Cancel Culture and Accountability on South African Black Twitter: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Language, Power, and Social Justice

by

Evah Lethabo Ngoasheng

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of Humanities

Rhodes University

In fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MA Journalism and Media Studies

Supervisors:

Dr Chikezie E. Uzuegbunam

Dr Kealeboga Aiseng

Rhodes University, Grahamstown

2025

PLAGIARISM DECLARATION

1. I know that plagiarism means taking and using the ideas, writings, works or inventions of another as if they were one's own. I know that plagiarism not only includes verbatim copying, but also the extensive use of another person's ideas without proper acknowledgement (which includes the proper use of quotation marks). I know that plagiarism covers this sort of use of material found in textual sources and from the Internet.

2. I acknowledge and understand that plagiarism is wrong.

3. I understand that my research must be accurately referenced. I have followed the rules and conventions concerning referencing, citation and the use of quotations as set out in the Departmental Guide.

4. This assignment is my own work, or my group's own unique group assignment. I acknowledge that copying someone else's assignment, or part of it, is wrong, and that submitting identical work to others constitutes a form of plagiarism.

5. I have not allowed, nor will I in the future allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as their own work.

Name……Evah…Lethabo Ngoasheng……

Student #.....G23N8167.....

Signed Ngoasheng E.L…….

Date ……26 December 2025…….

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

This thesis critically examines cancel culture and accountability on South African Black Twitter (SABT), specifically addressing how the platform's simplified binary discourse risks reducing complex social issues and hindering effective accountability measures. The study investigates the use of social media to hold individuals and commercial brands accountable for misconduct. The objective is to scrutinise the linguistic and discursive processes that construct, enforce, or overturn public accountability while retaining the necessary cultural and political nuance. This research employs a multiple case study approach utilising Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), an adaptation of Fairclough's CDA, across a sustained 2019-2024 period. The methodology involved analysing a dataset of 1,500 high-engagement tweets collected from five high-profile cancellation cases (including politician Helen Zille and corporate brand Clicks) to analyse campaign progression across different institutional targets. The core findings establish that SABT operates as a *digital imbizo*, characterised by moral sovereignty: accountability is negotiated via Ubuntu and Black solidarity for economic justice (Clicks) or restorative justice (Maboe). Platform affordances are strategically weaponised for political resistance, as the Zille case shows how archival surveillance affects ideological dispossession, positioning the *imbizo* as the ultimate decider of political legitimacy. Furthermore, techno-linguistic adaptation and other mechanisms expose significant racialised double standards, demonstrating SABT's structural efficacy in accountability. This unique process provides an essential theoretical framework for understanding how marginalised digital publics successfully repurpose platform affordances to achieve material outcomes that bypass traditional judicial and corporate systems. This study makes a significant contribution to the field by theorising SABT's role as a unique counter-public sphere that uses resistance to generate material and culturally resonant forms of social justice, highlighting the tension between community-led accountability and entrenched power structures.

Keywords: Cancel Culture, Public Accountability, Black Twitter, Digital Imbizo, Techno-Linguistic Adaptation, Communicative Justice, Archival Surveillance, Post-Apartheid South Africa

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter introduces the phenomenon of cancel culture within the South African context by situating it within broader global debates. It begins by outlining the role of social media as a space for public discourse and digital activism, positioning cancel culture as a mechanism through which individuals and communities attempt to enforce accountability in online environments. The chapter traces the historical and conceptual origins of cancel culture and examines its role in contemporary social justice movements. It also introduces key concepts central to the study, including cancel culture, language, and power, clarifying how these are understood within the research framework. Finally, the chapter presents the study's aim and research questions, outlining its relevance and contribution to existing scholarship.

1.2 Context and Background of the Study

With the rapid digital evolution, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for communication and connection among communities worldwide. As an information system, social media is built upon Internet communication technologies and ideological beliefs regarding how information should be created, accessed, and distributed (Kazanskaia, 2025; Wolf et al., 2018). These beliefs include the democratisation of information, user control over content production and distribution, and real-time networked communication (Wolf et al., 2018). Social media enables the instantaneous sharing of information, allowing users to mobilise and respond quickly to events, as seen on platforms such as WhatsApp and X.

Compared to traditional media, which requires financial and institutional resources for production and distribution, social media significantly reduces cost and time barriers. It allows users to create and distribute content from their own spaces (Ghafar, 2024). Unlike traditional media systems, content diversity on social media is shaped by algorithmic filtering and recommendation systems (Helberger, 2018). These algorithmic systems prioritise engagement and advertising optimisation rather than purely informational value (Helberger, 2018). For example, platforms such as Facebook employ pay-per-click (PPC) advertising models that

target users based on geographic location and behavioural data (Ghafar, 2024; Khraim & Alkrableih, 2015). PPC advertising allows advertisers to track engagement in real time and adjust campaigns accordingly, while users experience personalised and interactive browsing (Sampat, 2020).

The potential for content to go "viral," spreading rapidly within digital communities, means that messages can reach millions within minutes (Ghafar, 2024). Research indicates that emotionally charged content, particularly content evoking high-arousal positive emotions such as awe or negative emotions such as anger and anxiety, is more likely to spread widely (Mousavi et al., 2022). The use of negative framing, causal arguments, and threats to core values often triggers emotional responses, thereby increasing virality (Mousavi et al., 2022).

Social media platforms can further be understood through their core functionalities. Identity construction, for example, refers to how users present themselves in digital environments (Wolf et al., 2018). Users may construct virtual identities that differ significantly from their offline selves, sometimes portraying themselves as more outspoken or socially engaged online than in physical settings (Caffrey, 2017; Wolf et al., 2018). Social media also facilitates both synchronous and asynchronous communication, allowing real-time interaction through live features or delayed responses through messaging and comment threads (Wolf et al., 2018).

Sharing is another central function, enabling the circulation and amplification of content through posts, retweets, comments, and reactions (Geboers et al., 2025). Presence, defined as the awareness of others being active on a platform, creates psychological immediacy and fosters a sense of community and affiliation (Schultze & Brooks, 2019; Wolf et al., 2018). This perception of co-presence encourages dialogue and participation, reinforcing social bonds in virtual spaces.

Relationships formed on social media may be reciprocal or non-reciprocal. On platforms such as X, following is asymmetrical, meaning users can engage with others without mutual acknowledgment (Costello, 2018). In contrast, platforms like LinkedIn require reciprocal confirmation of professional relationships (Wolf et al., 2018). These relational structures shape how influence and visibility operate online (Hoffner & Bond, 2022).

A significant consequence of these platform dynamics is opinion polarisation. Social media's architecture facilitates the rapid spread of contrasting views on political, social, and cultural issues (Sun et al., 2023). Algorithmic recommendation systems expose users primarily to

content aligned with their pre-existing beliefs, resulting in echo chambers that reinforce ideological homogeneity (Brown et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2023). For instance, platforms such as Facebook utilise behavioural data to curate personalised feeds, isolating users from opposing viewpoints (Sun et al., 2023).

Polarisation is also shaped by the ideological framing of content. Content ideology refers to the belief systems articulated through language that justify certain social positions (Asker & Dinas, 2019; Sun et al., 2023). Language becomes central to meaning-making, particularly in textual environments such as X, where discourse is condensed and highly symbolic (Sun et al., 2023). Toxic or aggressive language, characterised by disrespectful or inflammatory tone, is more likely to be shared and can intensify divisions between ideological groups (Sun et al., 2023). Highly opinionated or provocative posts further deepen polarisation by encouraging emotional and reactive engagement (Sun et al., 2023).

These dynamics are evident in high-profile South African controversies. For example, in 2023, South African rapper and television host Jub Jub (Molemo Maarohanye) faced widespread backlash following remarks perceived as misogynistic during an interview on *Podcast and Chill with MacG*. Social media users criticised his comments for perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and referenced previous incidents involving his conduct (Guerandi, 2021). Calls for his removal from television illustrate how digital publics mobilise collective judgment and demand accountability.

Virtual societies operate through asymmetrical power structures, where visibility, attention, and amplification function as forms of digital capital (Barbera, 2020). Likes, shares, and trending hashtags become mechanisms through which power is politicised and commodified. However, when discourse challenges entrenched systems of power, it may receive less algorithmic amplification (Barbera, 2020). Thus, digital accountability practices are embedded within broader socio-economic politics of visibility and influence.

1.2.1 A Background Look at Cancel Culture

Cancel culture has become a prevalent phenomenon on online platforms, where individuals or organisations are held accountable for perceived misconduct. On platforms like Black Twitter, this collective judgment goes beyond calling out misconduct; it negotiates cultural values, societal norms, and power dynamics. This section introduces cancel culture, examining how language, social ideologies, and digital platforms shape who gets cancelled and why. It outlines the origins of cancel culture, its accountability mechanisms, and raises critical questions about whether cancel culture is a genuine social movement or primarily a punitive practice. The section also considers criticisms of cancel culture and the challenges it poses to achieving justice and accountability.

In digital media, people can be discredited entirely based on statements or actions deemed offensive (Bromwich, 2018). Cancel culture typically involves withdrawing support such as viewership, social media follows, or purchases from individuals perceived to have acted unacceptably (Aiseng, 2025), often due to social justice concerns like sexism, homophobia, racism, or bullying (Ng, 2020). According to Gracia (2021:3 in Rosenbaum & Fichman, 2019):

> Cancel culture evolves around bringing justice for an offensive word or action by a public figure. A backlash often ensues, fueled by politically progressive social media, where the person calling for cancellation acts in place of a jury to uphold respect and honour.

Three key elements define cancel culture: (a) public shaming, (b) withdrawing support, and (c) demanding consequences or penalties, such as social ostracism or loss of employment. Actions may be passive, like unfollowing an account, or active, such as mobilising others to withdraw support from a brand or individual. Motivations include preventing harmful actions, limiting the offender's visibility, or expressing moral disapproval (Ng, 2020).

Sidwell (2022) traces the origins of cancel culture to intellectual and historical developments, particularly the New Left movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which promoted social change through non-violent infiltration of institutions. Marcuse's concept of "repressive tolerance" advocated intolerance toward harmful ideologies as a form of liberating tolerance, an early precursor to modern speech restrictions. Seeletsa (2021) frames cancel culture as a form of digital activism empowering marginalised voices to enforce social justice. Unlike traditional boycotts targeting institutions, cancel culture targets individuals or groups,

leveraging public shaming to expose misconduct (Barbera, 2020). Historical parallels, such as the public condemnation of Galileo Galilei, illustrate how social ostracism has long been used to enforce norms (Lindberg, 2010; Mishan, 2020).

Cancel culture is an evolution of related concepts like political correctness and call-out culture. Political correctness emphasises avoiding offensive speech or behaviour (Chernyavskaya, 2021; Kitrosser, 2016), while call-out culture publicly names instances of oppressive behaviour to educate or prevent harm (Ross, 2019). Cancel culture differs in its goal: it seeks tangible consequences for offenders, often through digital platforms. Clark (2020) situates cancel culture within Black oral discursive resistance strategies, historically used to exert social and economic pressure for change.

Social issues around identity such as racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination are central to cancel culture (Kovalik, 2021:139-149). The consequences vary, ranging from temporary public shaming to lasting ostracism (Norris, 2023). Offenders may take responsibility and apologise, but if they refuse, the offended group seeks societal justice by isolating and diminishing the offender's status (Barbera, 2020). This process provides collective validation for harmed groups through visibility, public denouncement, punishment, and support (Barbera, 2020). For brands, cancel culture functions as collective consumer resistance, calling for support to be withdrawn in response to irreparable offences, thereby aligning market practices with societal values (Demsar et al., 2023).

Cancel culture has expanded with digital affordances, especially on platforms like X (formerly Twitter). Functions such as retweeting, mentions, and hashtags amplify discourse and connect users around shared interests (Haskell, 2021). Black Twitter, a culturally connected meta-network on the platform, popularised the concept of being "cancelled" and shaped its practices (Clark, 2020). However, these platforms also introduce challenges: they can oversimplify complex issues, accelerate moral outrage, and spread hate speech, cyberbullying, and ideological rigidity (Gwen Bouvier & Machin, 2021; Aiseng, 2024; Ng, 2020). Anonymity and pseudonymity further fuel cancel culture and mob-like behaviour (Thomason, 2021).

Critics argue that cancel culture can stifle meaningful discussion and prioritise punishment over rehabilitation (Fenton, 2018; Tucker, 2018), while others emphasise the need for counter-speech rather than censorship (Bromell, 2022; Mill, 2015). Social media movements allow

users to participate with minimal effort, yet online support does not always reflect genuine engagement (Kalina, 2020).

Despite these critiques, cancel culture remains a key vehicle for social accountability, particularly in contexts where traditional mechanisms fail. Yet, literature shows a gap in understanding how cancel culture operates differently for individuals versus commercial brands, especially within South African Black Twitter. This study addresses that gap by examining how culturally specific language practices on Black Twitter are used to call out, shame, and hold targets accountable, localising the process in the South African context.

Methodologically, this study contributes through the application of Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), which integrates Fairclough's linguistic analysis with Brock's techno-cultural framework. This approach acknowledges technology as both a cultural product and factor, examining how platform affordances, such as character limits, threading, and tagging, are exploited to achieve negotiated accountability. The study also operationalises techno-linguistic adaptation as a measure of decolonial resistance against algorithmic suppression, highlighting how users maintain visibility while circumventing content moderation. By framing South African cancel culture as a virtual meeting hall (digital imbizo), the research provides insight into Afro-communitarian values like Ubuntu as mechanisms for moral accountability.

Finally, the study aims to critically investigate the dynamics of cancel culture on South African Black Twitter, exploring how language in tweets, retweets, and comments enforces moral judgment, public shaming, and accountability. It interrogates the power dynamics, cultural values, and social ideologies shaping both who is cancelled and who drives cancellation campaigns.

1.3.1 Research questions

- How is language used on Black Twitter to judge and shame individuals and brands for their perceived misconduct?
- What cultural values and social beliefs influence who gets cancelled on South African Black Twitter?
- Who holds the power to start cancellation campaigns on South African Black Twitter, and how does this affect whether the campaigns succeed?

Therefore, the research problem that this study investigates is the use of social media to hold individuals and commercial brands accountable for their perceived misconduct, utilising practices such as cancel culture. The use of such practices is problematic because social media has the potential to oversimplify and reduce complex issues, leaving little room for nuance. This simplification, driven by the binary nature of online discourse, hinders the effectiveness of accountability measures and fails to address the multifaceted nature of the issues involved.

This study informs South African digital policy by highlighting Black Twitter's cultural fluency as a form of resistance against racial, corporate, and patriarchal hegemony. It emphasises the need for inclusive digital platforms that amplify indigenous languages and protect radical discourse from moderation (Clark, 2024). The findings also contribute to existing conversations around cancel culture, positioning Black Twitter as a unique case of shared accountability rooted in post-apartheid and gendered struggles (Pitcan et al., 2018). The study also serves as a starting point for research that considers the African context, particularly in South Africa, as a factor in understanding how phenomena occur in this region.

1.3.2 Key Concepts

This section defines key terms used throughout the study, clarifying how we can understand concepts such as language, power, social movement, and cancel culture within the specific context of South African Black Twitter.

Language - a structured system where possible forms of social organisation and their likely social and political consequences are produced, defined and contested. It is also the place where people's sense of selves, their subjectivity, is constructed (Talbot et al., 2019).

Power - more than an authoritative force in decision-making, its strongest form is in its ability to define social reality, to impose visions of the world. Such visions are inscribed in language and enacted in interaction. Power is deployed by those who are in a position to define and categorise, to include and exclude (Talbot et al., 2019).

Social movement - a collective effort to realise a common interest or common goal through collective action outside the scope of established institutions (Waani, 2021: 267).

Cancel Culture - the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice

perspective, especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues (Ng 2020: 623).

Performative Allyship - refers to someone from a non-marginalised group professing support and solidarity with a marginalised group, but in a way that is not helpful.

1.4 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is organised into seven chapters, each addressing a distinct aspect of cancel culture on South African Black Twitter.

Chapter 1: Introduction
This chapter introduces the study by situating cancel culture within its academic context and showing its origin. It describes the role of social media in facilitating discourse and social justice, contextualising cancel culture as a means of holding individuals and brands accountable in the digital space. Key concepts relevant to the study, including cancel culture, language, and power, are clarified in relation to the research framework. The chapter also explores the study's aim, research questions and outlines the research problem it hopes to address.

Chapter 2: Literature Review
This chapter contextualises Black Twitter as the selected platform and why. It differentiates Black Twitter from its host platform X, explaining its emergence and role in facilitating discourse and accountability. The chapter looks into how hashtags on X serve as tools for mobilisation and activism, particularly within Black Twitter. To localise the study, it situates cancel culture in South Africa, identifying its influence in relation to the country's oppressive history. It investigates case studies on the cancellations of politician Helen Zille and the brand Clicks. The chapter also discusses the role of fans in maintaining an individual's public image on Black Twitter and how this can shield them from being effectively cancelled.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework
Here, I present the theoretical framework guiding the study. I apply Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) to analyse how Black Twitter functions as a space of cultural production, resistance, and identity negotiation. CTDA helps to unpack how language reflects and shapes social power relations in contexts where race, media, and politics intersect. The chapter draws on the theory of networked publics to understand how Black Twitter forms as a participatory public shaped by digital affordances and shared cultural engagement. These

frameworks help us analyse how cancel culture takes place on Black Twitter, focusing on language use, cultural beliefs, and the dynamics of online public spheres.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter outlines the qualitative research approach used in the study. It explains the use of non-participatory digital ethnography to collect data from Black Twitter, with a focus on tweets related to the concept of cancel culture. The chapter outlines the process of data collection, including the criteria used to select tweets. It also describes the application of Critical Discourse Analysis to analyse the collected data, highlighting how this approach allows for a deeper understanding of language use, power, and cultural expressions within the context of cancel culture on Black Twitter.

Chapter 5: Data Analysis

This chapter presents the findings from the data analysis. It examines how language, cultural references, and platform features are used on Black Twitter to judge and shame individuals and brands for perceived misconduct. In this chapter, I identify recurring themes and patterns in the discourse, such as the use of satire and humour, and explain how these elements contribute to cancel culture. I also explore the role of anonymity and digital affordances in shaping the cancellation process.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Here, I link the findings to the literature review and theoretical framework, providing an in-depth analysis of how language, cultural beliefs, and digital power all intersect during cancel culture. I address the research questions by explaining the role of language in determining who gets cancelled and who holds the power to initiate cancellation campaigns. The chapter also discusses the implications of these findings for understanding the role of social media in social justice movements and the complexities of online accountability.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The final chapter shows the significance of the findings and their contribution to the body of knowledge. It discusses the recommendations for future research and suggests areas for future study, particularly in the context of social media platforms.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I contextualise Black Twitter as the chosen platform for analysing cancel culture. I differentiate it from Twitter (X), explaining how it emerged and its role in facilitating discourse and accountability of conduct. I also investigate the main feature of X, the hashtag, and its use as a tool, particularly in social movements. To localise the study, I analyse the phenomenon of cancel culture in South Africa, examining its influences through case studies. Lastly, I briefly touch on the importance of fans in maintaining an individual's public image on Black Twitter and how that shields them from being actually cancelled.

2.1 History of X

A new approach to the platform began with billionaire Elon Musk's takeover in October 2022, which included rebranding Twitter to X, collecting biometric data, and promoting a libertarian free-speech ethos (which included reinstating previously banned users). For example, Donald Trump was banned from X in January 2021 for his role in supporting the US Capitol attack and to reduce the risk of further incitement of violence; Musk then unbanned him in November 2022 (Murthy, 2024).

The acquisition of Twitter and its subsequent rebranding to X challenged the platform's utility as a fully democratic space (Radsch, 2024). The change in ownership was viewed less as a corporate rebranding and more as a takeover, with multiple users expressing concerns about the new owner prioritising free speech for the powerful over safety and moderation for the marginalised (Radsch, 2024). Black Twitter had successfully operated by leveraging the platform's features for decentralised mobilisation and counter-hegemonic critique. However, the public viewed the dismantling of content moderation teams and the rise of content deregulation as a direct threat to the community's safety and discursive effectiveness (Radsch, 2024).

For this study, this shift in governance is important because cancel culture depends on platform affordances such as visibility, virality, and moderation. If moderation weakens and harmful speech increases, then the discursive platform in which South African Black Twitter performs

accountability also changes. Understanding this transformation is therefore necessary for analysing how language and power operate within contemporary cancel campaigns.

2.2 Black Twitter

Black Twitter emerged as one of those hashtags and became a virtual community brought together by user-generated hashtags on topics of interest (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021). Black Twitter is an online community characterised by discourses on cultural issues affecting the Black community, including race relations, identity politics, sexual orientation, and decolonisation (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021). While anyone can participate, this space is especially vital for the Black community to share experiences, discuss racial identities, and express Black subjectivity (Florini, 2014). Active participation in Black Twitter requires fluency in Black culture, its commonalities, and the digital practices associated with it (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022).

Black Twitter challenges White hegemony by using Black cultural codes, turning traditional customs into memes and short messages on X for users to engage in public debate humorously (Florini, 2014). These codes, such as “tea” (gossip) or “receipts” (evidence), were originally part of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and have now been turned into widely shared memes and short messages that encourage public debate. Traditional customs like “reading someone”, a sharp, witty critique, have also been transformed into humorous memes or viral tweets, allowing users to comment on societal issues or critique public figures in a playful but impactful way (Florini, 2014). These linguistic practices are central to this study because cancel culture on Black Twitter is often expressed through culturally embedded humour, critique, and moral judgement.

Black Twitter is not a separate entity from X; similarly, Black culture and identity are not a monolith; rather, it is a virtual community of collective voices on a variety of issues and topics (Klein et al., 2022). Users come together to share opinions, discuss cultural topics, and raise awareness on social issues. Just like Black culture, Black Twitter is diverse, comprising a multitude of different voices and perspectives (Klein et al., 2022).

Like X, it is composed of tweets, threads, and layers of back-and-forth discussion on various topics. These interactions are often brought together by hashtags (like #AskAMan) or by popular words or phrases as an alternative. Most topics originate from mainstream news or popular culture; the discussion often begins with a tweet. An individual may post a tweet or

thread, a question, or an opinion, and depending on the topic of discussion, alignment among users begins to take shape and a community temporarily coalesces around the issue. However, there is no official way to become a part of Black Twitter, either in South Africa or globally (Clark, 2020). Instead, people naturally come together when there is alignment on an issue (Clark, 2020).

Engler (2018) describes Black Twitter as a cultural showcase of Black life, utilising satirical humour, investigative skills, and sometimes militant defence of ideas. There is no portal or password; you know what Black Twitter is by being part of it, and the version varies depending on location and language. South African Black Twitter is not a replication of its American counterpart (Klassen et al., 2021). In the United States, much of X's popular vocabulary originates from African-American communities (Cottingham and Rose, 2023).

While extensive research about Black Twitter in the US exists, there has been limited research in the South African context (Klassen, 2022; Mpofu, 2019). Given South Africa's history of colonialism and apartheid, public discourse around race and identity carries particular historical weight (Molefe and Ngcongo, 2021). For this study, this context is essential because cancel culture in South Africa cannot be understood outside of its post-apartheid socio-political landscape.

2.2.1 The Hashtag

At the heart of Black Twitter's visibility is the hashtag, initially introduced as a tool to group tweets on the same subject, allowing users to find and follow discussions. Over time, however, users began to utilise hashtags not only for categorisation but also to add meaning, tone, and cultural context to their tweets (Brock, 2020; Klein et al., 2022). This evolution played a significant role in bringing Black Twitter into the public eye. The prominence of Black Twitter hashtags in the Trending Topics section enabled outsiders to engage with Black discourse that had previously operated outside the mainstream gaze (Klein et al., 2022). Although hashtags existed before trending topics, both features were instrumental in exposing Black Twitter's activities to broader audiences, particularly given the overwhelming volume of content on the platform (Brock, 2020).

The use of user-generated hashtags to categorise and spread messages, especially when they reach trending status, extends beyond X and influences broader media culture. Widely circulated hashtags often evolve into media-friendly labels that encapsulate the spirit of a

particular online moment (Sharma, 2013). The emergence of racialised hashtags such as *#ifsantawasblack* or *#onlyintheghetto*, often referred to as "Blacktags", demonstrates this phenomenon. These hashtags circulate rapidly within Black Twitter and, at times, rise to the top of trending topics. Frequently expressed through ambiguous or racially charged humour, they contribute significantly to the shaping of discourse around Black identity and representation (Sharma, 2013).

