

Governance of the Black Experience on Reddit: r/BlackPeopleTwitter as a Case Study in Supporting Sense of Virtual Community for Black Users

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Despite frequent efforts to combat racism, almost no research has explored how to cultivate positive experiences of thriving Black culture on Reddit. In this case study, we surveyed users of r/BlackPeopleTwitter (BPT)—a large, popular subreddit that showcases screenshots of hilarious or insightful social media posts made by Black people (mainly from Black Twitter). Our research questions seek to understand users' motivations for visiting BPT, how they experience a sense of virtual community (SOVC) and membership in BPT, and how BPT's governance influences these experiences. We find that that users come to BPT primarily for excellent humor and entertainment, sociopolitical context on issues relevant to Black people, and/or partaking in the shared Black experience. Black users are more likely to report higher SOVC and to identify as members, whereas non-Black users are more likely to identify as guests or visitors to the community. To protect Black expression, the BPT moderation team implemented a governance strategy for verifying racial identity and limiting participation to only verified users in certain threads. Our data suggest that this policy is a contentious but influential aspect of SOVC that simultaneously constructs and challenges the sense of the subreddit existing as a safe space for Black people. We synthesize these results by discussing how: differing platform affordances across Twitter and Reddit combine to cultivate a thriving Black community on Reddit; the need for Black authenticity on an otherwise anonymous platform can guide future research in identity verification; and the limitations of this study motivate future work to support all marginalized communities online.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Reddit, Black Reddit, Black Twitter, BIPOC safety, sense of virtual community, online communities, survey, profile verification, racism, platform pluralism, cross-platformism, migration

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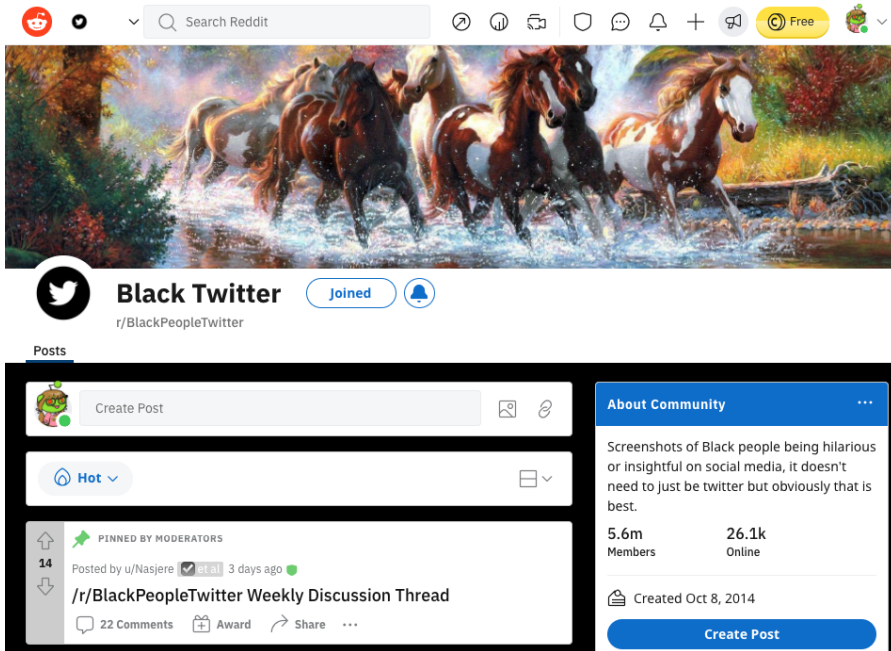


Fig. 1. Landing Page for r/BlackPeopleTwitter as of August 2022.

“Without community, there is no liberation...but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”

— Audre Lorde

1 INTRODUCTION

Known as the “front page of the Internet,” Reddit ([reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)) is a network of hundreds of thousands of inter-connected discussion fora called “subreddits” in which registered anonymous users called “Redditors” can post, vote, and comment on content about specific topics [5]. One prominent feature that led to this reputation is the platform’s long-running capacity to create and aggregate some of the most engaging content and memes from across the web. Another fascinating element of Reddit is how its major affordances (e.g., threads composed of original posts plus comments, up/downvoting, etc.) are similar across subreddits, yet communities of users innovate on these affordances to create a strikingly diverse collection of unique online spaces with highly specific topics and norms [108]. In this paper, we focus on a case study of [r/BlackPeopleTwitter](https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackPeopleTwitter) (BPT), a subreddit that showcases screenshots of social media posts, most of which come from Black Twitter—a prominent community of mainly Black people on Twitter ([twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com)) [79].¹ Figure 1 depicts a screenshot of the subreddit’s landing page, as captured in August 2022. On Twitter, user profiles are more often tied to people’s offline identities by using their real names and photos. Rather than digital “containers” like subreddits, communities of Twitter users are shaped by affordances like re-tweeting, quote-tweeting, and hashtags that lend themselves to the rapid and viral spread of information across a so-called “digital commons” or a “public square” [137].

¹We will use the term “Twitter” to refer to the microblogging platform as it existed during the time of data collection. The platform has been acquired in late 2022 and re-branded to “X” in 2023 [28, 74].

In stark contrast to the vibrant body of work on Black Twitter [13, 25, 49, 52, 65, 79], and despite increasing research attention on Reddit in general [109], there is a serious gap in the literature specifically on the experiences of Black Redditors. In HCI, many research efforts involving technology users overlook disenfranchised, marginalized, and underrepresented people to focus on a “default” user who often possesses hegemonic characteristics (white, male, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, from the global North, *etc.*) [100]. As suggested in recent discussions of Critical Race Theory in HCI [100, 118], rendering non-dominant users invisible causes the needs and contexts of those users to be missed or misunderstood as platforms are developed. Moreover, recent work suggests that “color-blind” moderation strategies on Reddit can perpetuate systemic marginalization of Black users and other People of Color [134]. Thus, BPT provides an exemplary case study for moving away from both a color-blind [134] and damage-centered [128] narrative in research on the Black community, and for navigating the complexity evoked by the epigraph from Audre Lorde above [86]: All people *need* community, and yet there are fundamental differences between communities and people that cannot be ignored.

In order to better understand, elevate, and support Black culture on Reddit, we partnered with the BPT moderation team to post a survey on the subreddit about users’ experiences related to their sense of virtual community (SOVC). By centering a community focused on Black experiences and voices, we hope to not only better understand and serve this particular community, but also to ensure that future research is sensitized to the needs and concerns of Black people more broadly across Reddit and other platforms. We use the following research questions to characterize the research pursuits of this case study:

RQ1: What motivates Redditors to visit r/BlackPeopleTwitter?

RQ2: How do users of r/BlackPeopleTwitter experience feelings of membership and community within the subreddit?

RQ3: How have the governance and moderation strategies of r/BlackPeopleTwitter shaped users’ experiences of virtual community?

In December 2021, our survey received 250 valid responses. We used content analysis to understand themes in the qualitative data (Table 2). We then used statistical analyses to understand how users’ self-identified race related to codes applied through content analysis (Table 3) and to users’ assessments of SOVC (Fig. 2) and membership (Fig. 3). Using the analogy of Reddit as the front page of the Internet, we found evidence that users view BPT as “the front page of Black Twitter.” Many respondents report tremendous positivity toward the subreddit for its thriving and authentic Black culture—regardless of whether or not they consider themselves members of the Black community. Moreover, to protect BPT as a special space for Black expression on a platform with anonymous profiles, the moderation team has implemented a governance strategy for verifying racial identity and limiting participation to only verified users in certain “Country Club” threads. We provide evidence that this policy is a contentious yet influential aspect of users’ SOVC.

As summarized in Section 5.4, our case study contributes new knowledge of positive motivations for visiting BPT such as seeking humor, sociopolitical context, and shared experiences of Blackness; strong feelings of SOVC and membership on BPT, especially for Black users; and how governance using racial verification contributes to perceptions of Black authenticity. As we will explore in our discussion, these contributions establish a preliminary foundation for future work that can explore socio-technical analyses and implications of “Black Reddit” more broadly than BPT alone.

Moreover, these contributions also support and motivate future cross-platform studies. Accentuated by disruptive events like the Musk Twitter acquisition in 2022 [28, 74] and the #RedditBlackout in 2023 [93, 104], the futures of both Reddit and Twitter seem precarious. Thus, moving forward, it is crucial to understand and investigate matters of authenticity, safety, and joy for the Black

community to buffer against the destructive impacts of what Sara Ahmed refers to as a pervasive “*phenomenology of whiteness*” [2] across Reddit, Twitter, and other social media.

1.1 Accountability in Presentation Choices

We are aware of the delicacy and care needed in discussions of race. Therefore, our author team has carefully discussed the following grammatical and lexical choices:

- **Capitalization and grammar:** Similarly to major news outlets [6, 26, 83] and scholarly recommendations [29, 48], we have adopted the style guideline of capitalizing Black but not white. To preserve the character of participants’ expressions, however, we have not altered capitalization, grammar, spelling, or usage of terms in any participant quotes.
- **Reporting of self-identified race:** All demographic questions were optional in the survey, however almost all participants answered them, including self-identification of race. Due to the nature of emergent themes, we felt it necessary to report participants’ race alongside individual quotes for contextualization of their thoughts and opinions.
- **Descriptions of groups based on race:** Recent discussions of terms like “People of Color” (POC) suggest that it can flatten important distinctions between different racial identities and experiences [94]. The term “Black, Indigenous, People of Color” (BIPOC) may be more inclusive [128], while a new term “People of the Global Majority” has also recently emerged and been used in the media [7] and scientific literature [125, 136]. Global Majority refers to “*the group of people in the world who do not consider themselves or are not considered to be white.*” [33]. Because of BPT’s explicit focus on Black people, we felt it would be most accurate and appropriate to retain the distinction between self-identified Black users (including those who selected “Black or African American,” plus any additional race(s) in their demographic responses), non-Black POC, and white survey respondents. We acknowledge that our use of the term POC is imperfect and *does* flatten or erase important racial distinctions between non-Black identifying people. Future research should continue engaging with diverse marginalized communities and their identities to highlight their respective needs and desires [128].

