

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND MOBILE VIDEO:  
EXPLORING BLACK CULTURAL PRACTICE ON VINE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores Black cultural practice on the mobile video platform Vine, a six second micro video editing mobile application. The purpose of this research is to critically examine how African Americans embraced social video through Vine and how Black cultural practice is enacted within the political economy of the mobile video landscape. This dissertation employs the use of Qualitative Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) as a means of systematic yet adaptive exploration of the cultural phenomena transpiring in Vine videos, and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (Brock, 2018) to establish context and meanings of the descriptions that emerge through the content analysis. The analysis demonstrates Vine videos produced by Black users were important to Vine's success. Videos fall into the following categories: everyday life, celebrity cameo, content remix, Black boy joy, comedy & jokes "the dozens", music & dance, tech speak, and socio-cultural commentary. Black content creators leveraged punchy storytelling to compel the world's internet users to watch and adopt Vine. This practice is defined as Black digital efficacy in the study, the process by which technology is given direction, labor, and Black aesthetics to propel it forward.

This work is dedicated to my family, friends, and everyone who supported me through the journey. To my mother and father, Evangelist Doris Jean Nance and James Napoleon Nance, may your legacy live on. You two are the reasons I crossed the finish line. Shelbert Nance, Ulysses Nance, and Alecha Nance thank you for the 15 nieces and nephews you have given me. May this document be a testament to our inheritance that anything is possible.

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## **CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION**

African Americans as a group have a high affinity for technology and use mobile devices as their primary digital modality (Grace et al., 2018). Mobile devices have drastically changed the ways in which visual media are displayed and consumed. The vast adoption of mobile technology means media is now accessed everywhere there is internet accessibility. This study uses the theory of Distributed Blackness by André Brock (2020) to examine how Black content creators used Vine and the socio-technical impact of their creative inventions.

I situate this work within a 10-year career in entrepreneurship and web development. I spent the last three of those years as a User Experience Researcher studying people and building digital products at some of the largest social media and software companies in the world. I have spent countless hours scouring interfaces, studying behavior, flow entry points, calls to action, funnel analysis, and conducting heuristic evaluations to improve design, process and efficiency in digital experiences.

In 2011 a mobile video platform was launched called Socialcam (Lunden, 2013). I spent hours browsing videos on Socialcam. One day I noticed the top video board contained content predominantly by Black users. A large percentage of the posted videos were of Pentecostal Christian church services. Not only was I surprised and shocked by the trending board, but I also wondered how the founders of the site felt, knowing their most actively engaged users were Black folks. A few weeks after my revelation, I logged in and noticed the developers reprogrammed leaderboard. They no longer showed organic results, but now featured top videos by celebrities and seemingly

prioritized users with a larger following, thus sending those Black users I previously saw into the darkness of the Socialcam ether. Invisibility now defined their existence as erasure took place.

Over time the world saw the retirement of Socialcam and new mobile apps launched like Vine. Much like Socialcam, Black users took to Vine quickly and began to create innovative viral cultural artifacts, from the mundane to quirky. With the rise of Vine, the world began to see Black culture on display in viral snapshots like never before. Vine gave the world viral videos such as “Do it for the Vine”, “Why the Fuck You Lying”, “Eyebrows on Fleek”, “What Are Those?”, and countless others.

Years after the retirement of Socialcam, the erasure of Black users from the trending board of Socialcam made a lasting impression. At the time with few scholars addressing Black users and social media, specifically mobile video, I always wondered if I was daydreaming. The birth of Vine validated my hypothesis as it emerged as a space to study Black mobile video practice.

Through this work I want to emphasize the practice of Black cultural production in mobile video as innovation. The video becomes the interface, it embodies a practice, and it has a culture and belief that situates it within technology and society. Ultimately this process creates the foundation for Black digital infrastructure. The practice becomes a product.

## ***Black Mobile Usage***

According to *From Consumers to Creators: The Digital Lives of Black Consumers*, “Black Americans are leveraging digital know-how and open-source innovation to critique, connect, collaborate and create everything from new platforms and content to new product categories and successful competitors in saturated markets that have failed to understand their unique need” (Grace et al., 2018, p. 3). With 1.3 trillion dollars of annual spending power, Black influence is being acknowledged beyond hip hop and the music entertainment industry (Chang, 2005; George, 2005; Rose, 1994). Black consumers are leveraging social media to bring awareness to this power to create impactful change in multiple industries where their presence has been omitted.

When it comes to access, 90% of African American consumers own smartphones, compared to 81% of non-Hispanic white households. Blacks also lead in device ownership across the board compared to whites: tablet, gaming consoles, wireless headphone, smartphone, internet to tv streaming, and smart watch. 54% of Blacks are digital natives, meaning over half of the population has spent their entire lives in the digital era. This number is 6% higher than the total population. Specifically, when it comes to video and audio consumption, “African Americans over-index for all things done on a smartphone, with a higher reach for social networking (75%), video (66%) and audio streaming (45%) on their smartphones. The group also spend more time listening to radio, with the average African American spending over 13 hours weekly listening to the radio” (Grace et al., 2018).

Through the numbers it becomes evident how mobile becomes the gateway through which the practice of social media is facilitated, executed, and exponentially compounded into significant consequence. Considering the rates of social media engagement and video streaming, it is logical to assess the impact of social video on Black users. As mobile video platforms like Socialcam, Vine, Instagram, and Snapchat emerged, Black users embraced the technologies and became heavy consumers and producers of content across these platforms.

### ***Legacy Deficit Models***

Though the Black community has been on the cutting edge of technology adoption and content creation, historically much of the scholarship on Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) used deficit models as the foundational lens to explore and examine Black users' online behavior (Brock, 2005; Epstein et al., 2011; Eubanks, 2012; Kling, 2000; Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). Much of the emphasis has been placed on "social access" as well as "technological access" (Kling, 2000). Simply put, does the user have access to machines connected to the internet and do they possess the "know how" to navigate digital spaces? Through Kling's work in Social Informatics, a lens of ICTs emerged that identified technology as more than just a tool but a sociotechnical system of embodied parts in need of an ecological worldview. Not only is it an embodiment of "*Sciences of the Artificial*" (Simon, 1969) but also political and economic (Pacey, 1983) enactments.

## ***Strides Towards Socio-Cultural Models***

Moving beyond technological determinism, discourse has changed over the years, paving the way for dialogue around the socio-cultural embeddedness of ICTs. The shift has moved to race as technology (Chun, 2003), Black Vernacular Technological Creativity (Fouché, 2006), distributed Blackness (Brock, 2020), Black digital journalism (Steele, 2016), Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Clark, 2014), algorithm bias (Noble, 2018) among other topics. Many scholars have laid the framework for mapping cultural and technical experiences into the digital space.

As discourse matured around ICTs, Black use of mobile technology also shifted with the emergence of new forms of social media practice. To further complicate the story of ownership and access in mobile video, the birth of mobile live streaming applications such as Periscope (Twitter) and Facebook Live highlighted another aspect of Black existence. Access to mobile live streaming technologies turned users into instant news broadcasters. Day or night, with the click of a button, any video or stream had potential to go viral. At times what these new broadcasters captured was gruesome. Live video of police brutality gave the world heightened insight into the lived experiences of Black community members (Juhasz, 2016; Alang et al., 2017; English, 2016; Fakunle et al., 2017). Thanks to live mobile video, social media and national news outlets have benefited greatly from the sensationalization of Black deaths. Violent videos capturing Black deaths at the hands of police officers garner millions of views and provide grandiose exposure for media companies. The virality of these deaths provides a fragmented view of the overall social video landscape, failing to take into

account the many contributions African Americans have made to ICTs via cultural conduits. Within the framework of sensational media, Black bodies become conceptualized as pawns of commercialization used to generate profits for large media companies such as Facebook and Twitter.

Juxtaposed to the aforementioned narratives, there are myriad activities transpiring daily from Black content creators and consumers via social video. These activities help shape the dynamic culture and practices in video platforms. Practices such as the creation of new hashtags, words, memes, dances, are among the many contributions (Calhoun, 2016a; Calhoun, 2016b; Gaunt, 2015) Once uploaded to the internet for the world to see, video creations often become part of mainstream society, generating valuable new knowledge and cultural expressions. By negating negative digital divide narratives that define disenfranchisement and deficit models as the impetus of Black consumption and use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), this research seeks to provide greater understanding about African American use of social video and its societal impact.

### ***Black Cybercultures as a Theoretical Approach***

This work uses André Brock's theory of Black Cybercultures and Distributed Blackness as the conceptual underpinning of analysis of Vine videos. In his book *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, André Brock (2020) argues that "Black folk have made the internet a "Black space" whose contours have become visible through sociality and distributed digital practice while also decentering whiteness as the default internet identity" (p. 5). By navigating the internet, a space that was not created

for them, Black people have reinvented what those online technologies mean by employing those technologies in ways they were not meant to be employed. These new inventions of online practice are what Brock deems to be “Black cyberculture”. Examples of Black cyberculture include conversational and culturally relevant hashtags like “Black girl magic” and the concept of “showing receipts”.

Brock uses the concept of the existential “here” by George Yancy (2005) as a foundation for the flexibility of the Black body in online spaces. This body is not just a “point of view” but a “point that is viewed” (Gordon, 2018). To this point, “the possibilities for communicating, performing, and apprehending Blackness in digital practice and spaces diminish the theoretical power of antiBlackness” (Brock, 2020, p. 228). Without the tight restrictions of racism, fear of discrimination and physical violence, Black people are permitted a level of freedom not afforded by the material world. This freedom creates the foundations by which the community enjoys what Brock calls the joy of Black “mundanity” in digital practice.

Using Black cybercultures as a theoretical underpinning for Vine allows me to center Black digital practice; to make Blackness the default without judgement or respectability politics. In this work video memes, descriptive hashtags, social dance, and “the dozens” are normative practice. An element of Black cyberculture, Black joy is typical and expected. Like Brock’s work, this research is not overly focused on oppression or resistance, but instead the practices generated by the mundane experiences of everyday living.



### ***Distributed Blackness as a Theoretical Approach***

Distributed Blackness uses Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis to read technologies as text. In CTDA technologies are analyzed via three modes: the interface, practice and belief. The theory of CTDA, "...combines analyses of information technology material and virtual design with an inquiry into the production of meaning through information technology practice and the articulations of information technology users in situ" (Brock, 2018, p. 1013). Brock argues CTDA provides a "holistic framework" to explore technology and the connections between its various parts.

The modes of analysis in CTDA each play a unique role in investigating and teasing out components of digital phenomena. The interface becomes the visual surface that users engage with. This could be the Google Search box, or the technological affordances of a tweet (retweet, like, comment, share), or a video. Practice embodies the representations of cultural production, the engagements users embody, act upon and create. These could be hashtag creation, social dances, or embedding only the chorus of a song in a Vine video. Belief in this context deals with the ways in which, "users perceive, articulate, and ultimately define the technocultural space in which they operate and exist. These discourses of technocultural ideology are contingent upon the contexts in which they are enacted" (Brock, 2018, p. 1016). Belief is about how the user sees his or herself, not how they are seen by the outside world. Thus, through belief, context is established and re-centering takes place as the framing moves from western ideologies to principles of Black racial identity.

## ***Research Questions***

This study explores Black cultural practice on the mobile video platform Vine, a six second micro video editing mobile application. This research investigates what Black digital practice on Vine is and how it connects to the larger discourse of ICTs as a whole. It is understood through socio-technical theory that groups define meaning and relevance for technological artifacts and by doing so give artifacts an application that makes sense in their local environment (Bijker et al, 1987). The purpose of this research is to critically examine the forms of Black digital practice on Vine and the aesthetic manifestations of those practices. Through this work I will explore: (1) What type of content did Black creators produce on Vine, (2) how did Black content creators leverage culture on Vine and (3) in what ways were Vine social practices innovative?

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Vine garnered millions of users and a strong legacy of Black content creators with a lifespan of only four years. This chapter explains the origination story of Vine and maps the app's existence to a larger socio-technical lens within Information and Communication Technology literature. I discuss what Vine is, why it was created, Vine's popularity among Black content creators and how the app helps transform the narrative of common ICT models such as the digital divide.

### ***What is Vine?***

Founded by Dom Hofmann, Rus Yusupov, and Colin Kroll, in June of 2012, Vine was a 6 second mobile video application (Vandersmissen et al., 2014). Twitter acquired the micro video platform for a reported \$30 million dollars and fully launched the application in 2013. By August of 2013, Vine had already accumulated over 40 million users, making it a huge success (Van Grove, 2013). Since its creation, Vine has become known as the first well known "short form" video or "micro-video" platform (Redi et al., 2014; Vandersmissen et al., 2014). The Vine app allowed users to shoot, edit and upload 6 second looping video clips or "Vines" on their mobile phones that could then be shared across other social media platforms. The app would allow users to record by touching the screen of their phones. Only scenes captured while pressing the screen would be recorded. This functionality popularized the rise of stop motion animation on the platform, as well as looping videos (videos with no distinguishable ending, that appear to repeat) (Redi et al., 2014). Typical Vine videos include content like, "singing, dancing, physical stunts, and magic tricks", as well as comedy (Kunze, 2014). Comedy

became a very important genre on the platform creating numerous Vine stars like King Bach, Destorm Power, and Jay Versace. Their popularity on Vine generated billions of views and allowed the creators to leverage their success to launch careers in standup, screen writing, and acting.

A few technological affordances users enjoyed with the application were, “follow other users, re-broadcast videos to their followers by so-called revining, comment on videos and embed videos on websites” (Vandersmissen et al., 2014). Users could also create Titles and descriptions for their Vines; the metadata associated with Vine videos often included hashtags for findability or as an artistic tribute mechanism to link the Vine to previously created content. Due to the unique 6 second technological affordance, many believe this restraint led to creativity and innovation in storytelling, one of the many reasons Vine became so popular (Calhoun, 2016a). With only 6 seconds to create a storyline, plot, characters and voice narrative, Vine users began to use their ingenuity to produce compelling highly scripted punch line stories, full of humor. Yet other users leveraged spontaneity and live events to capture video.

Vine was Twitter’s way to tap into the video landscape occupied by sites such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube and Snapchat. Like Twitter, according to founder Dom Hofmann, Vine had similar goals to allow users to, “come together to share and discover what's happening in the world” (Stern, 2013). The short format is likened to Twitter’s very own succinctness of 140 characters of text. At the announcement of Vine’s launch, Mike Sippey, Twitter’s Vice President of Product, confirmed the platform as, “a mobile service that lets you capture and share short looping videos. Like Tweets,

the brevity of videos on Vine (6 seconds or less) inspires creativity. Now that you can easily capture motion and sound, we look forward to seeing what you create” (Sippey, 2013). Where Twitter provided grounds for written discourse, Vine now provided the audiovisual details needed to fully engage users into the world of content creators.

## Vine in the Mobile Video Landscape

     	Social Media App & Date Founded	Date Mobile Video Launched	Length of Videos
	Youtube, February 2005	June 2007	Up to 12 hours
	Instagram, October 2010 (Photo)	June 2013	Up to 1 minute
	Snapchat, September 2011 (Photo)	May 2014	10 seconds
	Vine, January 2013	January 2013	6 seconds
	Periscope, March 2015 (Live Streaming)	March 2015	Unlimited
	Facebook Live, January 2015 (Live Streaming)	January 2015	Up to 4 hours

**Figure 1: Social Media Mobile Video Launch Dates**

### ***Black Youth and Vine***

Black youth were among Vine’s most active and prominent users (St. Felix, 2015; Smith, 2016). Black teenagers went about, “documenting their lives, parodying their cultural icons, dabbing, whipping, roasting each other and toiling to get that sketch just under 6 seconds” (St. Felix, 2015). Black culture was synonymous with Vine. So much so, that it did not need a denotation of “Black Vine” because the two were one in the same (St. Felix, 2015). These videos often went viral and made their way into mainstream television like the Daily Show and Ellen DeGeneres.

The popular video “Do it for the Vine” features a cute Black child dressed in a leotard refusing to dance when told “do it for the Vine”; she responds “I ain’t gonna do it”. After the third time, she breaks into smile and dance. Following the success of the video, Vine and social media users on multiple platforms remixed the video creating new memes and parody. Remix culture had long played a role on Vine. Videos featured mashups of popular songs, dances, memes, catchphrases, and video clips of tv shows and movies (Highfield & Duguay, 2015; English, 2016). Borrowing content from other Vine users became so popular on the platform that users created a unique manner of signifying borrowed content. Vines imitating original content were specifically tagged in the, “caption of the video by including “IB” (“inspired by”) and the username of the original Viner or by including a hashtag that references the original Vine....When users do not know if there is a single Viner who started a trend, but they know that others have posted similar Vines, they may include #remake” (Calhoun, 2016a).

Chicagoan Kayla Newman, also known as Peaches Monroe, started her channel to document her high school life and other mundane daily occurrences. She would also sing, dance, and pontificate her life’s wisdom from the passenger seat of her mother’s car. She also enjoyed featuring her mother in her videos. Kayla’s videos had primarily been a compilation of her life’s story and a journal. After creating numerous videos, she eventually captured an audience of millions with one catchy video. In her viral video Peaches Monroe describes her mood, “We in this bitch, finna get crunk, eyebrows on fleek, da fuq”. Her 6 second video became so viral, garnering millions of views, that big brands like IHOP, Denny’s, Dominoes, and Under Armor picked up the

term “on fleek” and used it in advertising campaigns (Grady, 2017). Though the video was created in 2014, a quick search in Google and Twitter can find the term still in full circulation at the time of writing. “On fleek” caught on and became a cultural phenomenon transcending its original points of origin. Though the word on fleek spread quickly, Peaches Monroe was not able to capitalize on the fame. She received no endorsements, no deals. Her creation was appropriated and hijacked by big brands and mainstream media, yet few credit her for her innovative gift to the world (Ellis, 2017).

Youngster Jay Versace, 16, gained popularity on Vine imitating his mother, teachers, and other authoritarian figures. The kid adorned himself with wigs and sometimes dresses to sing old pop songs parodying famous African American singers such as Pattie Labelle and Erica Badu. Viners like Jay Versace used their cultural wealth to deliver comedy relevant to their background and upbringing. Jay comments in an interview on his personal comedy style, “I have a different taste in comedy because of me being Black and my personality, the way I see things. I have something they don't see that often” (St. Felix, 2015). The youth on Vine worked hard to chop their punch lines and stories down to 6 seconds. In the process, they shared with the world everything from social dance to social commentary. Unfortunately, though many young Black faces helped Vine gain prominence as a mobile video platform, they rarely received a direct benefit from the company itself.

### ***Vine and Racial Comedy***

Vine creators like Andrew B. Bachelor also known as King Bach, a Black man known for his “Vine racial comedy”, was the most followed Vine user, with 16 million

followers and over 600 posted videos. He created skits about the stereotypes of race (Calhoun, 2016a). King Bach videos garnered over a billion loops, or replays, over the course of his Vine tenure. His videos featured social commentary on issues like racial profiling, interracial dating, Black Jesus, drive-by shootings, police brutality and fatherless homes. King Bach's videos embody influences from "Black stand-up comedy, animated reaction GIFs, and hashtag activism as discursive tools for taking a stance on racial issues" (Calhoun, 2016b, p. 2). His social commentary mirrors that of the late comedian Richard Pryor, who became notorious for racial comedy, illuminating racial injustice within the United States in the most vulgar and obscene manners (Carpio, 2008). King Bach utilized his position to critique systematic structures that oppress people of color, from the educational system, to the judicial system.

