands of images that followed altered and challenged a reality to many Black men to invoke themselves in a vulnerable moment, a moment to smile. These images have widened the limited scope of what it means to be a Black male during any stage of life, often unbelievable to those outside of this exclusive identity group. Since many of the documented images of Black men have resulted in negative and distorted portrayals, tweeting (thus, including hashtags and images) enables Black men to perform as an extension of *Cool Pose*. This positive enactment of *Cool Pose* allows Black men to

present and reaffirm their gender and racial authenticity (Florini, 2014) and establish a sense of digital identity.

Today let's share some pics of **#BlackMenSmiling**. Like big goofy smiles. Happy (even if just for a moment) with life smiles. Normalize happy. **#BlackHistoryMonth** 🍪 where your teeth at?

50

627

3.5K



*Figure 2.* The first tweet containing #BlackMenSmiling from user @felonious\_Munk

### Digital Identity

The addition of digital spaces has provided another avenue for Black men to discuss a variety of topics via tweets that were once secluded to homes, churches, and barbershops. While within the digital medium of Twitter, Black men are able to develop their digital image. This cultivation of digital identity as described in Chan (2017) results in a “composite of images that individuals present, share, and promote about themselves within the digital domain” (p. 164). This composite of digital identity can be further explained into three distinctive expression of identity that includes: real identity, pseudonymity, and anonymity identity. The concept of real identity refers to the individual’s accurate depiction of themselves from the physical space to the digital medium.

Subsequently, pseudonymity refers to when an individual only shows moderate levels of their physical identity in the digital medium and anonymity is complete ambiguity. This article continues to expound upon Black men ability to navigate their racial authenticity and self-identity development amid others. Recently, media studies research has explored the social and cultural factors that impact audience members (followers) perception of others (Jones, 2015; Lee, 2017; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). The continual building of this research can be viewed in Lee (2017) as Black audience members’ utilization of Twitter has made it a space to reimagine Black bodies, exploring counter-narratives to organize and build extended communities (p.7). Moreover, Twitter’s informal and authentic nature permits users to tweet as they speak, making it possible to

connect linguistically and connect via regional dialect (Jones, 2015). The tactic of Cool Pose is for Black men to cope with external stress regarding their racial identity and systemic barriers. For many, the utilization and space of Twitter results in an avenue for Black men to connect with audience members that they believe possess similar capabilities to act, resulting in heightened self-efficacy beliefs (Guan & So, 2016).

## **METHODS**

The complexities of *Cool Pose* vary for every Black male; however, the commonalities exist between self-identity and perception through external outlets like friends, family, and social media. This article reveals one angle of a previous study completed that highlighted masculinity in digital spaces. The purpose of this article is to bring awareness to one finding from the foundational study as Black men seek to reclaim their racial identity online. The study was conducted in the winter of 2019, utilizing qualitative research and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methods. In research qualitative inquiry focuses on participants experiences by communicating their interactions with a particular phenomenon and does not silence members of oppressed and marginalized groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Macias, 2015). In the same manner, IPA seeks to learn from each participant's individual story, and through an in-depth individualized analysis, a more informative understanding of participants' thoughts, beliefs and behaviors are attainable (Williams, 2019). For this study, there were ten participants that expressed interest in this study and five committed to be interviewed and to submit tweets for a content analysis. Participants in this study self-identified as Black, cis-gendered, queer, or gay and all resided within the United States.

This study required participants to submit their own tweets that showcased them acting within their racial scope. The average amount of tweets and followers between the five participants were 109,100 and 2,214 respectively. Table 1 reveals the number of tweets and follower each participant had at the time of this study.

Table 1  
*Participant Demographics by number of tweets and followers*

| Participant Number | Number of Tweets | Number of Followers |
|--------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| 1                  | 54.K             | 1,962               |
| 2                  | 6.1K             | 2,409               |
| 3                  | 448.K            | 2,909               |
| 4                  | 15.7K            | 2,479               |
| 5                  | 21.1K            | 1,313               |

The recording of number of tweets and followers reflect during the Winter 2019

The participants agreed to two interviews during this study. The first interview was semi-structured (Patton, 2002) and the second was a content analysis (Berelson, 1952) of tweets. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow this author to build rapport with the participants and steer the interview naturally (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews also exposed the hidden meanings that are a result of interpretivism and select symbols. To accurately record the data, the primary investigator used the Twitter analytic application Twitonomy. Twitonomy is a Twitter analytics tool that captures, manages, and optimizes activities on Twitter (Rayson, 2014). Twitter also has an activity dashboard that records tweet metrics based on impressions, total engagements and detail expand ("About your activity dashboard", n.d.). The Twitter metrics in this research served as a vital anchor in this study as they revealed visible images, tweets, and hashtags of Black men. By using these metrics, the author had access to the last six months of Twitter engagement data for each participant to accurately focus on the impression of user's tweets and to record their interactions with their audience to cultivate identity.