1.1.1 Disclosure of Authorship Team Identity. We are sensitized to the difficult history of unethical research that often causes hesitancy in Black people to participate in research [72]. We also recognize that when researchers of color conduct the deeply-needed research within their own communities and contexts, their research may not subsequently receive the same recognition or citations as when white researchers conduct research with non-white participants [110]. Prior studies on Black Twitter have also received criticism for being conducted by majority-white research teams, and for not actually benefiting Black Twitter [19], whereas the inclusion of positionality statements has been recently critiqued as narcissistic and colonial since they can reify hegemonic researchers as existing in positions of privilege or power [45]. Due to the importance of race in this paper, we disclose contextual details about our team that necessarily influenced the methodological production of our work, but we do not assert power or privilege (beyond the fact that some academic researchers may hold privileged positions in society, regardless of race). Members of our research team have differing racial identities; three authors identify as white, one as Black, and one as Asian. We acknowledge that we cannot rectify colonial problems through a single manuscript. However, we aim to center and proactively mitigate these concerns as we are able, since we believe it is neither practical nor equitable to impose all of the burdens of research on an already overburdened population.

In response to recommendations from [Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al.](#), we prioritize Black scholarship [100]. We hope our results can provide value to `r/BlackPeopleTwitter` users by highlighting the importance of positive Black experiences on Reddit. Additionally, everyone on the authorship team made conscious efforts to: (1) deepen our knowledge of the Black experience online; (2)

consult on methodological considerations to reduce the chances of making egregious, violating, and avoidable mistakes; (3) rein in problematic biases, misconceptions, or misconstruals in our narrative and writing; and (4) respectfully conduct research with a predominantly Black online community. Similarly to Stowell and O’Leary et. al’s work with Black churches [101, 123], we offer this model of inclusion as a way to increase the volume and quality of work conducted with Black communities, and to elevate Black scholarship, while trying to avoid colonial dynamics and assertions of privilege. While we sincerely pursued the aforementioned during the research process, we recognize there may still be opportunities to learn and grow as scholars.

2 RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Black Online Communities

Even before social media as we know it today, Black people were gathering online. While early scholarship on digital sociality reproduced color-blind assumptions that racialized identities would not be salient online, race unambiguously shaped the structure and culture of the Internet [57, 97]. Early internet Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) like the Usenet community Afronet in the 1980s, and nascent websites such as American OnLine’s Black Voices, NetNoir, and Georgia Tech’s Universal Black Pages and Knowledge Base of the 1990s provided spaces for the Black digital populace to congregate [3, 92]. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, websites like BlackPlanet.com were attracting over 16 million Black people [15].

The tendencies for affordances of internet and social media platforms to attract and amplify racist and other hate speech is well-documented [31, 90, 134]. Yet despite the hostility built into platforms, Black people continued to carve out digital spaces and communities to represent their identities and connect around their interests. For instance, there are Black feminist communities on Instagram and Twitter [105] and a growing presence of Black professionals on LinkedIn [89]. Identity-based social media communities abound for marginalized people, for example in groups on Facebook and gathered around hashtags on Twitter, as they can operate “underground” and be hidden while in a public space engaging in a liberatory practice [124]. There are even Black online communities that collect themselves around podcasts such as *The Nod* (2014-2020) and *Still Processing* (2016-) [44], or around Black experiences in online gaming [50, 51, 111]. Wherever Black people *can* be online, they are there.

2.2 Black Twitter

Perhaps one of the most well-known online Black communities for Black and non-Black people alike is Black Twitter. Black Twitter is a diverse group of mainly Black Twitter users who communicate, converse, and kiki through the performance and expression of Black oral tradition and culture [79]. This digital space operates publicly on Twitter, while intentionally making would-be infiltrators work harder to access and fully participate in the cookout, so to speak, due to the heavy reliance on Black digital practices that require first-hand, intimate knowledge of the multifaceted Black experience [52]. First discussed outside of Twitter on websites like *The Root* and Anil Dash’s blog in 2008, Black Twitter functioned as a digital space within which Black discourse shaped by Black culture could thrive [13].

Black Twitter was even featured as the inaugural case study for critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA). CTDA is “a multimodal analytic technique for the investigation of Internet and digital phenomena, artifacts, and culture.” [14]. It has continuously garnered research attention over the years and has been theorized as an important counterpublic for the Black community [49, 65]. Squires defines counterpublics as spaces in which subaltern or marginalized identities can “engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and utilize traditional social movement tactics,” and

differentiates these from enclaves which “*hide counterhegemonic ideas and strategies to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning*” and satellites that “*seek separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but are involved in wider public discourses.*” [121] Within the counterpublic of Black Twitter, Black people have the opportunity not only to participate in and produce counterdiscourses [121], but also to continuously define and re-define “Blackness” [25] and Black authenticity [88] for themselves, using online speech that reflects the diverse regional dialects of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) [73]. Additionally, the community re-appropriates Twitter’s hashtag affordance as racialized “Blacktags” [117], and uses these to galvanize social movements [53, 113, 131, 133]. This scholarship demonstrates that Black Twitter has real-world impact, and has gained research traction in a myriad of disciplines. Yet the research community will benefit from broader inclusion of studies of Black communities that exist across many other corners of the internet. In particular, our work draws attention to the Black community on Reddit by exploring r/BlackPeopleTwitter (BPT), which pulls most of its highlighted content directly from Black Twitter. Given how little research exists on the Black experience on Reddit, an interesting and valuable theoretical question raised by our work is whether and how BPT—or a “Black Reddit” more generally—functions as a counterpublic, enclave, or satellite space for Black users; we will return to this question later in the discussion.

2.3 Experiences of Black Redditors

There is scant research to be found when it comes to the Black experience on Reddit. One paper by Gay et al. reveals multicultural microaggressions experienced by users of Black-Asian subreddits [47]. As section 2.4 will soon describe, many research papers explore strategies for eliminating racist toxicity across the platform. Yet these works do not capture the positive and uplifting character of spaces that cultivate Black culture online. For example, an ACM search (in 2022) for the term r/BlackPeopleTwitter returned five papers, but the subreddit was simply treated as a data source alongside other subreddits rather than as a specific and unique site of expression and potentially community [20, 23, 30, 32, 95].

Unfortunately, in a brief statement describing the dataset, one of these papers [95] denoted the subreddit as follows: “*r/BlackPeopleTwitter makes fun of tweets purporting to originate from African Americans.*” This example portrays an inaccurate representation of the community. BPT does not make fun of tweets, instead it *celebrates* funny tweets. Moreover, tweets *are* from Black users—and not only African Americans. People from the African diaspora (“*people born of African descent across the diaspora, including Africa, the Caribbean, North and South America, Canada, Europe, and Asia*”) [39] are included in Black Twitter, and thus their tweets and contributions count as well. We do not aim to cast blame upon individual researchers, as much as we intend to critique broader research cultures of: (1) marginalizing or diminishing Black culture online; and (2) undertaking research with insufficient understanding of the communities being studied, and how the research could impact them. In the case of [95], it appears that researchers “parachuted” [37] into the community and created an inaccurate description. Regardless of whether this was intentional or not, it now exists in the literature as a harmful (mis)appropriation of the community’s identity and its members’ experiences.

The lack of intentional and respectful research attention paid to the experiences of Black Redditors is disappointing, especially since popular subreddits like r/blackladies and r/blackfellas have been designated as spaces for Black people, for purposes of celebrating Blackness [63].²

²Along with BPT, these subreddits were published in Insider and made known to the public outside of Reddit [63]. For this reason, we felt comfortable discussing them in this paper. As of time of publication, r/blackladies is a public subreddit with 100k members, while r/blackfellas is private, thus there is no available public information on it.

Unfortunately, these spaces also regularly face a barrage of racist comments and trolls. In 2015, the Southern Poverty Law Center designated Reddit as one of the Internet’s sources for “*the most violently racist Internet content*” [59]. That same year, Reddit banned some of its most egregious hate subreddits, including *r/coontown*, a racist subreddit full of violent hate speech against Black people that featured an animated banner image of a lynched Black person with a Ku Klux Klan member in the background [22]. Harkening back to Sutherland’s insights about identity-based social media communities hiding in plain sight [124], it becomes abundantly clear why Black people seek each other and safe spaces online. The next section summarizes how researchers and platforms have broached the problem of trying to govern these spaces for Black safety.

2.4 Governance of Black Experiences

Many papers have focused on reducing racism on platforms like Reddit, such as [4, 22, 34, 35, 135]. For example, Chandrasekharan et al. found that Reddit’s ban of *r/coontown* effectively mitigated racist behaviors at a macro, platform-level scale [22]. On the other hand, quarantining toxic subreddits (i.e. restricting visibility to unsubscribed members [64]) can reduce membership growth, but it does not reduce toxic behavior within them [21]. Although bans and quarantines are extreme and uncommon, algorithmically-supported content moderation is commonplace. For instance, Reddit’s popular *u/AutoModerator* bot uses curated keyphrases to identify, remove, or ban overtly racist content/users, and it is used by many moderators as the de facto tool for handling racism [20]. However, such tools can backfire. For example, Twitter uses a centralized, top-down model of governance, and Twitter’s hate-speech detection algorithms are more likely to flag and penalize utterances of AAVE [112]. In general, the “authenticity paradox” suggests that it is difficult for social media users to behave authentically since it can run against broader norms on a platform (e.g., positivity bias) or result in unintended social consequences [55]. Haimson et al. show that systemic social marginalization makes authenticity even more difficult for marginalized people [55], such as for groups of Black or transgender users whose content is disproportionately removed through moderation actions relative to the more dominant groups on the platform [54]. Consequently, platform-mandated algorithms or tools that systematically penalize AAVE or slang add yet another technical hurdle for Black authenticity online.

