Exploring the Effects of Black Twitter (X) on South African Millennials' Mental Health

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Abstract

This study qualitatively explored the perceptions of black South African millennials about the effects of Black Twitter (X) on their mental health. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with black South African millennials who actively interact on Black Twitter (X). The data was analysed using thematic analysis. Participants had positive and negative perceptions of the influence of Black Twitter (X) on their mental health. Participants identified Black Twitter (X) as a convenient source of information and a form of escapism but the prevalence of trolling and hateful content causes anxiety and depression. The effect of Black Twitter (X) on black South African millennials' mental health is complex. It can provide a supportive community, inspire activism, and increase awareness of vital issues. However, it does present challenges, such as the possibility of cyberbullying and negative interactions. Recognising these dynamics is essential to maximise advantages and minimise potentially damaging disadvantages.

Introduction

This article aims to explore the effects of Black Twitter (X) on black South African millennials' mental health. In recent years, there has been an increase in recorded suicide deaths as a result of cyberbullying globally (Luxton *et al.* 2012; Schonfeld et al. 2023; Mohd Fadhli *et al.* 2022) however, the increase in such tragedies by black South African millennial celebrities, in 2022, raised concerns about the effect of social media platforms on the mental health of South African users (Mwareya 2022). The subsequent depression caused by cyberbullying was highlighted as a cause of suicide (Luxton et al. 2012), and agreeably the frequency of depression among South Africans has shown an upward trend (Xulu 2022). Studies by Craig et al. (2022), Ardington, and Case (2010) elaborate that anxiety, childhood trauma and

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adversity, socioeconomic status, and demographic characteristics affect the mental health of South Africans. However, in addition to these factors, the characteristics of social media platforms, such as 24/7 social connectedness, anonymity, and the far-reach of rich and uncensored content, can enable fake news and cyberbullying (Olweus 2012; Luxton et al. 2012), which can affect mental health. Cyberbullying, in particular, has grown dramatically over the past few years, following the COVID-19 pandemic, and it has created many new victims and bullies (Olweus 2012; Kee et al. 2022). Whittaker and Kowalski (2014) explain that because of the growing popularity of social media platforms like Twitter (X), cyberbullying has become more widespread and popular among perpetrators. Of concern is that the effects of social media on mental health may be prevalent because social media is ingrained in people's daily lives (Ramalepe 2023), including millennials, who spend a significant portion of their day on one or more social media platforms. Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are aged between 28 and 43 years (Wandhe 2024), they are more active on social media than other generations, including Generation Z (Ramalepe 2023), with Twitter (X) being one of the most preferred social media platforms (Whittaker and Kowalski 2014). A survey by Statista South Africa conducted in 2021, reported that approximately 40.5% of Twitter (X) users were millennials, comprising 23.2% of the population (Nirmala & Fathima, 2019). Black Twitter (X), especially, garners great engagement among South African millennials who are predominantly black Africans (Cowling 2023). The meaning of Black Twitter (X) is a bit ambiguous however, it can be identified as a collective of black identities and voices on Twitter (X) who interact in a collective and culturally-specific dialogue (Cowling 2023). The language patterns, comic phrases, and cultural references found on Black Twitter (X) are well recognized and celebrated for their distinctiveness within black communities globally, creating support communities (Cowling 2023; Goolam 2019). These elements often reflect the lived experiences and perspectives of individuals within the black community (Molefe and Ngcongo 2021). Parham (2021) correctly states that Black Twitter (X) is "both news and analysis, call and response, judge and jury - a comedy showcase, therapy session, and family cookout all in one". The discourse frequently involves using hashtags that are sustained for an extended duration, exerting influence on mass media, public opinion, cultural dynamics, and individuals' mental health. Goolam (2021) elaborates that Black Twitter (X) fosters an environment where no individual is exempt from scrutiny, and no kind of wit is left unfiltered, which makes it rife with negative interactions, online harassment, and cyberbullying. Thus, humiliating, stereotypical, controversial, and divisive memes, hashtags, images, and videos about people, most often celebrities, generate lasting conversations on Black Twitter (X).