King Bach used his stylistic finesse and humor to make his comedy palatable without losing its message. He also strategically worked with other Viners such as Destorm Power (also of the racial comedy genre), as well as actors and creators of different genders and ethnicities. Bach was the epitome of the Vine mainstream cross-over. Ironically, Bach's raw uncut methods proved funny and endearing, winning white and Black fans alike. Interestingly to note, King Bach was older than most Black content creators on Vine. Bach was in his middle 20s when he started on Vine. Unlike other young Viners of color, Bach was able to capitalize on his newfound Vine stardom, winning recurring roles in television shows like *The Mindy Project*, *Black Jesus*, *House of Lies*, and the comedy film *Fifty Shades of Black*.



### ***Vine as a News Breaking Platform***

Not only did Vine provide laughter, it also gave the world insight into events like the Boston Marathon bombing and the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. Footage of the Boston Marathon bombing, recorded by capturing a televised news show, was uploaded to Twitter via Vine. This video gained over 35,000 views within the first hour online (Bosker, 2013). The video shows runners proceeding to the finish line, while a red flare begins to emerge on the righthand side of the video and subsequently runners begin to fall. Videos like these exploded onto the platform in the bombing's aftermath, prompting journalists to label Vine as the new "news breaking" application. People on the ground in Ferguson, Missouri also used Vine to capture protests and encounters with law enforcement after the shooting death of unarmed Michael Brown by local police (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). While Black Twitter tweeted about social justice, attendees of rallies and marches were able to provide visuals for the movement via Vine. These events were before the popularity of mobile live streaming services such as Periscope and Facebook Live. While Twitter became the poster child of social media journalism during civil revolts such as Arab Spring (Khondker, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lotan et al., 2011), Vine now provided the possibilities to take viewers into the audiovisual world of movements changing the fabric of their societies.

### ***Vine Comes to an End***

In fall 2016 Twitter notified the world it would be discontinuing the Vine video platform in January 2017. During the same time Twitter also announced plans to cut 9% of its labor force as a way to tighten its financial budget and appeal to investors

(Dave, 2016; Dunn 2016). Twitter was also moving their priorities towards Periscope, a mobile live streaming company it purchased in 2015 (Fiegerman, 2016). Periscope did well in the market after its initial release gaining millions of users and killing the mobile live streaming company Meerkat, its only direct live competitor at the time (Tang et al., 2016; Kulwin, 2016). As Facebook Live launched for regular Facebook users (it was already an option for influencers with large followings), the mobile video landscape further diversified adding more competition. When Vine originally launched in 2013, there were few video competitors, especially in the micro video space (Redi et al., 2014; Vandersmissen et al., 2014). However, over time platforms like Instagram caught on, adding video to their photo service. Snapchat also became big with youth, and a winner in the mobile video economy for young people (Vaterlaus et al., 2016). As other social media sites gained popularity, and Twitter refused to invest in content creators, the site began to die a slow death as activity on the platform slowly decreased. The company eventually decided to kill Vine.

Many cite Twitter's financial dilemmas as a reason for Vine's demise, while others claim the company did not invest in their content creators, forcing them to flee to other platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Facebook. Viners created videos that received billions of loops, or playbacks. Yet, most did not earn income from their efforts. Vine never implemented a revenue sharing system like YouTube. As Vine creators struggled to monetize their creativity, they eventually ceased activity.

The decision to discontinue the Vine service led to backlash and disappointment. The blogosphere filled with articles of disdain like "A Moment of Silence for the Black

and Brown Talent That Grew on Vine”, and “How Vine Overlooked the People of Color who Made it”. Users also flooded Vine with negative reviews in the app store lamenting its death. Bloggers and social media activists claimed Twitter killed the home of Black and brown humor and comedy (Hughes, 2016). For the creatives who invested hours into the platform, the discontinuation of the service appeared one-sided.

Currently the Vine application as it used to exist is dead. There is a standalone mobile application called Vine that functions as a video editor and allows for uploads to Twitter. Old Vine videos can now be found on the Vine.co website which features highlight clips from each year Vine was alive. In addition, some user accounts are still up. Vine fans have also created their own compilations of their favorite Vine videos. Compilation videos can be found on sites like YouTube and Facebook.

### ***Vine’s Connection to Black Twitter***

High adoption of mobile technologies by African Americans paved the way for high adoption of ICTs such as Twitter, the parent company of Vine (Horrigan, 2009). Twitter is a microblogging website that allows users up to 140 characters to convey a message to people who follow their accounts. These messages are deemed tweets (Florini, 2014). The service was launched in October of 2006 (Java et. al, 2007), and had over 319 million active users worldwide as of 2016 (Russell, 2017). On the platform, users have the options to retweet, reply, direct message, and like. African Americans as a group disproportionately used Twitter more than any other group of people (Smith, 2014). This phenomenon became known as “Black Twitter”. Brock (2012) describes Black Twitter as, “a user-generated source of culturally relevant online content,

combining social network elements and broadcast principles to share information” (p. 530). In this case Black Twitter represents a public conversation, instead of a specific group of users (Brock, 2012, Florini, 2014). Accordingly, not every individual that makes up Black Twitter is Black and not every Black person on Twitter plays a role in “Black Twitter”.

Although celebrity adoption of Twitter broadened its mainstream appeal, Brock (2012) attributes Twitter’s interface design and discourse conventions to the high adoption by Black users. In his study Brock uses critical technocultural discourse analysis to analyze Twitter’s interface and the commentaries of both mainstream and Black blogs in regards to their stance on Black Twitter. Brock argues that the use of #hashtags around cultural topics or discourse led to the discovery of Black Twitter. He cites, “Like other Black online activities, Black Twitter would have been considered “niche” without the intervention of the hashtag/trending topic. These two features brought the activities of tech literate Blacks to mainstream attention, contravening popular conceptions of Black capitulation to the digital divide” (Brock, 2012, p.545). With the implementation of the trending feature, popular hashtags like “#cookout; #wordsthatleadtotrouble; #wheniwaslittle; #inappropriatechurchsongs; #ifsantawasBlack; #ataBlackpersonfuneral; #onlyintheghetto; #hoodhoe” (Sharma, 2013) made their way to the forefront, exposing a cultural phenomenon. Brock’s study identifies how “a topical hashtag, when leavened with cultural commonplaces, could enrich communal bonds between networked Twitter users” (p. 544). These connections

happen with users that represent many cultures, subcultures, and niches. No matter the affiliation or affinity, Twitter connects users around common ideologies.

Over time Black Twitter has become known as a cultural phenomenon capable of creating viral content out of any subject the public voice feels relevant. For Black Twitter, nothing is off limits—from politics, social justice, the TV show *Scandal* or one of its seasonal monikers #thanksgivingwithBlackfamilies. These hashtags or “Blacktags” represent a form of Black vernacular expression, and manifest “in the form of humor and social commentary” (Sharma, 2013).

### ***Black Twitter and Black Lives Matter***

Take for example the #Blacklivesmatter movement, which exemplifies the power of Black Twitter. The movement started in 2013 after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, yet became popularized via Twitter in 2014 after the shooting death of unarmed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Black Lives Matter was created by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors after George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, gunned down 17 year old Trayvon on his way home from a convenience store in Sanford, Florida (Garza, 2016). George Zimmerman was tried and then acquitted of second degree murder. The trio created the hashtag and movement as a, “response to the anti-Black racism that permeates our society and also, unfortunately, our movements. Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza, 2016, p. 23).

The hashtag #Blacklivesmatter was created in 2013; however, it only received a few thousand tweets leading up to the end of 2014 (Freelon et al., 2016). Not until the shooting death of Michael Brown, who was shot in broad daylight with his hands up for jaywalking, on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 did the hashtag begin to take off (Curry, 2014). The day Robert McCullough, St. Louis prosecutor, announced that they would not indict Darren Wilson, the officer involved in the shooting, the number of tweets catapulted to over 100,000 (Curry, 2014). Users who tweeted the hashtag included mainly non activists, as well as a diverse group of media personalities, internet celebrities, journalists, and common folks. Black Entertainers like Kanye West, Pharrell Williams 50 Cent, Nas, and Jesse Williams were among them. Two weeks after the St. Louis Prosecutor failed to indict Darren Wilson, the media led with the announcement of another non-indictment in the death of Eric Garner who had been choked to death by New York police (Curry, 2014; Freelon et al., 2016; Newburn, 2014). As a result of another Black death caused by police failing to obtain justice, Black Twitter tweeted in solidarity of disappointment and outrage causing the number of tweets with the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter to spike again. As users tweeted their shock, others took to the street in protests in cities across the United States like Washington DC, New York, and Oakland. The protests led to more tweeting and eventually national news coverage. By the end of 2014, into 2015, the movement #Blacklivesmatter received national attention and became more than just a hashtag.

What started as a hashtag eventually led to a real organization with physical chapters across the United States (Garza, 2016). The organization Black Lives Matter

thus becomes synonymous with the hashtag #Blacklivesmatter, a movement fighting for social justice for the Black community. In this case Twitter's ability to act as an organizing tool for social justice becomes evident, as well as its ability to transcend the digital space into the physical world, making national news, and creating visibility for social justice of marginalized people.

### ***Black Twitter and Black Online Spaces***

What makes Black Twitter unique was its invisibility at Twitter's onset, the notion that Black people were not occupying the same technological spaces as whites, and using technology in a manner that represented their own unique cultural competencies and affinities (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014). Black Twitter is especially important for many reasons. First, it provided a space for Black community members and discourse to exist: a place for African Americans to gather to talk about culturally relevant issues, content, and news relevant to their own cause. Black internet users have always had to carve out online spaces to exist, to be. Historically, content targeted to African Americans online has been less than that for whites (Hoffman et al., 2000). Though the number of sites have grown over the years, the need to create space for Black bodies in the digital ether has become increasingly important as more Black bodies are coming online and the digital divide is lessening (Gant et al., 2010). Before the discovery of Black Twitter, Twitter was regarded as a place for geeks, a place void of color, where the technological elite hung out. This elite group was primarily white and male (Brock, 2012). Black Twitter dismantled this stereotype by its discovery, and its existence

championed the importance of understanding varying cultural modes of consumption in information communication technologies.

### ***Black Twitter as an Economic Force***

Second, Black Twitter is an economic force. According to Leslie Miley, former engineering manager at Twitter, people of color and women comprised a significant portion of the company's U.S. revenue (Bates, 2015). He states in an article published by NPR, "At one point I tried to figure out how much of Twitter's U.S. revenue we can attribute to people of color and women. And it is *not* an insignificant amount. If that cohort goes away, Twitter pretty much doesn't survive" (Bates, 2015). To this end companies like Allstate Corporation and Home Depot have taken notice in the past, creating special campaigns with unique Twitter handles and buying advertisements on the website to connect with African American users (Koh, 2014). When the movie "12 Years a Slave" debuted, Cornerstone Agency invited Twitter users to private screenings to help generate buzz (Koh, 2014; Williams, 2014). Companies have taken notice of the importance of Black Twitter, yet within the realms of employees, Twitter did not make representation a matter of importance.

### ***Twitter's Blind Eye to Diversity***

Leslie Miley served as one of the highest ranking engineers at Twitter for 3 years and pushed diversity initiatives for more representation of women and people of color on the engineering teams, without progress (Bates, 2015; Dickey, 2015; Miley, 2015). Miley penned a Medium post after his departure from Twitter titled, "Thoughts on Diversity Part 2. Why Diversity is Difficult" (Miley, 2015). In his letter, Miley



acknowledges that over 30% of Twitter's active users were people of color, who contributed endlessly to the platform; however, less than 5% occupied engineering and product management roles within the company. According to Miley, the company would acknowledge the trending of hashtags like #ferguson, but did not go beyond to understand the how, why and importance of such creations.

Miley evangelized the needs for diversity within the company to appeal to important core users; however, he was confronted with the classic excuse "diversity lowers the bar". During a meeting with the Sr. VP of Engineering, Miley recalls the best solution the VP could propose was to create a name analysis tool to track ethnicities of job candidates through the hiring pipeline, which he knew would be ineffective. Discouraged with the outcome of the meeting with the Sr. VP and others like it, Miley left Twitter, fearing the company's commitment to diversity both in action and words would not get better (Bates, 2015; Dickey, 2015; Miley, 2015).

Like Twitter, Vine was used as a mechanism for social commentary and Black discourse (Giorgis, 2015; Luckie, 2016; Romano, 2016; Workneh, 2016), a space for Black bodies to exist and create. Vine saw an active user group of African American content creators push viral content daily. This activity brought the mobile app to mainstream attention, comparable to the ways in which tweets from Black Twitter went viral popularizing cultural #hashtags and trending topics. With Vine the audiovisual nature of the ICT provided an artistic perspective that Twitter did not offer, yet similar brevity to explore creativity within the scope of 6 second confinement. Twitter's ultimate

misalignment of diversity and disconnection to its core user base foreshadowed events to come with the Vine platform

### ***The Digital Divide***

The digital divide creates the foundational framework for understanding why studying Vine is important. The digital divide is a politically charged issue in the United States. It describes the “usage gap” in the technological adoption of computers, internet access, and information communications technology (ICT) (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). This “usage gap” describes those who own a computer and internet connection, and those who do not. Dichotomously depicted as a phenomenon of the “haves” and “have nots” (Eubanks, 2012), the digital divide discourse has historically focused on hardware possession and often omits issues such as digital experience and digital skills (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003). Discourse also underestimates the resources and know-how of communities who are deemed members of the “have not” category (Brock, 2005, Eubanks, 2012). Binary descriptors used in digital divide discourse are exceedingly simplistic and one-dimensional.

### ***Access vs. Digital Literacy***

Though many scholars and politicians believe access alone means upward mobility and a more educated society, others believe this stance is highly idealistic. Epstein and colleagues describe government policies in the U.S as focusing primarily on having the fastest and most powerful computers, and best telephone service. Their perspective is geared towards technology as the “ultimate development tool” and many believe, “simply installing it will spur development more broadly” (Epstein et al., 2011, p.

94). This stance is highly optimistic and does not highlight other dynamics of ICT adoption such as social access. As defined by Kling (2000), “*social access* refers to know-how—a mix of professional knowledge, economic resources, and technical skills—for using technologies in ways that enhance professional practices and social life”, and this component plays as much of a role in the phenomena as possession of hardware (Kling, 2000, p. 226). One needs more than an internet connection and laptop to experience the benefits offered by information access via the web. Possession does not equate to social change.

### ***Culturally Relevant Digital Content***

Brock (2005) provides an additional view for why marginalized people were slow to come online. He addressed the following concern, “...internet content will be developed to appeal to those who can best afford the service” and therefore the lack of content presented for cultural consumption for ethnic groups such as African Americans affect their adoption of the internet (p. 360). On the individual level if the user feels the information on the web does not meet their needs, they will not log on. Because African Americans and ethnic minorities demonstrated lower levels of technological adoption earlier on (Kling, 2000, Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003), the type of content culturally available and relevant to them has been lower than that for mainstream audiences (Brock, 2005). In this case, what the internet means for one group is not the same as the meaning derived for another group, it lacks relevance. If the meaning derived from the artifact is different from that of the engineers who designed it, it is not a failure on the part of the

technology nor does it represent an inadequacy on behalf of the user (Bijker et al., 1987). What it does demonstrate is a misalignment of goals and values.

### ***Political Economy of Information***

The information society provides an additional lens to view the digital divide. Information and ICTs are cultural, social, political, as well as economic artifacts (Winner, 1980). The information society describes the vertex where information, culture, and the economy intertwine. Herb Schiller (2013) in his book *Information Inequality* explains the “mountains of data and the growing stock of information processing equipment are the essential elements in the information using economy, the alleged “information society” that has emerged in recent years” (p.34). In the information society, information is used in two ways: 1) as a social good; 2) as a commodity. As a social good information serves the social welfare of the society. It aids in the democratic process, it provides information that allows citizens better health and wellbeing. Alternatively, as a commodity, information or ICTs are packaged and put up for sale to the highest bidder. This commodification has global implications and a long history, a history that traditionally benefits wealthy corporations and creates a path of inadvertent consequences.

According to Dan Schiller (2006), commodification is central to new ICTs and new media productions such as, “printing and continuing through lithography, photography, film, audio, and video recording, digital signal processing, and biotechnologies of genetic recombination” (p.23). The commodification process of ICTs is fundamentally aided by capitalism. Herb Schiller (2013) highlights that the majority of

people working within the industries listed by Dan, are “organized and controlled by a handful of giant businesses” (p. 7). Herb Schiller makes the case that high art and entertainment in America are controlled by corporate interests and those occupying jobs in these sectors are against scrutiny of a corporate culture that prioritizes the bottom line and the continuance of elite capitalistic legacies. For this reason television and radio programming, “falls short on its informational cultural potential” (p.117). As a result communication productions are advertisement laden, with programs focusing on the agendas that serve the elite to an economic prosperous end.

### ***African Americans and Mobile***

Though the historical view of the relationship between African Americans and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has been one of disenfranchisement, African American adoption of mobile technology challenges this narrative. African Americans have been equal adopters of smartphone technology when compared to whites (Smith, 2014). The study also reveals 12% of African Americans are “smartphone dependent”, indicating their reliance on mobile phones for internet access instead of broadband connections (Smith, 2014; Mossberger et al., 2017). Gant and colleagues (2010) also note the increased usage of mobile technology for African Americans. According to the National Minority Broadband Adoption Report, 81% of African Americans own a mobile phone, compared to 54% that own a desktop or laptop computer (Gant et al., 2010). 50% of African Americans displayed higher rates of accessing the internet via their mobile phone. Not only are African Americans logging onto the internet more via mobile technology, phenomena such as Black Twitter, and

active use on Vine also provide insight into the type of activities Black users are engaged in while online.

### ***Race and Online Content***

Content on the Internet is formatted, created and presented for a “general audience” (Brock, 2009, p. 346). This audience is assumed void of gender and race. According to Wright (2005), “in the Western imagination technology is the exclusive provenance of the West--it is by default always white, almost always male, and sexuality rarely emerges as an imaginative category” (p. 49). This ‘color-blind’ and ‘gender-blind’ ideology popularized by the creators and doers of the internet recreates old systems of racism and sexism, ultimately marginalizing women and people of color. The internet thus becomes an ecosystem of dominance and privilege that seats middle class white men in positions of power and everyone else in realms of vulnerability.

Like people of color, women have faced similar oppressive scrutiny when it comes to their history with technology. Wajcman (2010) highlights that “women’s power, women’s culture and women’s pleasure are regarded as having been systematically controlled and dominated by men, operating through patriarchal institutions like medicine and militarism” (p. 146). The problem is not that women have not had ideas. The issue is that the patriarchal systems mentioned by Wajcman sustained women’s lack of economic and social power.

Brock (2009) sums up what these ideologies mean for Internet users and creators: “In an American context this translates to information devoted to interests and fears of affluent, middle class White men. Women and minorities are constructed as

boundaries or objects for this audience” (p. 346). When you are the ruling class, “it is common sense to suppose that technology, as a medium of power, will be developed and used in any system of dominance to further the interests of those who are on top”, but the impacts this has on those at the bottom are detrimental (Cockburn, 1985, p. 8). In a capitalistic society that prioritizes competition and economic mobility, it is “common sense” that the ones creating technology would build reflexive artifacts that benefit self, web content included.

### ***Black Bodies and the Internet***

For example, Noble (2013) highlights how Google search commodifies the bodies of Black women to recreate racist narratives of traditional media. As a consequence of its economic success and near monopoly on search, Google operates as a highly successful Black box no one questions, yet a digital object everyone uses. Google generates the bulk of its revenue from advertising, rendering its algorithms a political tool. This tool plays the role of information retriever, advertiser, goods broker, and identity constructor. These factors create a dynamic yet nuanced experience for the user. Noble notes that at the time of writing, the term “Black girls” when searched on Google, generated massive amounts of porn results, while at the same time, googling the term “white girls” did not (Noble, 2013). Due to search protocols of tagging, backlinking, pagerank, search volume, and numerous other factors that encompass Google’s powerful algorithm, the term “Black girls” became associated with pornographic material. To further explain Noble states, “...their identity is subject to control by people looking for porn, and porn searches do not even have to be explicit. It

is precisely this shortcut, if you will, of making porn and Black girls synonymous that I am trying to point to as problematic for many women's identities" (Noble, 2013, p. 13). Here we see Black women are not in control of their own narratives in search. Google creates the narratives (those who design the algorithms), and those who use the algorithm (unbeknownst) define Black women identities online.