Unlike Twitter, Reddit uses a decentralized model reliant upon volunteer moderators to define rules and enforce norms [71], however, mods often take a “hands-off” approach that can empower racist content creators [24, 98]. Moreover, Wu and Semaan suggest that “color-blind” governance strategies, such as relying upon *u/AutoModerator* out-of-the-box, fail to capture continually evolving forms of covert racism, and that the arbitrary racial composition of mod teams often makes them ill-equipped to deal with problems of power corruption or racism [134]. For example, even if someone with an intersectionally marginalized identity—such as a user who is both Black and a woman—is not overtly attacked using racist terminologies, she may nonetheless experience marginalization if her posts are systematically ignored, mocked, or downvoted because of her perspective, choice of topic, or use of AAVE.

Rather than color-blind moderation, Wu and Semaan argue for adopting Bell’s approach of “racial consciousness” [8] by more mindfully combating racism in pursuit of racial justice [134]. Building on this, we emphasize that anti-racism need not be the *only* nor even the *primary* function of racially conscious research with the Black community on Reddit. Drawing on [130], To et al. suggest that “[BIPOC] communities are deserving of initiatives and research that look beyond a deficit-based, damage-centered narrative, and the definition of design guidelines that embody other aspects of humanity which highlight positive needs and desires.” [128] Our work supports and adopts this positive approach through our choice of: (1) a thriving Black community as a research site; (2)

research questions on positive community experiences; and (3) respectful collaboration with the moderation team.

Racial consciousness requires awareness of users' racial identities and how these identities can subtly or overtly influence users' needs, values, and experiences. Yet Reddit accounts are typically anonymous, thus understanding who is and is not Black becomes non-trivial. Section 3.2.1 describes a unique policy implemented by the BPT moderation team called "The Country Club" rule, which requires verification of users' racial identity before they can participate in certain threads. The concept of verifying Blackness has deep historical roots offline. Therefore, we next recount this history to properly contextualize how it informs BPT's governance strategies.

2.5 Verifying Blackness

The history of determining who is and is not Black stretches back centuries [36, 99, 102, 115]. Such discernment can either protect Black spaces from outsiders or prevent Black people from accessing certain spaces. During the era of enslavement in the United States, terms were invented to address mixed people. A number of these people resulted from white men raping Black women which, for many epochs in history, went uncriminalized [120]. Former categories in the U.S. Census made a distinction between a person who was Black and a person whose racial background was up to three-fourths Black (*i.e.*, half Black or mulatto, one-fourth Black or quadroon, and one-eighth Black or octoroon) [9]. The "one-drop rule" (*i.e.*, even one "drop" of African blood meant that a person was Black) also designated large swaths of the U.S. population as Black [66]. The construct of race, though social, still has a real-world impact on nearly every facet of society for everyone therein [100, 127, 129]. Colorism, or prejudices that surface due to a person's skin tone, is also a factor to be acknowledged. Despite sayings like "*the blacker the berry, the sweeter the juice*" to insinuate that darker skin tones are preferable, studies across marginalized populations have shown that people with lighter skin tones receive more favorable treatment on the job, within relationships, or in other areas of life [68, 75, 76].

In order to use skin tone to include or exclude Black people from social or civic groups, or to determine one's entry fee, people would use a "*brown paper bag*" test. Hall remarks that "*Various social events required the 'brown-paper-bag test' as a condition of admission. Those persons darker than a brown paper bag were assessed a fee before they could be admitted; those lighter were admitted free*" [56]. In addition to this humiliation, Maddox and Gray note that the test raised serious membership obstacles for dark-skinned Black people [87], and Powell summarizes how it invokes "*an historical, intraracial, color caste system*" that recognizes one's social mobility and communal value based on phenotypical approximation [106]. While the actual paper bag test has (mostly) fallen out of fashion [46], certain digital spaces and online communities that wish to maintain a Black-only space have used phenotypical tactics to allow or deny membership to their spaces. Whether you are looking to gain access to a Facebook group for Black travelers or gain special access and features within a subreddit dedicated to Black people, usually a photo of yourself is submitted as part of the verification process [62]. Though the digital space modernized the process, verifying Blackness remains a part of the Black experience for some, including users of BPT.

3 BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON R/BLACKPEOPLETWITTER

3.1 Affordances that Define a Black-Focused Community

r/BlackPeopleTwitter (BPT) was created on October 8, 2014.³ As of time of publication, this public subreddit had 5.8 million members and several dozen moderators of varying races and tenure

³We note that another subreddit called r/WhitePeopleTwitter was later created on December 31, 2014, and describes itself as "*People tweeting stuff. We allow tweets from anyone.*" It had 3 million members at the time of writing.

(ranging from 7 years from the beginning of the sub to a few months). As standard interaction affordances provided by Reddit, BPT users can participate in the forum by creating original posts (OPs), commenting on others' OPs, and up- or down-voting others' OPs and comments. BPT also offers chatting within a weekly discussion thread; weekly threads are not a default feature of subreddits, however, moderation teams commonly institute such threads across many subreddits.

On the other hand, BPT is uniquely differentiated from most of the rest of Reddit by its intentional focus on the Black experience and its explicit directives on the type of content it curates. Figure 1 depicts the subreddit's landing page, including the title text "Black Twitter" and a banner image depicting a herd of piebald brown and white horses energetically charging through a stream of water. The "About Community" sidebar describes the community as "*Screenshots of Black people being hilarious or insightful on social media, it doesn't need to just be twitter but obviously that is best.*" Examples like the subreddits `r/blackladies` and `r/blackfellas` demonstrate that there are certainly other Black-focused communities on Reddit. However, as described in Section 2.4, this topical focus of celebrating Blackness via title text, banner image, and community description is uncommon. Since norm development and enforcement is fundamental to the development of SOVC [10, 119], BPT's unique governance further differentiates it from the rest of Reddit.

3.2 Governance and Rules on `r/BlackPeopleTwitter`



Although moderation styles and degrees of enforcement vary substantially across Reddit [108, 114], Reddit's main affordance for defining the rules of conduct in a particular subreddit is a rule box in the side bar [43]. As shown in Table 1, BPT mods have created 13 rules which they actively enforce—both through the use of `u/AutoModerator` as well as more manual enforcement on a case-by-case or thread-by-thread basis. According to a taxonomy of Reddit rules [43], all five **prescriptive** rules are supporting of Black culture or humor. OPs must feature screenshots of social media posts from Black people only (Rule 1) and they must be hilarious or insightful (Rule 5). Rule 10 emphasizes respect of users' voices and Rule 12 asserts moderator fiat to enforce the rules, while we discuss Rule 13 in more detail below. The remaining 8 rules are **restrictive**. Rule 4 prohibits racism and hate speech while Rule 9 prohibits complaining about the use of AAVE or slang; both these rules further assert and protect the specifically Black-focused nature of the community. Several additional rules restrict bad faith participation (Rule 2), prevent disrespectful behaviors such as witch hunts, bullying, doxing, or calling people out as white (Rule 3), and instruct users to avoid Reddit cliches (Rule 6), reposts (Rule 7), low-quality post titles (Rule 8), or posts from corporate or meme accounts (Rule 11).

3.2.1 Rule 13: The Country Club Rule. On Reddit, "flair" is an optional tagging system that can be configured by a given moderation team to allow either users or mods (depending on the subreddit) to apply pre-specified keyword tags to OPs (i.e. content flair) or to user profiles (i.e. user flair). BPT has only one content flair, "Country Club," which is related to the eponymous Rule 13—an especially distinctive and notable rule. The Country Club began as an April fool's joke in 2019 to "*restrict access on this sub for black folks only*" as a response to the "*weight of unseen white opinion*" [61]. However, the community response was so strong that the mods decided to keep it. In a post describing the rule, they wrote that "*while we previously have locked posts that were filled with rule breaking comments, instead we are now setting these threads so that only verified users can comment.*"⁴ Any users can participate in non-Country Club threads, but only verified users are allowed to comment in Country Club threads, and only moderators can verify users. Moderators

⁴The Country Club rule and verification process were previously outlined here: https://www.reddit.com/r/BlackPeopleTwitter/comments/gumxuy/what_is_bpt_country_club_and_how_do_i_get/. As of July 2022, however, the user account that posted this message has been deleted.

Rule	Rule Type	Classification
1. Social media posts from Black people only	prescriptive	Content/behavior
2. Bad faith participation	restrictive	Content/behavior, Harassment, Hate speech, Trolling
3. Respectability	restrictive	Harassment Doxxing/personal info
4. No racism/hate speech	restrictive	Hate speech
5. Posts must be showcasing somebody being hilarious or insightful on social media	prescriptive	Content/behavior
6. Reddit Cliches	restrictive	Content/behavior
7. No reposts	restrictive	Reposting
8. Bad post title	restrictive	Low-quality content
9. Don't complain about the use of AAVE or slang	restrictive	Content/behavior
10. Please respect these voices of the users of this community	prescriptive	Content/behavior
11. No posts from corporate or meme accounts	restrictive	Advertising & commercialization Content/behavior
12. Moderator Fiat	prescriptive	Consequences/moderation/enforcement
13. Country Club	prescriptive	Content/behavior

Table 1. Rules on r/BlackPeopleTwitter. Labels are derived from the taxonomy of Reddit rules in [43].

are also the only stakeholders who can apply the Country Club flair to a given original post (at some point after it was originally posted and began to accrue comments). There are three levels of verification: (1) Black; (2) Non-white POC (Latinx, Asians, Middle Easterners, and Native/Indigenous peoples); (3) white ally. To become verified, users must take a picture of their forearm beside a piece of paper with their username (plus current date and time) written on it, upload it to the image-hosting site imgur.com, and send the moderators a link. Verified Black users receive a special user flair beside their username—the “check box with check” emoji . Verified non-white POCs and white allies do not receive visible user flairs, however, their verification allows them to participate in Country Club threads. Consequently, this use of the check box emoji  can be interpreted as a reappropriation of Reddit’s user flair affordance for verification of Black identity, according to the mods. After its initial launch, the rule was immediately met with both outrage and celebration, as well as a massive influx of photos [61], and it remains in place today.

