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'I want it, I got it': Cultural appropriation, white privilege, and power in Ariana Grande's "7"

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The University of Southern Mississippi

‘I want it, I got it’: Cultural appropriation, white privilege, and power in Ariana Grande’s “7
Rings”

by

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Abstract

Black women often suffer from not receiving recognition for their work. Still, nonblack people continue to use black women's contributions to pop culture to rebrand themselves. This is especially relevant in the music industry. Cultural appropriation is the act of a dominant group taking cultural elements from a minority group without acknowledging the cultural significance of those elements. The counterpublic Black Twitter gives black Twitter users the space to hold appropriators accountable. I used Grounded Theory to analyze tweets about Ariana Grande's "7 Rings" to explore how Black Twitter responded to Grande allegedly appropriating black women for financial gain. Critical Race Theory helped explain tweets that said Grande has the privilege to use cultural elements, i.e. music styles, slang, and aesthetics, without being scrutinized like a black woman traditionally would. The tweets also communicated that cultural appropriation has evolved to include blackfishing. Black Twitter users conveyed that it's not enough for black female artists to get songwriting credits. If they choose to be singers, they deserve support from the music industry and resources to ensure high visibility. Additionally, white artists should use their power to uplift black female artists publicly.

Keywords: Ariana Grande, 7 Rings, black women, cultural appropriation, critical race theory, Black Twitter

Dedication

Carlton McGrone:

Thank you for letting me submit an opinion article on “7 Rings” at the early hours of the morning after the music video was released and taking me to my first Ariana Grande concert.

You’re an amazing friend.

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List of Abbreviations

CRT	Critical Race Theory
AAE	African American English
OWN	Oprah Winfrey Network

Chapter 1: Introduction

Despite the lack of respect shown for black women, their creations and contributions to pop culture are commonly used by white female pop artists. Commentary by Black Twitter can provide evidence of a call for an end to cultural appropriation and a need to reclaim cultural elements.

Twitter is a social network that aims to connect others with many ideas. Users use Twitter to share real-time news and reactions, which creates a place for discussion and debate (Wojcik and Hughes, 2019). Within Twitter, many subgroups or counterpublics exist. Black Twitter is one of them. Researchers have found that black people use Twitter disproportionately more than white users, which has resulted in a digital divide and helped Black Twitter grow (Smith, 2011). The term “Black Twitter” describes the hashtags and discussions that relate to black culture. Black Twitter is perhaps most known for discussing social justice issues during the first 10 years of Twitter’s existence (Holm, 2019). Black Twitter users usually tweet to critique or unite with the community (Florini, 2013). In 2019, white female pop star Ariana Grande received criticism from Black Twitter after she released the song and music video for “7 Rings.” Critics accused Grande of appropriating black women’s culture by using narratives about their hair, hip-hop flows, slang, and aesthetics in the music video and for the majority of her career.

Grande released both the song and music video for “7 Rings” on January 18, 2019. In the song, Grande sings about buying her hair extensions and other gifts for herself and her friends. Listeners and viewers wondered if Grande was copying beats, lyrics, and aesthetics created by black artists Princess Nokia, 2 Chainz, and Soulja Boy (Ani, 2019). Princess Nokia posted a now-deleted video stating that the lyrics of her song “Mine” and “7 Rings” were similar, saying, “Ain’t that the little song I made about brown women and their hair? Sounds about white” (Ani,

2019). Rapper Soulja Boy sent out a series of now-deleted tweets demanding Grande give him credit for the beat of his song “Pretty Boy Swag” inspiring the “7 Rings” beat (Wicker, 2019). Viewers also noticed that the pink trap house featured in the “7 Rings” video resembled rapper 2 Chainz’s pink trap house installed in 2017 to promote his album *Pretty Girlz Like Trap Music* (Thompson, 2019). These allegations contributed to writer Wanna Thompson (2019) saying Grande was “yet another white pop star clinging onto marketable imagery of the hood to push her ‘bad girl persona.’” The controversy was further complicated by people noticing Grande adapting a darker skin tone, which caused some to accuse her of blackfishing, which is the process of intentionally tanning to look like a brown, black, or racially ambiguous woman (Shadijanova, 2019).