Notwithstanding, Black Twitter is used as a tool for activism whereby individuals and groups rally around issues affecting black communities such as #BlackLivesMatter or #UKnowUrBlackWhen (Molefe and Ngcongo 2012; Parham 2021). South African millennials are described by Noah (2018) as advocates for social change who hope to rectify the injustices of the divisive, unequal and oppressive wrongs of the former South African Apartheid regime. Although there is a growing body of research about the influence of social media on mental health globally (Luxton et al. 2012; Karim et al. 2020; Beyari 2023; Masiphephe network, 2023), most studies focus on children and adolescents. There is a lack of studies exploring the effects of Black Twitter (X) on South African millennials' mental health. Therefore the significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the body knowledge about this phenomenon, while also offering recommendations on how to effectively

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mitigate the adverse effects of Black Twitter (X) on the mental well-being of millennials.

Theoretical Framework: The Social Identity Theory

Theoretically, the social identity theory is a classic social psychological theory proposed in 1970 by Tajfel and Turner. The theory was developed to explain how individuals define their own identities based on social groups they belong to, and that these identifications function to improve and protect the group's identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Therefore, the identity of the group becomes more important than the identity of the individual. Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell (1987) further explain that the protection of the group's identity occurs to the extent that there is in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. The theory aimed to explain the cognitive processes that lead individuals to make in-group and out-group classifications using three key principles: social categorisation, social identification and social comparison.

Social categorisation

The first process explains the process through which individuals are organised in social groups that assist with understanding the social world. In this process, individuals are defined on the basis of the social categories in contrast to their individual features (Islam 2014). Although individuals can belong to different social categories in different situations, there are three main social categories: race, sex and class (Bodenhausen *et al*. 2012). Social categorisation generally occurs when there are similarities between individuals in the same group and differences between individuals in another group (Islam 2014).

Social identification

The second process is identifying as a group member and behaving according to the group norms (Turner et al. 1987). Relational reinforcement and social participation are important for the development of emotional attachment in the group (Paxton and Moody 2003).

Social comparison

The third process involves members of an in-group comparing themselves with members of an out-group based on prestige or social standing (Islam 2014). Thus a positive perception of an individual's in-group compared to an out-group often develops a positive social identity; however, failure of the group to have this outlook, is likely to result in the members abandoning the group for another with prestige (Smith 1999).

Applied to this study, Black Twitter (X) has created a social identity for black identities who have grouped themselves based on race and experiences. Within this online social group, black identities reinforce the group identity by comparison, sharing relational content, and opposing ideas that are unfavourable to the group, often to the extent that groupthink occurs, whereby individuals consent without critical reasoning (Wilkins 2019). Parham (2021) highlights that the black identities on Black Twitter (X) are not one homogenous group based on a similar race and black experience, he notes that black identities group themselves based on countries of origin, tribes and regions. Interactions are thus governed by these factors, whereby for instance, the issues that black South African IsiZulu users promote are often different from those promoted by Northern Sotho users. Thus out-groups are stereotyped and experience what Reynolds, Turner and Haslam (2000) term out-group degradation. However, the degradation is also experienced by in-group members who oppose the dominantly supported content, likely leading to cyberbullying, affecting mental health. In such cases, degrading language is often used to the out-group members to emphasise their exclusion from the in-group, often this is to the extent that the user will delete their Twitter (X) account, or as was the case with South

African celebrities, result in depression or suicide (Bopape 2023; Ndongeni-Ntlebi 2023). However, as previously noted, the perceptions about the effects of Black Twitter (X) on South African millennials have not been explored, hence the significance of this article.

Method

The study was conducted following a phenomeno-logical research methodology, which employed a qualitative research technique. This methodology was most suitable because it enabled the participants to provide in-depth insights about the *what* and *how* of their subjective lived experiences about the effects of Black Twitter (X) on South African millennials' mental health (Teherani *et al.* 2015).

Participant and recruitment sampling

The researcher employed a non-probability purposive sampling technique to carefully select eight South African millennials aged between 28 to 43 years old who avidly interact on Black Twitter and as such are most susceptible to the effects of Black Twitter (X) on their mental health. Ramalepe (2023), Whittaker and Kowalski (2014) and Ramalepe (2023) noted that millennials are more active on social media than other generations, including Generation Z, and Twitter (X) is the most preferred social media platforms. The intentional selection of a limited sample size is a defining feature of qualitative research, since it allows the researcher to collect comprehensive and detailed perspectives from participants who have been purposefully chosen (Showkat 2017). After obtaining ethics permission, the researchers contacted the participants over email. The email included an information sheet that included details about the goal and procedures of the research. Additionally, the participants were asked to provide their informed consent as a means of ensuring ethical protection.