4 SURVEY METHODS

In collaboration with the moderation team, we surveyed r/BlackPeopleTwitter. In this section, we present our survey methods, including recruitment, survey design, participants, and analysis. The moderation team permitted our research team to publish the name of the subreddit. This study was deemed exempt by our institution’s IRB.

4.1 Recruitment

In December 2021, moderators created a post about the survey and pinned it to the top of the subreddit for a few days. No financial incentives were advertised in the survey recruitment text, and participants were not required to provide any identifying information. However, they could provide their email to opt into a drawing for a \$10 eGift Card upon completion of the survey, enabling us to avoid receiving many spam or bot-generated responses, while also still offering a standard survey lottery incentive.

4.2 Survey Design

The survey included three central free-response questions:

- What motivates you to visit r/BlackPeopleTwitter?
- What makes r/BlackPeopleTwitter feel like a community to you?
- What (if anything) could be done to improve your experience in r/BlackPeopleTwitter?

As a quantitative complement to the second free response question, we included a previously validated 3-item psychometric assessment of the sense of virtual community with a 5-point bipolar Likert scale [10, 119].⁵ We also asked, “Do you feel that you are a member of this sub?” (Yes | No | I’m not sure). Finally, we requested demographics (optional) including age, race, and gender.

4.3 Participants

We collected and manually reviewed 260 total responses; we removed 10 responses that were incomplete or contained non-sensical free response answers. Respondents skew male (59.7%), residing in North America (88.2%), and relatively young (52.8% of respondents selected 25–34 years of age, and another 13.7% 18–24). We report race using a three-fold categorization scheme: 41.0% of survey respondents indicated that they are “White or Caucasian” with no other race (“white, only”), 39.4% indicated that they are “Black or African American” in some part (“Black, any”), and 19.5% indicated they are a non-Black other race (“Non-Black POC, any”). In comparison to the demographics of survey respondents on other subreddits (see [119], for example), the proportion of Black users in this sample is much higher than typical Reddit demographic distributions. However, it is crucial to note that there were similar proportions of Black and white respondents, with an additional 20% reporting a different racial identity.

4.4 Survey Analysis

We performed a conventional content analysis [67] of free response questions using categories inductively derived solely from this subreddit. This research design choice ensures that our results stay as true to this particular community as possible. Two authors participated in codebook development and application. We began by reading all free responses from the survey and taking notes on our observations of patterns in the data. Next, we wrote a preliminary codebook, including code names, descriptions, and data examples. Using inter-rater reliability (IRR) scores (Cohen’s Kappa) to guide our efforts, we refined codebook definitions and examples across five rounds of iteration, coding 30 data examples in each round until all IRR scores were greater than 0.7, indicating a high level of agreement. For each user, we concatenated all free responses into one block of text and applied codes to that block. Most codes are applied in a binary fashion, with (1) indicating presence and (0) indicating absence of the code; two codes also have a third option denoted by (2). Table 2 shows the final codebook. Finally, one author re-coded all data with our six codes (final IRR scores in parentheses): entertainment and humor (0.95); sociopolitical context (0.81); shared Black experience (0.84); positive interaction quality (0.71); guest (0.88); and Country Club (0.91).

During our analysis, user responses suggested questions about the nature of racial identity concerning peoples’ feelings of membership and sense of community. Therefore, rather than simple descriptive statistics on the quantitative questions, these data guided us to formulate and test hypotheses using independent *t*-tests with unequal variance (Welch’s *t*-test, see Table 3). For some codes, we report on significant differences based on people’s self-described racial identity according to “Black, any”, “Non-Black POC, any”, and “white, only” categories.

⁵Verbatim item text: “We are a unit.”; “We are a community.”; “We feel like a community to me.”

Code	Description	Example Quotes
Entertainment and Humor	User mentions that content is entertaining, including words like: funny, enjoyable, hilarious, amusing, jokes, comedy, memes, etc.	<i>“Comedy and insightful opinions through comedy.”</i>
Sociopolitical Context	User mentions interest in learning about politics, news, current events, or pop culture, esp. by seeing diverse perspectives (either from other Black people, or of a different race)	<i>“It is a way to see other black folks views on topics but also in some instances serves as a springboard for learning about ongoing current events and social issues.”</i>
Shared Black Experience	(1) Positive reference to self-experience of Blackness, or observation of other Black people with shared experiences or values, including references to: connection to the Black community; celebration of Black excellence and joy; safety in commiseration. (2) Negative reference to fragmented Black experiences, due to discrimination against certain skin tones, ethnic backgrounds, geographies, or genders.	(1) <i>“It’s the easiest way to stay connected to black people around the globe. There is ALMOST a comfort knowing that there is a near universal response to all fuckery (big and small).”</i> (2) <i>“Black women are still talked about negatively on the sub. I personally think when these type of comments/posts are made, it should be a reportable offense.”</i>
Positive Interaction Quality	User appreciates how people interact, including: appreciation for AAVE; validating, supportive, thought-provoking, or judgement-free discussion; recognizing familiar screennames.	<i>“We all may have different opinions on different issues, but for the most part, we are all respectful in discussing them.”</i>
Country Club (CC)	(1) User expresses sentiments in favor of: CC threads; user verification; increasing limitations on non-Black/non-verified users; temporarily making the subreddit private to members. (2) User expresses opposition to: CC threads, user verification; limitations based on race or verification; or making the sub private.	(1) <i>“More country club posts. Personally I find it really annoying when non-black people say stupid shit about topics.”</i> (2) <i>“I don’t like the country clubbing (I think it’s called) of the sub to non-blacks as it feels like I lost my access due to other people being racist assholes. Ban them. They suck everywhere on Reddit but this sub specifically shouldn’t have to deal with their shit.”</i>
Guest	User states that, as a non-Black person, they are a guest or visitor. Thus the sub is not for them, they cannot be a part of the community, or they should not participate.	<i>“I’m white and I don’t hide that. I’m just a guest there and know my place. I don’t comment on most posts because I’m there to either laugh at the memes or learn from other redditors.”</i>

Table 2. Complete Codebook. Most codes are applied in a binary fashion, with (1) indicating presence and (0) indicating absence of the code. Two codes also have a third option, denoted by (2), as indicated above. Codes are listed in descending order of frequency of appearance in our survey data.

5 RESULTS

5.1 RQ1: Motivations for Visiting r/BlackPeopleTwitter

In strong alignment with BPT’s community description, the pursuit of Black humor and insights into sociopolitical context on the Black experience were two major motivations for visiting BPT.⁶ Many respondents additionally stated motivations related to the shared Black experience.

5.1.1 Entertainment and humor. As the most commonly stated motivation, entertainment and humor were mentioned by 74.8% of respondents ($N = 187$ out of 250). Table 3 shows that this code was not significantly differentiated by race between either Black and white users ($t = -0.32, p = 0.748$) or Black and non-Black POC ($t = 0.67, p = 0.503$). Some users specifically wanted to avoid Twitter, but still wanted to follow the funny conversations happening there. For example, one user

⁶The survey instrument required all respondents to answer this question to ensure human rather than bot responses.

Theme	“Black, any” vs. “white, only”			“Black, any” vs. “non-Black POC, any”		
	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	Sig.	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	Sig.
Entertainment and Humor	-0.32	0.748		0.67	0.503	
Sociopolitical Context	-1.96	0.050		-0.42	0.677	
Shared Black Experience	5.68	< 0.001	***	0.90	0.371	
Positive Interaction Quality	1.10	0.273		0.98	0.330	
Country Club	2.07	0.040	*	1.24	0.217	
Guest	-3.68	< 0.001	***	-2.07	0.043	*

Table 3. Welch’s *t*-test statistics for null hypothesis that thematic codes for “Black, any”, “white, only”, and “non-Black POC, any” users are identical; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$. There are no significant differences by race for entertainment and humor and positive interaction quality, and sociopolitical context has $p = 0.05$ for Black v.s. white users. However, Black users are more likely than white users to mention the shared Black experience and the Country Club; both white and non-Black POC users are more likely to mention being a guest.

shared, “*I am black and it’s a place to find entertaining material without going on twitter.*” Similarly, a white user described her motivation as, “*The insight, hilarious content, and ability to scroll the best of Twitter without having to have a Twitter account myself.*”

Given the analogy of Reddit as the “front page of the Internet,” these user data suggest that BPT may function something like the “front page of Black Twitter” by aggregating some of its best jokes and hot takes into the convenient digital container of a subreddit. This is especially important for Reddit, since Black culture is not nearly as visible elsewhere on the platform. For instance, one Asian user shared, “*I started checking bpt because it was a really good condensation of what was happening in Black Twitter: trends, news, memes, especially a lot of the culturally Black stuff I would miss through the rest of reddit.*”

5.1.2 Sociopolitical context. Sociopolitical context was mentioned by 62% ($N = 155$) of survey respondents, in connection to news, politics, pop culture, and current issues impacting the Black community. As with the humor code, we received responses that connected specifically to Black culture and Black Twitter—for example, one Black user shared, “*BPT helps me feel connected to Black pop culture without having to be personally invested in Black Twitter (which is very time-consuming).*” Sociopolitical context was also frequently tagged alongside humor, rather than on its own. Respondents especially appreciated the use of humor to cope with trauma, tragedy, or social justice issues in the Black community. For example, one Black user wrote,

When I need a good laugh, the memes on r/BlackPeopleTwitter are always the best. Especially when Black Lives Matter was at its peak in 2020 and during the January 6th Capitol riot, humor was the best medicine.