Similarly, Nakamura (2014) shows the impacts of racist memes on Black bodies via the websites like 419baiter.com and 419eater.com. Members of these online communities collect trophy photos of would-be scammers posed in emasculating "sexualized, nude, debased, and queered..." manners (p. 264). These scammers are always Black and male. The websites serve as a way to assist in the distribution of racist memes and artifacts via social media channels. Community members call themselves "digilantes" and pride themselves with being able to fool would-be scammers into conducting shameful acts, which stalls the scammers from committing additional acts of crime on vulnerable subjects. Using Brock's framework, in this example non-white men become objectified in gameplay and the personification of a glorified cyber sport causing public degradation and shame. Because "the hegemonic nature of the Web continues to prioritize information for the mainstream," community members find no wrong in their actions and therefore they do not see it as the blatant embodiment of racism, sexism and power it represents (Brock, 2009, p. 346).

### ***Digital Narratives as a Political Tool***

Nakamura (2014) and Noble (2013) identify examples in which digital artifacts cultivate and disseminate legacies of racism and sexism. Chun (2003) identifies new



possibilities, "through the orientalizing- the exoticizing and eroticizing of others, those imagining, creating, and describing cyberspace [internet] have made electronic spaces comprehensible, visualizable, and pleasurable" (p. 4). In this context the internet is about colonizing unknown spaces. Through the process of colonization narratives are being formed and meaning is being established. Leveraging the capabilities to colonize the internet, Chun (2012) approaches the internet as a tool to make race and gender "do different things". For Chun, "the best way to fight racism might not be to deny the existence of race but to make race do different things...to reformulate race, we need to reframe nature and culture, privacy and publicity, self and collective, media and society" (p. 57). It is through defining new narratives, telling new stories, through "media and society" that creators and doers in online spaces can leverage web content and information to embody new values, juxtaposed to those of mainstream insight.

Within the "new frontier" writing becomes the political tool. Every website, online community, and social media platform in the world is formed with language, including programmed code, user comments, blog content, social media updates, retweets, shares, and other forms of language. Haraway (1991) views writing as a powerful tool, a technology to redefine new futures. For her writing becomes a means of resistance and an important element of women's liberation. Writing for Haraway epitomizes cyborg agency of expression and creation. Beyond creative outlets, "cyborg writing is about the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (p. 160). Here the power of writing gives the cyborg (who we can assume to represent women and also people of color) a

way to create new imagery, to create a new narrative of self, stories which did not previously exist.

### ***Formulating New Narratives via ICTs***

A unique opportunity emerges to rewrite history, the history of other, which marginalized the cyborg from the rest of the population. According to Haraway (1991) these new narratives are, "...often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfilment in apocalypse" (p. 161). To combat issues of racism, sexism, domination and oppression, writing is vital. Writing allows those disenfranchised to voice their truths, share identities, and be remembered. Over time presenting alternative narratives erodes the prevailing ideologies of mainstream culture.

Wright (2005) suggests the creation of online communities for women and people of color as a means to expand narratives and rewrite history. Black Twitter and Vine are part of the digital repertoire challenging long-held narratives of "other" and disenfranchisement. Through 140 character tweets and 6 second videos, stories are told and futures are made. Creating new narratives in online spaces is a start. To further social change, increased representation of women and people of color in design and engineering roles is also essential. Creatives play a crucial role in building ICTs used in communities of color. Women and people of color need to be among the collaborators and contributors of product design to strategically shape the digital narratives and

culture of the future. Their presence, *ceteris paribus*, ensures diverse perspectives are considered from conception, design, development, and deployment of new technological artifacts.

### ***Culture and Innovation in the Periphery***

“I have these two views of the world that I believe few people in Silicon Valley understand. The first is this idea about culture. I think all global culture is led by American culture which is led by Black culture. Music, dance, food, everything. And more recently Latino and Asian culture. A biggest frustration of mine, is that I’m living in the earliest adopting region on earth, and it’s knowing very little about the earliest adopting culture. That’s a problem to me....That’s an opportunity” (Walker, 2017).

Dominant tech narratives push the innovative activities of women and people of color to the periphery of the larger technological landscape, while technology designed in spaces such as Silicon Valley becomes the center (Chan, 2014; Srinivasan, 2017; Avle and Lindtner, 2016; Suchman et al., 2008). Innovation outside of Silicon Valley is considered to be “catching up with the West” (Avle and Lindtner, 2016). Activities in the periphery become an afterthought and othered, virtually invisible, pushed to the edge of technological discourse and often not described as innovation at all. Though peripheral spaces are often marked invisible, “the dynamic activity from peripheral sites suggests how agents once holding minor status-and even the notion of “the copy” itself-can emerge instead as fresh sources of distinctly optimized or unencumbered productivity” (Chan, 2014, p. xi). Innovation happens everywhere and is not confined to the center. If the center paid more attention to the periphery the conversation would open up to include more diverse voices.

Take for example a study conducted on youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods and their use of social media (Stevens et al., 2017). The study used semi-structured interviews to talk with 60 youth, 30 males and 30 females ages 13-24. Some of the youth hailed from neighborhoods too dangerous to leave home after school (Holt et al., 2009; Jarrett, 2003). The study refuted normative notions that social media websites like Facebook are used as highlight reels, and a means of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Valenzuela et al., 2009). The youth in Stevens' study posed a different view of Facebook. Youth portrayed Facebook as a "ghetto news center": a place to learn the latest gossip from the neighborhood, a place to learn about premature deaths, shootings, and crime. As one youth describes, "I think Facebook is like a ghetto news center for like, who's died, who's pregnant, find out everything is bad in the world but nothing's good" (Stevens et al., 2016, p. 956). The youth in this study help to understand the use of social media in a broader context juxtaposed to normative conventions. For the disadvantaged youth, there was no social capital to be gained, more so fights and conflict. In this case Facebook was a service channeling digital manifestations of their lived realities of economic and social misfortune.

What counts as innovation and where innovation happens is a discourse driven by the center (Suchman et al., 2008; Srinivasan, 2017; Ehn et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2016). People see large companies like Facebook, Google and Twitter, and believe their role is to serve the public good. However, their primary purpose is to serve the goals of their shareholders and board of directors, and to that end, money is central (Srinivasan, 2017). The narratives of innovative domination served by corporate

interests are simplistic, technologically deterministic and exclusive. Large companies use their economic power, history of successful commodified goods, and research labs as the epitome of innovation. However, critical scholars are working to change this narrative to shine more light on the activities at the periphery and at the margin. My research on Vine aims to add to that scholarship.

With Vine, Black content creators, often Black youth, used the few resources they had to bring the world dynamic micro videos full of social commentary, humor and viral memes. Their contributions mainly went unnoticed, while their white counterparts received the bulk of the economic benefits. Linking the use and consumption of Vine to innovation in the periphery is critical to exploring the political economy of micro video.

## CHAPTER 3: QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

### ***Making Meaning of African American Authored Vine Videos***

The research herein is designed to answer the following questions: (1) What type of content did Black creators produce on Vine, (2) how did Black content creators leverage culture on Vine and (3) in what ways were Vine social practices innovative? To investigate the first and second research questions, I used Qualitative Content Analysis as a method to understand the characteristics associated with the everyday use of Vine. I also use Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis at the same time to interpret insights and answer the remaining dissertation question in greater detail.

Brock (2018) places emphasis on analyzing technology at 3 levels: design (interface), practice (culture), and belief (ideology). In order to systematically analyze Vine at the interface level, Qualitative Content Analysis was selected to capture video aesthetic patterns, cultural representations, content themes, and unique nuances located within the artifact and ethos of Vine. Qualitative Content Analysis can provide insight on what Vine was as a mobile platform, digital service, and cultural practice, while Distributed Blackness, Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis can establish precedence for Vine's importance within cultural, innovation, political, and economic contexts. In Chapter 4 both methods will be used in conjunction to dissect and make sense of Vine. Chapter 3 will focus on the research study design by further defining QCA, CTDA and the data collection process.

### ***What is Qualitative Content Analysis***

Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). QCA has its origins in communication sciences and originally dealt with text (Mayring, 2001). Many scholars have moved beyond investigating solely text to examine both manifest as well as latent meanings of content from materials such as: videos, music, manuals, art, or even other inanimate objects such as plastic (Graneheim et al., 2017; Krippendorff, 2018, Mayring, 2014. What sets Qualitative Content Analysis apart from traditional content analysis, also known as quantitative content analysis, is its deviation from strictly counting words or frequencies of occurrences of language in text to scrutinizing language of said text in order to group communication into categories and themes that have similar meanings (Weber, 1990).

This method has also been referred to as: qualitative media analysis or ethnographic content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), thematic content analysis (Smith et al., 1992), linguistic content analysis (Roberts, 1989), and flexible content analysis (Rustemeyer, 1992). Though each of the aforementioned methods have their own take on what it means to do non-quantitative content analysis, the intentions are similar: describe the latent meaning of text and media.

Historically content analysis has been geared toward statistical analysis of data to support activities such as hypothesis testing (Graneheim et al., 2017). In contrast,

Qualitative Content Analysis emphasizes meaning and relationships among the mode of communication being investigated. Though counting frequencies is not off limits when it comes to QCA, those quantifications are used less scrupulously than in content analysis. Ultimately the aim of QCA is “to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314).

### ***Conventional Approach to QCA***

The conventional approach to Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) was used in this study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach “is generally used with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon....This type of design is usually appropriate when existing theory or research literature on a phenomenon is limited. Researchers avoid using preconceived categories, instead allowing the categories and names for categories to flow from the data” (p. 1279). To address the question what kind of content Black users created on Vine, I immersed myself in a corpus of Vine videos and used conventional qualitative content analysis as a form of inductive category development (Mayring, 2001). By doing this I was able to establish categories based on the videos themselves without being tied to previous research or theory for my category development.

On the surface, the process of inductive category development makes the conventional approach to qualitative content analysis appear much like methodologies such as grounded theory or phenomenology; however, one large difference emerges. QCA does not lend itself to theory development like the aforementioned methodologies (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The end result of a study is one of “concept development” or



“model building” (Lindkvist, 1981). The job of QCA is to describe, and it does not seek to explain the “lived experience”. For this reason, I have broken the research of this study up using two methodologies: one to describe phenomena transpiring in Vine videos (QCA), and the other to explain the larger context and meanings of the descriptions that emerge using Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA).

I chose the conventional approach to QCA for its ability to scrutinize characteristic patterns shown in Vine without being hindered by previous work. In essence the videos were allowed to speak for themselves. Because there is little written about Vine in academic literature, I desired a methodology that would allow for a systematic yet adaptive exploration of Vine. Accordingly, QCA allowed the opportunity for new insights about Vine to emerge from the research.

### ***Trustworthiness in Qualitative Content Analysis***

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) argue that a challenge in qualitative content analysis is “...failing to identify key categories” (p. 1280). To establish trustworthiness and validity in the work, the researcher may use techniques such as: peer debriefing, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and reflexivity (Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Manning, 1997). In this research credibility was maintained by a series of activities: reflexivity, prolonged engagement, persistent observation and peer debriefing.

### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is the way in which a researcher’s own beliefs, lenses and understandings make their way into the work. Manning (1997) argues, “The researcher’s perspectives (e.g., opinions held, methodological training, persona

attributes) cannot be ignored on the assumption that they will not influence the study” (p.103). Here the goal of the researcher is to make their values and beliefs explicit so that the consumers of the work are well informed of the context by which the work was examined in order to provide their own critique of the ways in which these values shape the investigation (Belgrave & Smith, 1995; Phillips, 1990).

### ***The Researcher***

This research investigation was conducted by a Black woman of 34 years of age. She has worked for social media and technology companies and has served on the board of advisors for a startup developing mobile apps for equity and social justice. She has a broad range of methodological research skills in both qualitative and quantitative methods, which derive from her advanced training in theory and practice. The researcher has also lectured and given workshops over the last 7 years at the local, national and international level on topics related to technology, entrepreneurship, digital marketing, and African American use of digital technology.

Due to the proximity of the topic, the researcher leveraged the use of peer debriefers to add to the trustworthiness of the research investigation. The debriefers share a breadth of knowledge as it relates to technology, information science, and Black use of digital technology. Details for how the researcher deployed peer debriefers are provided below.

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Manning (1997) says peer debriefing occurs when, “the researcher engages in ongoing and periodic discussions with a colleague(s) knowledgeable about research

methodology but not directly engaged in the study” (p. 104). He cites as the foundation of his assessments. During these activities the researcher and colleagues engage in dialogue about the various hypotheses surrounding the phenomena and “the peer debriefer asks probing questions, plays devil’s advocate and provides alternative explanations” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 140). For this study the dissertation committee along with two colleagues served as peer debriefers.

While formulating the study, I met with various members of the committee to tease out methodology. These meetings culminated in a formal dissertation proposal, wherein I presented the methodology and rationale. During that time feedback was given, and those suggestions were folded into the work. For example, I originally planned to analyze the work of one Vine content creator. After feedback from the committee, it was suggested it would make a more trustworthy study to examine more videos. In response, I widened the scope.

One peer debriefer, also an African American woman, a graduate student in computer science was used to help question the formulation of codes for the Vine videos. She was chosen because she was unfamiliar with the direct topic at hand yet has cultural context to probe the relational constructs of the material. The second debriefer was an African American male, a researcher at a technology company. He was chosen to counterbalance the female representation of the aforementioned debriefers. His expertise is in quantitative and qualitative methodology; he provided unique perspectives on organizing the data.

### ***Prolonged Engagement***

This technique stems from anthropology and ethnographic literature and cites one year in the field as a guideline for prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Data collection, as detailed later in the chapter, began in February 2018 and through the process of theoretical sampling, the time spent with the data lasted over a year. Though this work is done with documents and not people, the time frame was long enough to establish good working knowledge of the video material.

### ***Persistent Observation***

This technique is concerned with “in depth pursuit of those elements found to be especially salient” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In order to accomplish this, a triangulation of events is observed to tease out the most important insights. In this study, I collected the Vine videos as well as the descriptions of those videos, along with information such as the number of times that video was viewed, reVined, and liked. Using Brock’s CTDA (2018), all of these technological affordances become the interface and a surface from which insight can be drawn.

Now that the precedence for trustworthiness has been established, the next sections will deal directly with the steps involved in qualitative content analysis and how I used the method to study the videos on Vine.

### ***Steps in Qualitative Content Analysis***

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) the qualitative content analysis journey begins with immersing oneself in the data: text, transcripts of interviews, or in this study, videos. Step one is getting to know your data (Tesch, 2013). This happens by reading

the data repeatedly to achieve optimal immersion and knowledge of the corpus. Following this technique, I spent hours watching over a thousand 6 second Vine videos. I studied each category from the archive, I listened to the audio, and gave special attention to the actors, settings, and topics.

After the researcher has been immersed in the corpus, mode of communication is then analyzed word by word in order to develop codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morgan, 1993; Morse & Field, 1995). Vine videos in this study were analyzed shot by shot. A shot is defined as, “a piece of film that has been exposed, without cuts or interruptions, in a single running of the camera. The shot is often regarded as the elemental division of a film” (Sharff, 1982, p.180). On average shots per Vine video varied but ranged between 1 to 8 shots per video. The more skilled the video creator, the more shots a video contained. Because videos only total 6 seconds, more shots mean shorter scenes. Due to the short scenes, shots flash quickly, at times blurring the cuts in the video. As a result, the video feels continuous.

Each Vine video was analyzed shot by shot (the uninterrupted film between transitions and cuts), and key concepts were written down. These first impressions became the foundation of the codes generated from the study.

Next, moving forward in analysis, the process of generating codes continues using the same steps listed above. Patterns are highlighted and characteristics are teased out shot by shot. Labels for the codes eventually emerge by combining more than one key thought (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For instance, in this study after watching multiple videos it is evident many Vine videos contain music and lyrics from

popular songs. Drake's *Hotline Bling* single is one example of the many lyric references present in viral Vines. The video features the rapper Drake hunched over dancing in a futuristic cubelike structure that changes colors and shapes throughout the video. He sings the lyrics, "I know when that hotline bling, that can only mean one thing" (Drake, 2015). In the song Drake talks about missing his girlfriend and fantasizes about if she is doing the things she used to do with him, with other people. In this case the code generated is *rap lyrics*.

Dances such as the *Shmoney* dance are also a frequent occurrence in Vines, here the code becomes *social dance*. The dance features the jovial movement of the shoulders back and forth. The videos collected in this corpus feature individuals dancing in groups, enjoying the playfulness of the dance and lyrical accompaniment. Commonly dance videos feature not only the music but also the lyrics of popular songs. The Shmoney dance features lyrics from the song *Hot Nigga* by Bobby Shmurda. Hence the dance is also a play on his name. The song goes, "Mitch caught a body about a week ago, week ago, fuck wit' us and then we tweakin', ho, run up on that nigga, get to squeezin', ho" (Shmurda, 2014). Though performed in the midst of violent lyrics, the dance is performed by Shmurda in a group, along with his friends in a vivacious carefree manner. The dance emulates a freedom and liberty, juxtaposed to the words being sung.

At times the labels come directly from the words or actions within the data. Categories are then formed by sorting and combining like codes into clusters. Related and linked codes are grouped, forming meaningful categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996;

Patton, 2002). Following my example from the study, the codes *rap lyrics* and *social dance* are grouped into a clustered category called *music & dance*.

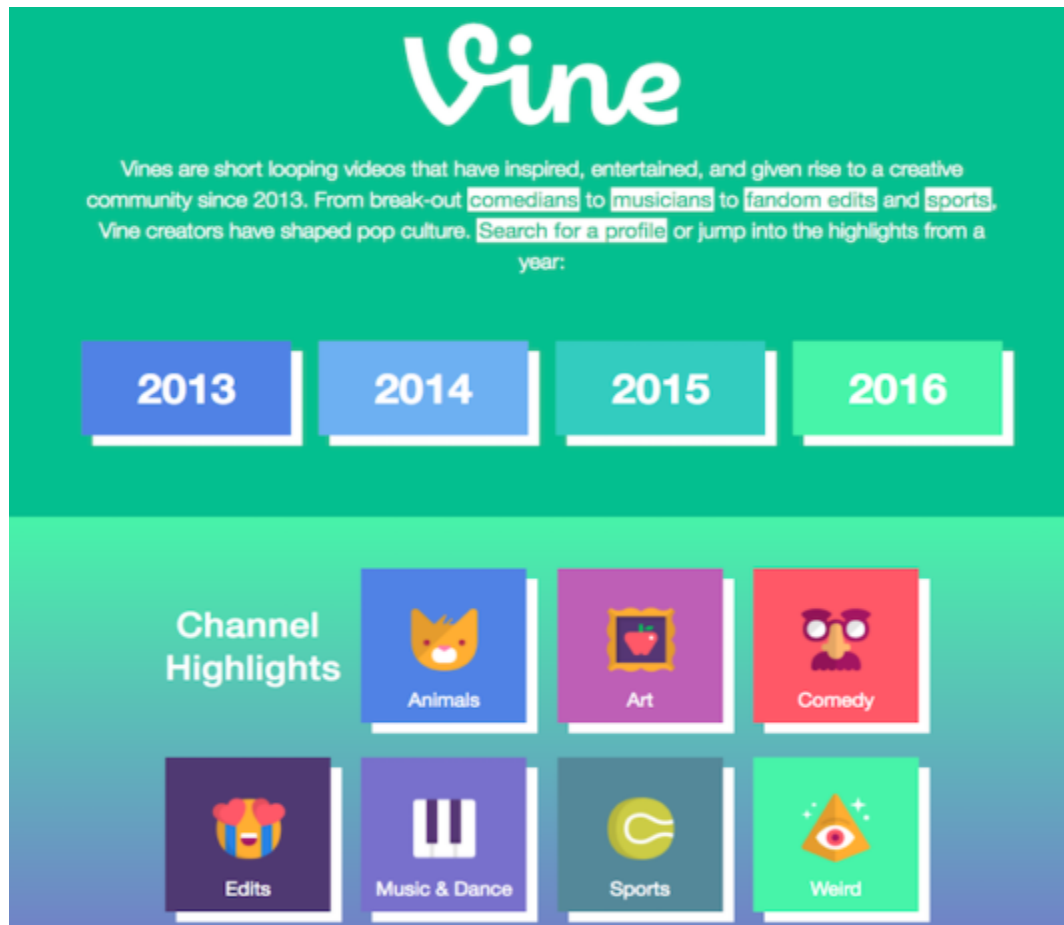
Lastly, once the codes and categories are created, definitions are established for each element outlining the distinctness of each abstraction. Categories may be relational or hierarchical and the use of tree diagrams can be used to visualize the organizational structure of the findings (Morse & Field, 1995). When reporting the findings of the research within each code and category an “exemplar” is selected as a model by which findings may be explained (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For example, in this section I selected Drake’s song *Hotline Bling* as an exemplar for the code *rap lyrics*. Consequently, both *rap lyrics* and *social dance* were used to show how codes are combined into categories (music & dance).