Prior to Grande releasing the single “7 Rings” from her 2019 album “thank u, next,” Grande was known as a pale, red-headed white woman who could pay homage to black hip-hop and R&B artists with little to no fuss or cries of cultural appropriation (McKinney, 2019). Her voice also earned her the title of “little white black girl” from African American soul singer Patti Labelle (Abraham, 2018) and an invitation to perform “Natural Woman” at Aretha Franklin’s funeral (Merrett, 2018). Notably, Grande has always claimed to be influenced by traditionally black genres and has credited her black influences and collaborators (McKinney, 2019). However, the night of the “7 Rings” release, Black Twitter exploded with comments. The users claimed that Grande’s slow evolution into a racially ambiguous woman who uses African American Vernacular English not only in “7 Rings,” but also in other songs and interviews makes her cultural appropriation clear and obvious (Helligar, 2019).

The tweets surrounding the conversation about “7 Rings” revealed a need for more research about white women appropriating black women. My research used Critical Race Theory

(CRT) and Grounded Theory to analyze the roles of race, white privilege, and power in Black Twitter's discussion about "7 Rings." The following literature review includes the existing research on Black Women, Representation and Agency in Music, Cultural Appropriation and Black Music, Counterpublics and Black Twitter, and Critical Race Theory.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

My research used Critical Race Theory to examine how Black Twitter users discuss cultural appropriation of black women and the role of white privilege in music. The purpose of this literature review was to examine the existing literature on black women, cultural appropriation, music, and Black Twitter.

The following sections in my literature review address Black Women, Representation and Agency in Music, Cultural Appropriation and Black Music, Counterpublics and Black Twitter, and Critical Race Theory. The first section includes a discussion of the research on black women in hip-hop and R&B music and the control women exhibit over their representation. The second section discusses the "cool factor" associated with traditionally black music genres (Rodriguez, 2006) and the white female artists who have adopted elements of black culture in their music. The third section of the literature review includes previous studies about the virality of Black Twitter and how it has been used as a place for critique, community organizing, and solidarity. The final section includes the existing research on Black Twitter and Critical Race Theory.

White musicians being accused of cultural appropriation is not a new research topic. For instance, three researchers in my literature review studied Miley Cyrus and her privilege to rebrand herself as an innovative, body positive "twerker" while black women continue to be criticized and hypersexualized (Gaunt, 2015; Brady, 2016; Toth, 2017). My research is

significant because it explored how Black Twitter responds to alleged cultural appropriation of black women in music. Because cultural appropriation takes from minority groups and can reap monetary benefits for white, famous, wealthy people, studying Black Twitter's response is important in understanding the need for black people to control the narrative about their culture (Lambert, 2019). To begin this discussion, it's important to assess research that shows how black women have been represented inside and outside of the music industry: sexually deviant and disposable for men's entertainment (West, 2008).

Black Women, Representation, and Agency In Music

Black women have been branded as "Jezebels" since they were brought to America and were the victims of rape by Europeans (West, 2008). The term "Jezebel" stereotypes black women as naturally sexually deviant. Contemporary Jezebels can be found "jiggling and gyrating in hip-hop music videos" (West, 2008, p. 294). Internalizing the stereotype, black men have also referred to black women as "hoes" or "whores" to assert their masculinity and reap financial benefits (Adams and Fuller, 2006).

Rebollo-Gil and Moras (2012) conducted research on the marketing of black men and women in hip-hop. The researchers determined that whiteness might be to blame for the sexualization of black female bodies and the correlation between black male rappers and violence (Rebollo-Gil and Moras, 2012). They critiqued previous analyses of the hip-hop genre that reduced it to sex and violence. Still, they acknowledged that popular rap songs often reinforce negative stereotypes about the black community and can result in real life implications like the Hip Hop Task Force in New York, which works with the FBI to monitor rappers' activities (Rebollo-Gil and Moras, 2012, p.122). In addition, they recognized that white-owned

corporations control the distribution of music and therefore control the narrative of hip-hop. Unfortunately, sex and violence are the topic of most rap songs solely because they sell (Rebollo-Gil and Moras, 2012, p.120).

Although some black women consume music with sexual and violent imagery, not all black women support that imagery. The women of Spelman College protested the misogynistic imagery in rap artist Nelly's music video for "Tip Drill." The video featured explicit, sexual images of black women that could only be aired on Black Entertainment Television's late-night show *Uncut* (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). *Essence* magazine used the moment to campaign against misogyny in rap with the "Take Back the Music" movement. Readers of the magazine were encouraged to respond to the articles relevant to the movement on the website. After analyzing the comments, Reid-Brinkley (2008) found that the discussions were too dependent on respectability politics. Furthermore, she said similar discussions create a dialogue about what defines a "good" or "bad" black woman (Reid-Brinkley, 2008). Black women choosing to present themselves as "black queens" who are better than openly sexual black women creates an identity dependent on negating other black women's identities (Reid-Brinkley, 2008, p. 256). Reid-Brinkley (2008) concluded by suggesting future research be challenged through a black feminist theory approach, one that acknowledges intersectionality and how some black women are more susceptible to being put in the "bad" category.