Another example from a white user states,

I’ve learned quite a lot from the news-related tweets when it comes to US politics, racial injustice, and police brutality. The comments are always real, funny, or a combination of both and I appreciate the human element I feel when I read through them all.

Many BPT users also expressed a strong interest in hearing about such issues from multiple different perspectives. For example, as her motivation, one white user wrote, “*Wanting to hear from people who aren’t like me. It’s a bit of a social thermometer for me to see how black (usually American) people process the events in the world.*” This code was not significantly differentiated by race at the $p < 0.05$ threshold. However, the test between Black and white users hovered just shy of statistical significance ($t = -1.96$, $p = 0.05$), suggesting that white users may be more likely to

seek information about Black sociopolitical context, as in the quote above. However, no significant pattern was suggested between Black and non-Black POC ($t = -0.42, p = 0.677$). We found that Black and non-Black POC similarly shared an interest in hearing from many different voices, however, the tone of these comments was usually more about what Black people hold together in common or what can hold them apart—nuances that are better captured by the next code.

5.1.3 Shared Black Experience. 85 respondents (34% of the full sample) additionally specified the importance of the shared Black experience on the subreddit. Black users' responses were significantly more likely than white users' to receive this code ($t = 5.68, p < 0.001$). However, there was not a statistically significant difference between Black and non-Black POC ($t = 0.9, p = 0.371$), suggesting a greater degree of relatability among BIPOC users to the challenges that different racial minority groups hold in common. For 75 of these users, the subreddit represents a celebration of Black excellence and culture—a place where Black users can freely and joyfully express themselves and share relatable experiences, both good and bad, without fear of judgment. Some users explicitly tied this to moderation decisions such as updating the rules. For example, one Black man wrote:

It started off as a funny subreddit at first. But as I spent more time on it and the rules on the sub tightened over the years, it became a safe haven of sorts on reddit which is mostly a cis-white-dominated space. A lot of issues that affect black people are brought up and can be discussed there.

However, not all evaluations were positive; 10 users also reported concerns about a fragmented experience of Blackness, wherein users with certain skin tones, ethnic backgrounds, geographies, or genders still experienced discrimination and/or lack of representation. Several comments alluded to BPT as a space dominated by the male Black/African American voice, which was not open to alternative perspectives or opinions. For example, one Black woman wrote, “*I like feeling like there’s a safe place for black people to engage on Reddit, but r/BlackPeopleTwitter isn’t a safe place for black women so I don’t gravitate towards it.*” Prior work on Black Twitter has described how some Black users who frequent the community and enjoy the content nonetheless feel like “outsiders.” [79] We relate this experience of being a Black outsider on Black Twitter to a similar phenomenon on BPT, since not all Black people feel welcome, and as Section 5.2.3 will show, most—but not all—Black people identify as members of BPT.

5.2 RQ2: Users’ Sense of Virtual Community and Membership in r/BlackPeopleTwitter

There is some overlap in people’s motivations for visiting BPT and their responses about SOVC. For example, one white user answered the first free response question that he came to BPT for “*witty humor based on current events or pop culture,*” and the second free response question, that BPT felt like a community because of “*the overall attitude and sense of humor, like everyone is in on a joke together.*” Due to this overlap, we will focus this section on two new codes that emerged in response to our second free response question.⁷

5.2.1 Positive Interaction Quality. 30% of respondents ($N = 75$) mentioned positive interaction quality as a source of community feelings, citing the supportive, respectful, and affirming tone of most comments, the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), or the recognition of legendary users who keep the content and interactions coming. There were no statistically significant differences for this code between Black and white ($t = 1.10, p = 0.73$) or Black and non-Black POC ($t = 0.98, p = 0.330$), yet the perception of Black authenticity was central to users’

⁷Note that this second free response question was not required by the survey instrument, and therefore did not receive as many responses overall as the motivation question.

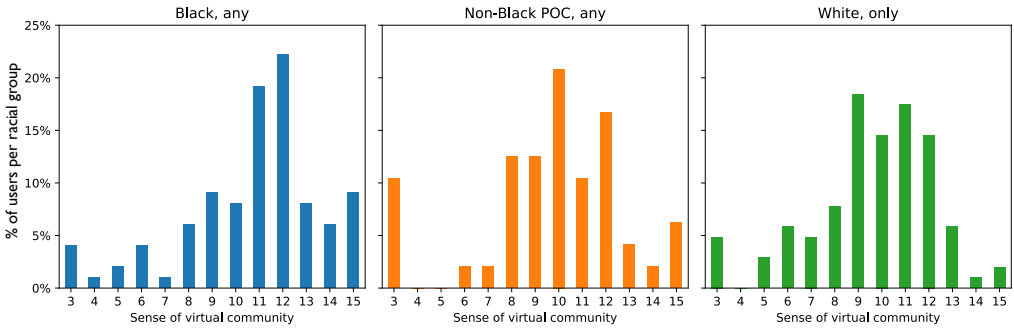


Fig. 2. Sense of virtual community (SOVC) scores by race. Ratings were collected for 3 SOVC items on a 5-point bipolar Likert scale from “Strongly disagree” (1) to “Strongly agree” (5). X-axes show summative scores (range of 3 to 15); Y-axes show % of users in each racial group providing each summative score. Left plot: Black, any (blue). Middle plot: Non-Black POC, any (orange). Right plot: white, only (green).

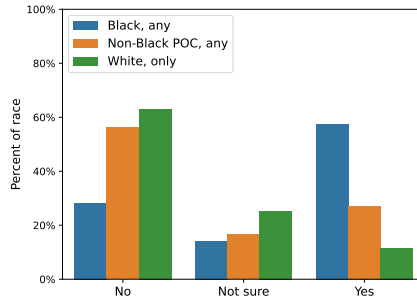


Fig. 3. Answer choice evaluations of membership: Most Black users identify as members, whereas most white and non-Black POC do not. Question text: “Do you feel that you are a member of this sub?” X-axis responses: “No,” “Not sure,” and “Yes.” Y-axis: Percent of each racial group selecting each response. Black, any (blue), Non-Black POC, any (orange), and white, only (green).

descriptions of SOVC, whether or not they were Black themselves. As one Black user wrote, “Black people can be black authentically without having to check themselves.” Another Black user shared, the slang/vernacular that is unique to us as black Americans. Also, it’s refreshing to see open discussions on racism and other issues that affect the black community without much outside interference or trolls.

A white user wrote, “Everyone here is just kinda vibing and having a good time,” while a Latinx individual wrote,

The comments are usually where you can really see some comedic shit that just kills me. Whether it be puns or people getting nasty! Also, one of the few places where emojis aren’t frowned upon and AAVE is more than welcome!

While most users tended to observe and praise the interaction quality and content on BPT, some users raised issues about whether or not the community was truly theirs, and who was actually allowed to participate.

5.2.2 *Guests.* 10% of respondents ($N = 25$) explicitly mentioned their own race (e.g., white, Hispanic, Asian) as a fundamental barrier to experiencing feelings of membership or sense of community in the sub. Some of these users mentioned feeling excluded (i.e., a few non-Black POC

felt that although they shared a great deal of commonality with the Black community, their voices were not welcome on the sub). More commonly however, respondents (especially white users) mentioned feeling like *guests* or *visitors* to the community, rather than members—they love Black culture, but some don't have friends in their offline lives to experience it with, and for others, the sub is a fun way to keep in touch with issues that matter to their offline Black friends. For example, an Asian user wrote, “Rarely interact with black people since my best friend moved away. He showed me the sub and it's a way to connect for us.”

This code was significantly associated with race; Black users were less likely to identify themselves as guests than either white users ($t = -3.68, p < 0.001$) or non-Black POC ($t = -2.07, p < 0.043$). It is worth noting that this was the only code in our content analysis for which a statistical difference exists between Black and non-Black POC. Our interpretation of the data suggests that users see BPT as a specifically and authentically Black space. For the most part, users appreciate, value, and seek out this Blackness, even if it causes non-Black people to feel like guests. Being a guest or visitor is not intrinsically problematic, however some individuals do identify it as exclusion.

5.2.3 Quantitative assessments of SOVC and membership. The results of our content analysis prompted us to query our data to understand how our qualitative coding aligned with users' own evaluations of their feelings of SOVC (Fig. 2) and membership (Fig. 3). Figure 2 shows that regardless of race, SOVC is present for many users; users trend toward rating BPT more as a community than not. Both Black and non-Black users' SOVC scores also appear to be normally distributed, however, Black users' SOVC scores are higher. The average for Black users was 10.73 ($SD = 2.91$), whereas the Non-Black POC average was 9.51 ($SD = 3.30$) and the white average was 9.57 ($SD = 2.59$). Using a Welsh's t-test for unequal variance, we found that Black users are more likely to experience greater SOVC than white ($t = 2.96, p = 0.0034$) or non-Black POC users ($t = 2.17, p = 0.032$). There were no significant differences between white and non-Black POC users in their ratings of SOVC ($t = -0.12, p = 0.90$).

We observe a very different pattern concerning membership. Fig 3 shows the percent of users who selected “No,” “Not sure,” or “Yes” when asked if they felt they were members of BPT. Aligning with our results on the “guest” code, there is a clear trend showing that most Black users (57.6%) identify as members, compared to 26.5% of non-Black POC and 11.7% of white users who do identify as members. On the other hand, most white users (63.1%) and non-Black POC (56.3%) do not identify as members, compared to 28.3% of Black users who do not identify as members. As introduced in Section 5.1.3, it may be the case that the phenomenon of Black outsiders as observed on Black Twitter [79] is also reflected on BPT in these Black users who do not see themselves as BPT members. Nonetheless, statistical tests confirm that Black users identify as BPT members more than white users ($t = 7.12, p < 0.001$) and non-Black POC users ($t = 3.97, p < 0.001$). There were no significant differences between white and non-Black POC users in identifying as members of BPT ($t = 1.29, p = 0.200, n.s.$). It is also important to note that for all three racial groups, there are substantial proportions of users who are not sure about their membership status.