Once the findings are reported via codes and categories, “relevant theories or other research findings are addressed in the discussion section” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In this study Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis was performed alongside QCA to connect the findings to a larger socio-cultural context in the discussion chapter.

### ***Video Selection Criteria***

Vine as a mobile application was discontinued in January 2017 (Dave, 2016; Dunn 2016). The application was taken down from the Google Play Store as well as Apple’s App Store. As a result of the denouement of service, Twitter, Vine’s parent company, created an archive of Vine videos at [www.Vine.co](http://www.Vine.co). The creation of an archive to house old videos was a unique action taken by the company and done partially in response to the outcry from fans (Hughes, 2016).

For this study the Vine.co website was used to select videos created by Black content creators. The Vine.co website will be referred to as the archive or Vine archive throughout the dissertation. Below is a partial snapshot of the archive homepage.



**Figure 2: Vine Video Archive Home Page Categories**

Upon arriving to the archive homepage, multiple categories are listed by curators. Videos are divided into multiple categories: by year (2013, 2014, 2015, 2016); by genre (Animals, Art, Comedy, Edits, Music & Dance, Sports, Weird); as well as Editor's Pick, Playlist, and Community categories. There is no clear indication how categories were formed or who created the categories. While working through this research project, the primary assumption is that someone from the company Vine established the categories



and placed selected videos within each category they deemed best fit the content of that group. Videos vary from thousands of views to millions of views.

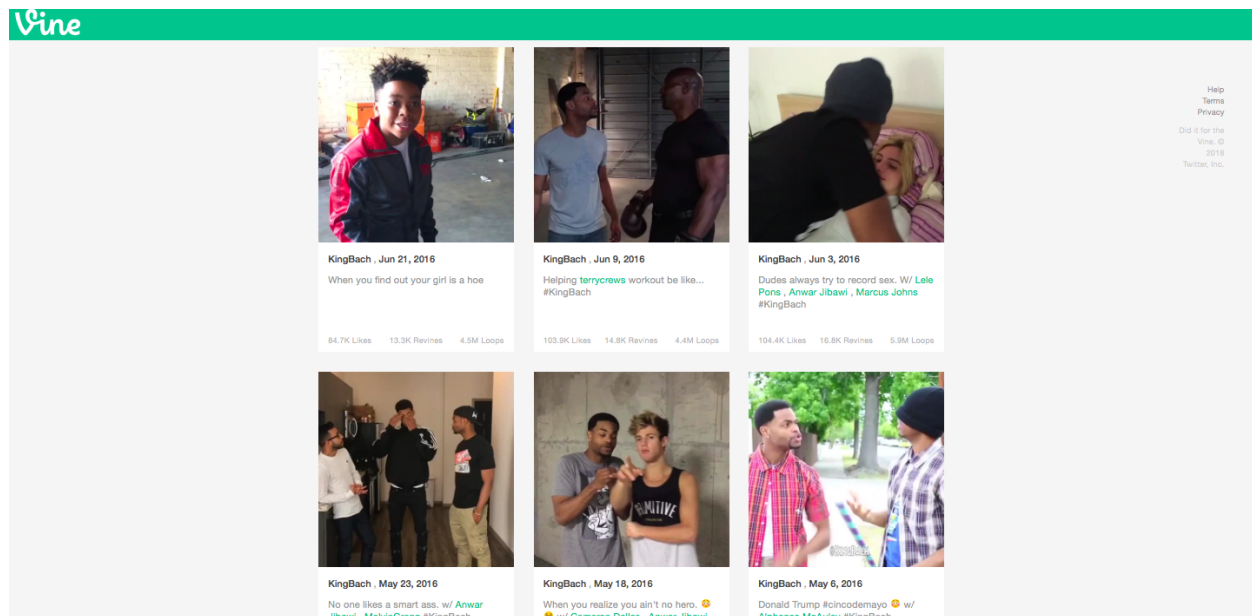
Unlike the categories pictured above, Editor's pick, Playlist and Community included solely widely known viral videos such as "Eyebrows on Fleek," "Do it for the Vine," and "Lebron James". The videos for these 3 unique categories were placed below the fold of the page, and were also smaller in nature (a few dozen videos) as compared to the Channel categories listed above which featured hundreds of videos.

Beyond categories listed on the homepage, the archive also featured the ability to search the site by content creator. Inside of the search box one could type "King Bach" or "Jay Versace" to be forwarded to the creator's content pages. While the possibility to search by content creator was present, the archive lacked the ability to search using keywords or other metrics such as the number of reVines or loops a video received.

I tested the archive search capabilities by conducting searches for well-known viral Vine videos. Two of the searches I conducted were for "What are those?" and "Why you always lying?" The searches came back with zero results. Adequate use of search capabilities meant knowing exactly which content creator or publisher you were looking for; otherwise, the efforts would not end successfully.

It is also important to note that outside of the search function, the archive's user experience was extremely limited in its browsing capabilities. The only way to browse random videos outside of the video categories listed above, was to search for a content creator, and view the videos posted to their individual channels. Videos on publisher

channels were listed in the order in which they uploaded to the site historically. The newer videos appeared in the feed at the top of the page while the older videos appeared towards the bottom. Below is a snapshot taken from King Bach's (Vine's most followed content creator) channel video feed.



**Figure 3: Vine Archive User Home Page**

Due to the bad user experience and limited search capabilities, I made the decision to utilize the video categories to establish the video corpus for this study. This method proved to be the most efficient and systematic way to log Vines via the archive. Videos in each category ranged from a few thousand views to uber viral videos with upwards to 70 million loops. Videos were shown in a seemingly random fashion without respect to loops, reVines or content creator. In the next section I will discuss further the decision to utilize the video categories.

### ***Why Vine.co Video Categories?***

Due to virality of Vine videos and the fact that many content creators published content on other social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, as I searched for original Vine videos, it became increasingly difficult to decipher which videos originated on Vine and which videos originated on other platforms such as YouTube or Facebook. To limit the confusion and maintain reliability amongst corpus videos, the Vine.co website was chosen. Although the categories are arbitrary and more than likely do not include every viral or popular Vine video created by Black content creators, the decision to use the archive still made sense as there remained dozens of videos present to use for analysis.

### ***Video Category Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria***

The categories that were selected to create the video corpus were as follows: 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, Community, Editor's Pick, Playlist, Comedy, Music and Dance, and Weird. I excluded the following categories: Animals, Art, Edits, and Sports. Videos in the Animals, Art, and Edits categories contained few videos portraying people of color. Videos featuring dogs and cats were the norm in the Animals category while Art and Edits included abstract content such as stop-motion, heavy graphics, bold colors, and spectacular looping effects.

Sports videos contained Black actors, in the personification of athletes, however, the content overwhelmingly favored pro sports highlights such as that of the NBA, NFL, and MLB. For instance, NBA highlight videos featured slam dunks and over the top action plays from stars such as LeBron James and Kobe Bryant. Videos in the sports

category also featured content of prep sports as well as high school competition. Pickup games at the local gym were also commonplace. To create space for a diverse video corpus, I decided to omit the Sports category and focus on content where it was easy to decipher intentionality in the form of production. I'm referring explicitly to the creator and actor relationship. I felt it was necessary to limit content created solely as a mashup of third-party content. Theoretical sampling supported this decision. I will speak to sampling in the coming sections.

### ***Additional Inclusion Criteria***

Videos selected for study include either a Black content creator or Black actor. A Black content creator is defined as a video publisher, a person whose channel or brand is used for distribution of video content. Some videos selected for study include diverse cast members.

To be included in the study, the presence of a Black content creator or Black actor was needed. Black in this study is defined by three elements of Blackness that may or may not be mutually inclusive: self-identification, phenotype, and signifying.

The criterion of self-identification is simple, an actor or content publisher must identify as being Black, either in their videos, their channel profile or in any other identifiable previous work. The U.S. Census Bureau uses the 1997 Office of Management and Budget standards on race and ethnicity which allows individuals to self-identify to answer U.S. Census race questions (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In keeping with the traditions of the U.S. Census, self-identification was selected as one criterion.

In addition, the way race is constructed within American society also places emphasis on outward appearance. Stereotypes about what race “looks like” are defined by what is seen. Hence the use of Phenotype. Omi and Winant (1994) identify gender and race among the first two things people notice about one another. They believe navigating race means having a preconceived notion of what each race is supposed to look like. Film and television are among the sources of exposure to these racial myths, stereotypes and beliefs. According to Omi and Winant, in a U.S. context everyone conforms to racial ideologies or what they call “race etiquette”. No one is exempt, “everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Race becomes “common sense”- a way of comprehending, explaining and acting in the world” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.13). Accordingly, I will use my innate knowledge of Blackness, as a Black woman born and raised in the United States, to identify Black content creators and Black actors on Vine.

Performing Blackness or signifying is the third element of Blackness used in the selection criteria. Brock (2012) defines signifying as, “...a practice where the interlocutor inventively redefines an object using Black cultural commonplaces and philosophy” (p. 533). In everyday practice signifying is a form of communication about a subject in an indirect way. Signifying establishes new words and new meanings relative to African American context. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2014) defines it, “signifying, in other words, is the figurative difference between the literal metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning” (p.89). According to Abrahams (1981) a few examples of signifying are,

“to stir up a fight between neighbors by telling stories [making fun or playing the dozens]; it is signifying to make fun of a policeman by parodying his motions behind his back; it is signifying to ask for a piece of cake by saying, “my brother needs a piece of that cake” (p.54). Signifying represents cultural solidarity as the performers and the audience must know and understand the nuances of Black culture. For this reason, signifying was incorporated into the criterion of Blackness. The assumption is that those doing the performance are Black or close in proximity to Black culture.

### ***Theoretical Sampling***

Borrowed from grounded theory, theoretical sampling was used to select videos for this study. Glaser et al. (1968) outlined the procedures of theoretical sampling for the researcher, “the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges” (p. 364). Though the purpose of this work was not to develop theory, theoretical sampling provided a systematic structure for analyzing the data. Within theoretical sampling, “initial sampling decisions are based on a general sociological perspective and a general problem” (Draucker et al., 2007). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990) purposive sampling can be done by selecting data sources that deliberately maximize the ability to distill potential categories. The decision to use the Vine.co archive categories to establish the corpus as highlighted in previous sections follows this logic. The categories provided a simple, reliable and systematic source to identify videos fit for study.

Glaser et al. (1968) specifies that once the initial sampling frame is set and coding begins, the flexibility of theoretical sampling allows the researcher to follow, “all directions which seem relevant to [the] work” (p. 364). In this work the initial sampling frame represents the initial videos found within the selected archive categories. Open coding then began the moment I started to watch and code my first video featuring Black actors and content creators by jotting notes from the archive categories.

Defined by open, axial and selective coding, theoretical sampling is similar to the steps in the conventional approach to qualitative content analysis highlighted earlier in this chapter (Draucker et al, 2007; Glaser et al., 1968; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Open coding is defined as “line-by-line or word-by-word examination of the data for the purpose of developing provisional concepts” (Draucker et al., 2007, p. 1138). By using constant comparison key thoughts are condensed into categories. For this study Vine videos from each selected category were watched and coded shot by shot. Axial coding further establishes emerging categories from the open coding phase (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process involves, “relational, or variational, sampling, in which data are gathered to uncover and validate the relationships among categories that have been discovered” (Draucker et al., 2007, p. 1138). Lastly selective coding is used to verify theoretical or concept saturation by examining data that most likely accounts for the most variation (Strauss, 1987). Selective coding also suggests viable relationships between established categories (Strauss, 1987). This is done by discriminately sampling data to verify codes (Draucker et al., p. 1142). In the next

sections I will walk through the data collection process and how I began to establish coding frames.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

After consulting the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, it was determined that this research was not considered human subjects research. The selected videos were drawn from videos available on the open web, and information gathered from videos did not contain private information regarding actors in the videos, limiting possible harm to individuals observed within this study.

While this work did not require consent, there are other considerations in the surveillance of Black bodies. In her work *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, Browne (2015) discusses what happens when Blackness enters the frame. She highlights numerous instances of the surveillance of Black bodies throughout time and various modes such as the reinterpretation of the planning of the *Brooks* slave ship using Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon (1786); the usage of lanterns in the creation of the *Book of Negroes*; as well as the troubling of computer vision with "dark matter".

Browne highlights the YouTube video "HP Computers Are Racist," in which Desi Cryer and Wanda Zamen try out HP's MediaSmart computer. While testing the webcam, Cryer notices the face tracking software in the camera is not capable of responding to his gestures. Once Wanda enters the frame, the camera proceeds to pan, as designed. Browne argues in her epilogue that biometric omission and lack of recognition of Blackness is proof that, "when dark matter troubles algorithms in this way, it amounts to a refusal of the idea of neutrality when it comes to certain technologies.



But if algorithms can be troubled, this might not necessarily be a bad thing” (p. 163). I highlight *Dark Matter*, to further tease out the complexities of distributed Blackness. As we explore technologies and the embodiment of race, it is important to continue the dialogue around the pros and cons of technologies: hyper surveillance as well as the reverse. Opportunities depend on how all users engage with technological affordances; hacks included. I define all users in this case as the viewer as well as the one doing the viewing. Ultimately there is a need to think critically about how technology is used, leveraged, and employed.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The unit of analysis in this research is the 6 second Vine video created by Black content creators. Following the principles of theoretical sampling, in February 2018 I began building the Vine video corpus. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the following categories from the archive were used to establish the corpus: 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, Community, Editor’s Pick, Playlist, Comedy, Music and Dance, and Weird. There were 2899 videos found in total within these categories. This number included both Black content creators and nonBlack creators.

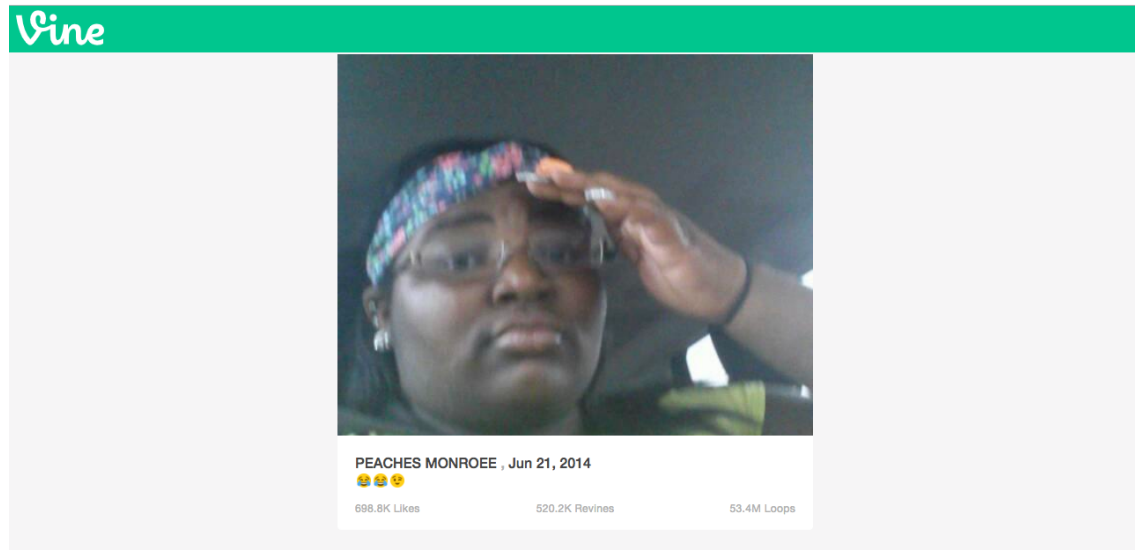
With the criteria in hand for establishing Blackness (self-identification, phenotype, signifying), I parsed each category looking at Videos which featured Black actors and/or content creators. As I took a deep dive into the data, I started with 2013 and worked my way down the list of category items (2014, 2015, etc.) jotting notes and detailing observations within the data.

Because the selective sampling returned thousands of videos and open coding generated emerging concepts, I made the decision to limit the sample to videos that included 20 million loops/views or more. Because the questions of this research aim to understand innovation, I decided to move towards using the diffusion of innovation as a logical step in the process of elimination for determining the sample (Rogers, 2010). That is to say by analyzing videos that have been heavily disseminated, there is the assumption there is something innovative about its contents or there are elements of the content that makes it frequently consumed by a global audience of spectators.

I acknowledge the importance of edge cases, or less popular cases to find innovation. However, I argue addressing Black users as a whole is an edge case and simplifying the data by virality gets the research closer to addressing the core question of use and innovation within the Black content creator community. It is also important to note that due to hyper dissemination of viral content across multiple social media and video platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram, it is highly probable most videos have been watched substantially more than the recorded loops report.

With the sample limited to videos receiving 20 million or more views, I continued to watch Vines and code the data. At this stage in the sampling process each video found by Black content creators was placed into an excel spreadsheet to keep track of the data. For each video I collected the following data: video url, video description, date, creator, number of reVines, number of likes, number of loops, verbal dialogue, video plot, and concepts. Below is a screenshot of Peaches Monroe "Eyebrows on Fleek" viral Vine that obtained over 53.4 million views on the Vine platform. Within the frame of

the web browser interface the metadata available to be recorded is viewed: creator, date, description (laughing emojis in this case), likes, reVines, and loops.



**Figure 4: Vine Video Page “Eyebrows on Fleek” by PEACHES MONROEE**

After working through the three coding stages (open, axial, selective) the corpus concluded with 74 videos, from which the categories and themes were generated. Once the entire corpus was established, I went through each video again to ensure saturation of the categories that emerged. Below is a snapshot of the metadata collected from each video within the excel spreadsheet.