Data collection

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed both the researchers and study participants the opportunity to flexibly delve into the inquiries and responses (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019). During the interviews, the researchers probed the research participants about the effects of Black Twitter (X) on their mental health. The researchers videotaped and transcribed the interviews in order to facilitate data analysis.

Ethics

In order to adhere to ethical guidelines, the researcher was obliged to seek first authorisation from the University of Johannesburg, Faculty of Humanities. Following this, the project received ethics approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Johannesburg prior to its initiation. The researcher informed the participants that their participation in the study was completely voluntary. The rights of the participants were deliberated about prior to the commencement of the interviews. Each participant provided their consent for the interviews

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to be recorded. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher underscored the need to maintain anonymity and confidentiality, assuring participants that their personal information would not be identifiable or connected to their responses. In order to preserve the confidentiality of individuals, pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions. Furthermore, the participants were duly informed of their right to discontinue their involvement in the study at any point without facing any adverse consequences, and were assured that their data would be promptly erased. Due to the sensitive nature of the study, exploring mental health, it was made clear in the informed consent form that participants can decline participating in the study or refuse to answer uncomfortable questions (Silverio *et al.* 2022).

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the correctness and rigour of research findings, it is imperative to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enable the inclusion of a diverse and complete range of participants' experiences, the study prioritised the legitimacy of these experiences and their accurate representation (Stahl and King 2017). The researchers engaged in a process of iterative cross-validation, comparing the identified themes with the raw, transcribed data. This ensured that the themes and subthemes accurately represented the replies provided by the participants. Transferability pertains to the extent to which the findings of the present study may be extrapolated to different contexts and populations under investigation (Stahl and King 2017). The researchers provided a comprehensive account of the research methodology and included a description of the study participants to provide a contextual background for the current study, acknowledging the limitations in generalising research findings when using qualitative and interpretive methodologies. The concept of confirmability pertains to the extent to which the findings and interpretations of research accurately represent the experiences and viewpoints of the participants (Adler 2022). The researchers relied on a detailed audit trail to ensure accuracy and avoid researcher misinterpretation.

Data Analysis

The process of examining and interpreting data in order to uncover patterns, relationships, and insights is commonly referred to as data analysis. The findings were interpreted using a thematic analysis approach based on the three-step model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), which involves data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drafting and verification.

Findings 1: Community of Support

The majority of millennials from black communities identified Black Twitter (X) as providing a sense of community and support. They shared that it can be used to connect with others who share similar experiences, obstacles, and passions. *"I want to call it a safe haven; a safe haven for black people"*. Two participants revealed that interacting on Black Twitter (X) reduces the fear of missing out (FOMO) by keeping one up-to-date with the latest news and entertainment that often take time to be shared on mainstream media, or are omitted by mainstream media. Engaging with this community can improve psychological health by reducing feelings of isolation through information sharing. Thus despite the online nature of this community, the opportunity to be part of a community engaging about similar experiences of black identities can establish human connections based on openness and relatability, that are important for mental well-being.

Findings 2: Activism

Black Twitter (X) is renowned for bringing attention to social justice, political and socio-economic issues from the perspective of black communities. One research participant shared that *"I wrote a tweet saying that women complain about men killing them in South Africa but they kill men too. I might be quoting it incorrectly, but then it obviously got more attention than my usual tweets because people are very sensitive"*. Engaging in these discussions can create a sense of social responsibility and activism in millennials, which can be empowering and advantageous to their mental health. However, the amplification of voices can be exclusive, marginalising some groups in black communities. Another research participant shared *"I'm an observer, so I never participate in anything...I've seen what it does to people. So you just avoid it"*.

Findings 3: Cyberbullying

Black Twitter (X) is rife with negative interactions, online harassment and trolling which can greatly harm mental health. The information overload about the opinions and lifestyle choices of others can create feelings of inadequacy in millennials. *"It's a lot of comparisons; people compare themselves to other people and they usually feel like they are not worthy; and that's what kills our mental health"*. Another participant disclosed that *"Black Twitter is a place where people say the meanest things that they can think of; that they would never say in person, but on Twitter they feel like because they are behind the screen, they can get away with it"*. Such interactions can cause distress, anxiety, sadness or lead to suicidal thoughts.

