

Black Twitter



By [Keenan Harduth](#)

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One of the biggest things I have noticed about [SXSW](#) 2013 is the glaring contrast between Africa and the rest of the world, specifically America. The people, the food, the landscape, even our strategy is all vastly different. What's not, however, is one thing - Black Twitter.

For a while now South Africans have been distinguishing between what is flippantly referred to as the so-called 'white Twitter' and 'black Twitter'. (I'm still waiting for Coloured and Indian Twitter - A luta continua!). Interestingly, one does not have to be white to be part of white Twitter, however there is certainly more of a case to be made for being black as a prerequisite for engaging in Black Twitter.

What is Black Twitter?

Trying to define what Black Twitter is can be tricky. It's a collection of conversations, habits and trends that are centered firmly on culture. Michelle Clarke, researcher from the University of North Carolina, says that Black Twitter is characterised by weak social ties, activism, non-geographic networks and an emphasis on pop culture. This is not a space characterised by business, marketing or hard news proliferation.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about Black Twitter is how dynamic it seems to be. The conversations evolve, the social media norms of short concise hashtags are thrown out and the language, thought leaders and influencers mutate all the time. This seems to characterise Black Twitter in both South Africa and in America.

Conversations about music, politics, television and celebrity have the same share of voice, the same level of importance and attention. Young black people are the thought leaders. In South Africa people like Khaya Dlanga: [@khayadlanga](#), Simphiwe Dana: [@simphiwedana](#), Sipho Hlongwane: [@comradesipho](#), Shaka Sisulu: [@shakasisulu](#), Zama Ndlovu: [@jozigoddess](#) and the infamous Sentletse: [@sentletse](#) have become influential voices on various topics with a strong political and activist feel. Twitter creates a participatory culture - which black activism and culture has been based on for so many years in so many countries.

Television plays a big part in Black Twitter, as it does in white Twitter. The difference is that Black Twitter is not constrained by the hashtags put up on our screens or by the content that broadcasters choose to publish. Ever seen [@DSTV](#) tweet about The Housewives of Atlanta, America's Next Top Model or Intersexions? No, I didn't think so. Across all conversations hashtags can be long, complicated and often seemingly unrelated to any other conversation happening on one's timeline.

What does it mean?

What does this all mean for community managers then? For people wanting to join the conversation? It means that you have some work to do - you need to research the key influencers, conversation and trends and ease your way into a space that is seemingly very guarded against both the hard and the soft sell, in an environment that is ever changing and shifting perspective.

Despite the difference in black population percentages in the United States and in South Africa, the number of black people on Twitter is disproportionally smaller than their white friends and family in both countries. However, many smaller communities are growing and forming larger parts of your target audience and data pool.

We need to stop brushing off the impact and complexity of Black Twitter within the South African context because marketers do not understand the language, jargon and do not socialise with the influencers personally. The "rules" for digital marketing don't apply here. Listen to the conversation, gain trust, understand the language and start telling your brand story on the fun side of the island.

ABOUT KEENAN HARDUTH

Keenan Harduth is currently the head of Cerebra's Online Reputation Management (ORM) division. He is responsible for the team that monitors various brands online, by using various tools to track mentions online, extract insights and make strategic recommendations for content development and assisting in meeting media and business objectives. You can contact Keenan by email on keenan@cerebra.co.za or follow @keenyekeen on Twitter.

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