Black Twitter utilises culturally specific hashtags, networked participation through comments and retweets among closely connected peers, and the viral spread of conversations to achieve trending status (Klein et al., 2022). While these elements were not initially framed as defining characteristics, they help explain how Black cultural expression adapts to and reshapes X's technological affordances (Klein et al., 2022). Scholars conceptualise Black Twitter as a counter public; a space populated by marginalised voices seeking to counter dominant discourse and resist stereotypical or "out of pocket" representations (Klassen et al., 2021). The intertwining of linguistic, technological, and cultural practices affords a contemporary outlet for critiquing structures that have historically dehumanised Black people (Klassen et al., 2021).

Importantly, Black Twitter does not merely exist in opposition to mainstream media; it actively critiques and redirects it by offering alternative narratives and calling out misrepresentation. Within this space, Blacktags, signifyin' (a practice rooted in Black oral tradition involving layered meaning and wordplay), and prioritisation of issues related to race and racism function as discursive tools (Klassen et al., 2021). Black Twitter is therefore notable not only for humour but also for sustained engagement in political, social, and cultural discourse (Klein et al., 2022). For this study, this is significant because cancellation campaigns frequently rely on these culturally embedded linguistic strategies to construct moral judgement and demand accountability.

The rapid dissemination of conversations through viral hashtags and trending topics also disrupted assumptions that online discourse is neutral or representative of a universal public. Instead, Black Twitter demonstrated how culture, particularly Black culture shapes digital communication (Landon, 2022). Through both external observation and internal participation, it became evident that race and culture influence how discourse circulates and gains legitimacy online (Klein et al., 2022). This challenges the idea of social media as an equal or culturally neutral space.

Brock (2020) identifies three interrelated elements of Black discursive style on X: culturally relevant hashtags, networked participation, and viral spread. Culturally relevant hashtags organise conversations around issues central to Black communities. Networked participation ensures that users, often connected through shared backgrounds or values, sustain and amplify discussions through retweets and replies. Viral spread occurs when heightened engagement propels a hashtag into trending status, extending its visibility beyond the immediate community. Together, these elements explain how discourse gains momentum and becomes powerful enough to influence public perception.

However, this structure also produces dynamics that complicate cancel culture. Discourse on Black Twitter often occurs through homophily, meaning users connect with those who share similar backgrounds, values, and interests (Klein et al., 2022). Klein et al. (2022) further explore the concept of "groupthink," where individuals adopt dominant views expressed by influential voices. As users engage through retweets, replies, and quote tweets, community bonds are reinforced, and particular narratives gain strength. Homophily creates a self-sustaining network where discourse spreads rapidly internally before reaching a broader audience (Klein et al., 2022).

Within this environment, social currency becomes critical. Individuals who consistently generate engaging content accumulate 'clout' and gain influence in the online social hierarchy. Harper argues that "Arguably, the online social circle now holds more meaning and power in determining the social hierarchy in the real world than the way you interact and exist offline" (Harper, 2017: 70 in Faucher, 2018). As dominant narratives solidify, dissenting voices may silence themselves, enabling echo chambers and the potential formation of mob mentality (Barbera, 2020). These dynamics are particularly relevant for understanding cancel culture, where amplification, repetition, and moral alignment can intensify public condemnation.

According to Wheeler (2019) in Klein et al. (2022), racialised hashtags and discourse on Black Twitter have also allowed mainstream white culture insight into how Black communities communicate and critique. In this way, Black Twitter demonstrates how culture reshapes digital interaction, rather than merely adapting to platform design (Klein et al., 2022). Social media therefore plays a significant role in democratising social justice by challenging elite control of mainstream narratives and enabling marginalised groups to mobilise collectively. High-profile movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter illustrate how hashtag activism can generate both online and offline consequences (Bouvier and Machin, 2021).

For this study, the hashtag is not simply a technical feature. It is a discursive mechanism through which alignment forms, power circulates, and accountability is demanded. Understanding how hashtags structure participation, visibility, and amplification is therefore essential to analysing how cancel culture unfolds on South African Black Twitter.

The structural features outlined in this section; culturally relevant hashtags, networked participation, and viral spread (Brock, 2020; Klein et al., 2022), do not merely explain Black Twitter's visibility. They also provide the communicative infrastructure through which cancellation operates. Hashtags function as organising devices, networked participation sustains engagement, and viral amplification propels discourse into the mainstream. In this way, the same mechanisms that enable counter public formation and cultural expression also facilitate collective moral judgement and accountability. When a hashtag shifts from humour, commentary, or critique to explicit condemnation, it becomes a tool of cancellation. Thus, cancelling on X cannot be understood separately from the discursive and technological dynamics of Black Twitter itself.

2.2.2 Cancelling and Social Justice on X

Building on the power of the hashtag, as described above, cancelling via hashtags was initially intended as a mechanism to highlight the wrongdoing of powerful figures and to demonstrate solidarity in combating social injustices (Romano, 2019). Hashtags functioned as tools to amplify claims, make tweets go viral, and mobilise widespread withdrawal of support from public figures, thereby diminishing their social or professional power. Black Twitter users were among the primary creators and drivers of such hashtags, with the *#MeToo* movement serving as a notable example.

The *#MeToo* movement was created in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a Black activist and survivor of sexual assault. The phrase "me too" was first used by Burke on Twitter to support a young woman who had experienced sexual abuse. Over time, millions of women formed a community on Twitter in which survivors shared experiences of sexual harassment and assault in hopes of holding perpetrators accountable (Hillstrom, 2018). The movement gained renewed momentum in 2018 when women reported sexual misconduct by former family medicine physician Larry Nassar, leading to his conviction (Hillstrom, 2018). Additionally, public scrutiny extended beyond the perpetrator to those who had ignored or enabled the abuse, resulting in criminal charges and resignations (Hillstrom, 2018). A decade after Burke initiated

the movement, white feminists on X went viral for exposing film producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual offences, propelling *#MeToo* into a widespread movement in 2017 (de Roos et al., 2024).

Similarly, the *#BlackLivesMatter* (BLM) movement emerged after the death of Trayvon Martin and rapidly moved from social media discourse to street protests demanding justice for Black Americans subjected to police brutality (Garza et al., 2014). Following the mobilisation surrounding #BLM, George Zimmerman faced second-degree murder charges in Florida, USA. The movement highlighted the vulnerability of Black Americans to racialised state violence and drew attention to how race shapes lived experiences of equality, freedom, and democracy (Lockett et al., 2021). In both cases, hashtags functioned not merely as digital markers but as catalysts for collective action and mechanisms of accountability.

However, scholars have also pointed to the structural limitations of platforms such as X in facilitating nuanced or complex discussions. Papacharissi (2015) and Costa (2018) argue that tweets often lack coherent, rational deliberation and instead become driven by emotion and simplified narratives that frame issues in terms of clear moral oppositions between good and evil. The brevity and fast-paced circulation of tweets further constrain opportunities for sustained engagement or considered responses (Costa, 2018; Bouvier and Machin, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015). While this structure enables rapid mobilisation, it can also intensify moral outrage.

Hashtags themselves may become highly narrow in scope, directing users toward similar viewpoints and reinforcing a sense of moral certainty. Algorithmic curation plays a central role in this process: users are shown content aligned with their previous engagement, resulting in patterns of mutual confirmation without necessarily fostering critical reflection (Ng, 2020). Furthermore, emotionally charged hashtags can generate moral intensity within online communities. Users may be motivated to produce extreme or controversial content in pursuit of virality, further amplifying polarisation (Bouvier and Machin, 2021).

Social media platforms such as X are heavily influenced by algorithms that shape visibility and engagement. Filter bubbles occur when users are shown content similar to their previous searches or interactions, while echo chambers emerge socially when users primarily follow others who share similar views. Filter bubbles are personal; echo chambers are social. Together, they contribute to polarised digital environments (de Roos et al., 2020). Even when

hashtags appear in the “Trending” tab outside a user’s typical feed, positive reinforcement mechanisms such as likes and retweets signal value to the algorithm. Content that receives significant engagement is pushed to broader audiences, reinforcing specific ideas and behaviours and encouraging the production of similar content (de Roos et al., 2020). This cycle intensifies the visibility of dominant narratives and can accelerate cancellation processes.

Bouvier and Machin (2021) further argue that engagement on social media is often fleeting. Users casually browse rather than critically analyse content, and the ephemeral nature of digital communication enables participation without full contextual understanding. In the context of cancel culture, this dynamic may contribute to rapid moral judgement based on partial information (Bouvier and Machin, 2021).

Additionally, platforms such as X can amplify performative allyship, whereby individuals with social privilege demonstrate superficial support for social causes without meaningful self-reflection or structural commitment (Wong, 2022). Performative allyship may manifest through liking, sharing, or posting content in response to trending movements, particularly during moments of cancellation. Such engagement can be chaotic and trend-driven, shaped more by peer pressure and virality than by sustained political commitment (Wong, 2022). Those with privilege, whether racial, gendered, or socioeconomic, may participate in this shallow solidarity, potentially distracting from substantive change and reinforcing herd mentality.

The minimal time and effort required to express online support may also create the illusion of meaningful participation. Kalina (2020) notes that individuals may perceive digital gestures as sufficient, even when no concrete action follows. In this sense, while hashtag activism has demonstrated its capacity to democratise social justice and challenge elite control, it simultaneously risks reducing political engagement to symbolic performance.

For this study, these tensions are central. Cancelling on X emerges at the intersection of social justice mobilisation, algorithmic amplification, emotional discourse, and performative engagement. While hashtags can enable accountability and collective action, the same structural features that allow rapid mobilisation can also foster polarisation, moral intensity, and superficial participation. Understanding these dynamics is essential to analysing how cancel culture operates within South African Black Twitter.

2.3 Cancel culture in South Africa

Cancel culture in South Africa has manifested through numerous instances in which citizens have used social media and other forms of public mobilisation to attempt to withdraw support from individuals, brands, and institutions as a form of accountability. In alignment with the aims and objectives of this research, this section focuses on two prominent examples: the attempted cancellations of Helen Zille and the brand Clicks. These cases illustrate how digital discourse, particularly on X, intersects with South Africa's socio-political history and contemporary identity politics.

Although cancel culture is often framed as a recent digital phenomenon, practices resembling social ostracism and boycotts have long histories. In South Africa, social and economic exclusion was institutionalised through colonialism and later Apartheid, where Black, coloured, and Indian South Africans were subjected to systemic segregation and oppression (Dunlop, 2023). While historical ostracism functioned as a tool of state control and racial domination, contemporary cancel culture operates differently: it is largely citizen-driven and digitally facilitated. Nevertheless, it draws upon the country's long-standing struggles over justice, belonging, and power. Contemporary cancel culture entered South Africa through social media and global pop culture trends, gradually becoming normalised and embedded within public discourse (Dunlop, 2023).

As in other contexts, South African cancel culture has targeted celebrities, corporations, and political leaders, often through online outrage, petitions, boycotts, and trending hashtags. Given South Africa's history of racial oppression, issues of racism and exclusion continue to provoke significant public reaction. Consequently, many high-profile cancellation cases centre on identity, race, and historical accountability.

One such case is that of Adam Habib, former vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand and Director of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. In March 2021, Habib was suspended from his role at SOAS after using what is widely regarded as a racist slur during an online meeting with students. Following a student petition and widespread online backlash, he faced public condemnation and suspension (Nkanjeni, 2021; Gillani et al., 2018). The term he used has historically been employed to dehumanise Black people, making its utterance particularly charged within South Africa's racialised context. Although Habib apologised during the meeting, he later posted on X

defending his position, stating: “Do I think I did something wrong? No, for reasons I explained above. However, I did apologise because some individuals felt offended, and it was the right thing to do. Did it make a difference? No, because some focus on the politics of spectacle. These are my final words on the issue” (Nkanjeni, 2021). His response reflects tensions often present in cancel culture cases, where apology, intent, and public perception collide.

Another prominent case is that of Helen Zille, former Premier of the Western Cape and Federal Leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA). In March 2017, Zille posted a thread of tweets reflecting on her official trip to Singapore. In one tweet, she wrote: “For those claiming the legacy of colonialism was ONLY negative, think of our independent judiciary, transport infrastructure, piped water, etc. Would we have had a transition into specialised healthcare and medication without colonial influence? Just be honest”. The statement sparked immediate backlash, with many interpreting it as a defence of colonialism. Following public pressure, she was suspended from her party and later issued an apology: “I apologise unreservedly for a tweet that may have come across as a defence of colonialism” (Dunlop, 2023). Despite this, Zille was eventually reinstated and continues to serve within the party, illustrating the uneven consequences often associated with cancellation.

These cases demonstrate that South African cancel culture is deeply intertwined with identity politics and the country’s post-Apartheid social norms. Public outrage frequently centres on perceived breaches of anti-racist, anti-discrimination, and anti-oppression values that have become foundational to democratic South Africa. Cancellation, in this context, operates as a mechanism through which citizens attempt to symbolically rectify historical injustices by holding individuals and institutions accountable.

South Africa’s historical injustices were structured around racial and ethnic classification, as well as gender, religion, and culture. Although the country has lived under majority rule for nearly three decades, racial tensions and the legacy of Apartheid remain embedded in socio-political life. The cases of Habib and Zille reveal that racism continues to function as a central site of public contestation. For many non-white South Africans, these controversies signal that structural inequalities and racial sensitivities persist. For instance, Zille has continued to post controversial statements without facing long-term political exclusion, including offensive remarks on Facebook regarding the #BlackLivesMatter movement (Nkanjeni, 2019; Verwey and Quayle, 2012).

Taken together, these examples illustrate that cancel culture in South Africa cannot be divorced from the country's historical context. Rather than emerging solely as a digital trend, it operates within a society still negotiating the meaning of justice, accountability, and racial reconciliation in the post-Apartheid era. For this study, these cases provide a foundation for analysing how cancellation unfolds within South African Black Twitter, where historical memory, identity politics, and digital amplification intersect.

2.4 Public Image on X

Public image on X plays a crucial role in shaping how cancellation unfolds and whether it results in meaningful consequences. While hashtags and collective outrage may initiate cancellation attempts, the durability of these efforts often depends on the presence of protective networks, particularly fandoms. Within digital spaces, fandoms can function as informal defence systems, shielding public figures from reputational damage. This dynamic complicates simplistic understandings of cancel culture as a straightforward mechanism of accountability and is particularly relevant for analysing how power circulates within online communities.

Fandoms frequently operate through parasocial relationships, in which fans develop emotional attachments to celebrities who remain largely unaware of them as individuals (Giles, 2020). These relationships are inherently one-sided: fans invest time, emotional energy, and identity into defending and promoting the celebrity, while the celebrity may only recognise the fandom as a collective audience. On X, these attachments are reinforced through constant updates, direct interactions, and algorithmic amplification, creating tightly bonded "in-groups" organised around shared admiration (Smith et al., 2015). These in-groups do not merely consume content; they actively shape discourse by defending reputations, reframing controversies, and countering criticism.

The in-group most closely associated with celebrity cancel culture is Stan Twitter. While stans are part of broader fandom communities, they are distinguished by intense emotional investment and defensive loyalty. Stans frequently mobilise collectively to attack critics, discredit accusations, and redirect narratives in favour of their preferred celebrity (Pabawani and Nuralin, 2025). Their actions may include harassment, coordinated hashtag campaigns, and the strategic flooding of timelines with supportive content. In this way, stans do not simply participate in discourse; they actively attempt to control it. As a collective force on X, they possess significant influence in shaping how cancellation narratives develop and whether they

gain traction (Pabawani and Nuralin, 2025). For this study, this demonstrates that cancel culture does not operate in a vacuum, it is mediated by power blocs within digital communities.

The case of American singer Chris Brown illustrates this protective dynamic. Following his 2009 assault of then-girlfriend Rihanna, he faced widespread backlash. However, his fanbase mobilised rapidly to defend him, using hashtags such as #TeamBreezy and aggressively challenging critics and media outlets that called for consequences. This sustained digital defence contributed to rehabilitating his public image and allowed him to continue his career without enduring long-term cancellation (Pabawani and Nuralin, 2025). This example highlights a key tension within cancel culture: accountability efforts may be counteracted by loyal online communities capable of reframing narratives and diffusing outrage. In relation to South African Black Twitter, this raises an important analytical question: when cancellation is attempted, who has the digital power to resist it, and how does that shape outcomes?

Across this chapter, Black Twitter has been positioned as both a counterpublic and a site of moral judgement. Its use of culturally specific codes, humour, and hashtags enables collective resistance to hegemonic power structures, while simultaneously fostering emotionally charged discourse (Costa, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). Linguistic practices such as the sharing of "receipts" and "tea" demonstrate how Black Twitter mobilises storytelling and evidence to critique those in positions of authority (Florini, 2014). These discursive tools are central to how cancellation gains legitimacy within the community. However, the structural features of X; brevity, immediacy, and algorithmic curation, constrain the depth of engagement possible in these exchanges.

The platform's emphasis on short-form communication encourages simplified narratives, often framed through moral binaries. While hashtags facilitate mobilisation, they can also channel users into echo chambers that intensify emotional alignment rather than foster critical dialogue (Ng, 2020). As Bouvier and Machin (2021) argue, online outrage is frequently characterised by rapid emotional responses that lack sustained deliberation. Algorithmic reinforcement further amplifies content aligned with users' prior beliefs, creating feedback loops that heighten moral intensity. For this study, these dynamics are central: they explain how cancellation can escalate quickly on South African Black Twitter, yet fail to translate into structural consequences.

This tension is evident in the cases of Adam Habib and Helen Zille. Although both faced significant backlash, their professional and political positions largely remained intact (Nkanjeni, 2021; Gillani et al., 2018). These cases suggest that cancellation may generate symbolic accountability without producing lasting institutional change. In this sense, cancel culture operates as a visible performance of public disapproval, but not necessarily as a mechanism of structural transformation. The uneven consequences observed in these cases raise critical questions about power, privilege, and the limits of digital mobilisation in post-Apartheid South Africa.

Performative activism further complicates this landscape. Social media allows users to signal solidarity through minimal engagement, such as liking, sharing, or reposting content, without committing to sustained action. This dynamic risks reducing social justice participation to symbolic gestures rather than material change (Bouvier and Machin, 2021). While Black Twitter has demonstrated its capacity to challenge dominant narratives, the interplay between performative engagement, algorithmic amplification, and protective fandoms may dilute the effectiveness of cancellation as a tool for justice.

Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates the duality of Black Twitter within cancel culture. It functions simultaneously as a site of resistance and as a space shaped by platform constraints, emotional intensification, and power imbalances. Hashtags enable visibility; networked participation sustains discourse; algorithms amplify outrage; fandoms mediate consequences. Together, these dynamics form the communicative environment within which South African cancellation cases unfold.

For this study, the central implication is that cancel culture on South African Black Twitter cannot be understood solely as either effective activism or irrational mob behaviour. Rather, it must be analysed as a digitally mediated practice shaped by historical memory, racial politics, algorithmic design, and community power structures. This framework provides the foundation for the empirical analysis that follows.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

Building on insights from the literature review in Chapter 2, research shows that digital activism is often compromised by oversimplification and performative allyship (Wong, 2022). Black Twitter mobilises users through hashtags and engagement, yet this process is often criticised for lacking the nuance required to drive structural change. To analyse these dynamics, this study adopts Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which examines how language is never neutral but actively constructs and reflects power relations, ideology, and inequality (Van Dijk, 2015).

Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model; analysing text, discursive practice, and social practice, CDA allows us to uncover the power structures embedded in online discourse. This approach is essential for understanding how users challenge perceived wrongdoing on South African Black Twitter and lays the foundation for adapting CDA to include digital and visual elements.

3.2 CDA and CTDA Integration

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is defined by Van Dijk (2001:352 in Van Dijk, 2015) as an approach that studies how social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through text and talk in social and political contexts. Fairclough (2023:11) adds that CDA systematically explores relationships between discursive practices and wider social structures, investigating how ideology shapes discourse and maintains power.

CDA enables researchers to analyse not only what is said but how language reflects broader social and cultural structures. On South African Black Twitter, CDA helps explain how users shape public accountability, negotiate moral norms, and express group values through text.

However, traditional CDA was designed mainly for written or spoken text and does not fully capture the multimodal nature of online communication, which includes images, emojis, GIFs, and platform features. To address this limitation, I integrate André Brock's (2016) concept of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), which extends CDA by incorporating

digital and cultural technologies. CTDA allows the study to examine how text, visuals, and platform tools interact to construct meaning, influence visibility, and shape interpretations on Black Twitter.

Specifically, this study applies CDA and CTDA by:

- Analysing how emojis, memes, and GIFs contribute cultural and visual meanings to tweets.
- Examining how social media features, such as hashtags, retweets, and platform algorithms, affect visibility and engagement.
- Investigating how textual and visual elements combine to communicate humour, mockery, or moral judgement.

3.3 Visibility on Black Twitter

Digital platforms consist of networked publics, overlapping spaces where users interact (Bruns, 2023; Boyd, 2010). This chapter examines how race, power, and platform design shape discourse in the context of cancel culture.

As Foucault (2004:29 in Feder, 2014) explains:

"Power is something that circulates… exercised through networks [so that] individuals are in a position both to submit and to exercise this power."

On Black Twitter, power is ephemeral, shifting depending on the incident. Users assert influence through **visibility**, which depends on three factors (Treem et al., 2020):

1. **Message visibility** – Users can post publicly, privately, or restrict replies. Strategic users, like brands or influencers, use hashtags, mentions, and timing to increase reach.
2. **Communication exposure** – Users may encounter content outside their network via algorithmic recommendations.
3. **Socio-material context of communication** – Platform architecture (algorithms, notifications, moderation) shapes which content is highlighted. Quote-tweet culture also influences content circulation.

Visibility is also shaped by cultural fluency. Black Twitter uses humour, metaphors, and "signifyin'" rooted in African and African American oral traditions (Florini, 2019). Understanding these requires familiarity with Black vernacular English, pop culture references, and socio-political context.

Structural and historical factors, such as digital divides in South Africa, further influence who can participate online (Lembani et al., 2019; Ndulu et al., 2022). Algorithmic moderation and platform rules act as gatekeepers, determining which voices gain prominence (Cobbe, 2021; Walton et al., 2021).

A clear example is the backlash against MacG's transphobic comments in 2021. Tweets that used indirect language, humour, or memes were more visible than those explicitly stating "hate speech," demonstrating how platform algorithms influence the spread of discourse.

3.4 Discourse Interpretation

South Africa's linguistic diversity and history shape online interpretation. Indigenous languages remain underrepresented in digital spaces, with English dominating online discourse (Makanise, 2024). Humour, a key tool on Black Twitter, is culturally coded and varies across communities (Wood et al., 2018; Donian, 2022).

A tweet or meme may resonate in the United States but confuse South African audiences due to historical, racial, and cultural differences. This study foregrounds local context, examining who leads cancellations, what is considered offensive, and how shared cultural knowledge affects interpretation.