Taken together, these results suggest that the specific norms and moderation of the subreddit *do* create a space that is perceived as a community space for many users. However, Black users report higher SOVC and they more often consider themselves members of this community, while others may perceive themselves more like guests. Our final set of results for RQ3 captures users' perceptions of the specific moderation choices that influence this.

5.3 RQ3: Governance and moderation strategies in r/BlackPeopleTwitter

Many users felt that BPT's positive community culture is well-supported by good rules and rule enforcement. Per the rules listed in Table 1, toxic behaviors are typically kept at bay while Black

voices are respected and appreciated. As described in Section 3, however, one especially distinctive community feature on r/BlackPeopleTwitter is its Country Club rule, which allows mods to limit participation on certain threads to *only* verified users.⁸ Our survey did not specifically mention the Country Club in any way, however, participants frequently referenced it directly in answers to our second and third free-response questions. 66 survey respondents (or 26% of the entire sample) organically mentioned this rule and/or periodic lock-downs of the subreddit in private mode to reduce influxes of what participants refer to as “*trolls and racists*” after major news events.⁹ Table 3 shows that Black users mention the Country Club more frequently than white users ($t = 2.07, p = 0.040$), however, there was not a significant difference between Black and non-Black POC ($t = 1.24, p = 0.217$). Survey respondents understood and described these moderation strategies—both the Country Club rule and locking the subreddit—as being intended to protect spaces for Black expression while keeping out unsolicited opinions from non-Black people and unwanted harassment. However, there was a mix of positive and negative reflections:

- **Supporting:** 40 respondents (16% of the entire sample) expressed support of the Country Club rule, along with its flairs and consequences for participation. Of these, 50% ($N = 20$) self-identified as Black, 12.5% ($N = 5$) as non-Black POC, and 37.5% ($N = 15$) as white.
- **Opposing:** 26 respondents (10.4% of the entire sample) were opposed to the rule or felt that there should be fewer Country Club threads. Of these 26, 50% ($N = 13$) self-identified as Black, 15.4% ($N = 4$) as non-Black POC, 30.8% ($N = 8$) as white, and 1 user elected not to answer the optional demographic question about race.

If these proportions align with broader trends on BPT, they suggest that there should be more support than opposition. Importantly, this also suggests that the distribution of racial identities (Black, non-Black POC, or white) may be similar, whether or not people support the rule. To unpack this complexity, we will next provide users’ reasons for their opinions on the Country Club rule.

Supporting the Country Club. Respondents who support the Country Club rule appreciated how BPT users have the opportunity to witness authentic Black culture in Country Club threads; for Black users, that feeling is especially salient because it is also their own culture. This performance of Black identity is necessarily tied to what is perceived as appropriate moderation. As one Black respondent wrote,

the mods feel like the RAs in an HBCU dorm.¹⁰ Like they come to lay down the law, but wouldn’t snitch if they saw you drinking at a party if you were behaving. Whenever the ‘Cookout’ happens, this is where I’ll find out about it.

Responses on how to improve the community from other Black users included “*Further limiting non-black perspectives on race issues. They are not wanted nor asked for by black folks*” and maintaining the Country Club, “*so long as the verification process for it means the majority of grey checks are black people. Those comments feel a lot more “real” and “honest” to the conversation being had.*” White and non-Black POC users similarly appreciated the ability to know that most comments are coming from Black people. One white user even stated that “*White Slaves for the country club*” would improve the community. While this turn of phrase may be polarizing, it is an example of the type of

⁸Although any verified user is enabled to participate in Country Club threads, it appears that the majority of verified users are Black, and our data below include some examples of users who misunderstood the rule to imply that only users who are verified as Black can participate.

⁹For example, shortly before our survey in November 2021, Kyle Rittenhouse was acquitted of charges of intentional manslaughter during protests of a police shooting of a Black man [12]; this verdict was celebrated as a victory by far-right extremists, therefore BPT mods temporarily locked the subreddit to protect it from an onslaught of trolls. Several survey participants praised or disagreed with this moderation decision specifically, or similar decisions in the past.

¹⁰This respondent supplied the acronym “HBCU” which refers to “historically black colleges and universities” [132]

humor encountered on BPT; within this context, we understand it to connote a reversal of historical power relationships. In a BPT Country Club thread, white people should show deference to the Black people that BPT showcases, even if this reversal might cause them to grapple with feelings of discomfort or marginalization regularly experienced by Black people.

Although these respondents were overall positive about the Country Club, many also included caveats. One non-Black POC wrote, *“I like the country club system. I’m sure there are improvements to be made, especially in keeping people safe when they identify as a BIPOC online.”* The notion of BIPOC safety was crucial in many responses. Black users also wished for *“an easier way to authenticate black people,”* or *“a less annoying verification process. I have zero suggestions for how to do that, sorry.”* The last comment in particular relates to many of the comments that led to more negative evaluations, as we will next describe.

Opposing the Country Club. Respondents who opposed the rule expressed concerns that the verification process is overly invasive or effortful. For example, one Black user wrote, *“I understand the intention behind it, but it seems a little invasive to apply.”* Others were concerned that the rule reinforces an exclusionary culture that only allows certain types of perspectives, rather than embracing diversity within and outside of the broader Black community. One Black user disapproved of the Country Club because it stops the whole community from participating—they wrote, *“Grow thicker skin and engage people with opposing view points. Pretending your better then others doesn’t sway them to your viewpoint.”* Another wrote:

Honestly, I doubt that there is anything in this community that could make me feel as if I belong. Since I am not a verified member (too many things to go through), I am often blocked from the country club, being able to comment and post and even the sub disappears occasionally despite the fact that I joined. Even more so, there seems to be a us versus them mentality (African Americans against every other black person or vice versa) and I can’t stand that. While I understand the need for gatekeeping, the intensity is a massive turn off and I hardly ever feel welcomed as a black person.

Another set of concerns relates to racial discrimination or racism.¹¹ One Black user wrote, *“It doesn’t feel like community, it feels like segregation,”* while another non-Black POC wrote, *“Maybe follow the same rules as other subreddits and not discriminate against anyone based on race.”* Some users called the rule damaging to free speech and/or racist, including both Black (e.g., *“Country club threads are the weakest thing ever, and they’re racist lol”*) and white users (e.g., *“stop racist rules like prohibiting people with white skin from commenting”*). One white user described deep frustration with the verification process not working,

I was banned for asking the mods to join, as per the sub rules indicated I should. Three times I tried and politely asked and with ZERO feedback. I received a perm ban from the same mods I was suppose to work with in this process. Total horseshit.

Other white users found the policy far too strict, or felt like other moderation affordances would be better—for example, *“[The Country Club] seems stupid, “reverse racist,” and counterproductive. I much prefer free speech, and the use of the platform’s features (for example, downvotes and mods) to identify and excise/censor unpopular or blatantly racist comments.”*

¹¹Note that in presenting peoples’ uses of terms like “reverse racism,” “racism,” etc., we preserve their verbatim statements, while also acknowledging that these usages do not necessarily align with contemporary definitions that recognize “reverse racism” as an impossible myth [11, 81] and “racism” as a historical and systemic matrix of domination [27] in which a dominant group asserts superiority and power over a marginalized group [100, 129]. As a case study of a Black-focused community, our goal is to address our stated research questions; it is not within the purview of this paper to comprehensively address all possible meanings or applications of these terms. Rather, we contribute these perceptions to accurately depict user utterances, so that future scholarship can consider these examples in broader discussions of racism.

5.4 Summary of Main Contributions

We will next concisely summarize the major contributions of our results:

User Motivations: Users describe BPT as the “Best of Black Twitter.” Thus, regardless of race, they primarily come to BPT for excellent Black-focused entertainment and humor. Often, humor is accompanied by in-depth discussions of sociopolitical context related to the Black experience. Additionally, Black and non-Black POC are more likely to describe motivations related to participating in or witnessing the shared Black experience.

Supporting Black SOVC: Regardless of race, users typically observe the subreddit to have a positive interaction quality that is thought-provoking, affirming of Black people, and encouraging of AAVE. This cultivates an online space that is admired and sought after for its portrayal of authentic Black culture. Black users report higher SOVC and membership, while white and non-Black POC users may feel more like guests or visitors who benefit from getting a glimpse into Black culture.

Governing for Black Authenticity: Many users support the Country Club rule (section 3.2.1) because they believe it successfully sets up threads where authentic Black voices are safe and welcome—particularly when the lived experience of being Black is required to offer meaningful input. Other users feel that the rule is unnecessarily exclusionary, technically convoluted and invasive, or even racist. Thus, this complex governance strategy seems to simultaneously construct and challenge the sense of the subreddit existing as a safe space for Black people.

As we will next discuss, future work can build upon these contributions to continue refining our understanding of how to support a thriving Black experience on Reddit and other platforms.

6 DISCUSSION

Given the historical marginalization and systemic oppression of Black people [27, 86], the erasure of or lack of attention to the needs of Black people in HCI [100, 128, 129], and the pervasive whiteness of large social media [2], it is vital to understand how to promote and protect successful Black spaces online. In service of this goal, the case study presented in this paper contributes empirical knowledge of how users experience a sense of virtual community (SOVC) in r/BlackPeopleTwitter (BPT), particularly given the subreddit’s unique governance strategies for supporting Black expression and culture. In this discussion, section 6.1 first connects our results to prior work in social computing and computer-mediated communication on how the affordances of social media platforms shape how communities of users present themselves and perform their identities [40, 107, 116]. Next, section 6.2 unpacks BPT’s governance strategies for protecting authentic Black expression, juxtaposing that against moderation strategies observed in other spaces on Reddit and beyond. Finally, section 6.3 describes the limitations of this study, along with future work that can and should be conducted to support Black people and other marginalized groups online.