Discussion

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews revealed that Black Twitter (X) has positive and negative effects on the mental health of black South African millennials. The online community of support Black Twitter (X) grants millennials in the black community enables them to share their voices and engage on matters that are often neglected or briefly covered in mainstream media. This sense of freedom is beneficial to the mental health of black South African millennials who feel they can be part of conversations that add meaning or understanding to their lives without the gatekeeping and restrictions of mainstream media. For instance, Parham (2021) noted that to obtain censored videos or in-depth insights about trending topics, Black Twitter (X) in contrast to other social media platforms, provides swift reporting. Moreover, the opportunity to converse in different conversations, affords millennials an opportunity to influence attitudes and behaviour, especially since South African millennials desire to rectify the injustices of the oppressive Apartheid system their parents were part of (Noah 2018). Through the use of hashtags that can become viral and sustained for long periods of time, millennials can become online activists for change, creating an inclusive online community. However, as argued by Dratwa (2023), divisive hashtags pertaining to patriotism and advancing specific goals exclusively beneficial to native millennials can marginalise other black identities in the interactions. The lasting hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst, is indicative of the divisive nature of Black Twitter (X) in South Africa. At the core of the hashtag is to promote patriotism in South Africa, and protect the rights and experiences of South Africans (Bezuidenhout 2020) however, the hashtag is often dominated by offensive and marginalising content about other black identities residing in South Africa (Dratwa 2023). Of concern, is that the excluded black identities are from other African countries, excluding African American black identities. This indicates that perceived prestige or association with a high economic status is considered a qualifying factor for an in-group. The out-group discrimination characterised by divisive content creates and sustains stereotypes about other black identities in both the online and offline sphere that affects the mental health of the victims (Tao and Fisher 2022).

This in-group and out-group phenomena highlights that Black Twitter (X) is not as *unified* as displayed because black identities categorise, identify and compare their identities depending on their countries of origin, experiences, tribes, and regions. This questions the true nature of *community* in this online space. In agreement, one participant stated that they engage passively on Black Twitter (X) due to fear of being *politically incorrect*.

Although Twitter (X) has measures in place to reduce hateful content, in the form of reporting, post removals, reducing post visibility, restricting engagement, downgrading post replies, and suspending accounts (X 2024). This appears to be insufficient because online harassment and trolling continue to dominate the online platform.

Furthermore, the obsession to be popular, and part of the trending list on Black Twitter (X), has created an online culture whereby people share content that is hateful and harmful in order to be validated by online communities, aligning with the social comparison principle of the social identity theory. This has negative effects on the mental health of millennials, particularly pertaining to perceptions about achievement (Elsayed 2021), connectedness and integration. This is aggravated by the constant comparison that occurs on social media whereby millennials have reported that they aspire to more affluent, successful characters and lifestyles online (Elsayed 2021). These often distorted perceptions that can be reinforced by challenging lived experiences such as childhood trauma and adversity, socioeconomic status, often experienced by black South African millennials can cause depression (Craig *et al*. 2022; Ardington and Case 2010).

There is a need to have more dialogue about the consequences of interaction on Black Twitter (X), and how it shapes the mental health of millennials. It is through this interaction that solutions can be proposed on how these negative issues can be mitigated, and more reflexive decision-making can be encouraged to actively avoid posting and interacting with hateful content. More especially because even though Twitter (X) has measures to reduce abuse and harassment on the platform, the measures are limited and insufficient to restrict hateful content. Moreover, lessons about digital

literacy, emphasising the respectful use of social media, for children and adolescents can also prove beneficial to avoid the negative effects of social media on mental health.

Conclusion

The findings of the current study suggest that the effect of Black Twitter (X) on the mental health of black South African millennials revealed both positive and negative effects. Black Twitter (X) provides a forum for black millennials to express their concerns, particularly regarding neglected issues in mainstream media, which improves their mental health by granting them the freedom to address injustices. However, divisive hashtags and exclusive objectives can result in the marginalisation of some black identities; and online harassment, resulting in mental health problems for them. In addition, the desire for online notoriety can lead to the dissemination of hateful content and unrealistic aspirations, contributing to negative perceptions of achievement and mental health issues, particularly among black South African millennials who have endured difficult life circumstances. It is thus crucial for online communities to support a variety of voices and promote connectivity and integration. Future research is needed to examine how black South African millennials can engage in inclusive dialogue about the negative effects of Black Twitter (X) on their mental health.

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