3.5 Applying CDA to South African Black Twitter

Fairclough's three-dimensional model has been adapted for this study to examine cancel culture on South African Black Twitter:

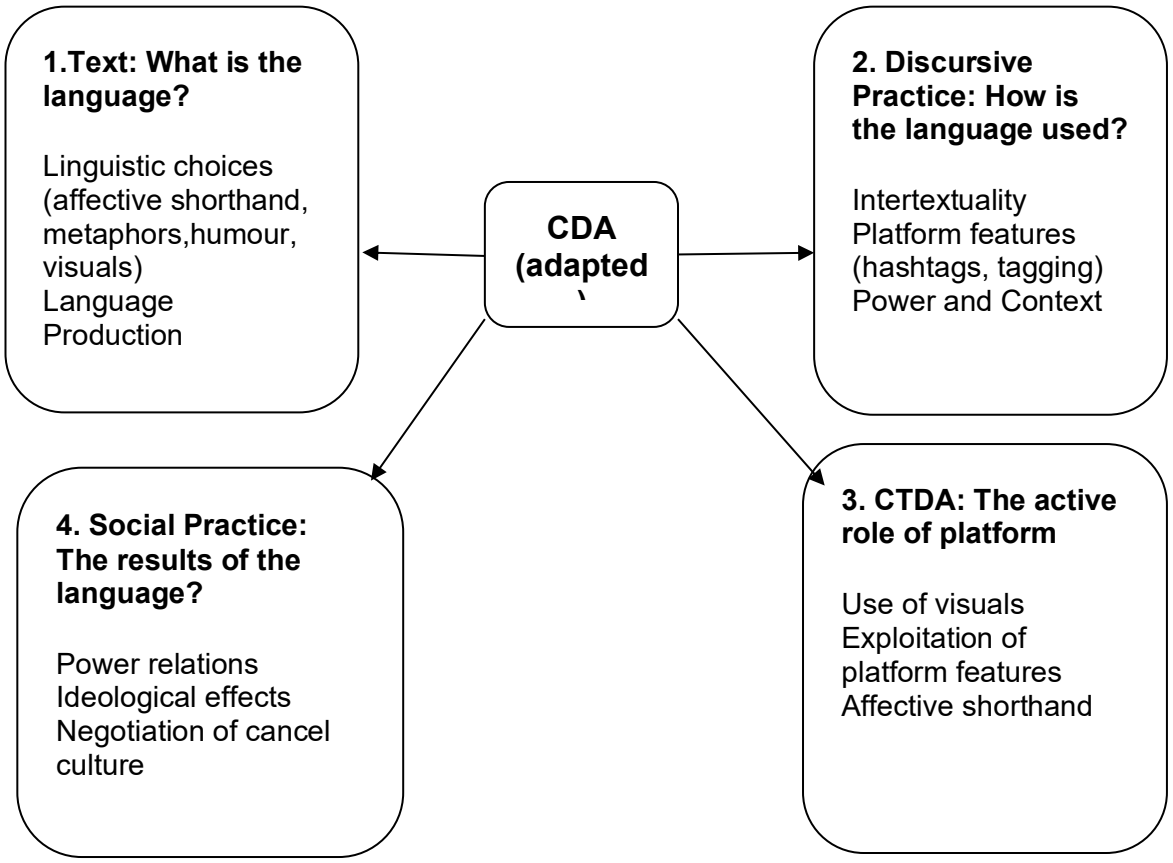

Figure 3.5

CDA is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how discourse contributes to power, dominance, and social inequality (Kumar, 2018; Van Dijk, 2015). What makes CDA critical is that it challenges assumptions, exposes embedded ideologies, and analyses the strategic use of language.

Traditional CDA focuses primarily on language. Online communication, however, relies heavily on visual elements; memes, emojis, GIFs and platform features like hashtags and retweets. To address this, CTDA extends CDA by incorporating digital technologies, helping to explain how these elements interact to construct meaning.

In this study, CDA is applied by:

- Analysing how visual elements complement text and convey tone.
- Studying the interaction of images and text to create meaning.
- Considering how hashtags, retweets, and algorithms affect visibility and interpretation.

This approach strengthens the analysis and makes it suitable for the mixed, visual nature of online discourse.

3.6 CDA and Black Twitter

South African Black Twitter is a space where users negotiate accountability through culturally situated discourse. Interpretation relies on historical memory, online language, and moral values (Van Dijk, 1993; Foucault, 1980). Users employ hashtags, quote-tweets, and other platform features to shape public conversations, express solidarity, and enforce norms (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022).

Cancellation draws on shared cultural references, local idioms, humour, and moral codes (Clark, 2020, 2024). These practices, such as "reading" and "dragging," originate from offline traditions of resistance. Platform structures amplify these messages, allowing them to reach wider audiences quickly.

3.6.1 Research Questions and CDA Application

1. **How do users on South African Black Twitter shame individuals and brands?** Tweets employ humour, moral framing, and mockery, reflecting shared social tensions and values (van Dijk, 2015; Munibi, 2025).
2. **What cultural values shape who gets cancelled?** Ideologies on Black Twitter include respectability politics, gender justice, and anti-Blackness. Examples include the #MenAreTrash debates and backlash against celebrities, showing competing norms and values (Pitcan et al., 2018; Clark, 2024).
3. **Who initiates cancellations, and how do they succeed?** Both influential accounts and smaller users can initiate campaigns. Success depends on visibility, language use, moral framing, and resonance with community values (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022; Shringarpure, 2020; Molefe & Ratale, 2024).

3.7 Conclusion

CDA, complemented by CTDA, allows a holistic analysis of South African Black Twitter by considering both text and visuals, and by linking language to broader social and cultural structures. Visibility, cultural fluency, and platform affordances all shape how discourse unfolds. This framework prepares the study to analyse specific cases of cancellation, showing how language, visuals, and platform tools interact to produce accountability, resistance, and community negotiation in online spaces.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodologies and research design employed for data collection, as well as the approach used for data analysis. I explain the methods used to collect and analyse data. I also explain how tweets were gathered, how specific hashtags and interactions were selected, and which tools I used to interpret the language and cultural context of those tweets. By combining digital observation with linguistic analysis, the chapter demonstrates how users employ language and social interaction to expose perceived misconduct, assert their values, and negotiate visibility online. I use a qualitative research approach that examines the meaning behind texts and their implications within broader social structures.

4.2 Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative approach, utilising a comparative case study design. This methodology was selected because the research aims to understand the nuanced meanings and power structures embedded in digital discourse, these cannot be adequately captured by quantitative metrics alone (Bennani, 2021). Qualitative methods help us to understand how emotional nuance, cultural references, and ideological tensions are intertwined with language and interaction; this meaning cannot be explained using numerical data (Bennani, 2021). By centering the analysis around race, gender, class, and historical memory, this approach allows tweets to be analysed as a part of larger, ongoing social conversations (Clark, 2024). This methodology helped us to engage with the complexity and ambiguity inherent in a space like Black Twitter, where humour, resistance, and moral framing are continuously embedded in the text.

For this study, I had to assemble a rich and balanced dataset across different contexts. Over one thousand five hundred (1500) tweets were manually collected from South African Black Twitter, spanning a sustained period from 2019 to 2024. This sample was selected carefully, focusing on a range of figures; politicians (Zille), media personalities (Maboe) and corporate

brands (Clicks), to ensure the analysis captured how accountability is framed and applied across different forms of institutional power (Molefe & Ratale, 2024). I applied the same principle to brands (selecting both global and local targets), to maximise the potential for comparative study, to show how power dynamics shift across institutional types. The depth that the qualitative approach focuses on was necessary to facilitate the thorough critique required by the CTDA framework.

4.3 Data Collection

The study used a non-participatory digital ethnographic approach (Forberg and Schilt, 2023). I systematically observed publicly accessible online discourse, making sure not to interfere to ensure that I do not affect the outcome of the discourse (Jansen, 2022). This method was helpful for analysing culturally sensitive and politically charged digital spaces while maintaining ethical distance (Klassen & Fieseler, 2022). The initial plan for data collection was scraping tweets, which was changed later in the study. X's public API restrictions, instituted in 2023, limited bulk and archival data access, giving rise to a post API era where financial constraints rendered automated tools inaccessible (Trezza, 2023; Ledford, 2023). Specifically, X officially ended free access to its Application Programming Interface (API) by introducing tiered pricing plans that restrict data availability based on payment level. This limitation required an adaptation from me as the researcher.

At the same time, full-archive or high-volume extraction requires high-level subscriptions, which are often financially inaccessible to independent researchers or institutions (Ledford, 2023). Therefore, I adopted manual data collection as both an ethical and technical alternative. This decision allowed me to collect data while avoiding the legal and ethical risks associated with unauthorised data scraping (Fiesler et al., 2020; Wheeler, 2018).

Handling such a large dataset (1,500+ tweets) required a thorough sampling protocol, to justify the sample size and ensure comparative depth across the five distinct cases (Clark, 2024). I intentionally collected data across a sustained window (2019-2024), this was to capture the initial emotional peak and see how cancellation progresses across the subsequent years, to avoid focusing solely on isolated tweets. Furthermore, the sample went through a criterion to confirm the relevance of the data.

I chose the sampling approach based on a criterion that ensured the data reflected collective social power and provided the necessary depth for CTDA. First, I came up with a threshold,

including only tweets that generated a minimum of 40 likes or retweets (the defined high-engagement threshold). The threshold ensured that I captured tweets whose discourse sparked conversation with multiple users. Second, I actively prioritised multimodal tweets (text accompanied by hashtags, memes, or visual receipts) because they carry a lot of meaning and they seem to trend more than textual tweets. This confirms the argument that visual evidence and multimodal strategy greatly influence the narrative and create a permanent archive (Brock, 2020).

4.3.1 Black Twitter - Methodological Markers

To ensure the findings are specifically from South African Black Twitter, I used a list designed to help keep the sampled discourse relevant to the specific context of the study:

- **Linguistic and affective markers -** I searched for tweets containing localised slang (e.g., *"nywwe nywee", "hayi"*), code-switching in SA indigenous languages (Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho phrases), and signifyin' (rhetorical irony, online idioms).
- **Hashtags -** I purposely selected tweets with hashtags that were used to mobilise the public, and the discourse was about events happening in South Africa. Examples of that include *#ClicksMustFall, #DontTouchOurHair, and #CheesecakeGate.*
- **Network reciprocity -** I observed retweets and replies between regular Black Twitter users and political figures (e.g. EFF accounts). I did this to ensure that the accounts were part of the recognised and influential counterpublic network, rather than isolated opinions.
- **Geographic and biographical markers -** I then screened the data for self-identification and geographic location markers (e.g., *Proud Black South African, Soweto, Durban*). These helped to locate the discourse geographically within the context of South Africa.

4.3.2 Case Study Selection and Sampling Criteria

To ensure that I fully understand the concept of accountability in digital spaces, I employed a multiple case study approach, drawing data from five high-profile cancellation cases that occurred between 2019 and 2024. The reason is that I wanted to fully understand how cancel culture works, even after the initial reaction following the offensive incident. I did not want to study isolated events; instead, I examined multiple figures and how their cancellations

progressed over the course of five years. The total dataset consisted of over 1,500 tweets manually collected from Black Twitter over a six-month period (January to June 2025).

4.3.2.1 Comparative Cases (Individual versus Brand)

While I examined a wide range of public figures and brands during data collection, my analysis focuses specifically on two high-profile cancellation cases that generated a lot of engagement on Black Twitter.

These two cases were the main data for my analysis, which was selected to provide a comparative perspective on how power dynamics shift across different institutional types. Analysing these cases side by side allowed me to distinguish between the cancellations individuals are subjected to compared to those of brands.

The first is the case of Helen Zille, a prominent political figure, who faced negative reception from users for posting tweets widely interpreted as racist and colonialist in tone, especially her 2017 post defending colonialism and follow-up tweets in 2020 that fueled racial tensions online. The second case involves the boycott and cancellation of the retail brand, Clicks. The brand published a TRESemmé hair care advertisement on its website in 2020, which described Black hair as “dry and damaged” while referring to white hair as “normal.” Both cases received extensive public critique, media coverage, and organised call-outs that were all witnessed on South African Black Twitter (Clark, 2024).

I selected these two cases because they represent distinct but overlapping cancellation campaigns, one targeting a public individual associated with political power and the other involving a corporate brand accused of racial insensitivity in its marketing. Studying these cases side by side enabled me to observe how different kinds of authority figures are held accountable, how language and hashtags are mobilised across contexts, and how cultural discourse takes shape in response to perceived harm.

4.3.2.2 Supporting Cases (Celebrity Politics)

To further broaden my understanding of cancel culture, I also looked at three additional cases: Katlego Maboe, Matthew Booth, and Kelly Khumalo. These cases focused on issues around marital misconduct, patriarchy and racial expectations, and they were helpful to show how factors such as gender and race can impact the cancellation process, even for prominent figures.

1. **Katlego Maboe -** Maboe is a well-established media personality who got cancelled following a viral video of him admitting to infidelity and alleged abuse. His cancellation was centred around gendered standards of public morality, the role of social media in domestic violence cases, and the impact of social ostracism on an influential figure's personal and professional life.
2. **Matthew Booth -** A former national soccer player, now commonly known as 'Mr Cheesecake', was involved in an alleged affair while still married to his estranged wife. The affair came to the surface after he was publicly shamed by his wife, with the video going viral on Black Twitter. His cancellation was about patriarchal norms of betrayal and accountability, women's views on marital betrayal, and the use of 'receipts' (evidence) to publicly shame an individual.
3. **Kelly Khumalo -** Singer and songwriter who has been a subject of public criticism due to her connection to the late Senzo Meyiwa's murder case. She was Senzo's partner at the time and was accused of being involved in Meyiwa's death. Her case focused on sustained discourse and collective memory, demonstrating how Black Twitter users utilise language to demand answers from public figures following suspicions.

4.3 Sampling Approach and Criteria

I sampled tweets across a sustained period from 2019 to 2024 to avoid focusing solely on isolated events and immediate reactions, which would provide an inaccurate description of how cancel culture actually operates. This approach enabled me to capture both the initial emotional reaction following a cancellable event and the sustained discourse after media attention subsided.

The 1,500-tweet sample was guided by specific criteria to ensure the dataset reflected sustained, collective discourse rather than isolated incidents:

- **Topical Relevance** – Tweets had to contain core, case-specific hashtags and keywords used by the Black Twitter community (see Table 4.1).

- **Sustained Discourse Window** – I collected tweets not only during the initial cancellation and immediate reactions, which were often emotional, but also in the months following, to determine whether cancel culture functions as a sustained

practice.

- **Engagement Threshold** – Only tweets generating significant engagement (more than 40 likes) were included. The cases I studied involved influential media figures whose discourse was likely to gain widespread attention. Engagement also includes comments, retweets, and quote tweets; capturing a larger set with varying engagement would not have been feasible given the available resources and timeframe.

The 2019–2024 timeframe was intentionally chosen to capture the full scope of the cancellation process, from initial calling out to de-platforming, or the gradual exclusion from online spaces. This allowed me to observe whether situations escalated or diffused over time (Marret, 2022).

The study also included a diverse range of public figures, such as politicians, musicians, media personalities, and social media influencers. This diversity increases the representativeness of the dataset and allows for an analysis of whether cancel culture manifests differently depending on the target, as power and ideology operate differently across discursive domains (Aiseng, 2024).

Although the focus was on two primary case studies, the analysis is situated within a broader conversation on online accountability. These cases were selected not only for high engagement but also because their patterns resonate with significant movements facilitated by Black Twitter, such as the #MeToo movement and the H&M cancellation, highlighting racial justice and critiques of institutional power.

The distribution of tweets across cases is uneven, reflecting the relative public resonance of each incident:

- **Clicks Case** – Generated the highest engagement due to its cultural sensitivity in the context of South Africa's history of Black oppression, as well as the socio-economic impact of boycotts on citizens' livelihoods.

- **Helen Zille Case** – Selected because she is an influential political figure active on X (formerly Twitter), whose controversial opinions prompted strong public responses, enabling broader participation in cancellation discourse.

- **Supporting Cases** – Maboe's case gained high engagement after his return to media screens, which was met with approval from users. Khumalo's case peaked during trial updates and personal developments. The inclusion of the Mathew Booth case illustrates how recency and public visibility influence engagement on Black Twitter. At the time of data collection, Booth was involved in a high-profile controversy that generated considerable public discussion. Including his case allows for comparison with more established figures like Zille or Maboe, highlighting how emerging or less prominent figures are subjected to the same mechanisms of online accountability, including scrutiny, moral judgment, and the use of humour or critique by the Black Twitter community. This demonstrates that cancel culture is not limited to historically powerful individuals but can also target figures whose influence is growing, thereby providing a broader understanding of the dynamics of online cancellations.

This sampling strategy ensures that the dataset reflects sustained, culturally embedded, and highly engaged discourse, which is crucial for analysing the dynamics of cancel culture on South African Black Twitter.

Table 4.3

Case Study	Key hashtags/keywords	Date of collection (sustained discourse)	Approx. tweet count
Clicks (Corporate)	#ClicksMustFall, #Tresemme, "Clicks hair, #Blackhair	Sep 2020 - Dec 2020 (peak); Sep 2021 - Oct 2021 (sustained)	480+
Helen Zille (Political)	"Zille", "racist", "colonialism", #StayWokeGoBroke	Various peak moments: Apr 2020 - Jun 2020 (sustained)	420+
Katlego Maboe (Redemption)	"Maboe", #KatlegoMaboe, "confession video"	Oct 2020 - Jan 2021 (peak)	280+
KellyKhumalo	#KellyKhumalo,	Various peak moments (2019-2024)	180+

(Sustained Cancellation)	"Senzo Meyiwa", "justice for Senzo"		
Matthew Booth (Family)	#CheesecakeGate, "Matthew Booth", "Sonia Booth"	Nov 2022 - Jan 2023 (peak)	140+
Total Sample Size			1500+

4.4 Data Analysis: Critical Discourse Analysis (CTDA) Framework

The data were analysed using an adaptation of Critical Discourse Analysis (CTDA), a qualitative approach that examines the relationship between language and power. CDA enables us to examine social phenomena by analysing how language constructs and reflects social power, ideologies, and identities (Farhadytooli, 2025). Specifically, the analysis examines data across three layers (shown below) to illustrate how meanings are constructed and negotiated within a broader social context and historical memory (Chachu and Liebzie, 2023).

The analysis makes use of Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Wodak & Meyer, 2009):

1. Textual Analysis (description) - The focus is on the linguistic choices made in the text. For instance, in this study, users employed metaphors to shame figures (e.g., *calling Helen Zille a "drunk uncle"*). They also used slang *("nywee nywee")* to construct accountability and in-group visibility.
2. Discursive Practice (interpretation) - We look at the production and consumption of text. Here, I connect the dots, looking for traces of intertextuality (how tweets reference past events like the H&M cancellation). I also analyse platform features, such as retweet chains and hashtags, to understand how interpretation shapes cancel culture (Schober and Dolgin, 2025).
3. Social Practice (explanation) - In this final step, I situate the discourse within broader social structures, looking at how discourse shapes and is shaped by social realities. Specifically, I analyse how references to heroic figures like Sobukwe, Biko, and Mandela, or concepts like ubuntu, tie cancellation campaigns to decolonial values and post-apartheid struggles (Zainub, 2019).

4.5 Operationalising CTDA: Shift in Methodology

While the main theory for the study is grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA, the digital, culturally specific nature of the data provides a need for a supportive methodological adaptation; Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). This adaptation was essential considering that factors affecting the discourse on Black Twitter are not only cultural but are also based on the platform's technological affordances in our unique post-apartheid context. There was a need to acknowledge and factor technology as an active, structural agent in the distribution of power (Brock, 2020). The inconsistency found in the discourse, where powerful linguistic critique often failed due to platform structure, confirms that a method that treats technology as a neutral site is structurally insufficient for understanding accountability on social media in the African context. The following steps detail how CTDA was operationalised to systematically capture this interaction.

4.5.1 Multimodal Data Analysis

Where tweets include visual elements such as memes, GIFs and stickers, the visuals are treated as a part of the communicative message that contributes to meaning-making. This is important because humour, critique, and rhetorical impact are often constructed via the multimodal integration of text and visuals. The analysis looked at the data for two additional elements, applied alongside Fairclough's model to identify the active role of technology in structuring racial and social dynamics:

- **Technological Adaptation**

  This element examines the platform affordances of X and how users adapt these affordances to work for them, either through maximising their visibility, engagement, or connection to a broader network. The coding focused on instances where users intentionally altered discourse to bypass platform constraints (e.g., evasive spelling, symbolic language).

- **Strategic Archival and Surveillance**

  Coding focused on instances where platform features were strategically weaponised (e.g., tagging sponsors, archiving content) to maximise engagement and get their tweets to a large audience.

4.5.2 CTDA Operational Steps

To ensure that CTDA was applied across all the tweets, I linked the traditional dimensions of CDA to the technological mechanisms of the platform. These steps helped guide the analysis, ensuring that techno-cultural elements were fully considered.

Table 4.5

CDA Dimension	**CTDA Operational Focus**	**Coding**
Textual Analysis	Affective Shorthand & Character Limits	Coding for culturally specific compressed language (e.g., "Mr Cheesecake") that maximises meaning and resonance within X's 280-character format.
Discursive Practice	Platform Affordances & Amplification	Coding for the strategic use of features (Quote Tweets, Threading) that enable Decentralised Initiation and Archival Surveillance (Brock, 2020).
Social Practice	Algorithmic Bias & Structural Resistance	Coding for linguistic forms used to resist algorithmic moderation (evasive spelling/symbols) and linking this adaptation to the broader context of decolonial resistance (Shahid et al., 2025).

4.5.3 Cultural Fluency and Circumvention

This element considers the role of the South African context on cancel culture, whether the makeup of the country (our multiple languages and history) has an impact on what constitutes cancellable behaviour. Here, I look at the following:

- **Linguistic Code-Switching -** I analyse the strategic use of indigenous languages in tweets when referring to direct terms that the platform would have otherwise banned had they been written in English. Users write their tweets using both local languages and slang, which acts as a barrier to outsiders and creates in-group solidarity and understanding.
- **Cultural Metaphors, Idioms and Values -** Here, I analyse the community values that guide the Black Twitter community. Online interactions mirror those offline; the same values that the Black community stand by in their everyday lives are also used on social media. An idiom like *'Umntu Ngumntu Ngabantu'* translated to '*I am who I am because of others',* and references to colonial figures (Sobukwe and Biko), show that cancellation is tied to who we are in relation to where we are.
- **Affective Shorthand -** I identify the use of culturally specific memes, emojis, and humour (e.g., satire and mockery) that act as a form of collective emotional response, such as the use of "Mr Cheesecake" in the Matthew Booth discourse.

By integrating these techno-cultural elements, the findings can provide an accurate reflection of what cancel culture looks like in South Africa.

4.6 Data Coding and Organisation (Triangulation)

Considering the large amount of qualitative data I worked with, I needed a system to organise all 1500 plus tweets. Initially, I used Atlas, a software used for systematic coding and thematic mapping, to code and manage the tweets (Smit and Scherman, 2021). The software helped me identify repeating patterns in the large dataset, which would have otherwise required a lot of time. I recognise that qualitative research is heavily reliant on the researcher's interpretation, so to understand social relations, I also examined the data myself and manually identified additional themes. In this way, I was able to pick up on subtle social cues that automated software could overlook, such as cultural nuances, tone, and context. As Friese (2019) notes, software is meant to support, not replace the interpretive depth required in CDA. I used the software to tag segments and write memos based on the given data, but it served as a support tool, not a replacement for my role in analysing and interpreting the data (Cumyn et al., 2019).

I conducted the data analysis using a series of calculated steps to ensure they genuinely reflect the data:

1. **Initial coding (Atlas) -** I used the software to generate descriptive codes, which provided an overview of the broad themes in the data. The initial codes identified three themes: humour as critique, the use of indigenous languages, and the use of metaphors.
2. **Categorisation -** The software also helped organise the large dataset into manageable sections, making it easier to organise and categorise the tweets. Specifically, I grouped the codes into smaller groups through a process called constant comparison (Speirs et al., 2018). For instance, I placed tweets that used humour (satire, mockery) under the category of humour and moral appeals.
3. **Interpretative coding -** I then conducted a manual critical analysis to double-check the data, refine the categories, and organise them into the final four themes, guided by both the CDA and the CTDA frameworks.

The study used over 1500 tweets collected manually and analysed using Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA). While the extensive data is helpful in showing a wide range of representation of various individuals and brands, it also presents challenges. The handling of large datasets can make it difficult to achieve depth and a comprehensive interpretation. The limitation presented by such data is the researcher's interpretive capacity, which could lead to surface-level readings and inconsistent coding of tweets (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022).

Furthermore, the nature of the tweets (brevity) and factors that encompass the whole meaning of the tweet, such as slang, emojis, hashtags, and cultural references, can complicate interpretation and risk misreading or miscontextualizing discourse. Using manual collection methods may introduce selection bias. The selected tweets could be a matter of personal preference and, therefore, subject to bias. Klassen and Fiesler (2022) speak to the ethical and methodological implications of studying marginalised online communities. They argue that researchers must be transparent about their criteria and reflexive about their own biases. Lastly, tweets may be a reflection of temporary incidents rather than sustained discursive practices, which could limit the ability to generalise findings (Marret, 2022).

4.7 Credibility

To ensure the credibility of the findings and to counter the inherent risk of researcher subjectivity in the analysis dealing with such a large dataset, I followed the following steps:

1. **Methodological Triangulation -** I used software (Atlas for systematic data organisation and initial mapping of themes) alongside manual analysis to add depth to the findings and ensure consistency with the identified themes.
2. **Data Triangulation** - I cross-referenced the tweets with corporate and political press statements posted on Black Twitter by the targeted figures and brands. For example, Clicks released a statement addressing the TreSemmé advert and how they will disassociate themselves from companies with racist views. For the public figures, they also released media statements, which were also referenced to validate the tweets. This strengthened the interpretation and provided a more accurate representation of the findings (Vivek et al; 2023).
3. **Reflexivity -** I maintained continuous reflexivity through the research process. I acknowledge my positionality as the researcher, being familiar with Black Twitter and the figures at hand. I used this familiarity to offer an informed rather than a distorted analysis.