While some have argued that black dancers in music videos like Nelly's are defined by their sexuality, researcher Murali Balaji found that Canadian former video model Melyssa Ford has vehemently challenged that view (Balaji, 2010). After studying the videos Ford starred in, Balaji concluded that the model proves to be an equal and, occasionally, a superior to her male

counterparts through the intentional positioning of her body in the videos. Moreover, Ford has separated herself from the “sexually charged” U.S. music video scene in her interviews (Balaji, 2010). By emphasizing her college education and refusing to participate in videos she thought were “too misogynistic,” she distanced herself from American women of color, who she said need to fight for the right to define themselves (Balaji, 2010, p. 16). Ford said American women of color “too often become willing sex objects in hip-hop music videos (and in daily life) ... in an industry where major corporations still finance the cultural re-production of stereotypes” (Balaji, 2010, p.16).

In 2002, Rana Emerson discussed the complicated relationship between themes of sexuality and independence in hip-hop and R&B. Emerson (2002) used textual analysis to study 56 music videos that featured black female artists. Emerson acknowledged critics of hip-hop by highlighting the exploited black female body, the lack of diversity in age and sexuality, and black male domination in videos where a black female is meant to be the star. Emerson contended that artists like Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, and Lauryn Hill serve as positive examples of black female artists controlling their own narratives. Emerson found that those artists satisfy both male and female viewers by featuring predominately black stars, expressing dissatisfaction with their love lives, and telling stories of black sisterhood.

Aisha Durham (2012) analyzed Beyoncé’s body and music through the lens of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Durham argued that the focus on her body through music videos like “Check on It,” “Lose My Breath,” and “Bootylicious” disrupted white standards of beauty and showed sexual agency. However, Durham suggested that Beyoncé’s insistence on contrasting a sexual, ghetto persona with a softer, feminine one in the aforementioned videos represents a dual identity that all black female artists must perform: a respectable, but sexually accessible woman.

The double standard for black artists is also conveyed in Christina Aguilera's music video for "Can't Hold Us Down," where Aguilera appeared alongside black female rapper Lil Kim. The video is supposedly a universal feminist anthem, but Railton and Watson (2005) used the video to contrast the way sexuality is performed by white and black female artists. To Railton and Watson, Aguilera represented an appropriation of blackness while Lil Kim embodied it. The authors concluded that Aguilera and other white women in music like Kylie Minogue possess the privilege to redefine themselves and not be confined to their sexuality while black artists like Lil Kim and Beyoncé are defined by primal hypersexuality.

Black women have been burdened with white people defining them in and outside of music videos (West, 2018). These one-dimensional views of black women have put them in a box, which could explain why they are constantly used to add sex appeal or a cool factor (Rebello-Gil & Moras, 2012). Although black women struggle with this derogatory view, their style is imitated and appropriated by their white peers. Remarkably, their white peers are given more creative license and not defined by their sexuality (Railton & Watson, 2005). As the researchers in the next section note, white artists' creative license and inspiration from black artists can turn into cultural appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation and Black Music

Cultural appropriation of music made by black entertainers is nothing new. It dates as far back as the 1920s when singer Judy Garland was praised as a swing icon in the media, which ignored swing's black creators (Artis, 1991). However, most of the existing research on the subject revolves around the hip-hop genre rather than the pop music industry.

Most of the literature about hip-hop blames color-blind ideologies as a reason for nonblack listeners buying more hip-hop music than black listeners (Yousman, 2003). Bill

Yousman connected white youth's attraction to rap music to Blackophobia and maintaining white supremacy. Yousman argued that white people buy rap music and other culturally significant things to black people as a way of exerting their power and feeling entitled to black culture without dealing with discrimination.

Jason Rodriguez built on those statements by proposing that white listeners consume rap music to be considered "cool" and progressive by their peers (2006). Rodriguez interviewed white hip-hop concertgoers about their fascination with the genre and the racial composition of the crowd at underground hip-hop shows. The responses included statements of guilt, confusion, and denial of racial differences. Still, Rodriguez (2006) found that these concertgoers believed race is irrelevant in their lives. Rodriguez concluded the white listeners were hypocrites for insisting on being color-blind and ignoring the cultural significance in most hip-hop music.