6.1 Differing affordances combined to cultivate a thriving Black satellite community

An important question underlying the community dynamics we observed in this work is:

Why do we observe a “best of Black Twitter on Reddit” v.s. a “best of Black Reddit on Twitter,” or even a more cohesive sense of a “Black Reddit” to start with?

6.1.1 Affordances on Twitter versus Reddit. On Twitter, many users go by their real names and include photos of their faces and/or bodies, which provides profile viewers with numerous textual and visual cues about users’ offline identities, including their racial identities. Mechanisms of community formation and interaction include tweeting, re-/quote-tweeting, and hashtags—affordances

that contribute to a “public square” governed primarily by corporate policies and opaque moderation practices. The community of Black Twitter, in particular, has been described as a “counterpublic” and an epicenter of thriving Black culture online [49, 70, 82]; its key influencers are Black, funny, insightful, and instantly on top of trending news and events in the world. Black Twitter has become a fundamental contingent of the Internet that is followed and admired by Black and non-Black users alike. The popularity of Black Twitter affords a special type of branding that encourages people on other platforms (such as Reddit) to create and sustain communities that celebrate it.

In contrast to Twitter, Reddit user profiles are usually anonymous with few or no image-based cues and greater acceptance of using “throwaway” accounts to anonymously participate in discussions [84]. Instead of gathering around groups of users or hashtags within a broad public sphere, Redditors generate and curate content within subreddits and threads. Rather than a central corporately-defined moderation strategy, subreddits are primarily governed by volunteer moderators whose substantial unpaid efforts result in the creation and enforcement of unique rules and norms that are highly specific to individual subreddits [85, 91]. The tagline of Reddit as the “front page of the Internet” results from the capacity of its millions of anonymous users to up- and downvote content that has been curated within subreddits. These affordances lend themselves to creating delineated spaces that are excellent at aggregating engaging posts and comments, allowing the best to rise to the top, and providing a structured space for nested comments and discussions of the original post. The BPT moderators have created a space with norms and rules that expressly encourage users to grab screenshots from Black Twitter (or other social media, so long as the profile is a Black person), and millions of anonymous users have shown up to participate. Thus, users view BPT as the “front page of Black Twitter,” since it aggregates the best of Black Twitter within a new digital container.

6.1.2 BPT as a satellite community. Prior scholarship has overlooked the existence of a “Black Reddit” or failed to grapple with the implications of its obscurity relative to Black Twitter. BPT is only one subreddit (albeit a prominent example), and our work is a case study of this single instance. Therefore, we cannot make any empirical claims beyond BPT. However, a “Black Reddit” could be defined as a collection of many subreddits dedicated to topics of relevance to the Black community. Under this definition, Black Reddit certainly exists, as evidenced by BPT and other subreddits like *r/blackfellas* and *r/blackladies* [63], in addition to many others (which we will not list because we have neither discussed it with their moderation teams nor identified public news coverage on them). Black Reddit may lack the same visibility as the counterpublic of Black Twitter because Reddit is less of a public square in general; users typically need to find and join subreddits from among hundreds of thousands of options.

Under Squires’ taxonomy [121], our study suggests that BPT most closely resembles a “satellite” community for Black people. It is not a hidden “enclave,” where the broader public is kept away (as on *r/blackfellas*, which is private as of the time of publication, and therefore not viewable by any members of our authorship team); rather BPT is a public subreddit and many non-Black people intentionally seek it out. Nor is BPT a public sphere unto itself, since all users cannot interact and participate equally. Instead, BPT cultivates separation from the rest of Reddit, not only to find reprieve from oppression but also to highlight specifically Black voices. Even though BPT does not meet the definition of a counterpublic, it is a sufficiently large and successful enough subreddit that some of its most active posts nonetheless arrive to *r/popular*—a subreddit created by Reddit that aggregates the most popular posts on Reddit.¹² Future work could explore Black Reddit in more

¹²Several respondents mentioned that this is how they found BPT. For example, two users wrote, “I see it [BPT] constantly at *r/popular*,” and “I see it in the popular feed and occasionally check out the other posts in the subreddit.”

depth to understand the challenges and nuances of interactions within and across these spaces, and how they do (or do not) meet the needs of Black Redditors.

Because of the interplay of affordances described above, Reddit (or platforms with similar affordances as Reddit) can never offer a replacement for Black Twitter. However, if Twitter were to be shuttered, our results suggest that as a satellite community, BPT may be well-positioned to function as one site of cultural resilience for the Black community due to its fundamental and explicit goal of highlighting Black humor and culture. For example, scholars like Andre Brock and Sarah Jackson have suggested that were Twitter to fail, “Black Instagram” could become more popular given similar opportunities for community coalescence around hashtags [103]; BPT could readily accept screenshots from Black Instagram, as its rules already allow this. Although a content analysis of activity on BPT is beyond the scope of this paper, some featured posts on BPT in 2023 already show content from alternative social media platforms like Mastodon, Bluesky, and Threads. Thus, a space like BPT can continue to aggregate examples of the best of online Black culture wherever it appears, leading to important suggestions for future work.

6.1.3 Future cross-platform work. The present instability and competition between social media platforms highlight the urgency of future work in cross-platform spaces for Black users. As suggested in the prior section, it would be valuable to study and document where BPT draws its content from and how that is changing over time, given how older platforms are changing and how newer ones are emerging. Additionally, do BPT-like counterparts exist on other social platforms? For instance, TikTok has rapidly gained popularity as a platform for expression of identity and curation of excellent content; how have communities of Black users appropriated platform affordances on TikTok? Does this resemble BPT or Black Twitter, or what types of generational and platform-specific features differentiate and distinguish the formation of Black communities in these spaces?

Another line of work can use data science to study migration patterns and interrelationships between different platforms, e.g., [138]. Open questions remain about the direction of influence between Black Twitter and Black Reddit. For example, are the posts on BPT, in fact, the best of Black Twitter—are tweets that are the most liked, re-tweeted, and commented on Twitter more likely to be screen-shotted and posted on BPT? Or are there other identifiable factors of the tweets themselves, or the users who are migrating tweets to BPT, that influence the curation of great content onto BPT? Likewise, do user activities on BPT propagate “backwards” and cause the original Twitter content to go viral in ways it had not before its exposure on BPT? Moreover, how do the culture and user behaviors across these two platforms converge or differ? Black Twitter has been shown to be a positive and celebratory space for Black users, and our work provides evidence that BPT shares these characteristics. However, our choice of methods in this paper does not directly compare behaviors across the two platforms; future work that cross-examines community dynamics can illustrate how these two different spaces mirror or diverge from the other’s experiences of creating and sustaining a sense of community. Finally, future lines of work can also focus on how to help users in their efforts to most effectively capture and translate great content across various community spaces, or how to support communities of users who need to move across platforms [42] to construct new safe spaces of their own [38].

6.1.4 Future work in Black-owned spaces. Black Twitter became a counterpublic within a public square. Millions of Black and non-Black users alike have benefited from exposure to this culture, and intentionally sought the best of it on BPT. Yet with the prospect of Twitter failing, one Black Twitter user (see fig. 4) writes about the resilience of the Black community and hopes that “*the next place we can own instead of rent.*” Exploring this concept, Klassen et al. ask what would it look like for Black people to co-envision and design their own spaces [79], using tools like design fiction

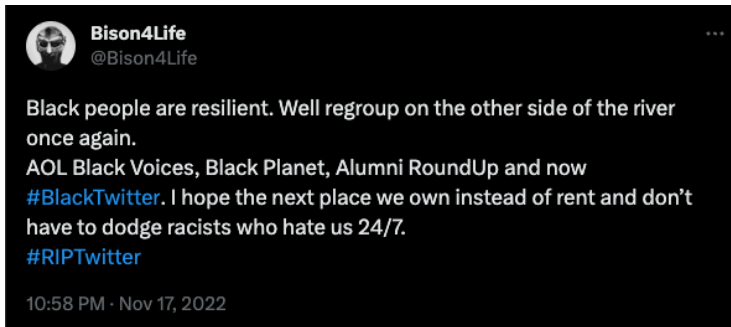


Fig. 4. A tweet from one Black Twitter user in November 2022, shortly following the Musk acquisition, that has been previously featured in the news [1].

to begin illuminating possibilities [77]. Work by To et al. also presents case studies of existing Black-owned platforms, such as the Wave (a hybrid online/offline digital community platform) and Liberate (a popular meditation app for Black wellness) [128]. Furthermore, in 2023, two Black ex-Twitter employees founded a platform called Spill [17, 126] as a Twitter replacement tailored for Black people. Digital and physical spaces for and by Black people are integral to the health and well-being of Black people and communities. Future innovation and research should seek to support not only the counterpublic and satellite communities that choose to operate “*in plain sight*” [124], but also the enclave and Black-owned community spaces that may be less visible to all users.

6.2 Moderation strategies for supporting Black culture and authenticity

On Reddit, moderation strategies, styles, norms, and rules vary substantially [23, 43, 114]. Some subreddits have been used by thousands of users for unambiguous hate speech and racism [22], while other subreddits that aim to support Black people have experienced barrages of harmful or racist comments that must be prevented and removed for the safety of users [63]. Consequently, challenging color-blind governance [134] and understanding how to moderate spaces for Black safety is a paramount concern. Rather than a reductionist and/or solely damage-centered perspective [128], technologists should also focus on aspects of design and moderation that promote joy, play, positivity, and healing for Black community members [96, 128].