Overall, I aimed to provide a balanced analysis of cancel culture by analysing tweets from a diverse range of public figures and brands, which prevents findings from being skewed by a single event, demographic, or social category. I strived to maintain a reflexive stance in the study to ensure that personal bias does not distort interpretation, but instead informs a critical analysis of power and language on Black Twitter (Vivek et al; 2023).

4.8 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the ethical standards for conducting research in digital spaces, particularly regarding privacy, anonymity, and the potential harm associated with studying marginalised minority groups and online communities (the Black Twitter community). In this context, 'minority group' refers to a population group that typically faces social, economic, and political disadvantages due to existing power structures and institutionalised inequalities (Qampi, 2022). Race is more than just a description of physical traits; it is a social determinant because historically it has been used to categorise people into hierarchies. Therefore, in the context of South Africa, even though Black people make up the majority of the population, they can still be considered a social class minority due to their historical and ongoing position in the socio-economic structure (Qampi, 2022).

I followed these steps to ensure ethical data collection and analysis:

1. **Privacy and Consent -** I did not require participant consent, given that I used publicly accessible tweets. However, I had to adhere to the ethical guidelines for handling public online content. To counter the risk of re-identification and digital harassment, all usernames, profile pictures, and identifying handles are anonymised and replaced with (e.g., User A) in the presentation of the findings in Chapter 5. The anonymisation helped minimise potential harm to these communities (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022).
2. **Platform Compliance -** The use of manual data collection over scraping tools was not only to enrich data interpretation but also out of respect for X's terms of service. Following the API changes in 2023, X made it clear that users cannot utilise foreign tools to access archival data, such as tweets from previous years. The study complied with the platform's policies concerning unauthorised access to data (Mancosu and Vegetti, 2020).
3. **Researcher Positionality -** I exercised reflexivity by acknowledging my positionality as a researcher familiar with Black Twitter and the complexities of the post-apartheid context, which enabled me to be aware of potential biases. This ethical practice allows researchers to disclose their relationship with the participants, which may influence how they analyse the data (Klassen & Fiesler, 2022).

   I have no personal relationship with any of the participants; however, I am familiar with the public figures from what I have observed about them through the media. Being aware of how that preconceived notion about them can potentially influence the analysis, I was conscious of the tweets I selected, trying to maintain a balance between the users' views and those of the public figures. This awareness helped enrich the findings by providing a well-informed critical analysis of power and language.

X's privacy policy states that:

> X is public, and tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone worldwide. We also provide you with private ways to communicate on X, including protected tweets and direct messages. You can also use X under a pseudonym if you prefer not to use your name. (https://twitter.com/en/privacy/previous/version_16)

X makes it clear to anyone opening up an account that public accounts can be searched and viewed. Alternatively, users can opt for a non-public account to protect their privacy. The account holder can accept or reject followers when they send a follow request. As this study

made use of public accounts, the ethical issue of accessing and viewing tweets was covered by approval from the service itself.

CHAPTER 5: Data Presentation and Analysis

5.1 Introduction

This chapter applies Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis to analyse over 1500 tweets collected from South African Black Twitter between 2019 and 2024. This approach is suitable for studying texts such as tweets because its primary focus is to examine how discourse can both produce and conceal relations of power and inequality. In detail, CDA examines how social power, abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through texts within the social and political context (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). This chapter applies CTDA to explain how platform affordances and cultural fluency in South Africa actively shape discourse around accountability. While CDAcan help reveal the power relations that determine who gets heard, CTDA brings a different perspective; we can use it to explain the role of digital infrastructure and cultural codes in the discursive process.

5.2 Case Selection and Comparative Analysis

The focus was on the cancellations of five public figures and brands, selected due to the high engagement they generated. This decision allowed me to compare accountability across different contexts.

1. **Primary Cases -** Helen Zille (colonial comments) and Clicks (corporate racism). These are the main comparative cases, showing how cancel culture challenges racial and economic power structures.

   In the case of politician Helen Zille, the issue is around political performative allyship, as she posted tweets defending controversial figures and using colonial rhetoric (*#CancelZille*). For the second case of retailer Clicks, the offence is about corporate racism, where they worked on an advert with cosmetic brand TreSemmé in 2020, depicting Black hair as “dry and damaged” *(#ClicksMustFall)*.
2. **Secondary Cases (Intersectional Morality):** Matthew Booth (infidelity), Katlego Maboe (infidelity), and Kelly Khumalo (racial stereotypes/gender norms). In these cases, we see the concept of intersectional relations. These show how Black Twitter integrates gendered morality and intra-community values.

This analysis addresses three research questions:

- How do Black Twitter users employ language to shame individuals or brands?
- What cultural values determine what constitutes offensiveness and cancellation?
- Who initiates cancellations, and how do they succeed?

Guided by these questions, I investigate how cancel culture occurs in South Africa. I examined the factors that influence the process. I analyse tweets by looking closely at the text and the choices behind it. Specifically, I analyse linguistic choices (memes, slang, emojis), cultural fluency (signifyin', shared cultural references), and socio-historical contexts (post-apartheid inequalities) to reveal how Black Twitter acts as a space for negotiating power and resistance.

5.3 Overview of the Findings

The findings of cancellation discourse reveal four themes, all of which demonstrate the power of Black Twitter as a site for post-apartheid resistance hegemonic power. From the themes, a critique, with the help of the community and the platform, has the potential to advance from a linguistic campaign to an actionable movement.

The structure of the themes models the progression of a critique, during the cancellation process on South African Black Twitter. What is used, why it is used, and how it succeeds:

- **Theme 1 -** The theme focuses on the type of language used to challenge figures and brands. This theme highlights the existence of diverse digital languages, and to understand them, one must be culturally fluent. Here, I examine affective shorthand (humour, irony, metaphors) and code-switching (slang, indigenous expressions), and how these elements create an exclusive yet shared language. These linguistic practices are the primary tool used to construct shame and assert collective identity (RQ1).
- **Theme 2 -** The second theme is essential because African values function as a moral compass to the language established in Theme 1. The theme proves that accountability is not rigid; it is a highly negotiated process. Here, I analyse how users apply core societal values such as ubuntu (child welfare, communal care), black solidarity, and economic justice to determine the suitable level of punishment. This negotiation explains why outcomes differ between campaigns, such as restorative justice for one individual (Maboe) and punitive action against a brand (Clicks) (RQ2).

- **Theme 3 -** This theme focuses on the strategies used to maximise the success of cancellations, from exploiting platform features to collaborative efforts to cancel figures. This theme shows the need for CTCDA for analysing how the community makes use of these affordances (hashtags, quote tweets). It is here where we see how techno-linguistic adaptation is used as a strategy to sustain campaigns and overcome structural limitations presented by the platform (RQ3).
- **Theme 4 -** This theme synthesises all preceding themes and shows how the previous themes have confirmed Black Twitter as a *digital imbizo*, where people can challenge power in post-apartheid South Africa. The synthesis shows how the combination of linguistic tools, negotiated values, and strategic mechanisms enables the community to assert moral sovereignty over failed institutional systems (political, corporate, legal).

5.4 Theme One: Linguistic Tools of Cancellation

This theme explores how South African Black Twitter uses humour, mockery, and moral appeals to shame public figures and brands, particularly Helen Zille, Clicks, Matthew Booth, Kelly Khumalo, and Katlego Maboe. From the cases, we can understand how linguistic choices, discursive practices, and broader social contexts interact to construct accountability.

5.4.1 Case Study 1: Helen Zille (ideological contestation)

The cancellation of Helen Zille was not merely political; it was systematic, reflecting a form of discursive exclusion. In this case study, I examine the discourse on three interlinked levels; textual, social, and discursive to explore how the public stripped Zille of political legitimacy and how Black Twitter users actively reinforced boundaries of a "true Black African" identity.

5.4.1.1 Textual Analysis

The textual strategies used in Zille's cancellation were heavily shaped by emotionally charged language, metaphors, and capitalisation, which collapsed her physical identity with the political ideologies she is associated with:

- **Metaphors and capitalisation:** Users labelled Zille a *"Dragon GodZille"* and an *"APARTHEID Monster."* Capitalisation and exaggerated language convey directness

and ideological threat, framing her as a symbol of historical oppression.

- **A-temporal critique:** Statements like *"Hell, she is apartheid walking"* (User B) employ a-temporal metaphor, treating apartheid not as a historical event but as an ever-present attribute inseparable from Zille (Jenkins, 2020; Wodak, 2015). This strategy justifies ongoing accountability by linking her directly to past injustices.

- **Cultural dispossession:** Zille is also dismissed using culturally resonant terms such as *"Umgodoi"* (dog, with racist settler connotations) and *"COLONIAL CLERK"* (User B). These concise, culturally fluent terms operate as intertextual metaphors, stripping Zille of political status and undermining her career legitimacy.

The combination of metaphor, capitalisation, and cultural references illustrates how textual elements on Black Twitter serve both ideological critique and identity policing.

5.4.1.2 Social Practice

At the social level, users engage in historical gatekeeping, actively defining who qualifies as a "real freedom fighter" through the social practice dimension of CDA. Zille is systematically denied membership in this moral and political community, dissociating her from heroism and revolutionary legitimacy.

- **Rejection:** Discourse frequently undermines Zille's self-portrayed anti-apartheid contributions by comparing them against perceived standards of revolutionary sacrifice. For instance, User D writes: *"She was a journalist at work, paid job, not death-threatening anti-apartheid activism."* This tweet diminishes Zille's claimed heroic role by framing her work as routine employment rather than courageous political engagement.

- **Complicity and betrayal:** Zille is labelled an *"Apartheid spy"* (User E), implying political betrayal, while User F describes her as a *"white privileged opportunist who was never harassed by the special branch."* Such framing challenges her to prove herself as a legitimate political hero, contrasting her experiences with the suffering

endured by Black South Africans during apartheid.

- **Identity policing:** Users redefine the boundaries of African identity to exclude Zille. User G argues: *"Helen Zille is not African; she's a South African... Being an African speaks of origin…"* This discourse positions Zille as an imposter whose claims to political legitimacy in South Africa are invalid, effectively excluding her from ideological and cultural conversations.

The effectiveness of a-temporal critique and ideological collapse is amplified by X's technological affordances. The platform's search and threading features function as tools for archival counter-surveillance (Brock, 2018), allowing users to preserve critiques and counter algorithmic biases that might suppress visibility. Nearly 50% of Zille-related critiques employ threads to sustain discourse, effectively transforming the platform into a persistent archive of accountability. This demonstrates how technological literacy intersects with ideological enforcement, enabling users to maintain public scrutiny of political figures and reinforcing that struggles over identity and legitimacy are inseparable from the ability to manipulate digital infrastructures (Landon, 2022).

5.4.1.3 Policing and Contestation (CTDA)

Using Critical Twitter Discourse Analysis (CTDA), the discursive practices observed around Zille reveal how users police ideological purity and exploit X's technological affordances to control narratives:

- **Dissent:** Positive framing of Zille is frequently delegitimised as a betrayal of African values. User F asserts: *"Anytime a Black person praises Helen Zille…just know dollars are involved."* This statement functions as ideological gatekeeping, suggesting that any support for Zille is financially motivated, thereby invalidating pro-Zille perspectives.

- **Ideological defence:** Supporters attempt to contest critiques using threaded replies. One user writes: *"Yoooh, hey, Black people love Hellen Zille, even after she 'idomised' them and called them dogs"* (2024). The use of Zulu/Xhosa exclamations

(*"yoooh hayi"*) and township slang (*"idomised"*) resonates with the Black South African community while framing defenders as culturally out-of-step. This demonstrates how the platform facilitates collective defence and negotiation over "truth" in real time.

- **Redirection:** Critique of Zille is also leveraged to comment on other political figures. For example, User H writes: *"harmless puppy Ramaphosa that Helen Zille drags by that humongous nose."* Here, Zille becomes a rhetorical vehicle to articulate broader frustrations with current political authorities, using metaphor to extend critique beyond the initial target.

These practices show that CTDA allows analysis of both ideological enforcement and the strategic use of platform features, highlighting how discourse on Black Twitter intertwines textual critique, identity policing, and technological literacy.

5.4.1.4 Multimodal tweets: Affective shorthand

Beyond textual critique, users on X strategically employ visuals, including screenshots, memes, and GIFs, to enhance meaning-making and function as technological receipts. These multimodal elements amplify contestation against Zille by condensing complex ideological arguments into digestible, affectively charged content that resonates widely across the community.

- **Rhetorical ridicule and subordination:**

Figure 5.4.1

Figure 5.4.1 illustrates an animated GIF of a puppy saying *"WOOF WOOF!"* in response to Zille's tweet calling Black people dogs. The GIF does not merely underscore offence; it visually subordinates Zille's defenders, highlighting how Black people have historically been dehumanised. By providing a visual representation of the absurdity and cruelty of Zille's comment, this rhetorical strategy accelerates cancellation, demonstrating how visuals operate as shorthand for ideological critique.

- **Identity:**

Figure 5.4.2

Figure 5.4.2 depicts a "race card" image used to dismiss claims that Zille's actions are racist. In this context, accusing someone of playing the race card implies manipulation of racial discourse to deflect accountability. The image transforms the accusation into a tactical discursive tool, diverting focus from Zille and reframing the debate around the accuser's credibility.

- **Visual reinforcement -** Tweets such as *"Helen Zille is unapologetically racist, and that will never change"* and *"Stop entertaining this wicked old lady; in fact, never go into a debate with a settler minority"* demonstrate the synergy between textual and visual modes. The captions, including phrases like *"wicked old lady"* and *"settler minority"*, contextualise the images, reinforcing the critique and acting as a technological receipt to document the discourse.

The interplay of textual metaphors (e.g., *"APARTHEID Monster"*), linguistic strategies, and visual shorthand (e.g., the "Race Card" image) illustrates how CTCDA enables analysis of both

linguistic and visual dimensions. This approach captures the progression of cancel culture on Black Twitter, showing how multimodal content consolidates ideological critique, identity policing, and community engagement into a powerful, resonant form of public accountability.

5.4.2 Case Study 2: Clicks (Corporate Resistance)

The Clicks cancellation (September 2020) provides a compelling example of how Black Twitter leveraged digital discourse to challenge corporate power, shifting public critique from online outrage to actionable political and economic mobilization. The controversy centred on a racist advertisement on the Clicks website, in collaboration with TreSemme, which depicted Black hair as "dry, damaged, and frizzy" while describing white hair as "fine and flat."

This case demonstrates a clear relationship between language, digital affordances, and corporate accountability, showing how discourse on social media can translate into material consequences for brands.

5.4.2.1 Rhetorical Analysis (CTDA)

In this case, we see how the Black Twitter community uses digital features to construct meaning:

Analysis shows that Black Twitter participants strategically deploy multimodal elements to construct meaning, amplify outrage, and coordinate collective responses.

- **Affective tools:**
  Emojis and GIFs serve as emotional shorthand, condensing complex evaluations into quick, resonant statements. For example, after TreSemme products were delisted, users responded to updates about Clicks with multiple clapping hands emojis 👏 (Figures 5.4.2.1–5.4.2.2), signalling collective triumph and approval without using text. Similarly, the thinking face emoji 🤔 was used in response to temporary store closures, expressing scepticism about whether corporate actions adequately addressed the harm done to Black identity.

The strategic use of concise, affective language exploits the platform's technical architecture; its threading, QRT, and reply functions to maximise visibility and mobilisation within a short time frame (Brock, 2018). When Clicks issued a vague corporate apology, users employed the

Quote Tweet (QRT) affordance to layer their own interpretations over corporate language, transforming online outrage into political and economic action.

Figure 5.4.2.1

Figure 5.4.2.2

5.4.2.2 Discursive Practice

The interactions between Clicks and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) supporters illustrate a discursive power struggle, where accountability is negotiated between corporate interests and the mobilised public. Table 5.4.2 summarises these exchanges:

Table 5.4.2

Actor	**Function (Discursive Practice)**	**Original Tweet**	**Analysis**
EFF	Mobilisation and demand for justice	*"We will not permit the unrepentant and perverse racism of Clicks to go on in South Africa. #clicksmustfall"* (EFF Twitter, Sept 7,	Initial outrage quickly translates into political mobilisation and economic threat. The hashtag amplifies collective action by directly calling on

		2020)	the public to withdraw support.
Clicks	Co-optation of accountability	*"We would like to issue an unequivocal apology. We have removed the images which go against everything we believe in… We recognise we have a role to play in creating a more diverse and inclusive S.A…"* (Clicks Twitter, Sept 4, 2020)	Clicks attempts to contain outrage by focusing on corporate image and values. The language isolates the error and disassociates the company from culpability without committing to actionable change.
EFF Demands	Structural accountability	EFF issued a list of demands to Clicks (dismissal of all employees/contractors involved, public listing of names of service providers and directors, and contract termination).	The demands enforce verifiable corrective measures, ensuring that apologies translate into tangible accountability rather than performative rhetoric.

The apology statement issued by Clicks can be analysed for rhetorical strategy:

Figure 5.4.2

Rhetoric	**Function**	**Interpretation**
"Unequivocal apology"	Damage control	The adjective *unequivocal* signals deep remorse to counter public outrage.
"We have removed the images."	Isolation of the error	Frames the incident as a discrete visual mistake rather than systemic bias.
"Go against everything we believe in"	Disassociation	Shifts blame externally to TreSemme, exempting Clicks from full accountability.
"We are strong advocates of natural hair."	Audience co-optation	Attempts alignment with Black consumers without committing to corrective measures.
"Put in place stricter measures."	Unclear accountability measures	Vague, unverifiable promises that avoid transparency about enforcement.

By deflecting responsibility and offering procedural yet non-committal measures, Clicks demonstrates how corporate language can strategically resist cancellation while appearing responsive. The subsequent communication about reopening stores prioritised social necessity over addressing boycott demands, reinforcing the tension between corporate interests and community accountability.

5.4.2.3 Social Practice

The EFF leveraged its influence to exert both political and physical pressure on Clicks. The official call to action was explicit: participants were instructed to "shut down all 880 Clicks outlets", demonstrating how digital discourse and institutional authority intersect to produce material consequences. The combination of hashtags, mobilising rhetoric, and emotive multimodal posts transformed Black Twitter outrage into coordinated action, highlighting the platform's role as both a discursive and political tool.

5.4.3 Case Study 3: Katlego Maboe (The resurrection)

The discourse surrounding Katlego Maboe's cancellation and subsequent "resurrection" illustrates how affective shorthand, moral reasoning, and racial critique can mitigate the long-term effects of cancellation. Unlike the other cases in this study, this case demonstrates the possibility of re-integration and restoration of social status on Black Twitter.

Theme 1: Ideological contestation

Stage	Tweets	Consequences & Public Support	Strategy and Outcome
1. The Cancellation	*"If Katlego loses his ability to earn an income... how will he support his child? I fully understand the trauma he caused his family, and morally his behaviour is wrong... but let his punishment be private."*	**Consequence:** Immediate financial loss (*lost his ability to earn income*). **Support:** The focus was on his hardship as a father, so losing his job would result in his failing to pay child support.	Tweets acknowledged moral wrongdoing but invoked a higher social good; child welfare, arguing for private rather than public punishment.
2. Defiance and Support	**User A (Nov 3, 2020)** *"Black people celebrating the downfall of Katlego Maboe, you will never see white people do this…so sad."* **User B (May 14, 2021)** *"Our media destroying Black talent! Yini kanti*	**Consequence:** Perceived racial and media targeting. **Support:** Maboe is framed as a victim of racial injustice or cultural prejudice *(media destroying black talent)*. The public seems to	The discourse frames the media as antagonists and Maboe as part of the Black community, generating solidarity and protective public sentiment.

	isono salomfana… We are behind you, Black child."	unite to protect one of their own, showing that Maboe is considered part of the community.	
3. **The "Resurrection"**	**@Katlego Maboe (Apr 21, 2023)** *"Firstly – GOD IS GOOD! I'm thrilled to co-host the #MMA23…"* **User A (Aug 25, 2023)** *"The same woman who succeeded in making Katlego lose everything is at it again. Now that Katlego is back on top of the game…"*	**Consequence:** Case overturned through legal acquittal (not visible in posts, but implied by return). **Support:** The public celebrates his return as a triumph over injustice (User A). Maboe uses spiritual language *(GOD IS GOOD)* to show that his return was deserved and divinely sanctioned.	Tweets shift focus from personal wrongdoing to systemic injustice, mobilising collective support and redefining the narrative around cancellation as racialised media oppression.

5.4.3.1 Linguistic Mobilisation, Racial Critique, and Restoration

The initial outcome of Katlego Maboe's cancellation was shaped significantly by the strategic use of language on Black Twitter. Multiple users suggested that his punishment be private, with tweets such as:

"If Katlego loses his ability to earn an income... how will he support his child?"

This discourse highlights the application of ubuntu principles, prioritising the shared well-being of the child over punitive measures against the father. In doing so, the community actively regulated its own moral response, demonstrating that Black Twitter is not only a space for critique but also for ethical deliberation. Language here functions as both a mechanism of moderation and moral negotiation, illustrating how the collective can shape the consequences of cancellation according to culturally grounded ethical norms.

Racial critique played a central role in reframing Maboe's narrative. Users strategically positioned the media and corporate sponsors as antagonists responsible for amplifying his downfall, often describing them as "destroying Black talent!". By doing this, the discourse shifted attention from Maboe's personal moral failings to a systemic racial injustice, reframing him as a victim rather than solely a transgressor. This use of language enabled a unified

counter-narrative, which not only sustained public support but also created conditions for his eventual reintegration into the public sphere.

The restoration of Maboe's social status was further facilitated by rhetorical strategies that emphasised divine approval and public celebration. Tweets such as:

> *"Firstly, GOD IS GOOD! I'm thrilled to co-host the #MMA23…"*

demonstrate how spiritual language can serve as both legitimisation and affective shorthand for success. This rhetoric validates the collective's moral authority, confirming that Black Twitter's cultural obligations and ethical principles take precedence over punitive cancellation. By sustaining discourse that celebrates his return, the community effectively rewrote the narrative, ensuring that Maboe's social capital and public legitimacy were restored.

In this sense, the Maboe case demonstrates a unique trajectory in the lifecycle of cancellation, where language, collective moral reasoning, and racial critique combine to mitigate the impact of cancellation and facilitate resurrection within the public sphere. The case highlights the power of Black Twitter not only to cancel but also to redeem, illustrating how communal norms and discourse strategies can actively shape outcomes for public figures.

5.4.4 Case Study 4: Matthew Booth

The cancellation of Matthew Booth, rapidly characterised by the adoption of the nickname *"Mr Cheesecake",* demonstrates how Black Twitter uses affective shorthand and humour to strip a figure of social status while asserting moral authority. This case highlights the interplay between personal misconduct, racialised critique, and communal arbitration in public discourse.

Stage	**Text**	**Strategy and Outcome**
Affective Shorthand	*How can I forget Matthew, aka 'Mr Cheesecake"*	The user reduces Booth's social status using a simple, symbolic phrase. The nickname functions as a discursive unit that strengthens the critique and resonates across the community through humour. It condenses complex moral judgement into a single

		linguistic tool.
Reframing	*Matthew Booth showed us that white men could never be the standard. He baked cheesecake for his side and couldn't even leave a slice for the kids.*	The critique shifts the discussion from personal infidelity to a racial and gendered debate. This racialised reframing highlights systemic critiques, positioning Booth's personal failure as a vehicle to assert universal moral standards. Black Twitter establishes collective ethical authority by showing that the conduct of white men is subject to the same scrutiny.
Dismissal of authority	*Truly bizarre. The Tupperware was in someone's house, and the cheesecake was missing. What can lawyers do about that?*	Users employ humour and irony to discredit Booth's legal and institutional recourse, rendering his attempts to retaliate against his wife absurd. This demonstrates Black Twitter's capacity for digital moral arbitration, asserting communal judgement over institutional authority.

5.4.4.1 Linguistic Mobilisation and Humour

Black Twitter employed concise linguistic tools and humour to manage the discourse around Booth. The nickname "Mr Cheesecake" acts as a symbolic shorthand, instantly communicating the moral transgression while generating virality. The repeated use of this phrase across threads and memes illustrates linguistic mobilisation, where a community weaponises language to amplify critique, maintain visibility, and reinforce collective norms.