During the second interview, participants were asked to engage in a content analysis to analyze their tweets. The content analysis of transcripts and tweets provided a dominant theme of "tweeting while Black." The scope of this theme included experiences of



their geographical location, gender identity, and Blackness. The presenters first searched their own tweets utilizing key words: masculinity, Black, south/southern, and male; or presenters would identify tweets that would answer “How do Black men use Twitter to cope as an extension of *Cool Pose*?” Historically, content analysis was a tedious and time-consuming process; whereas, with the advancements in technology content analysis are more accessible to identify socio- and psycholinguistics in race, gender, and media studies issues (Busch et al., 2012). Ultimately the relational content analysis describes the socio-cultural setting of Twitter for some Black men, the audience members that engage with Black men, and how *Cool Pose* is activated and coping beings. Online environments and especially social networks allow users to construct a digital identity take areas which are disembodied, mediated, and controllable, and through which other performances can be displayed to others (Bozkurt & Tu, 2016).

## RESULTS

Participants in this study signaled a keen sense of racial identity, and two participants identified the intersectionality of their racial identity and sexual orientation. This theme remained pivotal when introducing the layered navigation that Black men must work through while showing up on Twitter and experiencing discrimination. The detailed experiences in this section reveal Black men’s desire to express their Blackness in their own authentic manner with the sub-themes of location and multilayered identity. All five of the participants saw their racial identity intertwined with other identities or as another layer for their most salient identity. For one participant, his Black identity was in constant connection to his White parent and his hometown. For another, his identity rested in the pride of his environment and cultural connections within the Deep South.

The first quote illustrates how Participant 2 struggled with his initial racial identity development in learning from mixed parents on the boarder of Northern and Southern states. In addition, Participant 2 conveyed the significance of his geospatial location and identity development. He responded, “I grew up in Virginia with a black parent and a white parent in an area where there wasn't much kind of openness around non-black or non-white identities.” Another rich experience came from Participant 1 from living in the Deep South and having supportive cultural experiences surrounding him to

reinforce his racial identity development. As seen in Figure 3, Participant 1 quote reinforces the developing concept of the polyethnic expressions of Blackness with location as a primary factor.

I would like to see more Country/Soul projects though—especially for political reasons. Jazz and Hip-hop historically center Black folks who live in cities. Yes, **Southern** rap became more mainstream around the turn of the century but still centers urban, Black southerners.

*Figure 3.* The understanding of Blackness as it connects to geographic location

Participant 3 mentioned how being a Black man on Twitter allowed him to exist without any care and connect with others who shared the same unapologetic love. Figure 4 is a tweet posted by Participant 3 venting his disgust with respectability politics among Blacks who continue to seek acceptance from White individuals.

**I hate when black folks try to tell other black folks how to be black...**

*Figure 4.* The use of Blackness for respectability politics

Again, the resistance and challenge of common stereotypes worked greatly to increase the visibility of Black success. For the Black men in this research, visibility remained a focal point throughout their explanation of experiences in maneuvering their racial identity within diverse spaces. All the thematic findings in this article hint to the high demands to be visible and present counter-narratives to many stereotypes visible as well. The usefulness of Twitter allows Black men to build community and express their emotions as if they are writing in a diary. In the manner of expressing their discomfort, each participant was able to converse with audience members or followers to explain their discomfort.

Finally, the underpinning of Cool Pose emphasizes the performative measures surrounding the Black experience. For the participants who mentioned their racial identity as most salient, their experiences with Twitter were less traumatic than those

who remained authentic to themselves and included their gay or queer identity. This active resistance is a developing counter narrative to overcome societal and cultural norms continues to be pivotal at forming new meanings and shaping Black men future.

## DISCUSSION

The immediate findings provided in this research highlight that Black men continue to find innovative ways to cope with societal and cultural norms despite the restrictive measures towards existing. As the technological advancements of Twitter and social media continue, Black men will continue to use this avenue to write their narrative. The findings from this research introduces healthier ways for Black men to deconstruct the polarized understanding of the Black experience and expression. The review of literature has provided new methods that Black men have tapped into on Twitter to navigate their racial. While on Twitter, Black men use their tweets to cultivate a community where they can establish a sense of belonging, connectivity and express their thoughts as if writing in a diary. For participants in this study, their need to cope came from situations that occurred in the physical medium and their response was to craft tweets to explain their discomfort. This author can infer that Black men are aware of the various expressions of Blackness; the distinct performances of their racial identity; and the intersections of their racial identity and sexual orientation.

Despite the difficulties, navigating a rigid system based on skin color, power, and oppression, the list of plausible coping mechanisms for Black men continues to grow. Based on this research and the findings, one recommendation is to assist Black males in cultivating a digital archiving compiled of images, tweets, and hashtags. This #Syllabus serves as an opportunity to deconstruct many of the stringent deficit narratives that plague Black men. More importantly, this gives Black men the opportunity to author the collective narrative and expound upon individual experiences. The purpose of this archive serves as one avenue for Black men to see reflections of themselves in media to promote positive self-efficacy. While for the usefulness of Twitter, the platform continues to evolve as we evolve as individuals. Simultaneously, the Twitter atmosphere will transform rapidly as communal dynamics shift and the African American community shifts our collective clench from oppression and discrimination. Since the mirroring originates in the

physical domain, researchers and practitioner must investigate their internal biases in order to authentically tweet. More importantly, the internal search and challenge provides counter storytelling possibilities to defy the political power, privilege, and oppression that was used against marginalized community members. This alludes heavily to the intersections of social identities often compacted with racial identities.

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## Online Connections

To follow this author in social media: Twitter @Commandr\_nchief