Category	Video URL	Video Description	Date	Creator	Loops	Revines	Likes
2015	<a href="https://vine.co/v/e6nLQQyYJPn">https://vine.co/v/e6nLQQyYJPn</a>	IM DYING OMG 🤔🤔🤔 #soaring #flying	Jul 20, 2015	Kierra Santillan	97.8M	112.1K	289.4K
Playlists	<a href="https://vine.co/v/MFWZahKIQAj">https://vine.co/v/MFWZahKIQAj</a>	Lebron James	Jun 27, 2014	Darius	79.7M	524.1K	815.4K
Playlists	<a href="https://vine.co/v/elegupteHvd">https://vine.co/v/elegupteHvd</a>	When she say she got a cute friend for you	Aug 29, 2015	Down Goes Fraser	78.5M	333.5K	707.8K
Editor's Pick	<a href="https://vine.co/v/e2Q9LMxET12">https://vine.co/v/e2Q9LMxET12</a>	:)	Oct 7, 2015	Parker Kit Hill	73M	270K	785.5K
2014	<a href="https://vine.co/v/OAuuHZqYrZU">https://vine.co/v/OAuuHZqYrZU</a>	When your crush becomes single #SlidingInYourDmsLike 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 #ihadto #remake	Oct 8, 2014	IG: @marion_webb	73.1M	428.2K	681K
Comedy	<a href="https://vine.co/v/OW3xZAIJlQ">https://vine.co/v/OW3xZAIJlQ</a>	Cops be like.. w/ KingBach	Sep 20, 2014	Rudy Mancuso	72.7M	705.3K	1.4M
2016	<a href="https://vine.co/v/tbM0KegIDj">https://vine.co/v/tbM0KegIDj</a>	[no description]	Apr 14, 2016	aswad	72.3M	14.4K	31k

**Figure 5: Vine Meta Data Capture in Excel**

In this chapter I discussed QCA, CTDA and the data collection process. In the next chapter I will break down the findings by discussing the themes that emerged from the work. As the themes that emerged from QCA are dissected, CTDA will be applied to contextualize the themes and make meaning of the findings.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

### ***Categories & Codes***

What type of content did Black creators produce on Vine? How did Black content creators leverage culture on Vine? In what ways were Vine social practices innovative? These three research questions will be answered in this section. The following categories were derived from the Vine videos analyzed: everyday life, celebrity cameo, content remix, Black boy joy, comedy & jokes “the dozens”, music & dance, tech speak, and socio-cultural commentary. The definitions for each category can be found in *Table 1*. In this section I will walk through code and category definitions and highlight an exemplar from each category.

**Table 1: Category Definitions**

<b>Category Definition</b>	
<i>Super Codes</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Everyday Life	Daily activities captured on film.
Celebrity Cameo	Celebrity centered via appearance or name drop.
Content Remix	Remake or mashup of existing video, music, dance, lyrics or “Inspired By” (IB).
Black Boy Joy	Black men and/or boys smiling doing everyday activities.
Comedy & Jokes “The Dozens”	Humor intended for laughs whether orchestrated or performed by insults, jokes and/or drama.
Music & Dance	Musical performance as defined by singing, rapping, dance or any form of instrumentation.
Tech Speak	Critiques of social media use/practice, technology, and or devices.
Socio-Cultural Commentary	Expressed opinions on social norms, culture, and/or social justice.

The *super codes* or categories listed above, were derived from the clustering and organizing of the codes listed in *Table 2*. Each category is thus comprised of multiple codes. For example, the category *Socio-Cultural Commentary* is comprised of the codes: Black culture, Black parenting, moral values, social justice, and relationships. This category along with the others will be described in detail further in the chapter.

**Table 2: Theme Super Codes**

<b>Category System</b>	
<i>Super Codes</i>	<i>Included Codes</i>
Everyday Life	Captured in one shot, casual setting, natural setting, not performed or rehearsed
Celebrity Cameo	Celebrity presence, celebrity name drops, celebrity main focus of video
Content Remix	Music and video mashups, inspired by (IB), remakes, video remixes
Black Boy Joy	Black men/boys smiling, Black men/boys in leisure, Black men/boys at peace, Black men/boys in natural settings, Black men/boys laughing
Comedy & Jokes “The Dozens”	Funny, comedic relief, jokes
Music & Dance	Social dance, solo dancing, power moves, vocal performance, rap lyrics
Tech Speak	Social media usage, direct messaging, mobile phone use, devices
Socio-Cultural Commentary	Black culture, Black parenting, moral values, social justice, relationships

### **Everyday Life**

Black people living out their lives is what defines the “everyday life” category that emerged. This includes Black bodies living and breathing, going about everyday activities from rides in the car, to a trip to the amusement park. As described in *Table 2*, this super code is comprised of the following codes: captured in one shot, casual

setting, natural setting, and not performed or rehearsed. This category is heavily comprised of videos with little editing: no pans, zooms, transitions or cuts. Though these videos are perceived as funny, they are not necessarily intended to be funny, but can be. I'd like to think of this category as "when the mundane goes viral". *Table 3* calls out the exemplars for this category: "Eyebrows on Fleek" and "IM DYING OMG 🤔🤔👻 #soaring #flyin by". I will discuss the first video in extensive detail in this section.

**Table 3: Theme Categories & Exemplar**

Category	Sample Video Content
Everyday Life	<p>😂😂😂 aka "Eyebrows on Fleek" (PEACHES MONROEE, 2014)</p> <p>IM DYING OMG 🤔🤔👻 #soaring #flyin by (Kierra Santillian, 2015)</p>
Celebrity Cameo	<p>Nature w/ Chase Hauck (Eric Dunn, 2015)</p> <p>LEBRON JAMES (DARius, 2014)</p>
Content Remix	<p>When she say she got a cute friend for you aka "Why the Fuck you Lying" (_DowngoesFraser, 2015)</p> <p>When they ask if you have any special talents.. 🤩😂 w/ Metroo , IG: officialtazz , Instagram: @yung.astroo , Boiiiwonderrr #verytalented #Interview #kingvader (KingVADER, 2016)</p>
Black Boy Joy	<p>Thank you to whoever made the #ShowYourCurves tag #MadeNDade (Nino Brown_Roc, 2015)</p> <p>Killed his whole vibe 🤔😂 (DezMason, 2016)</p> <p>Smile for the day. (Wiz Khalifa, 2014)</p>

**Table 3, continued: Theme Categories & Exemplar**

Comedy & Jokes “The Dozens”	<p>Not even the Police are safe 🦴 aka “What are Those?” (A-RODney King, 2015)</p> <p>When you don't look like your dad at all, and you start telling him what he really look like😭😭 #NOODLEHEAD (Jessi Lockett, 2014)</p> <p>My pussy popz Severely (dUhGreatOne, 2014)</p> <p>The worse pain in the world is when a scooter karate chops your ankle... W/ INSTAGRAM: @Nampaikid (purpdrank, 2014)</p> <p>Me watching Law &amp; Order (IB: better call saul ) (IG: @NaturalExample, 2015)</p>
Music & Dance	<p>Trophies by Drake 🏆 #OMJeia (Inspired by IG: itsjoeyarias ) (OMJeia, 2014)</p> <p>#yeet 🤩🐱 (Jas Nicole, 2014)</p> <p>Do It For The Vine😭😭 (Dom, 2014)</p> <p>How i make occupy my free time in the Desert! 🇺🇸🐪🐪 #ShmoneyDance #AirForce 😎 (White Tee Dee, 2014)</p> <p>Superficial love pt 4 (ps I've finished writing the whole song 😊) (Ruth B, 2015)</p>
Tech Speak	<p>When you try and show your friend something on your phone and he grabs it w/ King Bach Rudy Mancuso (Nash Grier, 2014)</p> <p>Waiting to find out if your screen is cracked is like waiting for results on Maury. w/ KekePalmer (Extended version on Instagram @KingBach) (KingBach, 2014)</p>



**Table 3, continued: Theme Categories & Exemplar**

Socio-Cultural Commentary	<p>if you've been tagged in this, meet me outside the police station any time after curfew. let's loitering and disrespect people and things (electrolemon, 2014)</p> <p>Cops be like.. w/ KingBach (Rudy Mancusco, 2014)</p> <p>Getting new Jordan's be like... #TipToeingInMyJordans (purpdrank, 2014)</p> <p>ALWAYS save the J's 🤔🤔 (Extended version on my IG @KingBach) w/ Marcus Johns, Instagram: @Splack, INSTAGRAM: @Klarity , JJIsShow, #KingBach</p>
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Take the video “Eyebrows on Fleek” by PEACHES MONROEE, a Black teenager from Chicago. After leaving the nail shop with her mother, she was excited about getting her eyebrows done for the first time. PEACHES turned on the camera and began to record, “We in this bitch, finna get crunk, eyebrows on fleek, da fuq”. In an interview with BET Networks “*What “Eyebrows On Fleek” Creator Peaches Monroe Learned The Hard Way*”, she describes what that moment was like (2018). She remembers, “Honestly nothing was in my brain at the time...that happens to me all the time, I just say stuff”. PEACHES defines “on fleek” as meaning to look good or on point, or fly. To be sleek, or fashionable. The word is an entire mood. A word that can be used to express oneself in the state of realized full potential, peak performance, and high self-confidence. For PEACHES, the play on words and the creative inventiveness is an action, embodiment of everyday living. Something she doesn’t have to think about, but

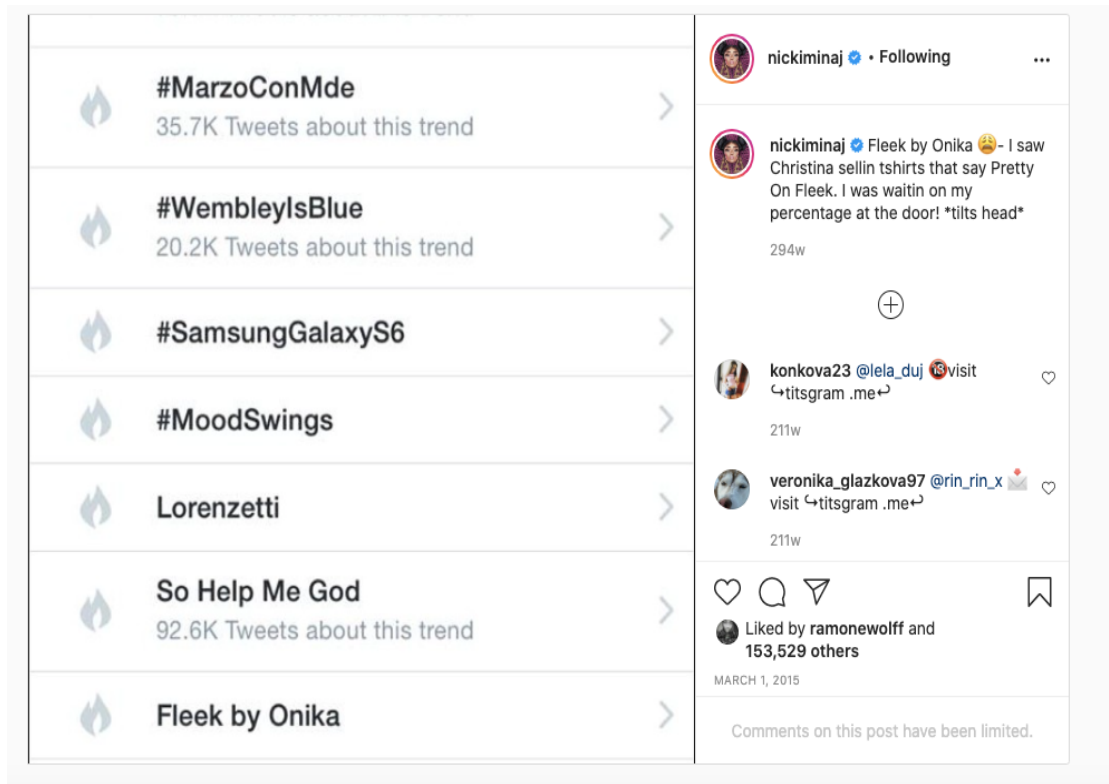
something she does. An innate, naturalistic process derived from her environment, personhood, and character. This act of cultural practice, is what André Brock (2020) calls the mundanity of life. This mundane practice birthed a word the world would embrace, and one corporations and celebrities alike would use to receive economic gains.

It is interesting to note the title of the video is void of the words “on fleek”. Two laughing emojis and one winking emoji are used to convey the emotions and the intentions of the video. This was typical of Vine videos, the same way hashtags allude to the content, context, and meaning of tweets for Black Twitter (Brock, 2012; Florini 2014).

It can be argued the catchphrase PEACHES coined “on fleek” is one of the most viral words originating from Vine, but it did not stay there. The phrase grew beyond the networks of Vine and transitioned into popular culture and online slang. People took to the word and began to use it all over Twitter, and in everyday conversation. Celebrities like Nicki Minaj, Kim Kardashian, Ariana Grande, Christina Millian and rapper B.o.B used the word in songs or for branding. Nicki Minaj used the word in her song “*Feeling Myself*” featuring Beyonce. The song was released on Feb 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015 on the social media site YouTube, and has over 125 million views. In the song Minaj’s lyrics boast, “kitty on fleek, pretty on fleek, pretty gang, always keep them niggas on geek”. The rap lyrics attach the phrase on fleek to describe Minaj’s female parts as well as her attractiveness.

While Minaj used the word in lyrical song, other artists used the word as a slogan to sell clothing, like actress and singer Christina Millian in her “*We Are Pop Culture*”

clothing line. After seeing posts for the new apparel, Nicki Minaj went to Instagram to take a jab at Millian as seen in *Figure 6*, “Fleek by Onika 🙄 -I saw Christina sellin tshirts that say Pretty On Fleek. I was waitin on my percentage at the door! \*tilts head\*”.



**Figure 6: Nicki Minaj Instagram Post About “Pretty on Fleek”**

The two then briefly share exchanges see *Figure 7*. Millian claims, “Hey Boo. Been saying #OnFleek everything for awhile now...” However, none of those exchanges include or acknowledge the originator of the term PEACHES MONROEE, though Millian claims that her clothing line is an homage to the culture. I argue that homage cannot come without attribution or compensation. Cultural appropriation may be too nice. Theft may be more suitable, the act of taking something that does not belong to you and

using it for benefit.



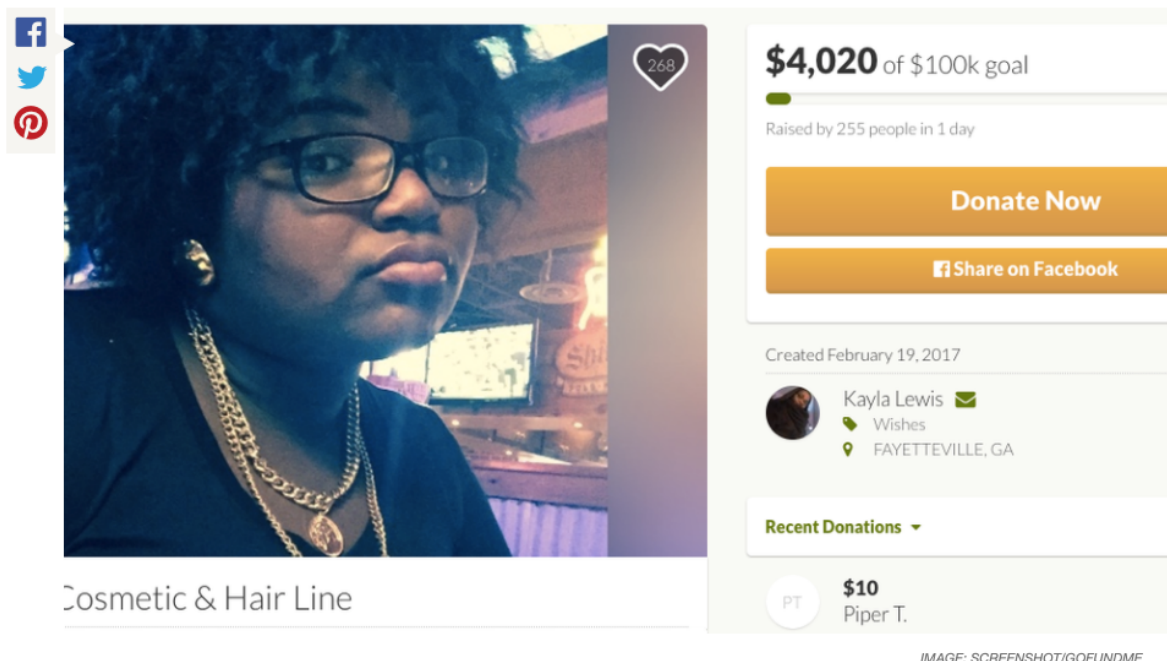
**Figure 7: Christina Millian’s response to Nicki Minaj claim on “On Fleek”**

Though posting as individuals, the two celebrity artists are the epitome of commercial industry that uses cultural artifacts to sell everything from food, alcohol, clothes, education, and activities with the derivatives of Black culture. Whether appropriation or theft, one thing is clear, benefiting from something you did not create is unethical. In the world of Black content creation in online spaces, the theft of intellectual and cultural capital is commonplace. In this case two powerfully influential women use their platforms to not only leverage the culture produced by another woman, they claim ownership, instead of empowering the woman who created said culture. Luckily for PEACHES MONROEE in this instance, Black Twitter came to her rescue identifying her as the originator of the term and bringing the debate online to an end (BETNetworks, 2018).

H&M, Forever 21, IHOP, Denny’s, and Under Armor are all iconic brands adopting the word as a marketing tool for their businesses, again with no mention of PEACHES MONROEE. Historically it has been seen that corporate brands often

appropriate the culture and language of marginalized groups to remain relevant. These artifacts are used at length to make sales and profit for large economic industries.

PEACHES took to GoFundMe in 2017 to raise 100k to launch her own cosmetics line. Below is a snapshot of her GoFundMe campaign as captured by Mashable.



**Figure 8: PEACHES MONROEE's GoFundMe Documented by Mashable**

Though it is unclear if she reached her goal, she garnered the support of many Twitter fans who recognized her efforts and the impact of her gift to the world. Below is a screenshot of a tweet from film director and writer Matthew A. Cherry in support of Ms. MONROEE, "Peaches is the creator of the term On Fleek. Show her some love since she was never properly compensated for the wave she created".



**Figure 9: Tweet by Matthew A Cherry Supporting PEACHES' GoFundMe**



**Figure 10: Tweet from a PEACHES Supporter**

Ironically a few years after his support of PEACHES, Matthew was the victim of scandal when his Oscar winning short film *Hair Love* was allegedly plagiarized by the producers of the children's animated show *Made by Maddie* which was slated to air on the television channel Nick Jr. Cherry's *Hair Love* tells the story of a Black father who has to do his daughter's hair for the first time in the absence of his sick spouse. After the release of the *Made by Maddie* trailer, Black Twitter took charge and began to call out the makers of the show. Black Twitter claimed the show had too many similarities, thus Nickelodeon indefinitely cancelled its release. If the claims of plagiarism are true, yet again we see big companies stealing the art of Black creators and spinning it off as their own without crediting the original source. In Cherry's case the mundanity of father-daughter bonding through the sculpting of Black hair becomes coopted by big box television.