5.4.4.2 Racialised Reframing

Through racialised critique, Booth's personal misconduct was transformed into a broader ideological statement. Tweets like "white men could never be the standard" shifted the focus from individual failings to systemic moral commentary, allowing users to impose universal ethical standards on public figures regardless of race or status. This reframing positions Black Twitter as both an ethical and social authority, capable of defining acceptable behaviour within South African public life.

5.4.4.3 Humour as Moral Arbitration

Humour and irony served as central rhetorical devices in Booth's cancellation. By making his attempts at legal recourse appear absurd, users effectively delegitimised institutional power and reinforced the moral clarity of their critique. Statements such as:

> *"What can lawyers do about that?"*

highlight the community's authority to impose consequences, demonstrating that Black Twitter operates as a digital arbiter of moral standards. Humour here does not trivialise the critique but instead enhances its persuasive and regulatory power, ensuring that the collective's judgement is widely understood and shared.

5.4.5 Case Study 5: Kelly Khumalo

The cancellation discourse targeting Kelly Khumalo reveals a structured campaign using language to enforce a consensus of guilt before a formal court ruling. The case highlights internal struggles over a consistent and fair campaign.

Stage	Text	Strategy and Outcome
Guilty until proven Innocent	*Is it okay for event organisers to cancel Kelly Khumalo's gigs until she is proven innocent?* (User A, 2023)	Users question whether figures should be punished based on suspicion rather than verified evidence. This pre-legal judgement functions as a form of moral sanction, asserting the community's authority to judge before formal legal processes conclude.
Double standards	*They are so quick to withdraw sponsors and whatnot when it comes to men, but Naba okelly Kubahambela kahle (but for Kelly, things are going well). But why won't the system cancel Kelly?* (User B, 2022)	The campaign employs rhetorical questioning to expose gendered inconsistencies in cancellation. It enforces internal accountability, demanding equal treatment for women and men, and reinforcing Black Twitter's ethical standards.
Amplification	*There should be more*	Hyperbolic and violent

	cancellations until Kelly Khumalo goes down like Senzo Meyiwa, pity she won't lose her breath, but she will never enjoy life…(User C, 2023)	language is used to escalate moral outrage and intensify pressure on external actors (organisers, sponsors). This amplification strategy exposes the community's fragility and the risk of extreme punitive measures in cases of internal frustration..

5.4.5.1 Linguistic Mobilisation and Pre-Legal Guilt

Kelly Khumalo's cancellation demonstrates the translation of linguistic tools into social sanction. By framing her as morally culpable before legal adjudication, Black Twitter asserts the right to impose consequences independent of formal institutions. The question "Is it okay for event organisers to cancel Kelly Khumalo's gigs until she is proven innocent?" shows how language itself becomes an instrument of control, structuring public opinion and forcing her to defend her moral and professional reputation continuously.

5.4.5.2 Gendered Critique and Internal Policing

A key feature of this case is the attention to gendered inconsistencies. Tweets highlighting double standards ("But why won't the system cancel Kelly?") function as internal policing within Black Twitter, ensuring that moral authority is applied consistently across male and female figures. The discourse demonstrates the community's negotiation of fairness, where critiques are both a form of moral assertion and a reflection of internal debates about equitable application of accountability.

5.4.5.3 Hyperbolic Framing and Emotional Escalation

Hyperbolic framing is the most visible linguistic tool in Khumalo's case. References to violent outcomes, such as *"goes down like Senzo Meyiwa,"* function as rhetorical escalation, heightening emotional intensity and generating pressure for punitive action from sponsors, organisers, and the broader public. While extreme, this strategy illustrates the performative power of outrage on Black Twitter, revealing both the strengths and risks of highly aggressive language as a mobilisation tactic. The case highlights how internal frustration can drive maximum moral and social pressure, even when it risks toxicity or overshooting proportional responses.

5.5 Theme Two: Cultural Values Underpinning Cancellation

This theme examines how cultural values; ubuntu, Black solidarity, and economic justice shape how South African Black Twitter defines offensiveness and navigates cancellations. These values operate within historical memory, platform affordances, and everyday socio-economic realities, influencing both the language used and the community's collective response. I analyse how these values are expressed through language (textual analysis), shared and negotiated (discursive practice), and reflected in broader social structures (social practice).

5.5.1 Case Study 1: Clicks (Economy and Ubuntu)

The Clicks campaign illustrates how ubuntu and economic justice operate as intersecting constraints on cancellation. Textual analysis reveals a tension between punitive impulses and community welfare: tweets like *"my Black people"* show empathetic identification with employees potentially harmed by boycotts, while *"I wanted to cancel Clicks… no Black-owned retailers"* signals the recognition of economic interdependence. Here, language mediates ethical reasoning, foregrounding collective over individual moral satisfaction.

Discursively, platform affordances such as Quote Tweets and threads are deployed to coordinate, critique, and optimise boycott strategies, reflecting techno-cultural literacy. Scepticism toward performative allyship (*"Watch Black people 'cancel' Clicks today but they're gonna be there on Sunday…"*) functions as internal regulatory discourse, policing the gap between moral rhetoric and material action.

Socially, the case highlights Black Twitter's capacity to institutionalise community negotiation, demonstrating that cancellation is not absolute but contingent on maintaining ubuntu-aligned economic and social stability. The Clicks campaign thus exemplifies the structural enforcement of cultural values: sanctions are shaped not only by the wrongdoing itself but by the wider social repercussions of punitive action.

5.5.2 Case Study 2: Helen Zille (Black Solidarity)

The Zille case demonstrates that historical consciousness and Black solidarity extend cancellation beyond immediate transgressions, linking present behaviour to colonial legacies. Linguistically, rhetorical questions and labelling (*"aren't you rather out of context tho"; "horrible person"*) are employed to discursively delegitimise Zille's authority, framing her as

a neo-colonial actor whose interventions violate collective moral expectations. Accusations of a *"White saviour complex"* situate her actions within a broader ideological critique, showing that cancellation here enforces normative boundaries of racial and political propriety.

Discursively, archival practices and threading on X allow users to create a permanent digital record, reinforcing a cumulative moral judgement grounded in historical knowledge. This intertextuality, which operationalises memory as evidence, ensures that Zille's political manoeuvres are scrutinised against a continuum of structural oppression.

At the social practice level, Black Twitter enacts ideological policing, framing Zille's behaviour as a breach of collective economic and racial ethics. The community's critique functions as a corrective mechanism, asserting moral authority over individual political actors and demonstrating how solidarity operates to safeguard shared epistemic standards.

5.5.3 Case Study 3: Katlego Maboe (Restoration and Insulation)

The Maboe case foregrounds the protective function of Ubuntu, illustrating that Black Twitter can mediate between sanction and rehabilitation. Textual strategies, such as emphasising child welfare (*"the most affected would be the baby"*) and claims of racial bias (*"It's pure racism, nothing more, nothing less"*), operate to insulate the target from full cancellation, redirecting moral scrutiny away from the individual.

Discursively, the debate over tagging and race-based comparisons shows collective negotiation of moral responsibility, reflecting both the limits of punitive justice and the role of Black solidarity in regulating internal community standards. The discourse shifts accountability from Maboe to external actors (his former wife or broader structural bias), demonstrating how language constructs moral thresholds for intervention.

Socially, the Maboe case illustrates that cancellation is not necessarily terminal; it is bounded by community values that prioritise relational and economic well-being. The celebration of his return reinforces a culturally sanctioned restorative justice, showing that Black Twitter's moral authority is flexible, contextually calibrated, and values-driven.

5.5.4 Case Study 4: Kelly Khumalo (Gender Expectations)

Khumalo's cancellation highlights gendered asymmetries in the application of cultural values. Textual evidence shows that moral condemnation is preemptive and suspicion-based (*"Is it*

okay for event organisers to cancel Kelly Khumalo's gigs until she is proven innocent?"), reflecting a community-operated moral vacuum that can override formal legal standards. Hyperbolic and supernatural framing (*"Kelly is using powerful traditional medicine"*) further illustrates how linguistic exaggeration amplifies moral authority, shaping collective perception even in the absence of evidence.

Discursively, critiques of feminist solidarity (*"Feminists always protect each other; they have big mouths when it's a man"*) reveal internal policing of consistency, exposing tensions between gender expectations and universal moral enforcement. Calls to de-platform Khumalo and intertextual associations with R Kelly show how affective shorthand and cultural memory are leveraged to coordinate moral sanction and reinforce collective norms.

At the social practice level, Khumalo's case demonstrates that cultural enforcement of guilt operates independently of institutional authority, with prolonged campaigns sustaining moral consensus despite elite protection or media bias. The intersectionality paradox; negotiating gender, race, and celebrity status reveals the community's struggle to apply shared values **consistently, highlighting structural limitations in moral governance.**

5.5.5 Case Study 5: Matthew Booth (Ubuntu and Accountability)

Booth's case demonstrates how Ubuntu informs the moral evaluation of private conduct, particularly regarding family obligations. Textual analysis shows that infidelity is interpreted not merely as a personal transgression but as a violation of collective responsibilities toward children and family finances (*"didn't even give his kids a slice"; "used child's school money for cheesecake"*). Racialised expectations (*"white men can never be the standard"*) situate the critique within broader social hierarchies, enforcing normative conduct through both ethical and cultural lenses.

Discursively, humour and irony (*"What can lawyers do about that?"*) function to diminish institutional authority and emphasise community-based adjudication. Tweets reinforce the expectation that public figures must internalise collective norms, particularly regarding economic and emotional responsibility.

Socially, the Booth case illustrates consensus-driven moral enforcement, contrasting with the restorative approach in Maboe's case. By focusing on family and relational obligations, Black Twitter extends Ubuntu to accountability, demonstrating that the community defines both the

scope and limits of permissible behaviour, and leverages affective shorthand to mobilise moral sanction across the digital sphere.

5.6 Theme Three: Mechanisms and Actors of Cancellation (RQ3)

This theme interrogates how Black Twitter exploits platform features and technical affordances to orchestrate cancellations, while navigating the constraints imposed by algorithms, language bias, and platform architecture. Analysis reveals that cancellation is a techno-cultural practice, reliant not just on content but on strategic use of visibility tools, multimodal evidence, and affective resonance. The mechanisms vary depending on the target's social position, illustrating the interplay between structural affordances and actor agency.

5.6.1 Case Study 1: Helen Zille (Decolonial Mobilisation)

5.6.1.1 Textual Analysis

Black Twitter demonstrates techno-linguistic sophistication to bypass algorithmic limitations and maintain decolonial critique.

- Techno-linguistic adaptation: Users condense complex ideological critiques into culturally specific neologisms like *"kwamakhwepheni"* or *"idomised"*, enhancing virality while ensuring interpretive exclusivity. This represents a strategic compression of critique that is both efficient and semiotic, intelligible primarily to culturally fluent participants.

- Visual supplementation: Screenshots and DA's official posters function as archival receipts, creating durable, multimodal evidence of hypocrisy. For example, the poster *"The ANC called you racists / The DA calls you heroes"* provides material proof of double standards, linking past and present political actions through visual intertextuality.

These textual strategies illustrate the deployment of multimodality as a structural countermeasure to the platform's ephemerality, ensuring sustained visibility for moral and political critique.

5.6.1.2 Discursive Practice

- Initiation and amplification: Influential accounts use threads to coordinate long-form, cumulative critique, with responses like "Very instructive thread" functioning as collect endorsement and credibility validation.
- Archival function: Users bookmark threads to create permanent repositories of political critique, allowing future reference and preventing decay of discourse.
- Multimodal archival intertextuality: Screenshots, images, and threaded commentary operate as evidence chains, ensuring accountability beyond ephemeral tweets.

The discursive strategy reflects structured memory work, leveraging platform architecture to sustain decolonial resistance and reinforce moral authority.

5.6.1.3 Social Practice

- Algorithmic constraints: Indigenous languages are marginalised, forcing users to develop coded linguistic strategies to bypass English-centric platform algorithms.
- Political literacy: Users demonstrate nuanced understanding of political operations, e.g., highlighting coordinated online support for specific politicians, reinforcing that platform-mediated resistance requires both technical and ideological competence.

The campaign exemplifies how Black Twitter enacts long-term ideological resistance, with CTDA revealing that platform affordances are actively manipulated to preserve memory and enforce moral sovereignty.

5.6.2 Case Study 2: Clicks (Economic Mobilisation)

5.6.2.1 Textual Analysis

- Affective shorthand: Memes and GIFs condense critiques into shareable, emotionally resonant formats, increasing virality and accessibility.
- Historical receipts: Comparative visual references (e.g., H&M "Coolest Monkey" hoodie) provide immediate, visualised warnings and establish precedent for accountability.

The combination of affective and archival multimodality exploits algorithmic favouritism for visual and emotionally charged content, demonstrating platform-informed tactical literacy.

5.6.2.2 Discursive Practice

- Clustering tools: Hashtags (#ClicksMustFall) enable discursive aggregation, converting decentralised moral outrage into structured, visible campaigns.
- Decentralised amplification: Political actors (EFF) amplify grassroots critique, showing collaborative mobilisation across social and institutional hierarchies.

These mechanisms highlight that cancellation is both networked and strategic, with online visibility leveraged to produce real-world consequences.

5.6.2.3 Social Practice

- Market intervention: Boycotts are operationalised through promotion of Black-owned alternatives, reflecting the community's capacity to translate online moral sanction into tangible economic consequences.
- Material enforcement: Images of EFF-led boycotts illustrate offline enactment of platform-driven campaigns, showing the seamless transition from digital critique to physical action.

Clicks demonstrates that platform architecture mediates not only visibility but also actionable agency, linking online discourse to economic outcomes**.**

5.6.3 Case Study 3: Katlego Maboe (Financial and reputational mobilisation)

5.6.3.1 Textual Analysis

- Strategic tagging and visibility: Maboe's wife used platform tags to notify sponsors (Outsurance, Expresso Show), transforming personal scandal into a corporately mediated accountability mechanism. Tags operate as digital levers, ensuring rapid dissemination to actors with financial and reputational power.
- Multimodal amplification: Screenshots, text threads, and media coverage were clustered to provide evidence chains, producing a permanent digital footprint of his misconduct. This mirrors archival strategies seen in Zille and Clicks, confirming that Black Twitter leverages multimodal content to compensate for legal ephemerality.

5.6.3.2 Discursive Practice

- Moral surveillance: User commentary framed Maboe's actions as collective betrayal, reinforcing the community's role as ethical arbitrators. Responses such as "Katlego Maboe lost everything in less than a year" indicate discursive linking of personal transgression to structural consequences, demonstrating that financial harm is legitimised through communal moral consensus.
- Restorative discourse: Once Maboe returned to public life, the same platform tools (mentions, hashtags) were mobilized to rebuild his social credibility, showing the dual function of platform affordances in both punishment and redemption.

5.6.3.3 Social Practice

- Economic consequences as accountability: Public pressure produced tangible loss of income and reputational capital, highlighting Black Twitter's capacity to enforce sanctions beyond legal jurisdiction.
- Community-regulated proportionality: Critiques of overuse of tags (*"irrational" and "unnecessary"*) demonstrate that users negotiate the limits of platform-mediated punishment, reinforcing a collective ethical calculus that balances visibility, harm, and proportionality.

Maboe's case demonstrates the strategic exploitation of platform architecture to produce financial and reputational sanctions, confirming that cancellation is both morally and materially enforced, and that social consensus mediates technological impact.

5.6.4 Case Study 4: Matthew Booth (Ubuntu-driven moral accountability)

5.6.4.1 Textual Analysis

- Multimodal aggregation for archival accountability: Tweets combined textual testimony (Sonia Booth's narrative), visual evidence (Tupperphotos, memes), and affective shorthand (*"Mr Cheesecake"*) to construct a persistent, searchable record.
- Affective shorthand: Recurrent nicknames and memes function as cultural markers, embedding moral evaluation within shared symbolic codes, making transgressions socially and digitally memorable.

5.6.4.2 Discursive Practice

- Validation and collective witnessing: Users actively corroborated Booth's wife's experiences, producing threads where personal trauma became a shared moral narrative. Comments reflected gendered solidarity and enforced ubuntu-centric ethical standards, prioritising familial duty over legal formalism.
- Discursive permanence: Continuous referencing of Booth's transgressions reinforces community-as-judge, demonstrating how online discourse constructs enduring social memory.

5.6.4.3 Social Practice

- Moral sovereignty over legal systems: The community dismisses legal intermediaries, asserting digital moral authority. Offline reinforcement occurs through social censure and public discourse, ensuring consequences are both cultural and structural.

- Technological countermeasure to ephemerality: Platform features (threads, multimodal content, QRT) are intentionally leveraged to prevent erasure of misconduct, demonstrating archival surveillance in practice (Brock, 2020).

Booth's case highlights Black Twitter's capacity to enforce ethical norms, blending textual, visual, and affective resources to achieve long-term accountability rooted in communal morality rather than legal enforcement.

5.6.5 Case Study 5: Kelly Khumalo (Elite immunity and algorithmic sanctions)

5.6.5.1 Textual Analysis

- Algorithmic sanctioning: Tweets and hashtags (#muteKelly) operate as digital exiles, restricting visibility as a proxy for legal or formal punishment.
- Hyperbolic mobilisation: Strategic use of exaggeration (e.g., *"she will follow the same path as Meyiwa"*) produces affective resonance, sustaining discourse and compelling platform engagement.

5.6.5.2 Discursive Practice

- Moral authority in the absence of law: Persistent commentary over years illustrates that community-defined guilt precedes legal adjudication, enforcing norms where institutional accountability fails.
- Platform-mediated consensus: By amplifying selective narratives, users maintain long-term surveillance, ensuring elite figures cannot escape scrutiny due to fame or structural privilege.

5.6.5.3 Social Practice

- Substitution for judicial enforcement: Digital sanctions substitute for state mechanisms, demonstrating that Black Twitter functions as a post-apartheid counter-public with moral and social enforcement power.
- Institutional critique through platform features: The campaign exposes perceived failures of legal and corporate systems, while demonstrating the platform's structural affordances as tools of collective justice.

Khumalo's case confirms that platform architecture enables a sustained, community-driven enforcement of accountability, particularly against elite individuals shielded from formal systems, highlighting the intersection of structural inequality, fame, and digital moral sovereignty.

5.6.6 The Hashtag: Clicks Case

Across all five cases, the hashtag functions as a distinct and critical platform affordance. Features such as threads and mentions (tags) serve specific purposes; the hashtag is the primary tool for strategic mobilisation. The hashtag aggregates individual voices into a coherent, searchable, and quantifiable cancellation campaign. The collective gathering of tweets from different users creates a digital archive, one that not only has the power to maximise the visibility of the campaign but can also be used in future cases. This section analyses the hashtag's function through the CTDA framework, using Clicks as an example:

5.6.1 #DontTouchOurHair

The #DontTouchOurHair campaign ran parallel to the #ClicksMustFall boycott, serving as a powerful discursive practice of decolonial mobilisation. The Black community wanted to reclaim the narrative, affirm their Black identity, and showcase their cultural pride. Below is a specific analysis of key tweets from this campaign, showing what can be achieved with hashtags, when used accordingly. :

Figure 5.6.1

This post by Basetsana Khumalo is a clear example of decentralised initiation by an influential account.

- **Association -** Khumalo links the Clicks case *(#TreSemme, #Clicksadvert)* to a clear statement of cultural statement about her natural hair.
- **Framing -** Khumalo strategically uses key terms to set the terms for the counter-discourse. In this way, she gets to decide which audience her tweet reaches for her desired outcome. *#DontTouchOurHair, #EnoughIsEnough*, and *#BlackIsBeautiful*.
- **Multimodal evidence -** By using a video, she employs a rich media format that has a higher chance of attracting attention, and it serves as her resource against the Clicks incident.

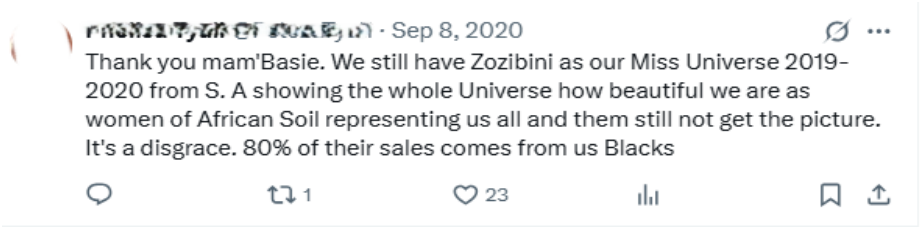

Figure 5.6.2

This is a direct reply to Basetsana Khumalo's tweet, a good example of archival intertextuality.

- **Validation -** The user validates Basetsana's point, showing agreement with the content. *("Thank you, mam'Basie")*
- **History -** The user immediately provides historical receipt by linking the current movement to *"Zozibini as our Miss Universe"*, a powerful moment for the world, considering Black women's hair was not considered the standard of beauty for years. The visual linkage (even when textual) situates the Clicks advert as a failure to recognise a globally validated standard of Black beauty.
- **Market intervention -** The user links cultural identity to economic power. *"80% of their sales come from us Blacks"*. This tweet shows how aware the user is of the discursive practice (affirming beauty) as the foundation for social practice (boycott) and its market effect.

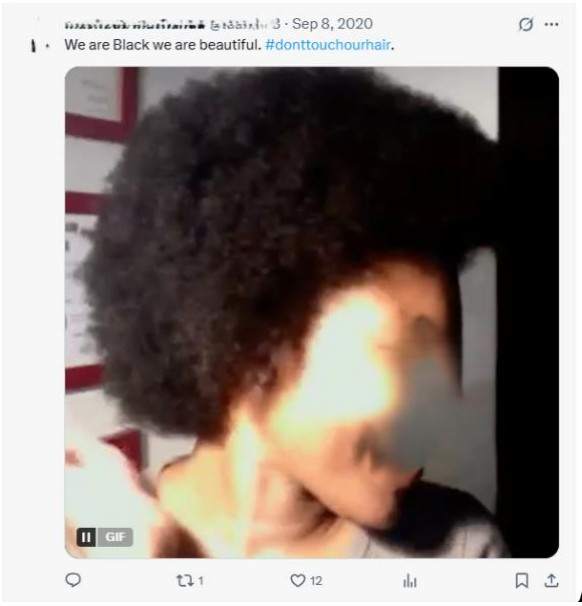

Figure 5.6.3

This is an example of collective validation and affective clustering.

- **Counter-discourse -** The caption *"We are beautiful"* is a direct and explicit textual critique of Clicks and the message their advertisement intended for the Black community.
- **Affective shorthand -** The use of GIFs (as opposed to static images) adds a level of emotion; joy, confidence, and pride to the archive. This emotional resonance is a form of techno-linguistic adaptation, making the post relatable and easily shareable.
- **Archives -** This user is contributing their own multimodal evidence to demonstrate to the collective the beauty of Black hair; the GIF adds to the permanent digital archive.

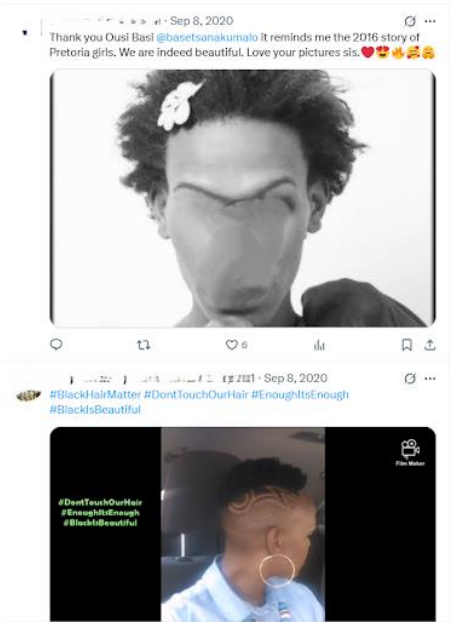

Figure 5.6.4

Here, users bring up past incidents to add to the historical context.

- **History -** The user connects the #DontTouchOurHair campaign to the 2016 story of Pretoria girls who were discriminated against because of their natural hair. This visual association places the Clicks incident alongside ongoing struggles Black communities have been fighting for.
- **Sustainance -** By referencing a past decolonial mobilisation, the user strengthens the past incident with the current one, suggesting that this is a fight that has been fought and won before.

Figure 5.6.5

Figure 5.6.6

These two images are examples of the permanent archive.

- **Multimodal evidence -** Both users contribute their own visual receipts to the *#DontTouchOurHair* movement.
- The first image (figure 5.6.5) is an individual act of collective validation, a form of personal testimony.
- The second image (figure 5.6.6) is a powerful visual metaphor for the campaign itself. They utilise affective clustering to show that there is a whole sense of community around Black hair. It visually represents the collective witnessing and unity that the hashtag is designed to create.