6.2.1 Technophilia on BPT. The concept of “technophilia” describes a nuanced grasp of how Black people are adopting technologies for beneficial, joyful, affirming uses in their communities [41, 122]. Technophilia is reflected across BPT’s rules overall, and its Country Club rule in particular as a form of norm-setting that values the contributions and lived experiences of Black people as the majority of users who can comment on certain types of topics or content. This rule creates a designated space where Black users can act in ways that feel fuller and more expressive to them than elsewhere. Yet hearkening back to the historical practices described in section 2.5, the rule hinges upon the complexity of racial verification.

6.2.2 Strategies in identity verification. Verification practices are a crucial contemporary topic in social computing because they dramatically shape users’ perceptions of the authenticity of accounts. For example, before Musk acquired Twitter, users could be “verified” by the company with a blue checkmark beside their name to signify that the account was controlled by the person or organization it claimed to be. The verification process was opaque and only available to sufficiently notable or famous accounts. Soon after Musk bought Twitter, he implemented a subscription service

whereby any user could receive the blue checkmark so long as they were willing to pay [69]; this move was broadly criticized for rendering the checkmarks worse than useless and resulting in many scam “verified” accounts which spread hoaxes or misinformation [18].

On Reddit, there are no such standardized platform-wide verification processes, however, some moderation teams create their own by taking advantage of manual verification processes and custom user flairs. Our work documents how BPT users can be verified based on race, but different subreddits can prioritize any other aspect of a user’s identity that is deemed contextually relevant. For example, Figure 5 shows an example from [r/Science](#) (which has over 31M users); the mods create and apply user flairs to denote a user’s academic standing and discipline (e.g., “Grad Student | Information Science” or “Professor | Computer Science | Human-Computer Interaction”). Similar to BPT, users can reach out to the moderation team with proof of their credentials to receive this flair, while the flair helps community members assess a user’s credibility, without necessarily connecting the profile to their full offline identity or name.

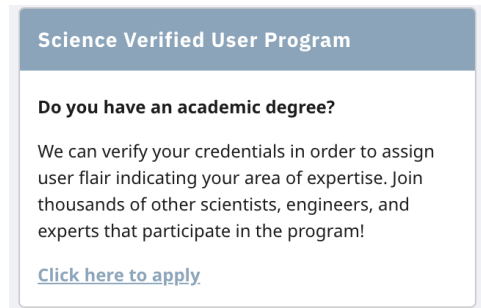



Fig. 5. Screenshot from the [r/Science](#) community sidebar (captured in December 2023).

6.2.3 Verification of racial identity. Set within this wider context of verification policies, our work highlights how and why racial identity impacts the community experiences of BPT users. Black Twitter has no formal verification of race. However, a less formal “verification” can take place when Black users call out accounts that are pretending to be Black. For example, Black feminists on Twitter used the hashtag #YourSlipIsShowing to call out fake accounts that used AAVE incorrectly and/or shared inflammatory and damaging posts [58]. A [Black Twitter app](#) uses the tongue-in-cheek “skill testing question”: “Do you put salt or sugar in your grits?” when onboarding new users, and redirects users back to Twitter if they answer incorrectly, indicating that the space should be preserved for Black users who know the “correct” answer. However, in chat-based dialogues where text is the primary medium of interaction, there is no clear-cut way to understand other users’ racial identities. Yet in the BPT, racial identity matters tremendously to the community’s ability to cultivate a space that is perceived as authentically Black, and this perception is essential for BPT’s audience of both Black and non-Black users. In section 5.2.2, we found that Black users are more likely to identify as community members than non-Black users. Black users also experience, on average, a higher sense of virtual community (SOVC) than non-Black users, although there are more similar distributions of scores for SOVC than membership (see Figs. 2 and 3).

For BPT to retain its reputation as an authentic Black space, the BPT moderation team introduced its Country Club rule—offering a more formal verification process than Black Twitter. Although Black, non-white POC, and white allies can all be verified by sending the moderators a photo of their forearm and username, only Black users receive a gray checkmark  flair beside their username. Any verified users can post in designated Country Club threads, while non-verified users can spectate. In our survey, we found more support and enthusiasm for the rule rather than opposition. Therefore, this case study of BPT suggests that this moderation strategy has been effective at serving this particular community’s need for a mechanism that constructs a sense of the subreddit existing as a safe space for Black users. In a space that could otherwise easily become diluted with non-Black perspectives and opinions, our results highlight the importance of providing marginalized communities with opportunities to innovate moderation strategies that

work for them, on their own terms, when they are operating within platforms that are dominated by white users. However, the same rule was also challenged by other users who raised concerns such as privacy invasion; problematic and unnecessary limiting of other perspectives; long delays in moderator responses or unfair moderator decisions; the rule being described as racist; or the rule reifying only one dominant perspective from African American men, rather than all Black genders, ethnicities, geographies, *etc.* These considerations suggest that the Country Club is an imperfect strategy that alienates some users, and increases certain types of moderation tasks if not also the full volume of workload overall.

6.2.4 Avoiding technochauvinism in pursuit of Black authenticity. Black identity and authenticity lie at the core of BPT’s need for Rule 13. Recall the quote from a Black participant who wished for “*a less annoying verification process. I have zero suggestions for how to do that, sorry.*” Data like this suggest that understanding racial identity is fundamental, yet the process for doing so is messy and imperfect. It is also socially embedded in a platform defined by anonymous accounts and text-based interactions. Meredith Broussard coined the term *technochauvinism* to describe the belief that technology can always provide solutions, regardless of how [16]. Rather than a technochauvinist set of design recommendations for Black Reddit, we suggest: **there is no perfect techno-solution for determining whether or not someone is Black or how to ensure that diverse Black voices are welcome.** Black communities need and deserve the space to experiment and do the best they can with the affordances available to them, learning and iterating as they go. We hope that one outcome of this research will be providing the BPT community with empirical insights so that moderators and users can use this information to continue refining moderation strategies that support the community’s thriving during this time of platform upheavals. We hope that another outcome can inspire future research and community experimentation to explore new solutions for less invasive, privacy-damaging, labor-intensive, and bias-prone verification techniques. Contrasting the example from *r/science* in Fig. 5 with BPT’s verification protocol, it is clear that large, popular subreddits are, in general, needing and creating solutions to ensure the credibility and authenticity of contextually relevant aspects of users’ online identity without necessarily verifying their actual name and offline identity. This complex issue is deserving of future research—both for the specific purposes of helping marginalized communities, as well as meeting the needs of more general-purpose and pro-social online communities where all users benefit from trustworthy profiles.

6.3 Ethics and Limitations

6.3.1 Ethics. As described in our positionality statement, we intentionally selected a subreddit for Black people to contribute scholarship centered on Black experiences to HCI research. However, bringing a spotlight to ostensibly safe spaces for Black people online through research could cause harm to those communities and fall into possibly unethical territory as the exposure may bring trolls or other unwanted scrutiny. Studying Black and other marginalized communities online, regardless of whether it is human-subjects or public data research, requires an understanding of that community (both historically and contextually), oneself as a researcher through reflexivity and positionality, and how one’s research may negatively impact the community with a plan for mitigation [78]. Equipped with these foresights, researchers, regardless of how their own identities intersect with those of their participants, can conduct research that is less likely to cause harm and more likely to benefit marginalized communities wherever they may be online.

6.3.2 Survey Limitations. Readers should interpret our results in light of standard survey limitations including the possibility of misalignment between actual behaviors and self-reported data, opt-in selection bias, and consequently the possibility that our sample of participants may or may not be

representative of the broader user base on BPT, Reddit, or the general population. For example, it is known that Reddit users seem to skew more male and of higher socio-economic status [60]; this consideration likely limits the representativeness of our sample. Additionally, our survey questions did not directly ask about BPT users' perceptions of all of Reddit's affordances or all of BPT's rules. This choice provided the benefits of reducing survey length and allowing for organic and emergent survey responses to our broadly stated free response questions. However, it implies that we do not know how *all* of our respondents feel about the Country Club rule or moderators' decisions to occasionally close the sub to non-members. Future work can leverage new strategies to understand these issues in more depth, such as measuring user-moderator alignment on subreddit rules and how they are applied [80].

6.3.3 Limited Generalizability. In our study, Black and non-Black POC were equally likely to mention all of the codes captured in our content analysis, except for the guest code (see Table 3). Non-Black POC relate to the shared Black experience, yet they nonetheless recognize BPT as a specifically Black community. Thus, despite perceiving BPT as a community space, most do not identify as members. This result connects back to our epigraph from Audre Lorde, demonstrating that fundamental differences in the identities and experiences of different marginalized peoples cannot be glossed over in online communities and technologies. These differences affect the title, focus, and topics of interest of communities, how participation can be structured authentically within them, and who are the intended community members. Thus, one strength of this work is its specific focus on the Black experience, however, this necessarily and appropriately limits our generalizability to other marginalized groups. Moreover, our results have also demonstrated that diverse and intersectional aspects of Black identity significantly impact users' experiences, thus future work should further explore the complexity of the shared Black experience on Reddit and elsewhere. Finally, future work must continue to center and explore the experiences of marginalized communities of many races, creeds, genders, geographies, and (dis)abilities. Whether or not other communities have the size and popularity of spaces like Black Twitter or BPT, they are equally deserving of research attention and innovation to support the humans behind the screens.

6.4 Conclusion

We surveyed `r/BlackPeopleTwitter` and found that most users visit the subreddit for its ability to provide humor, sociopolitical context, and celebration of the shared Black experience. We also found that positive interaction quality and certain racialized norms and appropriations of Reddit's affordances shape users' feelings of membership and sense of community within the subreddit. This work contributes new knowledge of how users view BPT as the "front page of Black Twitter." It also contributes knowledge of how BPT's moderation strategies simultaneously construct and challenge the sense of the subreddit existing as a safe space for Black users. We discuss the interplay of different affordances on Black Twitter and Black Reddit, pointing to a need for future cross-platform work that can capture and evaluate relationships between these and other platforms. Finally, we call for more work with Black Reddit and all marginalized communities.

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