**Figure 11: Cherry's Hair Love (left) Vs. Made by Maddie**





Figure 12: Black Twitter's Response to Made by Maddie



Figure 13: Black Twitter's Response to Made by Maddie





**Figure 14: Black Twitter’s Response to Made by Maddie**

Due to Black Twitter’s diligence the world was once again reintroduced to the work of Matthew A. Cherry, and Nickelodeon paused the debut of their children’s show, releasing the following statement:

“Since announcing the show’s premiere date this week, we have been listening closely to the commentary, criticism and concern coming from both viewers and members of the creative community,” the studio added. “In response, and out of respect to all voices in the conversation, we are removing the show from our schedule as we garner further insight into the creative journey of the show. We are grateful to Silvergate Media for all of their work. And we hold Matthew A. Cherry and the wonderful and inspiring Hair Love in the highest regard”. (Lee, 2020)

Was Black Twitter’s lament the reason Nickelodeon took action or the fact Cherry was a known Oscar winning director? Unlike Cherry, PEACHES MONROEE did

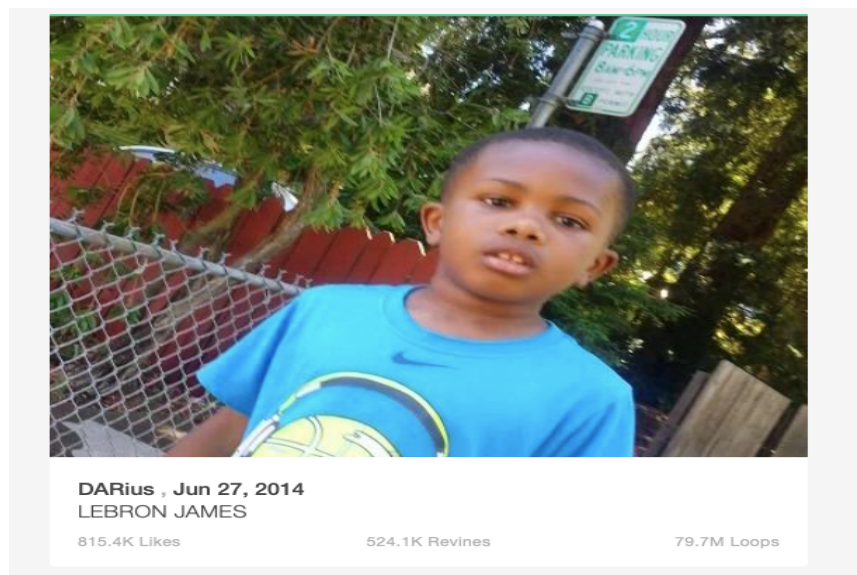
not have the prestigious recognition of an Oscar to back her name or solidify her contribution to the world of art and entertainment. Yet, even with such a momentous accolade, Cherry found his work at the center of a plagiarism scandal. What does an artist have to do to shield themselves and their creations from such theft? One would think that copyright or trademark law could help creators in the battle against cultural appropriation. Through this exemplar we see that not only social media celebrities are prone to cultural theft, but that it can happen to even the most decorated artists, even ones with resources.

### **Celebrity Cameo**

Celebrities were common in Vine videos, even videos not in this category. The “Celebrity Cameo” category is especially derived from videos that are created with a given celebrity or famous person as the central focus of the video. This super code is comprised of the following codes: celebrity presence, celebrity name drops, celebrity main focus of video. For videos that feature celebrities that are not in this category, the celebrity may be present but they are not the focus. To further explain, the celebrity may be present with a group of individuals, or there may be dominant events taking place in the video such as singing, dancing, or other phenomena not centered around the celebrity. For a video to make it into this category, the celebrity needs to be the focus of the video via their presence or by namesake.

The “LEBRON JAMES” video uploaded by Viner DARius on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2014 is one of the many videos in this category. The video features a young boy wearing a blue Nike t-shirt with a basketball surrounded by a pair of headphones. He’s positioned

outside of a home repeatedly saying the words “Lebron James” with a unique child-like distinct accent. By calling out the name of Lebron James, the child is paying tribute to a man many would arguably call the best basketball player of all time. The Vine has 5 cuts, and each cut features the boy poised in a different scene in front of the home as seen in *Figure 15*.



**Figure 15: Lebron James Vine**

In one take he’s in front of a metal fence, with a red wood siding. In another shot he’s on the sidewalk, with the third cut being a closeup of his face. When the 4<sup>th</sup> cut arrives, the boy is in front of a garage, and lastly a red pickup truck. In each scene the boy says the name “Lebron James”, with the last take being an elongated pronunciation of the name, with emphasis placed on the “a”. The drawing out of the last scene with the name variation is the most significant portion of the video. The kid’s funny accent is distinguishably heard in variance to the prior scenes. He’s leaned over the back of the

red pickup truck with his right hand. In the background, random objects can be seen in the truck. The face the kid makes on the 6<sup>th</sup> second of the video, as he elongates “James”, seals the performance with a comedic edge not present in the preceding cuts.

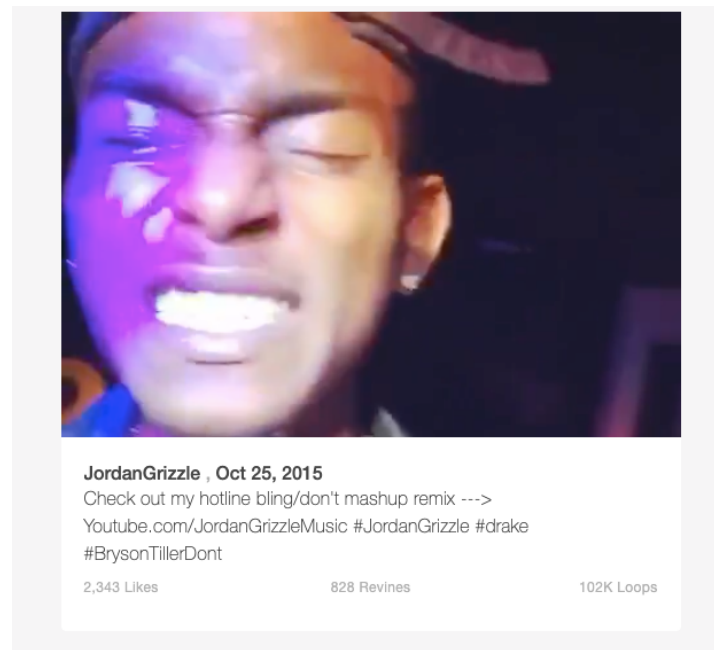
It is important to note in this category unlike the prior category “Everyday Life”, there are different takes and scenes. To maximize the use of 6 seconds, content creators break the videos down into scenes, with the climax happening around the 4 or 5 second mark, often leaving the last 6<sup>th</sup> second for comic relief, or the landing of the joke. Though creators optimize the time strategically in the storytelling, when the video cuts off, it is sometimes difficult to understand what has transpired, thus one has to view the content again.

The “LEBRON JAMES” video garnered 79 million views. It was created the summer after the 2014 NBA championship finals in which Lebron James loses to Tim Duncan and the Spurs in a 4-1 series defeat. July 11<sup>th</sup> of that summer, a few weeks after the video was shot, Lebron announced his return back to the Cleveland Cavaliers after a short 3 year move to the Miami Heat (Jenkins, 2014). James became the talk of the sports world during the NBA offseason that summer. That attention undoubtedly helped to propel the popularity of this Vine video. As with other Vines, this video was also remade and turned into mashups by everyday Viners and celebrities.

## **Content Remix**

Content Remix was the lifeblood of Vine! Taking someone else’s content and revitalizing it with a unique twist or spin was popular. Once viral videos reach diffusion in popular culture, they become well known memes and anthems. Drake’s *Hotline Bling*,

as mentioned earlier in the chapter, is one example of remix culture on Vine. Users would take either the aesthetics of the video (dance, clothes, filming technique), or the audio (speech or music), and form their own newly minted rendition of the original enactment.



**Figure 16: JordanGrizzle’s Rendition of Hotline Bling**

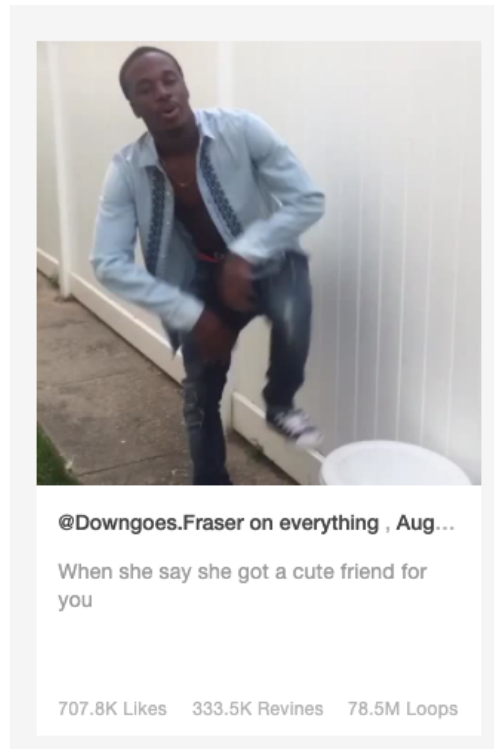
*Figure 16* shows a snapshot of JordanGrizzle’s rendition of *Hotline Bling*. In his performance, Jordan takes the lyrics, but strips the beat and the melody of the song. He instead merges the lyrics with the sounds of rapper/singer Bryson Tiller’s “*Don’t*”. What emerges from the play is a new vocal arrangement and sonic impression. The stylization makes the video distinct. Content remixes on Vine do not have to originate on Vine. People mashup and remake anything from old songs, slang, movie scenes, the list goes on.

DowngoesFraser released a video titled “When she say she got a cute friend for you”. The video is a remake of the song “*Too Close*” by RnB group Next, originally released in 1997. The song was so popular it eventually climbed to the number 1 spot on the Billboard HOT 100 list. The video was released via YouTube on Nov 7<sup>th</sup> 2009. In the music video the members of the group can be seen dancing in what appears to be a club. Some of the members are portrayed with their button up shirts undone, singing the lyrics, “Baby when we’re grinding, I get so excited, ooh, how I like it, I try but I can’t fight it” in a joyful melody (Rebel, 2009). The passionate lyrics are essentially about being aroused by one’s significant other during sexual pleasure.



**Figure 17: Next’s YouTube Video “Too Close”**

For Vine, Fraser remixed the lyrics, but kept the melody along with the visual aesthetics of the open shirt and dancing. The new lyrics proclaimed, “Why the fuck you lying, why you always lying, ooh my God, stop fucking lying”.



**Figure 18: Why the Fuck you Always Lying**

The description of the video is the setup to understanding the context and meaning of the skit. Without the description the video is without meaning. As seen in *Figure 18* “When she say she got a cute friend for you” is the prelude to the performance. The video implies the person who offered to connect the two individuals should stop lying because obviously the creator does not find the friend attractive. Without the description it would be difficult to understand the references and the significance of the video, but if a listener recognized the hook of Next’s song, they could enjoy the beat.

Description setups can be seen in many videos such as “*When they ask if you have any special talents*”, “*When you mess with the wrong dog*”, “*When your friend tell a joke and you just tell them it’s not funny in a nice way*”, “*How to get a friend to stop*

*smoking*”, and “*How females on Maury act when it comes to the DNA test*”. Here the descriptions act as the setup to the punchline of the joke, thus allowing the video to get straight to the point in the storytelling process.

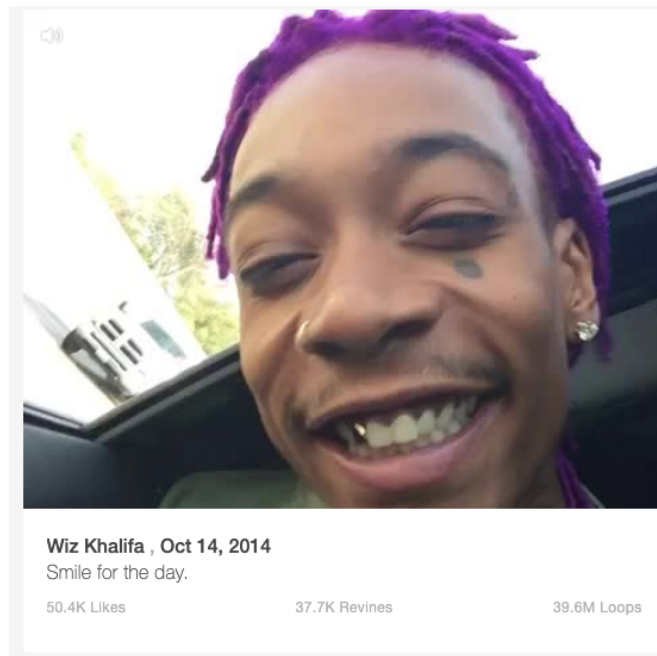
Like “on fleek” DowngoesFraser’s video was titled one thing but became known by a new name. I call this description remixing. Through cultural practice the most recognizable feature of the video is used to provide the content with a label or name. For “on fleek” the title of emojis could not identify the video, however a new word emerged and the video was crowned “on fleek: For Fraser, the video’s name was remixed into “why the fuck you lying”, a remix of the remix of the song.

### **Black Boy Joy**

Black men and boys smiling on Vine are a thing. Take the video “*Smile for the day*” by Wiz Khalifa. The video, *Figure 19*, shows the rapper with purple short dreadlocks leaning out of the right side of a moving vehicle. With his head semi perched out of the window, his hair can be seen blowing in the wind. The freedom and joyful expression on his face presents a peaceful ambiance. The rapper looks carefree and stress free in the moment, as if the troubles of the world are for a moment gone.

The car appears to be driving on a freeway. Wiz says nothing, only smiles and laughs around the 5 second mark. His smile is so wide all front teeth are visible. One tooth is decorated with gold, sitting as a perfect accent to his smiling face.





**Figure 19: Smile for the Day by Wiz Khalifa**

The category “Black boy joy” is comprised of the following codes: *Black men/boys smiling, Black men/boys in leisure, Black men/boys at peace, Black men/boys in natural settings, Black men/boys laughing*. The concept of “*Black boy joy*” is not new. It has been a hashtag with Black Twitter for years. Though the term is commonly used, it is difficult to track the origination of the word. In his thesis “*The Joyful Sounds of Being Your Own Black Self*” Amir Gilmore (2019) describes “Black boy joy” as:

Descending from the Black Radical Tradition, Black Boy Joy refuses the systems of whiteness and white supremacy by reclaiming Black stories, voices, and identities through the arts and humanities. Black Boy Joy is the quotidian refusal to stay in ones designated “place” and provides a space that gives Black males futures that they want now. As a blurred embodiment of various Black aesthetic expressions, including jazz improvisation, poetry, visual art, and griot culture, Black Boy Joy is a

social and spiritual practice of saying no to the terms, codes, rules, and laws of white supremacy that subjugate Black males. Boyhood and joy are concepts that are systematically stolen and denied. Black boys are never fully given the spaces to be where they can explore their masculinity, femininity, sexuality, spirituality, and identity without limits (p. iv)

Black boy joy is thus about loving oneself. It is about resting and embracing the fullness of Black masculinity without the confines of the gaze of white supremacy. It is freedom from the nooses of racialized stereotypes of hyper sexualization and violence. Black boy joy is existence and presence. The act of loving the hair and skin you are in. To be comfortable with being you.

To further explore, *Figure 20* is a Vine of a baby eating popcorn and dancing without music playing. When his father asks, “what are you doing”, the child stops dancing and slumps into a frown as if his “Black boy joy” is temporarily disrupted from the limitations imputed by his father. The mundanity of eating popcorn is so exciting to the child his body freely moves in rhythm without the need for musical accompaniment.



**Figure 20: Killed his Whole Vibe by DezMason**

The child is enjoying being, existing. Young enough to not have yet knowingly experienced the confinements and limitations of Blackness. A hopeful state. A place of possibilities, void of restrictions. His father who knows the rules “no music is playing” applies his restrictions to the innocent. The fragility of *Black boy joy* is seen in this Vine as the youth’s happiness is fleeting.

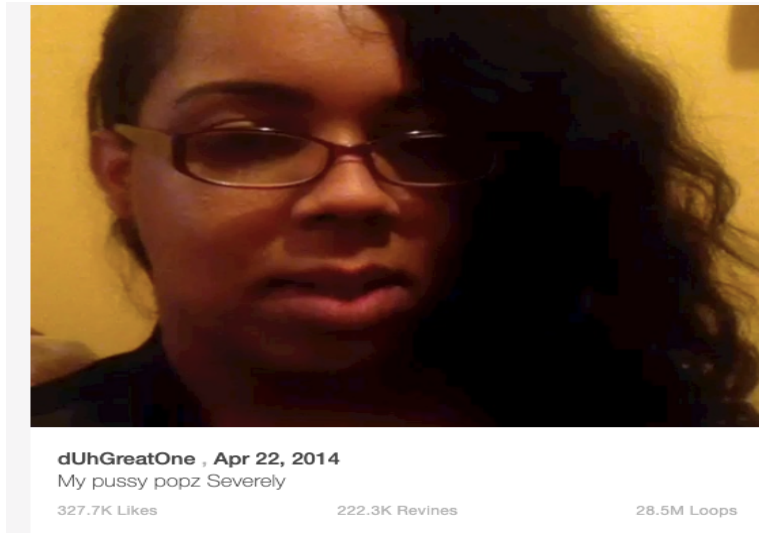
### **Comedy & Jokes “The Dozens”**

The short 6 second nature of Vine gave way to a genre of short punchy comedy. Comedy is the largest category in this work. The themes that dominate this category are: *funny, comedic relief, jokes*. Comedy performances may be scripted but many are not. These videos also include “the dozens” (Abrahams, 1962; Garner, 1983), defined by word play communicated by jokes or insults, a type of verbal combat typically used between men as a form of community bonding.

Calhoun (2019) in her article “*Vine Racial Comedy as Anti-Hegemonic Humor: Linguistic Performance and Generic Innovation*” argues that technological affordances and desires to become online celebrities dictated the types of Vines and genres users created. She explains, “the potential to achieve celebrity status within the domain of Vine...incentivized users to make Vines likely to receive high numbers of positive evaluations from viewers, which acted as measures of Vines’ (and Viners’) popularity” (p. 33). Hence, an abundance of comedy videos. King Bach, as mentioned in previous chapters, was the most followed Viner. His racialized comedy skits received millions of views. He not only created content on his own channel, he also collaborated with Vine creators of all backgrounds, thus appealing to large audiences across the globe. Taking

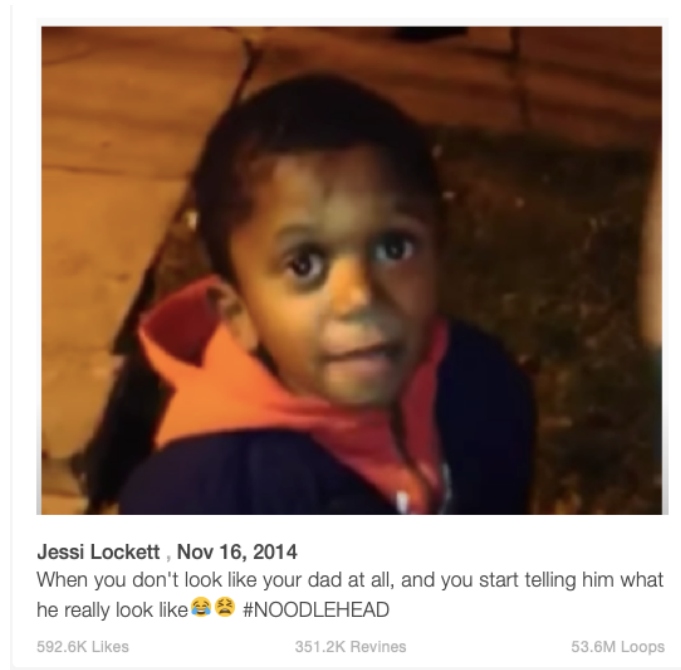
cues from his success, one would conclude in order to also be an internet sensation, make funny videos.

“My Pussy Popz Severely” is a comedy exemplar posted by dUhGreatOne on April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, see *Figure 21*. The video gained over 28 million views and features a young woman joking about how wonderful her sex life is. Viral Vines mined from the archive contained very few women as main actors. For this reason, I highlight dUhGreatOne. The video is an entire mood. She sets up the content of the video by first saying, “bitch [laughs] why you made?” posing the question for the viewers. In this video the viewer acts as the second person in the “dozens” play. Because the creator is the only person in the video, there is no one else but the viewer to create the response. With this in mind, she poses the question, pauses for a second and then gives the rebuttal. She then proceeds, “cuz my pussy popz severely [snaps finger] and yours don’t?” Extra emphasis is placed on the “don’t”. The competitiveness and sting of the words are creative, playful and unforgettable. Here we see a play on words that typically should not be together in a sentence. What does “my pussy popz severely” really mean? Subtle nuance adds mystery and comedic humor at the same time. Her accent also adds to the silliness of the video. For the most part dUhGreatOne appears to be a young girl having fun, exhibiting her Black girl magic in the public sphere.