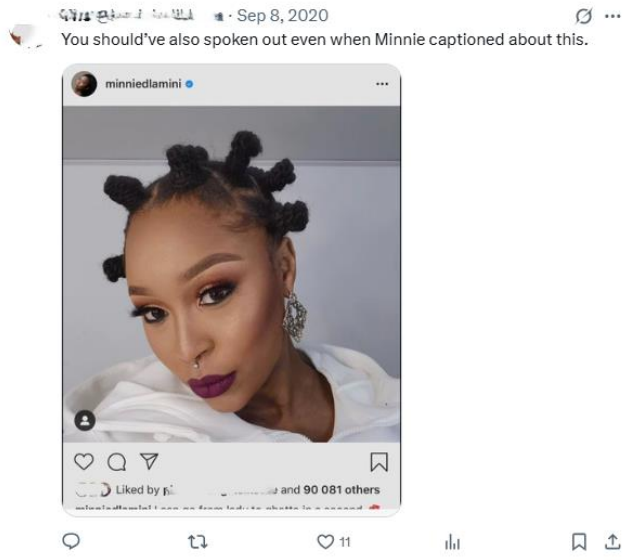

Figure 5.6.7

This tweet demonstrates the community's role in policing hypocrisy and promoting genuine solidarity.

- **Multiple platforms -** The user has utilised a strategic technological receipt from another platform (Instagram) and integrated it into X as part of the digital archive.
- **Mobilisation -** The user is publicly calling out a celebrity (Minnie Dlamini) for her perceived silence. The caption *"You should've spoken out..."* is an attempt to expose Dlamini's hypocrisy and possible performative allyship.
- **Moral authority -** On Black Twitter, visibility comes with responsibility. The community asserts its moral authority by demanding that elites use their platform to contribute to decolonial mobilisation, or be called out when they fail to do so.

5.7 Theme Four: Black Twitter as a Counter-Public Sphere (Synthesis)

This theme synthesises the findings from Chapters 5.1–5.6, confirming that South African Black Twitter functions as a digital imbizo, characterised by structural resistance against hegemonic power and the ability to enforce moral, political, and economic accountability. The following analysis emphasises mechanisms, discursive strategies, and structural implications.

5.7.1 The Production of Moral Sovereignty

The community constructs and enforces moral authority independently of formal institutions, operating through three interrelated mechanisms:

- Gatekeeping through multilingualism: The use of indigenous expressions (e.g., *"yhu kode kube nini?"*, *"kwamakhwapheni"*), slang, and AAVE functions as a cultural filter, enabling participants to evaluate the authenticity and political literacy of others. This strategy simultaneously excludes non-fluent users, demonstrating that Black Twitter maintains exclusive discursive boundaries, which allow the community to police its own moral and political sphere.
- Affective shorthand: Memes, GIFs, emojis, and nicknames (*"Mr Cheesecake"*) compress complex ethical or political arguments into digestible, shareable units. This mechanism maximises virality while retaining cultural specificity and interpretive depth, ensuring that critical discourse persists despite structural constraints such as character limits.

- Negotiation of values: Decisions to cancel, moderate, or restore figures are mediated by shared principles such as ubuntu and economic justice. For example, the Clicks campaign enforced structural accountability, while the Maboe case employed restorative principles, demonstrating that moral sovereignty is negotiated dynamically rather than imposed unilaterally.

These strategies reveal that moral authority on Black Twitter is structurally embedded, culturally coded, and constantly negotiated. The digital imbizo operates as a self-regulating moral ecosystem, where platform affordances are harnessed to produce ethical judgments independent of institutional power.

5.7.2 Archiving and Counter-Surveillance

The community uses platform features to combat discursive ephemerality and institutional inadequacy, achieving long-term ideological and political accountability:

- Techno-linguistic adaptation: Misspellings and symbols (e.g., *r@cist*, *blvck*) are deployed to circumvent moderation algorithms, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of platform bias and demonstrating strategic resistance to hegemonic visibility controls.
- Counter-surveillance: Visual archival practices, such as the Zille/DA poster juxtaposition or the H&M destruction imagery, serve as digital receipts, preserving historical memory and validating critiques. These archives operate as evidence chains, ensuring that institutional denial or performative allyship cannot erase the critique.
- Structural accountability: Offline mobilisation, elite exposure, and algorithmic sanctions (e.g., *#muteKelly*) demonstrate that Black Twitter converts digital consensus into tangible social, economic, and political consequences, confirming the imbizo's efficacy as a counter-public.

Archiving and counter-surveillance are not merely documentation practices; they are strategic interventions into power structures, embedding Black Twitter as an active agent of historical and moral record-keeping.

5.7.3 Cross-Case Comparison

By comparing the five cases, the nuanced application of Black Twitter's moral and political authority becomes evident:

- Clicks (Economic power and structural racism): Users exploited hashtags, memes, and visual receipts to translate online outrage into offline economic action, demonstrating that platform affordances can mediate material accountability. The case illustrates ubuntu pragmatism, where the broader principle of worker welfare shaped the campaign's ethical calculus.
- Helen Zille (Ideological and political dispossession): The sustained archival of past statements exemplifies ideological dispossession, showing how Black Twitter enforces permanent exclusion from political legitimacy. The campaign demonstrates that the community functions as the ultimate arbiter of historical and political memory.
- Katlego Maboe (Restoration): The reversal of cancellation, guided by restorative ubuntu ethics, shows that platform affordances can be repurposed for redemption, highlighting that the community balances punishment with relational and economic considerations.
- Kelly Khumalo (Elite immunity and double standards): The community's use of algorithmic sanctions in the absence of legal authority demonstrates digital enforcement of moral norms, revealing how fame and structural privilege shape the distribution of punitive power.
- Matthew Booth (Familial morality and archival permanence): The aggregation of multimodal content ensured that violations of ubuntu and familial duty were permanently preserved, confirming the centrality of archival practices in maintaining moral accountability.

Across cases, Black Twitter employs platform-mediated strategies that range from economic mobilisation to ideological exclusion, restorative justice, elite sanctions, and archival moral surveillance. The community's power is structurally reinforced by the platform while culturally validated by shared ethical frameworks, creating a dynamic digital counter-public capable of mediating justice where formal systems fail.

5.8 Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has shown that South African Black Twitter functions as a culturally fluent, strategically organised digital imbizo, negotiating accountability across political, institutional, and personal spheres. The findings reveal four key mechanisms:

1. Humour and moral appeals to construct socially enforceable shame.
2. Ubuntu and economic justice as community values guiding decisions on cancellation.
3. Strategic exploitation of platform features to enhance visibility, permanence, and efficacy of campaigns.
4. Innovative counter-hegemonic strategies, including techno-linguistic adaptation, archival surveillance, and algorithmic sanctions.

The analysis demonstrates that traditional CDA frameworks are insufficient to capture the technical, visual, and affective dimensions of Black Twitter. CTDA provides the necessary lens to understand how platform affordances, cultural fluency, and communal values converge to produce a structurally and morally potent counter-public. The following chapter will situate these findings within the literature, address the research questions directly, and highlight CTDA's methodological contribution to studying digital accountability.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1 Introduction

Cancel culture on South African Black Twitter is far from a simple phenomenon driven by mass outrage or mob mentality. On the contrary, this study demonstrates that it functions as a form of culturally-gated governance. Its progression is fundamentally dependent on platform affordances, which users strategically exploit to achieve a collective objective. Furthermore, the practice of cancellation is deeply rooted in local socio-cultural codes and values; these elements ensure that accountability remains a negotiated process rather than one forcefully imposed. The specific context of South African society, specifically the post-apartheid landscape and the collective will of the public serves as the primary determinant for the rules and outcomes of the discourse.

The discourse of resistance is also shaped by the co-constitution of culture and technology, the core premise of Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) which can either amplify or constrain the efficacy of a cancellation campaign. To fully comprehend digital discourse and its manifestation within virtual spaces, one must acknowledge technology as an active agent in the process rather than a neutral vessel. The findings confirm that the survival of such discourse is contingent upon the proficiency with which users exploit platform affordances (Brock, 2020). Consequently, the following chapter interprets these findings to substantiate this argument.

Furthermore, this study addresses the three primary research questions (RQ1–RQ3) by interpreting the themes identified in Chapter 5. This analysis provides a cohesive argument for the study's methodological contribution: the necessity of applying CTDA to understand non-Western digital counterpublics.

6.2 From CDA to CTDA

This study initially intended to employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the dynamics of cancel culture; however, CDA alone proved insufficient as its primary focus remains limited to the textual dimensions of tweets. CDA fails to adequately acknowledge the platform's active role in shaping how discourse occurs. Digital counterpublics are profoundly

dependent on the infrastructure within which communication takes place; it is therefore vital to recognise technology as an active participant rather than a neutral site. Surveillance practices, such as automated moderation, can obstruct democratic engagement by compromising user autonomy (Kruse et al., 2018). This creates a paradox of participation: the very platforms that empower marginalised voices also subject them to automated policing that can stifle free expression (Kruse et al., 2018). While CDA is effective at exposing power relations within language such as the colonial narratives identified in the Zille case, it cannot account for the structural mechanisms that enable such critiques to go viral despite algorithmic constraints. Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), by contrast, acknowledges the platform's architecture as an active, structural agent in the distribution of power (Brock, 2020). By adopting CTDA, this study operationalises the role of technology, recognising that the assertion of moral sovereignty on Black Twitter results from a constant, strategic negotiation between human discourse and technological affordances.

The necessity for a CTDA approach became evident through two primary themes identified during the data collection and analysis phases:

Survival – The 280-character limit imposed by X necessitates brevity, often leaving insufficient space for users to provide full context. While this carries a risk of misinterpretation, the findings reveal that these constraints do not necessarily diminish the depth of the message. Instead, users have adapted by employing affective shorthand such as the "Mr Cheesecake" moniker or specific emojis to embed complex meaning and context within the limited format. This practice serves a dual purpose: it ensures technical efficiency and captures attention through visual markers within an ephemeral digital economy. This strategic adaptation allows decentralised actors to layer meaning rapidly and collaboratively through Quote Tweets (QRTs) and threads, which subsequently accelerates the formation of consensus at a speed traditional text cannot match (Hine, 2015).

Resistance to Algorithmic Control – The strategic use of language within cancellation campaigns demonstrates an active resistance to algorithmic policing. Extensive platform monitoring often compels users to self-censor or alter their behaviour for fear of suppression (Earl et al., 2022; Kruse et al., 2018). However, the community consistently defies this control through techno-linguistic adaptations such as the deliberate use of misspellings or symbols to circumvent moderation filters on terms like "racist." While moderation systems aim to restrict the parameters of expression (Shahid et al., 2025), South African users continue to resist

technological hegemony by inventing innovative methods to maintain free communication. Marginalised communities are not passive subjects; they are active participants who reclaim their agency by pushing back against the systemic architecture.

Examining discourse through this lens provides a robust framework for analysing digital accountability in structurally unequal, postcolonial societies. Furthermore, communication in virtual spaces is frequently compromised by the mechanics of virality and algorithmic distribution, which can distort public deliberation and necessitate regulation (Kumar and Gupta, 2023; Post and Maduro, 2020). The analysis addresses this directly: the *imbizo's* use of affective shorthand is a strategic response to existing governance gaps. It allows users the freedom to express authentic views while simultaneously maximising a tweet's potential for virality. This demonstrates that local communities are developing sophisticated practices to manage the very structural mechanisms that global regulatory bodies are currently struggling to control.

6.3 Techno-Linguistic Adaptation (RQ1)

How does Black Twitter shame individuals and brands?

Before we define and attempt to understand techno-linguistic adaptation, we must first break it down to its roots and understand its origin. Linguistic adaptation is a process in which linguistic structures are adjusted to suit a specific level of the reader or listener (Klassen, 2021). Textual adaptation refers to modifications that improve text accessibility without altering its core semantics, style, or structure (Mambetova et al., 2025). For techno-linguistic adaptation, the argument is that language modification is driven not by the human audience but by the technological infrastructure itself. The data reveal that the adaptation from Black Twitter is to fit the technological limitations to ensure that meaning and context is not lost in the brevity of the tweets. Although there is a slight difference in the medium, the function remains the same. Both traditional and textual linguistic adaptation are meant to adjust discourse to enhance human comprehension (i.e., adapting to the reader).

While Brock (2020) and other scholars have discussed how Black cultural practices (like signifyin' or code-switching) are adapted to fit digital platforms, they use terms such as

technocultural adaptation; the process where culture meets technology and strategic code-switching, focusing on the linguistic choice itself (Klassen, 2021; Ngo, 2020). Techno-linguistic adaptation operationalises the linguistic outcome, specifically the active, tactical adjustment made to vocabulary, syntax, or spelling to bypass platform filters. The focus on the strategic alteration of form rather than the content of the cultural practice itself allows us to identify exactly where technological resistance can be seen (Shahid et al., 2025). This shift demonstrates that discourse is not merely delivered via the platform; it is actively constructed and monitored by an architecture that compels users to invent new linguistic forms to accommodate its design.

The digital environment is increasingly policed by automated systems that frequently fail to recognise the political gravity or contextual nuance of non-hegemonic discourse (Shahid et al., 2025; Zimmermann et al., 2022). These algorithms often categorise highly contextualised critiques, particularly those involving code-switching or sensitive terminology as toxic content, resulting in the automatic filtering, suppression, or shadow-muffling of the message. This automated policing is frequently justified as a means of maintaining platform "health" (Gibson et al., 2023). While moderation is framed as a neutral exercise, these systems are subjective sites governed by power. When platforms label marginalised discourse as toxic based solely on the language used, they fundamentally limit the expressive capacity of those communities. Techno-linguistic adaptation, the intentional manipulation of language through evasive spelling (e.g., r@cist or blvck) or the substitution of non-textual symbols for letters serves as a primary strategy to circumvent these moderation systems (Shahid et al., 2025). This structural threat, arising from algorithmic systems that fail to contextualise racial critique, forces users to adopt creative methods to maintain visibility. Consequently, the struggle for accountability cannot be decoupled from the technological structure of the platform.

Furthermore, techno-linguistic adaptation enhances the circulation of tweets, increasing their potential for virality within an ephemeral digital economy. Factors such as character limits, transience, and platform architecture significantly dictate how a tweet is perceived. This adaptation addresses these constraints by condensing complex sociopolitical critiques into simplified, visually engaging units. A pertinent example is the "Mr Cheesecake" moniker, which amplified the visibility of the critique; the simplicity and humour of the term resonated with the broader community, facilitating collective mobilisation. The use of compressed, technically adapted language ensures the longevity of discourse; such messages are more easily

archived and retrieved, allowing decentralised actors to layer meaning and collaborate rapidly through Quote Tweets and threads (Hine, 2015). This synthesis confirms that techno-linguistic adaptation is a critical strategic adjustment, designed to preserve the integrity of critical discourse in the face of structural bias and algorithmic suppression.

6.4 Platform and Language (RQ1)

How is language used to shame public figures and brands?

The first research question investigates how Black Twitter users employ language to sanction individuals and brands. The analysis of Theme 1 (linguistic tools) confirms that the shaming process is a function of digital literacy, constructed through rhetorical strategies that weaponise humour, affective shorthand, and moral imperatives. The circulation and distribution of content on Black Twitter are facilitated by the creation of affective shorthand. This rhetorical strategy is seen in virtual communities globally, within American Black Twitter, through the use of "signifyin'" and "calling out", practices deeply rooted in Black cultural tradition (Ng, 2022). For example, the reduction of a public figure to a single symbol (such as referring to Booth as "Mr Cheesecake") serves to strip away their individual status, refocusing the discourse entirely on their perceived transgression. This symbolic reduction encourages an immediate, collective moral judgement from the community.

Furthermore, the efficacy of shaming relies heavily on communal validation. The Clicks case demonstrated that meaning and consensus can be achieved entirely through non-textual means; for instance, the repeated use of the "clapping" emoji immediately following the news of TRESemmé's delisting served to signal a collective victory. This reliance on non-textual symbols suggests that, in the initial stages of digital shaming, alignment with the collective takes precedence over traditional logic or linear reasoning. This emotional resonance is what ultimately facilitates rapid mobilisation. Castello (2021) corroborates this, asserting that the increasing use of symbols and emotional markers is a fundamental factor in mobilising communities to enforce social responsibility within the digital age.

6.5 Black Twitter and Accountability (RQ2)

This section analyses how cultural values, technological affordances, and social hierarchies shape accountability on South African Black Twitter. The findings confirm that digital shaming is not a chaotic outburst but a strategic, culturally-gated process, deeply embedded in local

socio-political and post-apartheid contexts. Accountability is therefore negotiated rather than imposed, reflecting a collective moral sovereignty informed by Black cultural traditions, particularly Ubuntu.

6.5.1 Communal Governance and the Digital Imbizo

The community functions as a digital counterpublic, where decentralised users mobilise collectively to deliberate and enforce accountability, often bypassing traditional media (Mpofu, 2019; Schafer, 2015). This process can be conceptualised as a Digital Imbizo, a virtual forum where communal values, affective shorthand, and platform affordances converge to generate collective judgement.

Judgement within this framework begins with affective signalling tweets or threads that express initial outrage then gains momentum through retweets, Quote Tweets, and threading. These affordances ensure rapid circulation and consensus-building, demonstrating that the digital sphere operates according to structured mechanisms rather than spontaneous mob action. The strategic deployment of symbols, code-switching, and humour ensures that complex critiques resonate widely while maintaining cultural coherence (Hine, 2015; Ng, 2022).

The Digital Imbizo's effectiveness relies on this collective coordination: participants negotiate outcomes in real-time, considering ethical and practical consequences. For instance, the Clicks boycott integrated deliberations on the potential harm to low-wage Black workers, reflecting the community's ethical framework. This negotiation demonstrates that accountability is a communal, culturally-informed process rather than merely punitive or reactionary.

6.5.2 Hierarchy of Actors

Despite the decentralised nature of Black Twitter, influence is not equally distributed. A hierarchy exists, determined by participants' capacity to mobilise material or discursive outcomes. Three tiers can be observed:

1. Political Actors – Individuals or organisations capable of mass mobilisation (e.g., the EFF) whose influence is measured by their ability to translate digital outrage into offline consequences.

2. Intellectual Actors – Participants who shape discourse through reasoning, verification, or documentation, ensuring credibility and structural sustainability.
3. Individual Actors – Users who initiate campaigns or add emotional impetus but whose influence depends on the quality and resonance of their contribution.

This hierarchy allows Black Twitter to coordinate large-scale accountability while simultaneously managing risks of misinformation or disproportionate punishment (Mpuru, 2025). For example, Katlego Maboe's campaign initially invoked punitive measures via tagging (financial surveillance), but the community self-corrected, shifting toward restorative justice in line with Ubuntu values (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021).

6.5.3 Digital Justice and Moral Sovereignty

The community exercises moral sovereignty when formal legal systems fail to deliver timely or culturally relevant justice. Through technological tools; archival QRTs, tagging for financial consequences, and hashtags, the community enforces accountability, creating a parallel system of oversight. Examples include:

- The archiving of Helen Zille's tweets ensures long-term scrutiny and ideological accountability, independent of party or state intervention.
- Campaigns like #MuteKelly demonstrate the community's capacity to invent sanctions when traditional institutions are inadequate.

This form of digital justice balances expediency with communal ethics: while risks of vigilante action exist (e.g., Kelly Khumalo case), reflexive debates and restorative pivots (e.g., Maboe case) indicate that the community actively negotiates the boundaries of acceptable action. Accountability on Black Twitter is therefore structured, culturally informed, and technologically mediated, reflecting a post-apartheid ethical landscape rather than universalist Western ideals.

- Cultural fluency and affective shorthand enable rapid mobilisation while preserving ethical and contextual nuance.
- Hierarchies of actors ensure that influence is functional and sustained, balancing decentralisation with efficacy.
- Digital justice and moral sovereignty demonstrate how communities enforce accountability when formal institutions lag or fail.

- Overall, the Digital Imbizo operates as a sophisticated, negotiated system of governance, highlighting the necessity of local ethical frameworks in digital counter publics.

6.6 The Hashtag

Scholarly literature establishes the hashtag's role as a technical mechanism for coordinating discourse and projecting Black perspectives into the mainstream gaze (Suzuki and Velasquez, 2025; Klein et al., 2022). My findings substantiate this evolution but extend the analysis by re-evaluating the hashtag as more than a passive clustering device; it is an instrument for decolonial resistance and structural defiance. This interpretation is vital for understanding how the *Digital Imbizo* asserts authority within a post-apartheid landscape.

The hashtag is intentionally weaponised to assert moral sovereignty (Brock, 2020). While Sharma (2013) suggests that hashtags evolve into media-friendly labels, these findings indicate that this process is inherently structural. Hashtags such as #ClicksMustFall function as discursive anchors that consolidate decentralised moral outrage into a unified command structure. The efficacy of the platform is contingent upon the users' mastery of its architecture; the *imbizo's* structural resilience is directly linked to its ability to adapt to and dominate the technological landscape.

Specific platform features are leveraged to maximise systemic impact. The hashtag provides the technical framework necessary for decentralised initiation, creating a united front capable of bypassing traditional media gatekeeping and censorship. Furthermore, in cases like Helen Zille's, the hashtag serves as an archival instrument, preserving the long-term historical context of political hypocrisy. This strategic application ensures that, even within an ephemeral environment, the platform is utilised for memory work and ideological preservation, countering the natural decay of digital discourse.

The structural significance of the hashtag is most evident in its capacity to translate digital conversation into a tangible, actionable threat. The Clicks case confirmed that attaining trending topic status converts discursive critique into a formidable structural challenge. This was instrumental in justifying and amplifying the physical shutdown initiated by the EFF, demonstrating how digital tools can compel real-world compliance from corporate and political entities. This shift transcends the pitfalls of performative allyship (Wong, 2022) by enforcing a strict requirement for material consequences before the digital siege is lifted. This mechanism

is central to the CTDA framework, as it directly links algorithmic visibility to economic outcomes. By achieving maximum engagement, the hashtag forced major retailers to make substantive material decisions, such as removing TRESemmé products. This validates the *imbizo's* ability to secure structural accountability from corporate targets.

The sustained efficacy of the hashtag confirms its role in counter-hegemonic reframing. Racialised hashtags, or "blacktags" (Sharma, 2013), allow the community to reject and redirect mainstream media narratives that frequently depoliticise incidents of racism. This process reinforces the argument that the *Digital Imbizo's* strength is proportional to its mastery of the digital terrain. However, this reliance on amplification also reveals the platform's structural limitations; the hashtag's propensity to amplify emotionally charged, binary claims exacerbates the echo chamber effect (de Roos et al., 2024). Consequently, the hashtag remains a double-edged sword: while it provides the technical key to decolonial command, it simultaneously carries the risk of reinforcing internal biases and oversimplifying the profound complexities of structural justice.

6.6.1 Digital Justice

This study initially hypothesised that the accelerated pace of social media oversimplifies multifaceted arguments into moral binaries, leaving little space for nuance and fostering discourse driven primarily by rage (Costa, 2018; Papacharissi, 2015). While the findings substantiate this, they also reframe this simplification as a vital structural adaptation necessary for survival within an ephemeral attention economy.

The deployment of affective shorthand including metaphors, hyperbole, and emojis for emotional validation is a direct response to platform constraints. While critics might perceive this as the dilution of rational discourse, it functions as a strategic mechanism to capture attention and accelerate consensus-building at a speed that traditional text cannot match.

Mpuru (2025) suggests that the inherent nature of online critique is rooted in the existing socio-economic anxieties of the South African public, particularly amongst those facing unemployment, debt, or precarious working conditions. This moral outrage is further exacerbated by a perceived lack of efficacy in the criminal justice system (Mpuru, 2025). A recurring theme in the data was the tension surrounding economic justice; for instance, Clicks sought to insulate itself from accountability by highlighting the potential for job losses among low-earning workers. The community, acutely aware of this tactic, engaged in sophisticated

internal debates regarding whether the shutdown would primarily harm vulnerable employees rather than the corporate entity itself.

However, the findings also highlight the risks inherent in digital accountability, specifically the absence of due process and the potential for vigilante judgement (Mpuru, 2025). The Kelly Khumalo case provides a stark illustration of how communal consensus can override formal legal standards. The community's collective assumption of guilt and the subsequent demand for pre-legal sanctions; effectively "cancelling" the figure until her innocence is proven demonstrate a propensity for punitive action based on limited evidence. Furthermore, the use of violent rhetoric, such as the threat that she should *"go down like Senzo Meyiwa,"* confirms the genuine risk of vindictiveness escalating into threats against physical safety.

Crucially, the findings introduce a necessary nuance: this affective space is capable of significant self-reflection and internal correction. The discourse surrounding Katlego Maboe proves that the community is not a monolith of outrage; instead, it engages in reflexive debates concerning its own ethical boundaries. The pivot from punitive to restorative justice in the Maboe case indicates that while a campaign may originate from an emotional reaction, it is eventually subjected to communal scrutiny. This ensures that the *Digital Imbizo* establishes precedents for managing similar ethical dilemmas in the future.

6.6.2 Echo Chambers and Performative Allyship

Digital environments are characterised by inherent structural challenges, including the formation of filter bubbles, the entrenchment of echo chambers, and the algorithmic promotion of moral intensity (de Ross et al., 2024; Barberá, 2020). Given the low barrier to entry for digital activism, users frequently engage in performative allyship, where advocacy is motivated by the pursuit of social capital rather than a commitment to substantive systemic change (Duncan, 2025; Wong, 2022). These algorithmic structures risk reinforcing existing biases and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives, thereby exacerbating political polarisation and obstructing productive discourse (Cinelli et al., 2021).

The findings of this study substantiate these risks, particularly regarding how the *imbizo* navigates the tension between severe moral failure and entrenched structural power. Performative movements are often ephemeral, frequently reducing complex struggles into

oversimplified binaries. However, this study extends the current literature by demonstrating how the *imbizo* internally monitors and disciplines these tendencies. While many participants may engage in low-effort activism, the community collectively enforces a requirement for material consequence. The sustained effort to unmask performative political allyship, exemplified by the deployment of Helen Zille's historical political receipts illustrates how the collective can transform the platform's inherent ephemerality into a robust, long-term archival surveillance tool. Users strategically employ this method to ensure that the political objectives of the discourse are met, even when the majority of individual contributions remain superficial.

Nevertheless, the research corroborates concerns that this performative environment can lead to internal inconsistency. The disparate treatment of Kelly Khumalo compared to the defence of Katlego Maboe suggests that the *imbizo's* justice is susceptible to being swayed by immediate emotional momentum and group loyalty, rather than a consistent application of shared ethical principles.

Ultimately, these results reveal an internal struggle: Black solidarity is not uniformly applied and frequently fractures when policing the intersections of gender, class, and celebrity status. These cases expose an intersectional double standard, demonstrating that while the community successfully challenges external hegemony (as seen with Zille and Clicks), its internal consistency is undermined by the same echo chambers that amplify its reach. This confirms that the digital space both reflects and replicates the power hierarchies of the offline world (Mpofu, 2019).

6.6.3 Fandoms as Protective Shield

Celebrity fandoms, or stans, possess the capacity to mobilise into impactful movements designed specifically to protect their idols. By leveraging deep emotional attachments, these groups humanise controversial figures in a deliberate attempt to divert public attention from their offences (Pabawani and Nuralin, 2021). The findings of this study confirm that such insulation presents a significant structural limit to the community's collective authority. The Kelly Khumalo case serves as a poignant illustration: despite facing severe, sustained pressure and accusations related to homicide, Khumalo remained largely unaffected in a professional sense, maintaining her corporate sponsorships and public engagements. This persistent immunity is attributable not only to her elite status but also to her fandom, which functions as

a protective shield. Giles (2020) characterises this as a parasocial relationship in which fans prioritise loyalty over critical moral engagement.

In such instances, the community's efforts to enforce accountability reach a stalemate. This reveals that the moral sovereignty of the counterpublic can be successfully contested by the concentrated power of organised fandoms, who are willing to bypass traditional ethical norms to defend a celebrity. This internal friction highlights a fundamental limitation of Black Twitter: while the platform is adept at challenging external white hegemony (as seen in the Clicks and Zille cases), it struggles to maintain consistency when confronted with internal hierarchies of gender, class, and fame. The Khumalo case demonstrates that digital echo chambers can be sufficiently powerful to hinder the application of negotiated justice (Mpofu, 2019). This substantiates the argument that the platform mirrors, rather than resolves, the entrenched power structures of the offline world.

6.7 Cancel Culture in South Africa

Scholarly literature acknowledges that racial oppression is deeply embedded in the South African historical consciousness, rendering cancel culture in this context uniquely significant (Dunlop, 2023). My findings substantiate this, suggesting that the post-apartheid landscape is the primary determinant of what constitutes accountability. In this environment, cancel culture is not merely a foreign import or a global trend; it is a sophisticated local justice system driven by the necessity of rectifying structural historical injustices (Ngcobo, 2024; Hill, 2018). The shaming of figures such as Helen Zille illustrates this precisely: her offence was not perceived merely as a political misstep, but as a direct attempt to justify colonialism. Black Twitter responded through ideological dispossession, utilising a-temporal collapse to permanently anchor Zille to the harm of the past. The sentiment *"She is apartheid walking"* serves to ensure that her contemporary presence is closely linked to historical trauma.

Historically, South African ostracism most notably during the apartheid era was absolute and punitive. In contrast, this research indicates that justice within digital spaces is a negotiated and self-correcting process. The shared values underpinning these campaigns, particularly Ubuntu, act as a safeguard against irrational or purely punitive outcomes. This negotiation is most visible when comparing the Clicks case with that of Katlego Maboe. In the Clicks instance, the community's condemnation of corporate racism was tempered by the ethical imperative to

protect low-earning workers from the financial fallout of a total brand boycott. Conversely, Ubuntu was invoked to shield Maboe from terminal punitive action, with the community opting for restorative justice to protect Black talent from systemic marginalisation.

This study asserts that cancel culture on South African Black Twitter is profoundly shaped by local values, distinguishing it from Western discourses. The data suggests this phenomenon is best described as *Digital Imbizo* accountability: a complex, culturally-gated system of discursive governance. In this model, the impetus for action lies within the post-apartheid social landscape, where the collective will of the South African public serves as the final arbiter of rules and outcomes (Mpofu, 2019). This reality contradicts Western frameworks that prioritise decentralised, individualistic, and purely liberal democratic ideals (Mpofu, 2019).

These results disprove the notion that cancel culture is a purely reactive process driven by raw outrage. Instead, they confirm that local context dictates the parameters of digital justice. Accountability can yield various outcomes depending on the nature of the critique: it may be punitive, restorative (as with Maboe), or result in structural economic interventions (as with Clicks). This demonstrates that accountability is a negotiated rather than a merely imposed practice. The discourse surrounding Clicks, for example, was mediated by the central principle of protecting Black low-wage workers, proving that shared communal obligations rather than individual anger define the boundaries of punishment (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021).

Mpofu (2019) challenges the assumption that the internet is a structureless space designed for individualistic interaction. Western framing often privileges the "autonomous individual," a concept rooted in capitalist and classical liberal traditions. However, this model falters when applied to the South African context, which is defined by collectivist traditions and the enduring legacy of colonial power (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The argument that digital interaction is purely democratic fails to recognise that existing social structures are mirrored in the virtual sphere (Kumar et al., 2018). Without accounting for the role of shared community obligations and group identity, one risks the false assumption that decentralised platforms dismantle hierarchy. In reality, these platforms often provide a new arena for its performance.

6.7.1 Hierarchy of decentralised actors (RQ3)

Who initiates cancellations and how do they succeed?

The notion that digital networks are fundamentally neutral or non-hierarchical is immediately dismantled by the internal structure of Black Twitter. Although every user possesses the formal right to initiate a campaign (Schafer, 2015), the power to sustain and actualise such an action is distributed across a distinct hierarchy of actors. As evidenced in all five cases, authority is validated through an initiator's capacity to trigger material consequences or deploy discursive capital. This hierarchy is essential for translating decentralised critique into an organised movement capable of challenging traditional democratic assumptions (Mpofu, 2019). The primary structural actors; the political, the intellectual, and the individual occupy different tiers based on their ability to project influence into the offline world.

Schafer (2015) conceptualises digital counterpublics primarily as communicative spaces governed by principles of open access and visibility. In this view, an actor's status in the public sphere is defined by their equal right to participate, free from the mediation of traditional gatekeepers (Mpofu, 2019). The collective power of the counterpublic is derived from its decentralisation; no single political entity or media house holds exclusive control over the discourse (Suzuki and Velasquez, 2025). In this idealised framework, the individual's role is to bring matters of public concern to the fore, hoping their grievances resonate with the community to trigger collective action. This model positions the actor as a central figure in deconstructing traditional power dynamics, participating in a fully realised democracy where technological features amplify voices rather than suppress them.

However, Schafer's model, which suggests we can observe and participate in conversations as equals, is frequently criticised for its limited applicability in unequal societies (Kruse et al., 2018). While the intent is democratic, the model fails to account for real-world hierarchies that are inevitably mirrored in virtual spaces. The power of an initiator, the actor who launches a campaign is never truly equal; it is contingent upon their social capital, digital literacy, and existing power structures. Consequently, while all actors share a right to participate, their actual influence remains conditional.

The *Digital Imbizo* challenges the assumption of non-hierarchy by operating through a structured tiers of influence. This arrangement is necessary to transform decentralised critique into a tangible movement. The highest level of influence is held by political actors (such as the

EFF) and intellectual actors who can execute material or discursive consequences (Klein et al., 2022). A political actor's power is measured not by their tweet volume, but by their capacity for mass mobilisation. The Clicks shutdown serves as a prime example, where actors demonstrated the ability to orchestrate social disruption that forced corporate compliance (Bennet and Segerberg, 2023). Conversely, the individual actor earns authority through discursive capital, where the quality of their reasoned critique acts as a certified indicator of validity that the collective can then assess (Brock, 2020). In this system, the power of initiation is always tethered to verifiable functional authority.

The base tier is occupied by the individual actor, whose primary role is to mobilise the collective response; yet, they also pose the greatest risk to the system's moral authority. Because individual actors may introduce unverified information, they can compel the collective to act on false information (Mpuru, 2025). This highlights a structural weakness in decentralised justice: an individual's personal motivations rarely align perfectly with the collective goal of systemic change. The cases of Booth and Maboe illustrate this tension. In the Maboe instance, the community was forced into a process of self-correction when the punishment was perceived as disproportionate. While tagging was initially weaponised to inflict financial harm, a form of financial surveillance, the community eventually pivoted towards restoration and Ubuntu values (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021). This shift proves that the Digital Imbizo is a self-regulating moral system capable of monitoring its own ethical boundaries.

Ultimately, this hierarchy confirms that Black Twitter is a site of conditional power, challenging the democratic ideals of the digital public sphere. While platform features allow any user to initiate action, the ability to actualise that action is dependent on one's position within the hierarchy. Political and intellectual actors can translate discourse into material outcomes or sustain prolonged campaigns, such as the strategic archiving of Helen Zille's offensive statements. However, the individual actor remains a source of structural fragility due to their personal and often unverified motivations. The persistence of this tension the speed of decentralisation versus the necessity of verification demonstrates that the community's governance system is in a constant battle to ensure that its justice remains both fair and effective.

6.7.2 Moral sovereignty over formal systems

The decentralised nature of digital networks presents a direct challenge to traditional state sovereignty; the principle that a governing body should exercise exclusive authority over its own affairs, free from external interference (Mueller, 2019). As Pohle and Thiel (2019) observe, the fixed boundaries of territorial law are fundamentally at odds with the fluid, rapid nature of digital practices, creating a momentum that frequently bypasses state control. In response, governments have increasingly pursued "digital sovereignty," attempting to reassert national laws and regulate the transborder flow of data (Couture & Toupin, 2019).

This study offers a critical counter-perspective to these state-centric views. I argue that "moral sovereignty" emerges precisely when formal legal systems fail to deliver justice within a socially acceptable timeframe. This institutional delay compels the counterpublic to establish its own "deliberative assembly," operating independently of traditional legal oversight. On Black Twitter, this is evident when the community reaches a consensus on guilt (as seen in the Khumalo case) or invents platform-specific sanctions, such as #MuteKelly, to enforce accountability. These actions are direct responses to a formal system that has failed to bridge the gap between abstract constitutionalism and the lived injustices South Africans face daily.

Black Twitter asserts this moral authority by weaponising technology as a tool for structural counter-surveillance. When political and legal institutions falter, the counterpublic intervenes to ensure that both brands and individuals are held to account. For instance, the persistent archiving of Helen Zille's tweets serves to expose hypocrisy and "performative allyship." Even when she is legally reinstated by her party (Dunlop, 2023), the digital archive ensures that her ideological failures remain permanently accessible. This technological strategy underscores the necessity of the CTDA framework; it explains how marginalised groups manage accountability when formal institutions refuse to act.

Rundle (2016) suggests that the true value of law lies in its ability to maintain and deepen communication between citizens. When a legal system fails to reflect the moral reality of its people by appearing indifferent to racial or social injustice it loses its legitimacy. My findings demonstrate that the public is acutely aware of this flaw, perceiving the judiciary as either "captured" or inefficient. This perception justifies the community's turn towards punitive digital action. While this digital justice carries risks of cyber-vigilantism, it is a direct response to a demand for the transparency the judicial system currently lacks (Mueller, 2020). The long-

term nature of campaigns like the Khumalo case proves the counterpublic is acting as a self-appointed authority, forcing the legal system to reckon with a digital public that refuses to let failures of justice go unnoticed.

The central argument for CTDA is grounded in the reality that X (formerly Twitter) is not a neutral stage; it is an active participant that structures racial and social dynamics. Traditional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) often overlooks this architectural influence (Brock, 2020). This study proves that in the digital space, cultural discourse and platform infrastructure are inseparable. The rules of accountability within the *Digital Imbizo* are forged at the exact point where Black cultural needs collide with, and ultimately overcome, technological limitations.

6.8 Agency in the Global South

The findings highlight how South African Black Twitter exemplifies digital agency shaped by local cultural, ethical, and technological frameworks, challenging dominant Western theories of online activism. Agency here is not merely individual expression; it is collective, negotiated, and mediated through culturally informed mechanisms of accountability.

6.8.1 Collective Digital Agency

Black Twitter participants exercise agency by engaging in the Digital Imbizo, a virtual forum where communal deliberation, affective signalling, and strategic mobilisation converge. The Digital Imbizo enables users to:

- Translate outrage into coordinated action (e.g., boycotts, public shaming, or advocacy campaigns)
- Negotiate ethical boundaries based on Ubuntu-inspired communal values
- Amplify voices that might otherwise lack institutional power

This shows that agency is relational: it exists within a network of participants, where influence is distributed according to the hierarchy of actors. Individual posts gain impact only when they resonate with the broader community and adhere to shared cultural expectations.

6.8.2 Hierarchies and Influence

Agency is structured through a tiered system of influence: political actors, intellectual actors, and individual actors. This hierarchy ensures that digital interventions are both effective and

culturally coherent, balancing immediacy with deliberation. The South African context demonstrates that even in decentralised digital spaces, collective agency is coordinated rather than random: participants monitor, correct, and guide one another, exemplifying a self-regulating community.

6.8.3 Digital Moral Sovereignty

The exercise of agency is inseparable from moral sovereignty. When formal institutions fail to respond, the community enforces culturally-informed norms using digital tools: archiving content, creating hashtags to signal public disapproval, and tagging institutions or individuals to ensure accountability.

This digital moral sovereignty reflects:

- A reliance on culturally grounded ethics rather than universalist models
- An adaptive approach where punitive and restorative practices coexist
- A sustained, participatory form of oversight that demonstrates South African Black Twitter's capacity for contextualised agency

For example, campaigns around Helen Zille's tweets and the Clicks advert reveal that community members do not act indiscriminately; rather, they deliberate over potential social harm, the credibility of sources, and proportionality of response. This highlights that agency in the Global South is deeply contextual, culturally-informed, and technologically mediated, rather than a simple replication of global North paradigms of digital activism.

- Agency is collective, relational, and culturally grounded, not purely individual.
- The Digital Imbizo acts as both a space of deliberation and an instrument of action.
- Hierarchies of influence ensure effectiveness, credibility, and ethical coherence.
- Digital moral sovereignty allows the community to enforce norms and accountability in ways formal institutions may not.

Overall, South African Black Twitter demonstrates that agency in the Global South is strategic, ethical, and technologically mediated, offering a model for understanding digital activism beyond Western-centric frameworks.

6.9 Conclusion

This chapter argues that Black Twitter functions as a sovereign *digital imbizo*, directly contradicting the common portrayal of cancel culture as a chaotic or outrage-driven practice. Within this space, justice is mediated through a unique blend of Black solidarity and affective shorthand, yet it remains anchored by the ethical demands of Ubuntu and the urgent need for structural economic redress (Molefe & Ngcongo, 2021). The finding of this study is that the struggle for accountability is shaped not only by social status but by the architecture of the digital platform itself. By utilising the CTDA framework, these findings demonstrate how the *imbizo* actively resists digital colonialism (Shahid et al., 2025). This resistance is most evident in the community's ability to execute financial surveillance and maintain a permanent counter-surveillance through the strategic archiving of tweets (Brock, 2020). Ultimately, Black Twitter is far from a neutral platform; it is a contested site of defiance. This research provides a roadmap for how marginalised communities throughout the Global South can assert genuine digital sovereignty in the face of algorithmic control.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion, Contribution to Knowledge, and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

The analysis presented in this study establishes that the phenomenon often dismissed as cancel culture on South African Black Twitter is, in fact, a *Digital Imbizo*. Far from being disorganised, it is a sophisticated process governed by internal norms that actively challenge both algorithmic control and the performative allyship prevalent in post-apartheid society (Ng, 2020). This conclusion serves as a theoretical intervention, arguing that the accountability measures seen on Black Twitter demonstrate how marginalised communities in the Global South construct their own moral and political sovereignty. By doing so, they align digital space with local values rather than external mandates. This research directly challenges Western-centric frameworks that label digital activism as outrage demonstrating instead that its core function is to enforce a negotiated justice rooted in collective well-being and structural economic redress (Molefe and Ngcongo, 2021). Ultimately, this study positions the *Digital Imbizo* as a vital alternative to the shortcomings of formal democracy in the digital age.

7.2 Concluding thoughts

The need for the *Digital Imbizo* arises from the persistent structural failures of post-apartheid institutions to deliver timely, satisfactory justice for historical and systemic harms, compelling the counterpublic to assert its own moral counter-sovereignty (Mueller, 2020). The *Imbizo* thus operates as a self-appointed digital government, forcing elite, corporate, and political power to contend with the public that refuses to allow ideological failures or historical reputations, such as attempts to justify colonialism, to be left unaccounted for (Dunlop, 2023). The demonstrated capacity of the collective to execute both market interventions (the Clicks case) and ideological dispossession (the Zille case) confirms that the *Imbizo* possesses the structural power to translate decentralised critique into material consequences, asserting a localised form of digital sovereignty (Couture and Toupin, 2019). This mechanism of accountability functions as a collective public trial, administered by the community instead of the government, where the consensus is that legal innocence does not equate to moral immunity for acts that violate the core social contract (Rosenbaum and Fichmen, 2019; Rundle, 2016). The very existence of this

alternative justice is an indication of the formal constitutionalism that often fails to bridge the gap between principle and the lived post-apartheid reality, positioning the *Imbizo* as a significant corrective mechanism for transgressions.

The governance of the *Imbizo* differs from the rest in that its outcome occurs via negotiated justice, which is systematically mediated by the limitation of ubuntu pragmatism (Asamoah and Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019). This complexity suggests that the collective is able to counter the punitive influence that is often fueled by affective shorthand and the platform's capacity for emotion-led movement, thereby preventing it from collapsing into purely nihilistic or absolute ostracism. The decision to seek out restorative outcomes (Maboe case) or to limit punitive action against a corporate brand (Clicks) for fear of harming low-wage Black workers is proof that this system has a self-correcting ethical mechanism that aligns the consequences of the action with the higher moral code of a shared obligation. This mechanism fundamentally distinguishes the *Digital Imbizo* from the Western discourse of mob rule, demonstrating that the pursuit of collective well-being takes precedence over individual vengeance. This provides a model for how non-government actors can administer justice that is both structurally effective and culturally grounded.

The structural function of the *Imbizo* proves the need to adopt Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA), a framework that acknowledges that the struggle for accountability cannot be independent of the technological infrastructure itself. The study validates CTDA by establishing the need to use techno-linguistic adaptation: the active, strategic adjustment of vocabulary (e.g., evasive spelling, symbolic language, affective shorthand) to bypass western-centric moderation filters and algorithmic suppression. TLA is thus an essential survival strategy against algorithmic oppression, where systems incapable of processing decolonial critique actively suppress political discourse from the Global South (Shahid et al., 2025). This finding reframes X not as a neutral medium but as an active political agent that can suppress discourse, compelling the *Digital Imbizo* to construct its own discursive visibility by exploiting platform affordances. The efficacy and sustainability of cancellation campaigns are dependent on this strategy.

The operation of the *Imbizo* fundamentally changes how social capital works and challenges the liberal assumption of a neutral, democratic digital public sphere. The research reveals a clearly defined hierarchy of decentralised actors confirming that digital authority is conditional.

While every user has the right to initiate a campaign, the power to sustain and actualise that action is rooted in political actors (capable of material translation) and intellectual actors (validated by discursive capital and archival critique). This hierarchy, which challenges the idealised democratic models of the public sphere, ensures that counter-hegemonic action is linked to political or intellectual authority to increase the potential for real-world impact and to translate discourse into actionable material consequence (Klein et al., 2022). The successful consequence of a cancellation results in the loss of social capital (access to privilege, and public standing) which lies in the hands of the public (Barbera, 2020).

This reveals an internal paradox, the intersectional paradox. While the *Imbizo* demonstrates structural consistency in challenging external white hegemony (Clicks, Zille), it constantly struggles to resolve its own internal power hierarchies related to gender, class, and celebrity status. The unequal punitivism applied in high-profile cases (Khumalo vs Maboe) proves that the *Imbizo's* justice is susceptible to being swayed by immediate momentum and inherited patriarchal biases. This confirms that the digital counterpublic reflects and struggles with the power dynamics of the offline world. The ability of organised fandoms to act as a protective shield, successfully insulating certain targets and forcing a stalemate with the *imbizo's* moral sovereignty to highlight a new structural limitation, the emergence of digital power blocs that undermine the efficacy of the collective. This structural flaw requires a focused research agenda to define the boundaries of the *imbizo's* moral consistency and one that can acknowledge and factor in the influence of these insulating actors.

The ultimate goal of the *digital imbizo* extends beyond punishment of a figure or brand but the ultimate goal is to maintain moral order in society and to enforce a broader structural reform. The primary objective is to establish clear precedent and enforce a new social contract where future cancellations become unnecessary because the collective's values are universally internalised and upheld (Clark, 2020). The sustained social significance of the *imbizo* lies in its proven influence as a catalyst for structural change, providing a platform for marginalised voices to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and challenge the established status quo, one that is significantly defeated by those whose social capital is threatened by this shift in power (Wojcik & Hughes, 2019). The critiques against the *imbizo*, which often frame it as extreme, ambiguous, or overly emotional fail to recognise it as a unique, cultural act of resistance against institutional control and injustice.

7.3 Contribution to Knowledge

The contribution of this research positions the *digital imbizo* model as a crucial intervention in global studies of digital governance and social movements. This work challenges the universality of Western-centric discourses on digital accountability, asserting the *imbizo* has been a cultural practice to hold people accountable in African communities for years. By offering a model of self-governance rooted in ubuntu pragmatism, this research directly counters the Marxist critique that views cancel culture as an ideological manifestation of capital. Unlike the view that collective action is an engineered distraction generating profit for the owning class, the *imbizo* model asserts the agency of the collective to assert a moral standard that transcends the motive of capital, proving that political intervention and justice-seeking are possible despite and against the system's ideological underpinnings. With this perspective, we see a counter-narrative that shifts the focus from passive victimhood under global systems to proactive, culturally constructed sovereignty.

The study makes a methodological contribution by advancing the theory of how marginalised groups achieve structural agency using practices familiar to them that align with their core values. The demonstrated function of the hierarchy of decentralised actors (political and intellectual) on Black Twitter proves that the ability to translate critique into material consequence is conditional and organised. Furthermore, the central role of techno-linguistic adaptation establishes a new technological dimension to group agency. The model offers a comparative tool for understanding the complex relationship between digital activism and the government in various global contexts, particularly in contrast to the dynamics of digital nationalism. While some global cancelling practices may work in collaboration with government goals to uphold national order or suppress internal dissent, the *digital imbizo* functions as an oppositional and alternative force. Its moral sovereignty is asserted not in alignment with formal institutional power, but in a direct challenge to the insufficiency of the government to address racial and economic injustice. This distinction, a collective acting against institutional failure versus one acting in collaboration with government ideology, is critical for comparative studies seeking to categorise global digital accountability practices and demonstrates the *imbizo's* unique role as a necessary counter-power against entrenched, systemic inequity.