**Figure 21: My Pussy Popz Severely Vine**

Children also play the dozens. “When you don’t look like your dad at all, and you start telling him what he really look like 🤔😭 #NOODLEHEAD”, features a kid outdoors at night, in what appears to be the conclusion of a public gathering. From the video you can tell there are numerous people around, however the camera is zoomed in tight on the boy. In the long version of the video, someone can be heard calling the boy “son”. In response to the man, the child is frustrated and annoyed and yells to the man, “You’re not my dad you’re always saying something, ugly ass...noodlehead”.



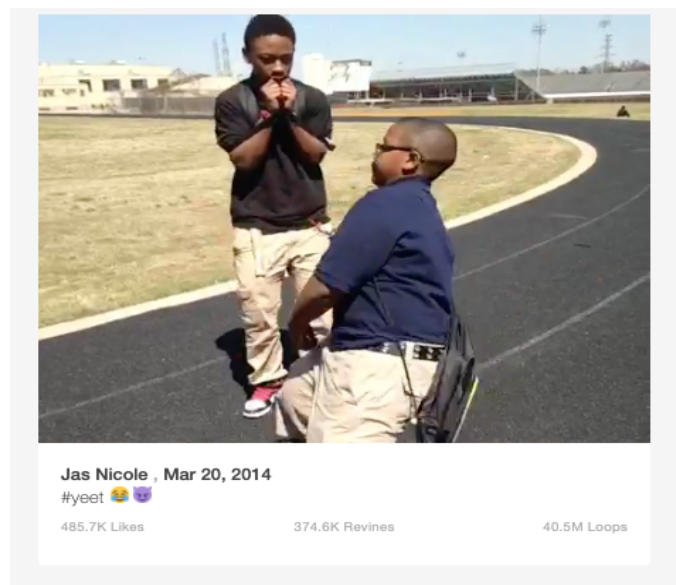
**Figure 22: Noodle Head**

The child responds quick, with such humor it appears he has developed an art for “the dozens” at a young age. Given the boy says “you’re always saying something”, it may be evident the person he’s yelling at may have some relation to him. His innocence mixed with the vulgarity of the words is striking yet funny. As the child lands the “noodlehead” comment, he can be seen reaching up to grab the hand of an adult in an attempt to make his way out of the scene. The fact the child feels comfortable saying those words to an adult creates additional amusement.

### **Music & Dance**

Marked by musical performance, “*Music & Dance*” contains singing, rapping, dance and/or any form of instrumentation. *Social dance, solo dancing, power moves, vocal performance, and rap lyrics* are the codes that form this category. This category is full of powerful exemplars as seen in *Table 3*. Much like playing the dozens, where people gather to compete via wordplay and jokes, social dancing is the dance

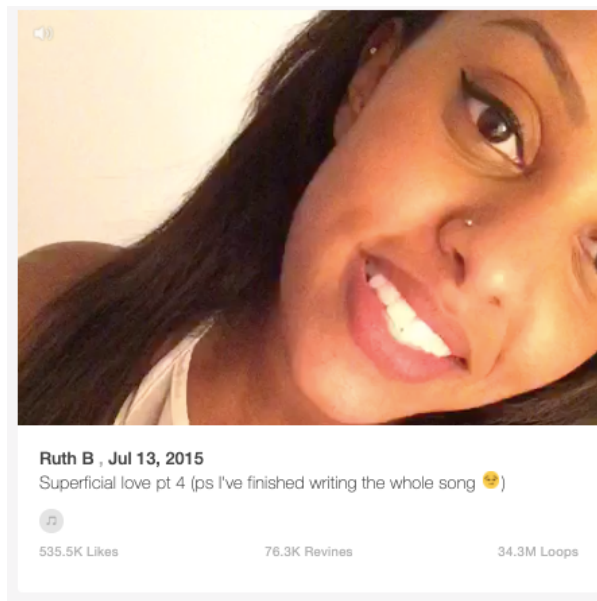
equivalent for community building and bonding. There are two types of social dance I want to highlight here. The first requires a group of individuals dancing together, the second requires an individual dancing surrounded by a group of peers or elders encouraging them in their performance. In the video #yeet, a young boy can be seen dancing with his friends outdoors on a track. The boys appear in khakis with a collar shirt, implying pupil status. The young boys use their voices as musical instruments. Their gleeful chants create the backdrop for the performance enacted by their friend. As they continue to encourage, the friend responds.



**Figure 23: #Yeet Vine Video**

His friends are saying, “yahh, yeet”, and at their command the boy is marching forward and dancing. Each “yahh” is followed by a body movement, with the word “yeet” accented boldly with a knee bent dip to the right, followed by an up and down hand swing. In this video dancing becomes part of storytelling. The powerful body movements

tell a story. One of liberation and freedom. Here we see Black boy joy without compromise or restrictions. Even in a world with systemic racism, there are moments where one is void of entanglements (Brock, 2020). For these young men, communal bonding with comrades through dance and vocal percussion is one of those spaces.



**Figure 24: Superficial Love by Ruth B**

*“Superficial love pt 4”* by Ruth B was the only original vocal performance found in the archive that met the inclusion criteria. The singer can be seen in the video with half her face exposed. She’s holding the camera at an angle, causing a portion of her face to be hidden outside the camera view. Her pure voice shines through as she sings the lyrics, “you’re really cute I must admit, but I need something deeper than this”. Ruth earned her fame on Vine singing music covers of popular songs like *“See you Again”* by Wiz Khalifa ft Charlie Puth, *“Love Me Like You Do”* by Ellie Goulding, and *“Earned It”* by The Weeknd. Ruth B also promoted her own original music. Here we see Viners becoming griots in their own right as musical storytellers. In this instance of *Superficial*



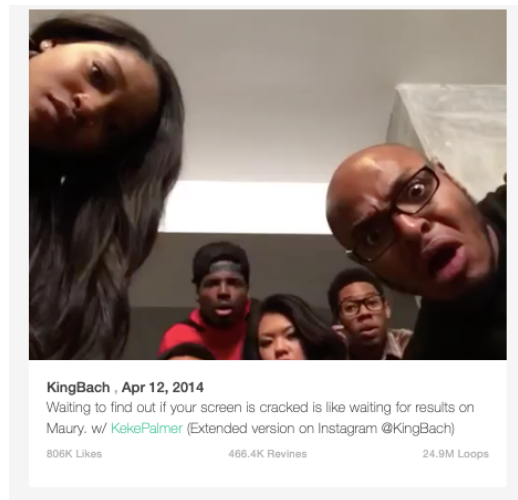
*Love Pt. 4*, it appears Ruth B is singing of a relationship. She realizes her significant other is attractive, but she desires more. A coming of age story. Lyrics embodying growth and development.

### **Tech Speak**

The information revolution has changed the ways millennials and generation z engage with technology and with each other. One of the most unique categories in this work is “*tech speak*”. I define *tech speak* as critiques of social media use/practice, technology, and or devices. Codes in this category are as follows: *Social media usage, direct messaging, mobile phone use, devices*. Black digital practice about Black digital practice. Black creators enjoy their devices and they also enjoy talking about their devices. Activities include social media, blogs, podcasts, and videos. Mobile and web apps are part of daily life too. This demographic, “being the first generation to have grown up in the era of ‘internet everywhere’, millennials are highly connected, technologically advanced and globally conscious and far more open to trying out new products and concepts than their parents or grandparents ever were” (Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2018, p. 955).

These practices are an extension of who they are, so they create Vines about these activities. Black content creators come from a community that take their phones seriously. In the video “*Waiting to find out if your screen is cracked is like waiting for results on Maury*” a woman fumbles her phone. See *Figure 25*. Her friend attempts to assist with recovering the phone before it hits the ground to no avail. The entire friend group leans over in anticipation to verify if the phone is intact after it has hit the ground.

King Bach then emerges with a cue card. He reads from the card and informs the group, “when it comes to the phone, your screen is not cracked!”



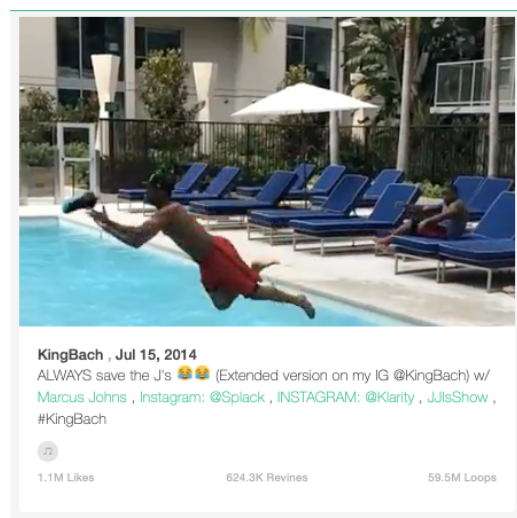
**Figure 25: King Bach & Tech Speak**

King Bach equates waiting for the results of a cracked screen to waiting for parental DNA results. Maury is a syndicated day time television show that features common themes such as paternity tests, domestic violence, pregnancy and sexual infidelity. Henry (2006) suggests, “Maury Povich has made a career of bringing scandalous paternity fraud stories to homes across America...”(p. 61). A typical Maury show depicts a male deeply in love with a child that may not be his own. The show is full of emotional roller coasters, surprises and sometimes fights. Show guests are often so amped, they cannot sit down. Hence in the phone skit, the group is so distraught about the results of the screen, no one is sitting down. The wait is unbearable. Once the results are read, the group shares extreme joy as the climax ends with a positive result.

## Socio-Cultural Commentary

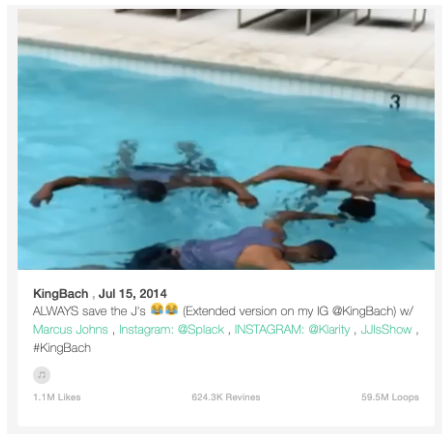
The most controversial category in the research findings is *socio-cultural commentary*. This category is where you will find King Bach's racial Vine videos (Calhoun, 2019). These videos discuss race relations with punchy jokes and satire. To formally define this category, it is the expressed opinions on social norms, culture, and/or social justice. Codes include *Black culture, Black parenting, moral values, social justice, relationships*. The good, bad, and the ugly of social norms and moral values are exhibited in this category.

King Bach's video "ALWAYS save the J's 🤔🤔" is an example of Michael Jordan shoe fetish. In the video a white guy throws a Michael Jordan shoe in a swimming pool. As he throws the shoe he says, "screw your J's". As the shoe is in the air, a group of Black men rush to the rescue.



**Figure 26: Men Saving Michael Jordan Shoe**

While the men jump into the pool to save the shoe, Nicki Minaj's song *Save Me* plays, "this time won't you save me, this time won't you save me". After the men successfully save the shoe, the last scene of the video shows the men floating dead in the pool.



**Figure 27: Men Dead in Pool After Saving Shoe**

Apparently, the men can't swim. Instead of saving their own lives, they save the Air Jordan shoe. Not only is materialism at work through sneaker consumption but also the stereotype perpetuated through American culture that Black people cannot swim. Materialism leads to death in this skit.

Dealing first with the Air Jordan shoe. Street culture has long embraced the shoe as an embodiment of personal values and worth. Jordan was the first rookie to have a shoe named after him. When Michael Jordan first emerged in the NBA wearing the shoe, its presence on the court was a rebellion (Brace-Goven & de Burgh-Woodman, 2008). Jordan stepped on the court for a preseason game against the New York Knicks in 1984 with the original AJ1s. A Black shoe, accented with a red swoosh, and red bottoms; Jordan defied tradition. The shoe raised concerns from NBA Commissioner David Stern as he said the shoe violated NBA rules that required players' shoes to be

primarily white with little color accents (Barias, 2017; Bush, 2017). A young Black man scoring his own shoe as well as a healthy endorsement deal with Nike was the talk of the sports world. Of course, Jordan also became a big superstar. Riding the excitement of the fervor, the Michael Jordan signature Air Jordan shoe thus becomes a status symbol where those wearing the shoe feel they are “sticking it to the man” (Gunduz, 2020).

Michael Jordan shoes cost hundreds if not thousands of dollars depending on the release. Sneaker culture has bought into the luxury lifestyle to become part of elite mainstream society. Though sneakers have given wearers fashionable statement pieces and status, there is a dark side that has led to detrimental outcomes such as youth violence. There are documented instances of people being robbed of their Michael Jordan shoes (Gunduz, 2020). Hyper sneaker sensationalism is the substance by which King Bach performs his cultural commentary.

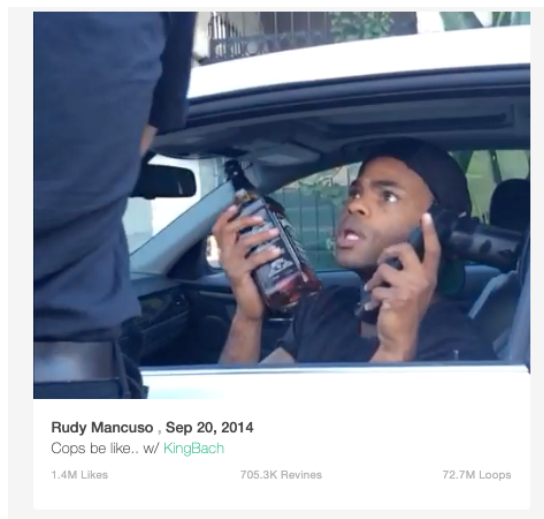
The stereotype that Black people don’t know how to swim comes from a long history of pool segregation stemming from the Jim Crow era where Black Americans were denied access to public swimming pools. After the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the ratification of the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1865 which abolished slavery, southern states in the confederacy began to pass “black codes” to continue the subjugation of slavery (Alexander, 2020; Gates, 2020). These laws regulated black labor and movement, and restricted fair compensation. Freed slaves could not buy or rent land and faced harsh penalties for “crimes” such as loitering and joblessness. With the ratification of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment these “black codes” progressed into Jim Crow

which continued to enforce racial segregation in America up until the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s (Chafe et al, 2011). The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment gave U.S. citizens equal protection under the law, yet the notion of “separate but equal” doctrine imposed by Southern states, strived to keep Blacks out of white public spaces. These laws made it illegal for Black people to live in white neighborhoods, attend white schools, hospitals, swimming pools, and even phone booths (Rothstein, 2017).

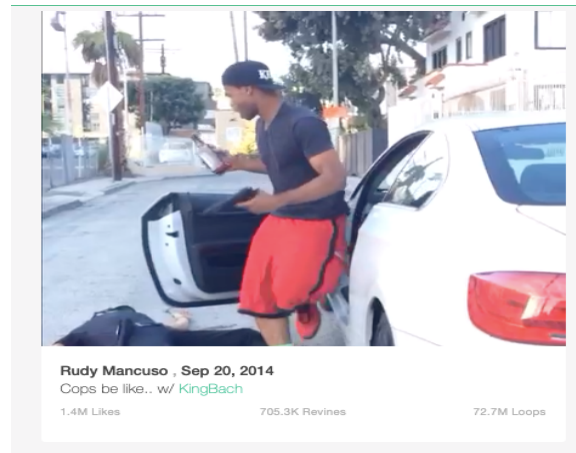
As a result of Jim Crow Black Americans endured much violence and torment at the hands of extremists, much of which was perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist hate group that practiced an extreme form of racial violence. The KKK was founded in 1865 (Davis, 1924). The national terrorist group was known for conducting raids on Black families and allies alike, using forceful intimidation tactics to sway political elections and social mobility (Bullard, 1998). The extremists burned crosses and notoriously committed murder by lynching and genital mutilation of Black men (Wood, 2011). This racial terror and intimidation tactics were used to maintain the caste system of segregation and to ensure the marginalization of Black society (Bullard 1998).

The myth of Blacks as non-swimmers is perpetrated by the harsh realities of Jim Crow racial segregation laws. To this end, “cities provided relatively few pools for Black residents, and the pools they did provide were typically small and dilapidated. And, third, cities closed many public pools in the wake of desegregation, just as they became accessible to Black Americans” (Wiltse, 2014, p. 368). Lack of pool access led to fewer Black swimmers and an increase in drownings (Claiborne & Francis, 2010; Stengle, 2010).

To further complicate the genre, the *Cops Be Like* skit is an ode to “driving while Black”. Harris (1999) defines *driving while Black*: “on our nation's highways today, police ostensibly looking for drug criminals routinely stop drivers based on the color of their skin. This practice is so common that the minority community has given it the derisive term, "driving while Black or brown" – a play on the real offense of "driving while intoxicated”. To summarize, driving is sometimes a crime if you are Black. Without legitimate reason many Black people are pulled over on America’s highways. They are questioned and sometimes detained without just cause. The skit, *Figure 28*, begins with King Bach pulled over by the police. An officer approaches the car and insists, “hey do me a favor, hold that [passes Bach a bottle of Jack Daniels Whiskey], hold that too [unholsters and hands Bach his gun], “I need backup right away [cop calls dispatch, then intentionally bangs his own head on the roof of Bach’s white car]”. Confused Bach exits the vehicle, as sirens can be heard in the background. With shock he squeals, “nigga!” See *Figure 29*.



**Figure 28: Cops Be Like Vine**



**Figure 29: Cops Be Like Vine Pt. 2**

Created September 20<sup>th</sup> 2014, the Vine comes a month after police shoot and kill unarmed teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Ray et al, 2017). Public execution of Eric Garner via choke hold took place July 17<sup>th</sup> of 2014 in Staten Island, New York. As racial turbulence ensued, Vine emerged center stage as a mode of satirical analysis to explore the deep wounds of racial tension within American society.

As the cop passes the gun and whiskey to Bach, white privilege is on full display, and Bach is vulnerable. In American society Black men are not believable. It is the quintessential opposite of Black boy joy. There is no joy to be had when police are on their way. To add an unconscious officer is at the scene of the “crime” and the weapon has your fingerprints.

In this skit, Bach knows he is in trouble and squeals, “nigga”, as if to say how did this just happen. What is one to do? There is no place to go, nothing to be said, nothing to be done. Michael Brown and Eric Garner were unarmed and yet faced public



slaughter. Historically a scenario such as this only has a few options: death or jail. The latter being the most optimistic.

Talking about race is difficult, yet Bach and fellow creators in the *cultural commentary* category pull viewers into conversations about social justice. If you are *woke* it confirms what you already know. If you exist outside of the community it challenges the status quo. This nuanced thought-provoking art renders contemplation without explicit invasion.

### ***Innovation on Vine***

In what ways were Vine social practices innovative? Innovation emerged in many ways on Vines. Funny Vines provide escape from the material world through laughter and disassociation. Laughing provides distance from psychological distress (Bonanno, 1999; Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). Disembodiment of the Black body in online spaces “diminish[es] the theoretical power of antiBlackness” (Brock, 2020, p. 228). This freedom from “antiBlackness” creates a safer space to do and be. The comedic nature of Vine videos provides much release and relief, yet can distract from other inventiveness within the platform. In this section I highlight the distinct ways Black cultural production on Vine was innovative.