Ultimately, the structural strength of the *digital imbizo* lies in its successful integration of affective urgency with deeply entrenched values that prioritises communal obligation over individual autonomy. By documenting the mechanisms of negotiated justice and the enforcement of a collective social contract, this research provides the necessary foundation and framework for marginalised groups globally to assess, mobilise, and institutionalise their own forms of digital accountability. The *imbizo* confirms that digital sovereignty is not granted, but rather technologically engineered and culturally constructed within the most complex and contested sites of post-colonial power, thereby contributing a foundational model for the future of democratic engagement across Africa and the world.

7.4 Recommendations

The literature has expressed concern regarding the lack of governance over viral content and source identification (Kumar and Gupta, 2023), showing the need for solid structural responses rooted in the *digital imbizo* model. These recommendations, therefore, focus on providing specific, implementable solutions to these two main problems. The fact that single individuals can disrupt entire systems proves that identifying the source of information is a fundamental governance challenge requiring updated liability laws. Moreover, because emotional shortcuts and the unique way people adapt language for social media are what truly drive engagement, regulation cannot rely solely on deleting specific posts. Instead, authorities must address the technical features that allow content to spread so rapidly. This requires platforms to take ethical responsibility for the damage caused by their internal design. Rather than just policing speech, policy should focus on governing the actual mechanisms of mobilisation and vitality. For African governance models, this shift offers a precise strategy to close the regulatory gaps currently present in the global digital economy.

7.4.1 Policy Recommendations

- **The need for language sovereignty**

  The study's primary recommendation is to mandate the development of AI systems built specifically for African linguistic contexts. The findings show that adapting language to fit technology is currently a structural need only because Western-centric platforms marginalia those who do not use standard English. By filtering or suppressing

code-switched phrases and indigenous languages, these platforms practice a form of algorithmic oppression (Shahid et al., 2025). This failure demonstrates that the fight for corporate accountability is inseparable from the fight for language sovereignty. When an algorithm mislabels political critique in isiZulu or SeSotho as toxic content, it directly weakens the democratic potential of the *digital imbizo*. Policymakers must, therefore, treat algorithmic bias as a form of structural violence. This requires regulations that force platforms to redesign their structures to end linguistic marginalisation (Birhane, 2020). The deployment of contextual AI will not only better the user experience but it is a decolonial requirement to ensure that political voices of the African public are visible, understood and protected.

- **Implementation**

  Achieving genuine technological decolonisation requires intervention that goes beneath the surface of current platform policies. In South Africa, where twelve official languages are constantly being sidelined by the dominance of digital English, policymakers must require tech firms to invest in multilingual AI models trained in local data (Plantinga et al., 2024). These systems should be built specifically using African language datasets, allowing them to grasp the emotional weight and political nuance of local speech such as distinguishing between sharp political satire and actual hate speech. This shift aligns with Afro-communitarian principles (Amugongo et al., 2024), moving away from the deployment of technology away from a narrow focus on individual products towards a model focused on collective well-being. By doing so, platforms can replace shadow banning and try to validate the concept of the *digital imbizo* where the people have a say in how best to hold each other accountable online. Ultimately, this confirms that for technology to fulfill local democratic and ethical obligations, it must be designed through the lens of a culture it serves.

7.4.2 Future Research (Applying CTDA)

Advancing Critical Techno-Cultural Discourse Analysis (CTDA) requires methodologies capable of interpreting the wide array of digital artefacts that exist beyond mere text (Brock, 2020). While this study successfully incorporated multimodal elements like memes and

screenshots from the tweet archive, future research must move past a reliance on text-heavy APIs and integrate visual ethnography. This shift is vital as digital resistance becomes increasingly visual; humour, sentiment, and political defiance are now frequently condensed into non-textual formats like GIFs, memes, and customary imagery. These elements are powerful tools for mobilisation, yet they can be easily misinterpreted or overlooked entirely by traditional text analysis. Consequently, future studies should pair CTDA with visual ethnography to fully decode the social, political, and cultural nuances embedded within these digital artefacts.

Integrating visual ethnography (Hine, 2020) into the CTDA framework provides the methodological depth required to capture the nuanced negotiations occurring within the digital imbizo. This approach involves a systematic study of how visual artefacts are created, circulated, and interpreted, treating each image as a dense cultural text rather than a mere illustration. Future research could apply this method to the Zille case, for example, by tracing the entire lifespan of the DA poster juxtapositions. Such an analysis would reveal the origin of the visual critique, how it migrated across platforms like X, WhatsApp, and TikTok, and how its meaning evolved within different cultural contexts. This systematic adjustment would address the limitations of the current study and demonstrate the broader utility of the CTDA framework, ensuring that findings regarding techno-cultural dynamics are more robust and applicable across the Global South.

References

Abiade, S. F. (2025). Algorithmic Sovereignty and the New Security Dependencies: How Foreign AI Surveillance Technologies Reshape Domestic Autonomy in the Global South.

Aiseng, K. (2024). Black Twitter and Digital Counterpublics in South Africa. *Studies in Media and Communication*, *12*(2), 302–320.

Amugongo, L. M., Bidwell, N. J., & Corrigan, C. C. (2023, June). Enriching Ubuntu Ethics in AI for Healthcare: Enabling Equitable Care. In *Proceedings of the 2023 ACM conference on fairness, accountability, and transparency* (pp. 583-592).

Asamoah, K., & Yeboah-Assiamah, E. (2019). "Ubuntu philosophy" for public leadership and governance praxis: Revisiting the ethos of Africa's collectivism. *Journal of Global Responsibility*, *10*(4), 307-321.

Asker, D., & Dinas, E. (2019). Thinking fast and furious:Emotional intensity and opinion polarization in online media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *83*(3), 487-509.

Banaji, S., & Bhat, R. (2021). *Social media and hate* (p. 140). Taylor & Francis.

Barberá, P. (2020). Social media, echo chambers, and political polarization. *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform*, 34-55.

Bennani, K. (2021). Trena M. Paulus and Jessica N. Lester.(2021). Doing Qualitative Research in a Digital World.

Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2023). The logic of connective action: Digital media and the personalisation of contentious politics. In *Handbook of digital politics* (pp. 287-338). Edward Elgar Publishing.

Billingham, P., & Parr, T. (2020). Enforcing social norms: The morality of public shaming. *European Journal of Philosophy*, *28*(4), 997-1016.

Birhane, A. (2020). Algorithmic colonisation of Africa. *SCRIPTed, 17,* 389.

Bolander, B., & Locher, M. A. (2020). Beyond the online offline distinction: Entry points to digital discourse. *Discourse, Context & Media*, *35*, 100383. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100383

Brock, A. (2020). *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. New York University Press.

Brock, A. (2018). Critical technocultural discourse analysis. *New Media & Society*, *20*(3), 1012–1030.

Brock, A. (2012). From the blackhand side: Twitter as a cultural conversation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *56*(4), 529-549.

Bromell, D. (2022). Counter-Speech Is Everyone's Responsibility. In *Regulating Free Speech in a Digital Age: Hate, Harm and the Limits of Censorship* (pp. 191-215). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Brown, M. A., Bisbee, J., Lai, A., Bonneau, R., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. A. (2022). Echo chambers, rabbit holes, and algorithmic bias: How YouTube recommends content to real users.

Bruns, A. (2023). From "the" public sphere to a network of publics: Towards an empirically founded model of contemporary public communication spaces. *Communication Theory*, *33*(2-3), 70-81.

Bouvier, G., & Machin, D. (2021). What gets lost in Twitter 'cancel culture'hashtags? Calling out racists reveals some limitations of social justice campaigns. *Discourse & Society*, *32*(3), 307-327.

Boyd, D. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In *A networked self* (pp. 47-66). Routledge.

Cammaerts, B. (2021). The new-new social movements: are social media changing the ontology of social movements?. *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, *26*(3), 343-358.

Castello, I. (2021). Challenges and Opportunities in Using Social Media to Promote Corporate Social Responsibility. *The Routledge companion to corporate social responsibility*, 319-328.

Chachu, S., & Liebzie, L. (2023). Community Interpreting and Translation in Africa: Bridging the Language Divide. *Journal for Translation Studies in Africa*, *5*, 1-3.

Chernyavskaya, V. E. (2021). Social meaning in the mirror of political correctness. Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University. *Language and Literature*, *18*(2), 383-399.

Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociocchi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media. *Proceedings of the national academy of sciences*, *118*(9).

Clark, M. D. (2024). *We tried to tell y'all: Black Twitter and the rise of digital counternarratives*. Oxford University Press.

Clark, M. D. (2020). DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called "cancel culture." *Communication and the Public*, *5*(3–4).

Cobbe, J. (2021). Algorithmic censorship by social platforms: Power and resistance. *Philosophy & Technology*, *34*(4), 739-766.

Cottingham, M. D., & Rose, A. (2023). Tweeting jokes, tweeting hope: humor practices during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. *Health Communication*, *38*(9), 1954-1963.

Costa, J., Silva, C., & Ribeiro, B. (2018, December). Learning in Twitter Streams with 280-Character Tweets. In *International Conference on Soft Computing and Pattern Recognition* (pp. 177-184). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Costello, C. D. (2018). "Hello? Are You Still There?" The Impact of Social Media on Self-Disclosure and Reciprocity in Interpersonal Relationships: A Literature Review. *Channels Where Discip. Meet*, *2*, 3.

Couture, S., & Toupin, S. (2019). What does the notion of "sovereignty" mean when referring to the digital?. *New media & society*, *21*(10), 2305-2322.

Cumyn, A., Ouellet, K., Côté, A. M., Francoeur, C., & St-Onge, C. (2019). Role of researchers in the ethical conduct of research: A discourse analysis from different stakeholder perspectives. *Ethics & Behavior*, *29*(8), 621-636.

de Roos, M. S., Veldhuizen-Ochodničanová, L., & Hanna, A. (2024). The angry echo chamber: A study of extremist and emotional language changes in incel communities over time. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *39*(21-22), 4573-4597.

Demsar, N., et al. (2023). Collective consumer action: Brand cancellation as market realignment. Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 42(3), 250–269.

Di Marco, N., Loru, E., Bonetti, A., Serra, A. O. G., Cinelli, M., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2024). Patterns of linguistic simplification on social media platforms over time. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *121*(50).

Dunlop, R. (2023). *Digital Ostracism and the Politics of Forgetting: Cancel Culture in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Journal of Southern African Studies, *49*(5), 899–915.

Earl, J., Maher, T. V., & Pan, J. (2022). The digital repression of social movements, protest, and activism: A synthetic review. *Science advances*, *8*(10).

Facca, D., Smith, M. J., Shelley, J., Lizotte, D., & Donelle, L. (2020). Exploring the ethical issues in research using digital data collection strategies with minors: A scoping review. *Plos one*, *15*(8).

Fairclough, N. (2023). Critical discourse analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 11-22). Routledge.

Farhadytooli, M. (2025). Studying the fundamental approaches to critical discourse analysis: Disclose the criticism of power and ideology. *International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies*, *5*(2), 156-164.

Faucher, K. (2018). *Social capital online: Alienation and accumulation* (p. 194). University of Westminster Press.

Feder, E. K. (2014). Power/knowledge. In *Michel Foucault* (pp. 55-68). Routledge.

Fenton, N. (2018). *Digital, political, radical*. John Wiley & Sons.

Florini, S. (2014). Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin' Communication and Cultural Performance on "Black Twitter". *Television & New Media*, *15*(3), 223-237.

Forberg, P., & Schilt, K. (2023). What is ethnographic about digital ethnography? A sociological perspective. *Frontiers in Sociology*, *8*, 1156776.

Freitas, M. V. (2025). Digital Sovereignty and Data Colonialism: Shaping a Just Digital Order for the Global South. *Policy Center for the New South*.

Friese, S. (2019). *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti*, 1-344. Sage Publications.

Garza, A., Tometi, O., & Cullors, P. (2014). A herstory of the# BlackLivesMatter movement.

Geboers, M., Pilipets, E., Bösch, M., Divon, T., Rogers, R., Righetti, N., ... & Noordenbos, B. (2025). ambient amplification: attention hijacking and social media propaganda. *Selected papers of internet research: University of Illinois libraries*.

Gibson, A. D., Docherty, N., & Gillespie, T. (2023). *Health and toxicity in content moderation: The discursive work of justification. Information, Communication & Society, 27*(10), 2005–2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2259123

Gillani, N., Yuan, A., Saveski, M., Vosoughi, S., & Roy, D. (2018, April). Me, my echo chamber, and I: introspection on social media polarization. In *Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference* (pp. 823-831).

Giles, D. C. (2020). Parasocial relationships and affective and emotional character engagement. *The International Encyclopedia of Media Psychology*, 1-5.

Gordon, C., & Foucault, M. (1980). Selected interviews and other writings, 1972−1977.

Goroshko, O., & Poliakova, T. (2018). Persuasiveness in political discourse on Twitter.

Govenden, P. (2022). Racism and the post-apartheid media: Problematizing the racist Clicks advert as a manifestation of token transformation. *Journal of African Media Studies*, *14*(3), 347-362.

Guerandi, G. (2021). *The toxic masculinity chord rears its head in the South African music industry.* Daily Maverick. Website accessed: The toxic masculinity chord rears its head in the South African music industry.

Gullberg, C., & Gustafsson, N. (2025). Accountability through (Inter) Action? A Framework of Affordances for Understanding Civil Society Accountability on Social Media Platforms. *Social Media+ Society*, *11*(2), 20563051251340146.

Hill, M. L. (2018). "Thank you, Black Twitter": State violence, digital counterpublics, and pedagogies of resistance. *Urban Education*, *53*(2), 286-302.

Hill, M. L. (2018). "Thank you, Black Twitter": State violence, digital counterpublics, and pedagogies of resistance. *Urban Education*, *53*(2), 286-302.

Hillstrom, L. V. (2018). The #MeToo Movement. In *The Internet: A Historical Encyclopedia*.

Hine, C. (2020). *Ethnography for the Internet: Embedded, embodied and everyday*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Hoffner, C. A., & Bond, B. J. (2022). Parasocial relationships, social media, & well-being. *Current opinion in psychology*, *45*, 101306.

Jansen, W. (2024). Engagement and Ethics for Digital Ethnography: Reflections from (online) Indonesia in times of COVID-19. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, *55*(4), 513-535.

Kalina, P. (2020). Performative allyship. *Technium Soc. Sci. J.*, *11*, 478.

Kazanskaia, A. N. (2025). Digital Communication for religious organizations. *Neya Global*.

Khaer, F., & Aba, A. (2025). Analyze the Language Used in Political News and Its Implications for Public Opinion: Analisis Bahasa yang Digunakan Dalam Berita Politik, Serta Implikasinya Terhadap Opini Publik. *Jurnal Riseta Soshum*, *2*(1), 1-6.

Kitrosser, H. (2016). Free speech, higher education, and the PC narrative. *Minn. L. Rev.*, *101*, 1987.

Klassen, S., Kingsley, S., McCall, K., Weinberg, J., & Fiesler, C. (2021). More than a modern day Green book: Exploring the online community of Black Twitter. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1-29.

Klassen, S., & Fiesler, C. (2022). "This isn't your data, friend": Black Twitter as a case study on research ethics for public data. *Social Media+ Society*, *8*(4), 20563051221144317.

Klein, C., Reimann, R., Quintana, I. O., Cheong, M., Ferreira, M., & Alfano, M. (2022). Attention and counter-framing in the Black Lives Matter movement on Twitter. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *9*(1), 1-12.

Kumar, A. M., & Gupta, S. (2023). Governance of social media platforms: A literature review. *Pacific Asia Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, *15*(1), 3.

Kumar, S., Hamilton, W. L., Leskovec, J., & Jurafsky, D. (2018, April). Community Interaction and Conflict on the Web. In *Proceedings of the 2018 World Wide Web Conference* (pp. 933-943).

Laucuka, A. (2018). Communicative functions of hashtags. *Economics and Culture*, *15*(1), 56-62.

Ledin, P., & Machin, D. (2019). Doing critical discourse studies with multimodality: from metafunctions to materiality. *Critical Discourse Studies*, *16*(5), 497-513.

Leskovec, J., Krause, A., Guestrin, C., Faloutsos, C., VanBriesen, J., & Glance, N. (2007, August). Cost-effective outbreak detection in networks. In *Proceedings of the 13th ACM SIGKDD international conference on Knowledge discovery and data mining* (pp. 420-429).

Lindberg, D. C. (2010). *The beginnings of Western science: The European scientific tradition in philosophical, religious, and institutional context, prehistory to AD 1450*. University of Chicago Press.

Lockett, D. (2024). *Cognitive landscapes: Argument evaluations, misinformation corrections, and racial attitudes in modern media* (Doctoral dissertation, Washington University in St. Louis).

Mambetova, M., Myrzabek, B., Taubaldiyev, M., Karymkhan, A., & Nurlangazykyzy, B. (2025). Linguistic adaptation of the text: Theoretical and practical aspects. Forum for Linguistic Studies, 7(1). https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i1.10358

Mancosu, M., & Vegetti, F. (2020). What you can scrape and what is right to scrape: A proposal for a tool to collect public Facebook data. *Social Media+ Society*, *6*(3).

Marret, C. M. E. (2022). *The Impact of Social Media on the Polarisation of the Political Debate: Three Case Studies in the European Context.*

McGarry, A., & Jasper, J. (Eds). (2015). The identity dilemma: Social movements and collective identity. Temple University Press.

Molefe, M., & Ngcongo, M. (2021). "You Don't Mess with Black Twitter!": An Ubuntu Approach to Understanding "Militant" Twitter Discourse. *Communicatio*, *47*(3).

Mpofu, S. (2021). Of beaches, monkeys and good old days: How social media race-talk is dismantling the 'rainbow nation'. In *Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding in Africa* (pp. 244-258). Routledge.

Mpofu, S. (2019). Jesus comes to South Africa: Black Twitter as citizen journalism in South African politics. *African Journalism Studies*, *40*(1), 67-90.

Mpuru, L. (2025). A new frontier of cyber vigilantism? Reviewing the Black Twitter community in South Africa. *SA Crime Quarterly*, *2025*(74), 1-12.

Mueller, M. L. (2020). Against sovereignty in cyberspace. *International studies review*, *22*(4), 779-801.

Munibi, A. Z. (2025). Language as a Catalyst for Shaping Religious Identity and Political Ideology in the Era of Social Media. *Jurnal Multidisiplin West Science*, *4*(07), 944-956.

Murthy, D. (2024). Sociology of Twitter/X: Trends, challenges, and future research directions. *Annual review of sociology*, *50*(1), 169-190.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2013). *Coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa*. African Books Collective.

Ng, E. (2022). Cancel culture, Black cultural practice, and digital activism. In *Cancel Culture: A Critical Analysis* (pp. 39-72). Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Ngcobo, S. (2024). Humour as Self-Deprecation in Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood by Trevor Noah. *Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies*, *15*(1), 41-51.

Norris, P. (2023). Cancel culture: Myth or reality?. *Political studies*, *71*(1), 145-174.

Oyedemi, T. D. (2021). Postcolonial casualties:'Born-frees' and decolonisation in South Africa. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, *39*(2), 214-229.

Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Perbawani, P. S., & Nuralin, A. J. (2021). Hubungan parasosial dan perilaku loyalitas fans dalam fandom kpop di Indonesia. *LONTAR: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi*, *9*(1), 42-54.

Pitcan, M., Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2018). Performing a vanilla self: Respectability politics, social class, and the digital world. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, *23*(3), 163-179.

Plantinga, P., Shilongo, K., Mudongo, O., Umubyeyi, A., Gastrow, M., & Razzano, G. (2024). Responsible artificial intelligence in Africa: Towards policy learning. *Data & Policy*, *6*.

Pohle, J., & Thiel, T. (2020). Digital sovereignty. *Pohle, J. & Thiel*.

Post, R., & Maduro, M. (2020). Misinformation and technology: Rights and Regulation Across Borders. *Global Constitutionalism*.

Radsch, C. C. (2024). *Meta and Mark Zuckerberg must not be allowed to shape the next era of humanity*. The Guardian.

Romano, A. (2020).Why We Can't Stop Fighting about Cancel Culture. *Vox*. Date accessed: 30 October 2025, Website accessed: https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/12/30/20879720/what-is-cancel-culture-explained-history-debate

Rosenbaum, H., & Fichman, P. (2019). Algorithmic accountability and digital justice: A critical assessment of technical and sociotechnical approaches. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology, 56*(1), 237-244.

Ross, L. (2019). I'm a Black feminist. I think call-out culture is toxic. *The New York Times*, *17*, 1-2.

Rundle, K. (2016). Fuller's internal morality of Law. *Philosophy Compass*, *11*(9), 499-506.

Sauter, E. S. (2011). *Shout Amandla! A rhetorical analysis of Helen Zille* (Master's thesis, Colorado State University).

Seeletsa (2021). 'I am sorry to have caused this controversy,' says Habib on the n-word saga. The Citizen. Date accessed: 30 October 2025, Website accessed: 'I am sorry to have caused this controversy,' says Habib on n-word saga | The Citizen

Schäfer, M. S. (2015). Digital public sphere. *The international encyclopedia of political communication*, *15*, 1-7.

Schober, M. F., & Dolgin, R. S. (2025). Lost in Virality: How Social Media Can Amplify Hidden Misinterpretations.

Schultze, U., & Brooks, J. A. M. (2019). An interactional view of social presence: Making the virtual other "real". *Information Systems Journal*, *29*(3), 707-737.

Shahid, F., Elswah, M., & Vashistha, A. (2025). Think outside the data: Colonial biases and systemic issues in automated moderation pipelines for low-resource languages. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2501.13836*.

Sharma, S. (2013). Black Twitter?: Racial hashtags, networks and contagion. *New formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics*, *78*(1), 46-64.

Shmargad, Y., & Watts, J. K. (2016). When online visibility deters social interaction: The case of digital gifts. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, *36*(1), 1-14.

Shringarpure, B. (2020). Africa and the digital savior complex. *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *32*(2), 178-194.

Sidwell, M. (2022). *A silent revolution: The intellectual origins of cancel culture* (No. 110). IEA Discussion Paper.

Smit, B., & Scherman, V. (2021). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software for scoping reviews: A case of ATLAS. ti. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 16094069211019140.

Speirs, K. E., Vesely, C. K., & Roy, K. (2018). Lost in the Data: Strategies Used to Analyze a Large-Scale Collaboratively Collected Qualitative Dataset of Low-Income Families. In *How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens* (pp. 128-141). Routledge.

Suzuki, T., & Velasquez, A. (2025). Theorizing networked counterpublics sanctions. *New Media & Society*, 14614448251363940.

Talbot, M. (Ed.). (2019). *Language and power in the modern world*. Edinburgh University Press.

Tracy, S. J. (2024). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. John Wiley & Sons.

Thomason, K. (2021). The moral risks of online shaming. In *The Oxford handbook of digital ethics* (pp. 145-162). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Treem, J. W., Leonardi, P. M., & Van den Hooff, B. (2020). Computer-mediated communication in the age of communication visibility. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *25*(1), 44-59.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2015). Critical discourse analysis. *The handbook of discourse analysis*, 466-485.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1998). Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & society*, *4*(2), 249-283.

Venter, I. M., & Daniels, A. D. (2020). Towards bridging the digital divide: The complexities of the South African story. In *INTED2020 proceedings* (pp. 3250-3256). IATED.

Vivek, R., Nanthagopan, Y., & Piriyatharshan, S. (2023). Beyond methodology: Theoretical foundations of triangulation in qualitative and multi-method research: A literature review. *Scientific Studios on Social and Political Psychology*, *29*(2), 53-62.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Wojcik, S., & Hughes, A. (2019). Sizing up Twitter users.

Yue, S., & Shi, N. S. Revisiting Queer Counterpublics: A Critical Conceptual Review of Theoretical Evolution and Limitations in Authoritarian Digital Space.

Zainub, A. (2019). Decolonization and anti-colonial praxis. *Koninklijke Brill: Shared lineages*.

Zimmermann, A., Vredenburgh, K., & Lazar, S. (2022). *The political philosophy of data and AI. Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 52*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1017/can.2022.28