### ***6 Second Pause***

Six seconds to produce a meaningful story is a limitation. Prior to Vine, no other digital platform restricted users this way. By default, Vine as a platform was innovative in its approach to micro video and user generated content. Branching from this 6 second innovation, what emerged through the corpus was a distinct visual aesthetic

enacted by video producers. With only 6 seconds to tell the story, the creator thus needed to get through the beginning, middle, and the end. To land the story, the anticipated climax of the video happens around the 4 and 5 second mark, with the 6<sup>th</sup> second used as the “pause” to solidify the content. Though the 6<sup>th</sup> second should theoretically be the stoppage of the video content, the looping nature of Vine sends the playback to the beginning of the video to be replayed from the 1 second mark. I take the concept of “pause” from Doug Lipman’s (1999) *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play*. The pause is powerful in that it, “does not usually indicate that an audience response is expected. Instead, it creates a powerful silence that may elicit eagerness, dread, or laughter. Since the storyteller does not “lose her turn by pausing, the teller gains an absolute power over the pause” (p. 26). The pause of the 6<sup>th</sup> second clinches the fate of the Vine. Did the audience understand it? Did the joke register with the audience? All of this is determined at the 6<sup>th</sup> second. If the audience has doubts, it’s okay because the video replays again. From the replay the audience thus has another chance to reinterpret and reimagine the nuances of the clip.

### **Vine as Music Innovation**

Within the gaze of the 6 second pause, other elements of the video are fitted concisely. Hip hop music is the largest genre present in the videos featured in the corpus. Hip hop can be identified by “its most salient feature-its dominant funky beat” (Shusterman, 1991, p. 615). Historically hip-hop DJs would seek out songs by the sound of their “break”, these breaks in the music would then be turned into additional “tunes” (Chang, 2005). The break is the section of the music where the vocals are

turned down and only the musical accompaniment plays. Within these breaks, the beats are loud and distinct, full of 808 sounds (heavy bass laden drums), synthesizers and memorable loops. These bass-filled beats are snipped from popular hip-hop songs, typically around the chorus, and then inserted into Vine videos for theatrical effects, creating a loop of a loop. This loop together with the melody, chorus, creates a groove (Chang, 2005). The groove is intended to be danced to. Vine practitioners thus are engaging in sampling, “the process of extracting recorded sound and reusing those sounds in a new recorded sound product” (Sewell, 2013, p. 1). This cultural practice has been used in hip hop music for decades.

Content creators reimagine their favorite songs by capturing the sonic loops from the most enjoyable parts of a song, thus creating catchy 6 second jingles that repeat. Couple this with the fact the songs chosen are already popular, these Vines further impress the music into the cognition of its audience. The catchiness of the sample is then played over and over again across Vine, helping to diffuse the video within the network.

Why does this matter? Vine creates awareness beyond a simple share. It gave audiences new ways to experience musical reinterpretations such as Drake’s *Hotline Bling* and *Too Close* by Next. The remixing and sampling of content creates free advertising for large corporations. In exchange for free use, businesses generate more sales and awareness through content creation.

## Word/Phrase Inventions

“On Fleek” is an invention. Arguably if PEACHES MONROEE had not shot the Vine in her mom’s car after a girl’s trip to the salon, Nicki Minaj would never use the word in her song *Feeling Myself*. Christina Millian’s clothing line *We Are Pop Culture* would also be void of t-shirts phrased “Pretty on Fleek”. The phrase “what are those?” was also a Vine invention used to poke fun at anything out of the ordinary. Who could forget the phrase “do it for the Vine”, another phrase created in a video of a young Black girl dancing in her ballet clothes.

These are all inventions that need acknowledgement. As technology advances and features are enacted, much thought towards documenting content origination is important. Ensuring the right people get the right credit is critically important in an open market society. Otherwise even within capitalism the incentive goes down for people to produce if ideas are constantly stolen without due process.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study explored Black cultural practice on the mobile video platform Vine. With the help of Qualitative Content Analysis and Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis, this thesis examined how African Americans embraced social video through Vine and how Black cultural practice was enacted within the political economy of the mobile video landscape. The analysis demonstrates Vine videos produced by Black users were important to Vine's success. Video content fell into the following categories: everyday life, celebrity cameo, content remix, Black boy joy, comedy & jokes "the dozens", music & dance, tech speak, and socio-cultural commentary. By using Vine and creating viral videos, Black content creators leveraged punchy storytelling to compel the world's internet users to adopt Vine.

### ***Limitations***

One limitation of the study is the use of the video archive as the basis for video sampling. Videos used for this study were derived from the Vine archive, and not directly from the app itself. Because the app was removed from App stores after the announcement of Vines ending, there was no immediate access. Beyond the cues of video loops, it is impossible to verify a real list of the top 100 most viewed Vine videos. Through the excavation of the archive, I attempted to exhaust every category and link from the homepage to create a sample of highly viewed Vines produced by Black content creators in accordance with the inclusion criteria. Key videos may have been left out.

By using the Vine archive for this study, emphasis was placed on viral Vines. Though the archive contained thousands of videos, the majority of those videos had high view counts. While conducting the investigation it became evident the viral Vines comprised mostly male actors. The lack of female representation in the corpus is another limitation of this study. In optimal circumstances it would have been preferential to include more videos by female actors and content creators.

### ***The Importance of Black Culture on Vine***

This work investigates user-centered innovation from the standpoint of content creation by Black digital practice. Through this work we see cultural practice used as a vehicle to create new inventions built upon the conduits of Black culture. We also see culture leveraged as a mechanism of technological adoption and commercial benefits. Vines like “Eyebrows on Fleek”, “Do it for the Vine”, and “Why the Fuck you Lying” attained virality driving millions of views to Vine by using dance, music, fashion, social justice, and ratchetness. How did users consume video via Vine? They did so by watching the videos via web browser on the Vine website or by downloading the official Vine app from the Google or Apple app store. Put plainly, Black content creators leveraged punchy storytelling to compel the world’s internet users to watch and adopt Vine. By doing so Black culture became an integral key to Vine’s technological adoption and success.

Though this study focused solely on Vines with Black actors, Black cultural aesthetics are not limited to videos with Black actors. The appeal of Black culture transcends content outside its point of origination as seen via PEACHES MONROEE in

Chapter 4. Her linguistic invention “on fleek” was stolen and used by corporations and music artists without her permission nor royalties. In doing this research I not only watched hundreds of Vine videos by Black content creators, I also watched videos by non-Black content creators. Those videos were out of the scope of this work, but it is evident that elements of Black aesthetics such as music, dance, and language are also found in videos with White, Latin-x, and Asian content creators.

### ***Blackness as Infrastructure***

Black digital practice is powerful, and through this work I view Blackness as infrastructure or the rails by which Vine runs. I call this infrastructural process “Black digital efficacy”, a resource that powers future making and technological adoption. Black digital efficacy is the process by which technology is given direction, labor, and Black aesthetics to propel it forward. The concept of race as technology and infrastructure is not new, however I zoom in a step further to identify Blackness, or Black cultural practice as described in this thesis as infrastructure.

Ruha Benjamin (2019) frames technology as coded inequity with anti-Blackness built into its processes and designs. Technology, or the anti-Black box as Benjamin dubs it, “links the race-neutral technologies that encode inequity to the race-neutral laws and policies that serve as powerful tools for White supremacy” (p. 35). To this point, Benjamin recounts a story of a former Apple employee on the Siri team. The voice assistant team members worked on Indian, Australian and Singaporean linguistic dialects, but when questioned about African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the boss insisted this dialect was outside of Apple’s premium targeted market. While on one

hand the company embraced Black culture by acquiring Beats by Dre, it devalued Blackness by rejecting the importance of Black dialect while developing Siri.

The program One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) is another example of race as technology through the racialization of technology politics. From its onset the project was determined to lead with a technological deterministic view instead of one of equity and inclusion. Headed by Nicholas Negroponte this initiative aspired to put a solar powered laptop, valued at approximately \$100USD, in the hands of every child in the developing world, but it failed substantially (Fouché, 2013). The laptop was feature rich, solar powered, flash memory, wireless capabilities, with a Sugar (Linux-based) opensource operating system (Fouché, 2013). The laptop was touted to create a “technologically savvy population” in the developing world (p. 76). However, the communities in which the technology would be deployed were never consulted beforehand and after deployment very little training was given to teachers and students in the classroom (Kraemer et al., 2009).

The software was buggy, there was no tech support, and the overall costs to sustain the technology outweighed the \$100USD required to invest in it (Kraemer et al., 2009). National administrators who had originally supported the concept did not go through with orders as they desired their students to learn commercial software such as Windows. OLPC thus became another example of how whiteness via policy and systems design can have adverse effects on populations outside the default white monolithic view of technology. What’s good for Silicon Valley is not always good for the rest of the world.



Black digital efficacy is a process with three key functions: direction, labor, and Black aesthetics. Direction is based on user centered design. Users create the course by which the technology moves as they influence how the technology takes shape through the design process (Abrams et al., 2004). As users engage with the app, data is generated from videos watched, time spent on site, feature engagement, comments, shares, etc. As companies analyze user generated data, behavioral models are created. On site metrics coupled with user research (usability studies, interviews, focus groups) help app makers iterate product features. This process is often called design thinking, an iterative process teams use to understand users by empathizing with their needs, identifying their goals, problem solving, designing and testing new experiences (Brown and Katz, 2011). Though companies follow different design thinking practices, on site metrics derived from user engagement is central in feature updates. Users generate data and companies determine product direction through their design thinking feedback loop.

Labor is the sweat equity given to technology by Black bodies through the process of content creation. While companies view labor through the lens of app metrics, content creators spend seconds, minutes, and hours shooting and editing videos for upload. Casual consumers also invest labor through watching videos, commenting, and sharing. Over time labor builds value in the technology through the Black digital efficacy function of “direction”. Despite the hard work put into the app by users, the results of that labor may be less than desirable for creators as discussed in earlier chapters. This inequitable return on labor parallels post emancipation

sharecropping. After the Civil War, “Black codes” made it impossible for freed Black slaves to own land. After the South’s defeat, confederacy banks were unstable making it impossible for white landlords to obtain lending to pay for wage labor (Jaynes, 1995; Reid 1973; Royce, 2010). After all, they were used to unpaid work through slavery.

As a result, contractual arrangements emerged between freed slaves and whites. Landowners provided a portion of their land for Blacks to work. They also loaned the sharecroppers things like tools, food, medicine, animals and seeds. When the harvest came, the parties would share profits. Harvest uncertainty made this system predatory. Landowners also charged high interest loan rates for material borrowed by the sharecropper and over time the value of cotton decreased. As a result, Black people were paid low prices for crops, and many could not cover their outstanding loans (Reid, 1973), thus keeping the sharecroppers in the hole and building a system of debt they could never escape. The chances for upward mobility were slim, causing sharecroppers to live poor lives (Fusfield & Bates, 2005).

Contemporarily digital sharecropping has been defined by Grimshaw (2018) as the reality where “digitally, we are all active workers as both producers and consumers, because our digital consumption is in itself data work” (p.4). Ironically, by using apps like Vine people are willfully participating in building inequitable systems. Digital consumption and creation seem trivial, “but the aggregation of this in data factories is where big profits are to be made...even in the realm of cultural production because of copying and piracy and the means of the control of access. What makes the digital

sharecropping successful is that the vast majority of those working do not view their work as such, nor their data as valuable” (p. 4)

The third function of Black digital efficacy is Black aesthetics which supports the entire infrastructural system. Black aesthetics are defined as black vernacular technological creativity, as Rayvon Fouché (2006) explains it, “innovative engagements with technology based upon Black aesthetics” (p.641). Here Black aesthetics are meant to highlight a “technology of stylization” (Murray, 2017) or art that “recur over time and across different forms of cultural expression” (Caponi, 1999). Thus, black aesthetics can be seen through creative arts such as “music, dance, literature, visual art, and sport” (Fouché, 2006). Fowler (1981) further defines Black aesthetics as, “Black creativity and Black sensibility” within the Blackamerican community (p. V). This survival culture is the result of years of oppression. This stylistic expression takes roots in the need to create cultural authenticity in a society that has refused to see Black people as equal in every aspect of life (Fowler, 1981).

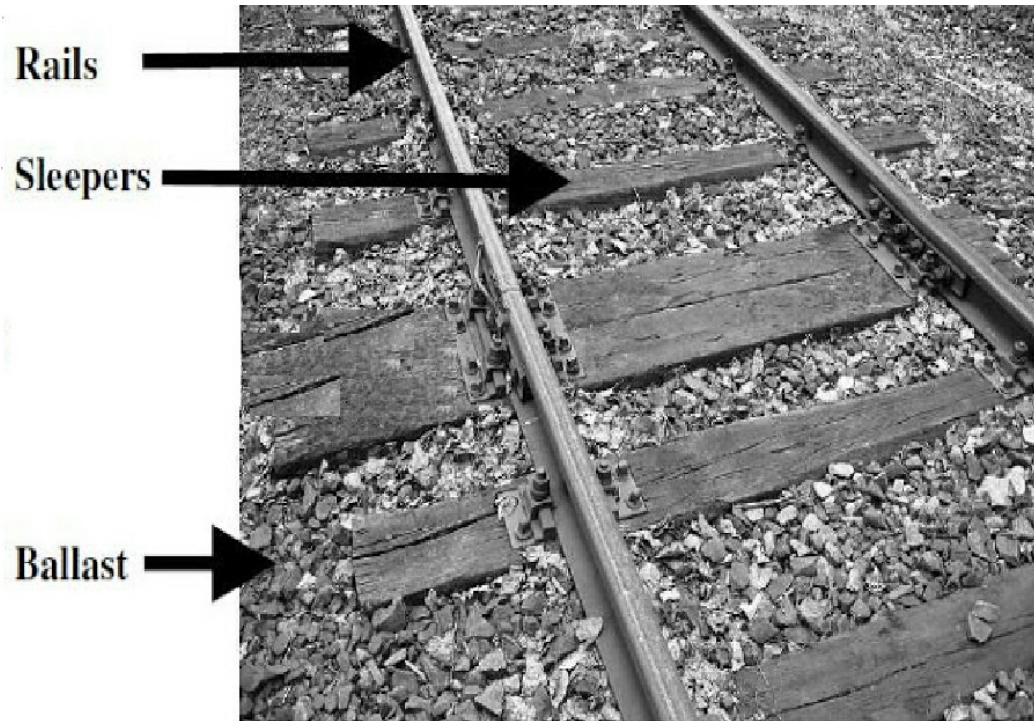
Black aesthetics creates cultural authenticity by embodying values, characteristics and action that sets it apart from other groups. Fowler (1981) believes Black aesthetics does this by a convention known as balance.

Balance is knowing how far to go and still get back; how far to bend over in the dance without falling, how long to draw out a note without losing musicality, how far to take an improvisation without losing the theme. The same sense is in operation when the black artist balances the risqué or frankly lewd meaning on innocent words, as in blues lyrics. Balance is also in knowing how to dress “extravagantly,” to mix bold colors and many patterns. There is balance in celebrative, “exaggerated” body movements, in histrionic speech patterns--dramatic pauses, deep contrasts in high and low pitch, in intonation. Balance is in the art forms derived from those speech patterns, such as black preaching and jazz. And it is even in the

hipster's walk and the tilt of his hat. If we use balance as an organizing principle, all the art forms can in fact be accommodated. And terms which suggest a falling away from the ideal state—such as “exaggeration,” or “extravagance”, can be reclaimed as part of a sense of what is appropriate. For any combination and any extreme is aesthetically appropriate, if you can balance them all without losing control (Fowler, 1981, p. xvi-xvii).

Why are Black Vine videos so viral? The Black aesthetic principle of balance plays an important role. Black content creators, through cultural tradition, have perfected the practice of bending rules for artistic expression. Creators quickly find the contours of what is possible and push the boundaries of those affordances. Armed with strong aesthetic values described by Fowler above, Black content creators think outside of the confines of the rules and seek ways to layer Blackness within cultural productions. The result, in the case of Vine, generates new words, dances, and jokes.

To further expound on Black digital efficacy, I will use the analogy of a train and railroad tracks. Vine is like a train that comes fully assembled ready to move passengers from one place to another. The railroad track is the mechanism by which the train travels. Simplistically a track is made up of rails, ties also known as sleepers, and track ballast. Rails (direction) provide the course for the train, and the mechanism for the train to move along. The sleepers (labor) hold the rails together, keeping them upright as the train moves along. The ballast (Black aesthetics) fills in the structure and holds the track in place. It also absorbs the weight of the train. Protecting the railroad track from nature is important for the ballast. Water is absorbed into the ballast and runs off, so the track does not get flooded (Remennikov & Kaewunruen, 2006). Figure 30 shows these track functions in their natural environment.



**Figure 30: Diagram of Railroad Track**

Black digital efficacy as an infrastructural process moves technology like a transportation system. We see this in Vine and we see this in other social media platforms like Twitter. When users are given a technology, they adapt, give it culture, and expand its use. Where Black digital efficacy leads technology is dependent on the culture produced through the technology and how it is perceived by the owner of said technology and society at large. We know Twitter's trending feature helped the world discover "Black Twitter" (Brock 2012). Black users were already committed to the labor of creating conversation and using hashtags in unprecedented ways. It wasn't until the practice was exposed in the platform did the world pay attention to Black Twitter's activism.

## **Black Digital Efficacy & The Future**

Black digital efficacy is concerned with the future. Where I differ from Brock (2020) is my approach to the “future”. Brock believes Black technoculture is futuristic and is situated within a post present existence. He distinguishes himself from afro-futurism (Nelson, 2002), as he believes it emphasizes a utopian state of being in a future far from the present in chronological time. Afro-futurism is a term coined by Mark Dery in 1993 and defined as, “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture--and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery, 1994, p. 180). Afro-futurism reenvisions the future by telling Black stories. Arriving to the future is not its concern nor a preoccupation with history or the present. Hence, it feels impossible to achieve, fictional at best. For Brock (2020) Black technoculture is the mundanity of life. A place where respectability politics do not govern engagement and ratchetness is allowed. A process by which, “banality of Black Twitter and other spaces where ratchet digital practice is enacted reinvests futurity into present uses of the digital rather than in possible Black cyborg or Black magical futures” (p. 217).

If Afro-futurism is a place far off, and Black technoculture is the present, Black digital efficacy represents a networked space between: the infrastructure needed to bridge the gap between the two destinations, the rails by which cybercultures and Afro-futurism are connected. A pathway forward and a process founded upon user centered

design and ownership. I argue that neither Black mundanity nor speculative futures are enough.

Black content creators are inventors. Sometimes those inventions go unnoticed, but nonetheless they provide the labor to support the technology. Labor is futuristic as it transforms the technology through design processes, explained earlier in the chapter. There is a big difference between the railroad tracks and the train. Though Black content creators have mastered the art of cultural expression via mobile apps, there is room for growth by owning more trains as well as the railroad tracks that propel them. This equates to complete infrastructure ownership.

Propelling technologies not built for the community puts the community at risk and has inadvertent consequences. Does this mean stop using social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Tik Tok? No. However, over time Black infrastructure needs to expand to full ownership of the railway system in order to maintain the narratives of the culture and protect the interest of the culture.

How this is done within a capitalistic society must be defined and determined by the community performing the cultural practice. Convincing mainstream society for inclusion is not in vain but the opportunity cost is high. Currently big technology companies maintain a monopoly in certain areas of play such as search (Noble, 2018) and social media. It takes time to build infrastructure. Railroads are not built in a day. However, the need to start sooner than later is paramount. Black technological infrastructure allocates space in the marketplace for Black businesses and users. This allocation gives Black users a choice where to create new futures. What that

infrastructure looks like is up to the culture but may be mobile and web apps, hardware, software or more avenues of content production.

### ***Future Work***

Since the retirement of Vine, new mobile apps have emerged such as Tik Tok and the audio app Club House. Future work will investigate the manifestations of Black cultural practice within contemporary apps and aim to understand how Black cultural practice is evolving over time, and how companies are responding to Black digital efficacy.



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