Pamela Perry (2001) interviewed white high school students at one predominantly white and one multiracial school to discover how they define white culture. When she compared the students, she observed that black students at the multiracial school, who were the majority, claimed black popular culture like music as markers of their identity and a signifier of their black pride. Other students, regardless of race, adopted elements of black culture as their own and made it the dominant culture (Perry, 2001). Perry found that most of the white students interviewed struggled to articulate their ethnic makeup and called themselves cultureless because they felt no strong ties or pride for their ethnicity's traditions. Some opted to define white culture by their pop culture interests. Perry (2001) concluded that whiteness is post-racial and anti-culture. She further suggested that this denial of white culture is dangerous because it makes those who do not claim to have culture appear to be more rational and superior than those who do. Not challenging whiteness and anti-culture reinforced white hegemony (Perry, 2001).

On the other hand, there is research that suggests that white artists emphasize their “otherness” when they are around black people, who are usually used as props in music videos. In bell hooks’ (1992) book *Black looks: race and representation*, Madonna was used as an example of a white pop star who uses black culture for personal gain. Hooks focused on Madonna appropriating black dance moves and positioning herself as the white savior in music videos, such as “Like a Prayer.” Hooks likened the black women who literally uplift Madonna in the video as the stereotypical Mammy and criticized Madonna for exploiting Catholicism and blackness.

Emphasis on whiteness or otherness can also be seen in white hip-hop artist Iggy Azalea’s music, according to Maeve Eberhardt and Kara Freeman (2015). The two authors concentrated on Azalea’s use of African American English (AAE) in her music despite being Australian and not using AAE in casual speech. Furthermore, they argued that her lyrical references to her whiteness is Azalea attempting to disprove critics who say she is trying to be black. They also suggested that Azalea reinforces problematic narratives of hypersexual black women by including them in her music videos. Lastly, they found Azalea shows her a lack of nuance when she refers to the hip-hop community as multi-racial, which shows a lack of respect for the black artists who inspired her. In this way, she and white women like her show entitlement to hip-hop (Eberhardt and Freeman, 2015).

Similarly, white pop artist Miley Cyrus’ appropriation of black culture through twerking during her *Bangerz* album era in 2013 has been studied several times. Lucille Toth (2017) focused on how Cyrus made the dance well-known to the white community after twerking at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. The performance sparked conversation about how the mainstream media and black artists like Big Freedia and Nicki Minaj responded to twerking

gaining national attention. Toth defended Cyrus and claimed that the dance challenges expectations and desirability of skinny white female dancers. Toth asked in conclusion: “Why aren’t we all shaking our butts to resist?”

Contrastingly, Anita Brady (2016) pointed out the need for intersectionality in feminism by analyzing celebrity feminists in an article inspired by a feud between Miley Cyrus and Sinéad O’Connor, where O’Connor criticizes Cyrus for her sexual image. The article also analyzed the words of white female musician Annie Lennox, who criticized black artists like Rihanna and Beyoncé for showing pride in their sexuality. To Lennox, their work is “feminist lite.” Brady noted that Cyrus, O’Connor, and Lennox all lacked nuance by ignoring the hypersexualization of the black female body.

Lastly, Kyra Gaunt (2015) distinguished the difference between black adolescent girls and Miley Cyrus twerking in “YouTube, Twerking & You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus.” In her research, Gaunt credited black cis and transgender women from New Orleans for creating twerking. Contrastingly, Cyrus dominated the news headlines after her “We Can’t Stop” music video, which featured black female dancers. Gaunt (2015) considered why Cyrus was praised for using twerking, “an ethnic marker,” to transform her brand while young black girls are condemned for their presentation of ethnicity and gender on YouTube (p.245). Gaunt deduced that it is easier for white audiences to look down on black girls in the digital space because of a lack of media literacy and context collapse, or implicit bias. In conclusion, Gaunt said that Cyrus using black women as twerking, voiceless props in “We Can’t Stop” only further perpetuates harmful opinions about black girls.

The articles above showed that white women have the power to take black styles without taking the negative connotations associated with things created by black people. Instead, they

benefit financially and are called innovative and beautiful (Gaunt, 2015). One way black audiences can respond is by creating their own spaces, known as counterpublics, for discussion and combatting narratives. An example of a counterpublic would be Black Twitter (Graham and Smith, 2016).

Counterpublics and Black Twitter

In 2011, black people were found to use Twitter proportionally more than white users (Smith, 2011). In 2019, 24 percent of black U.S. adults said they use Twitter in comparison to 21 percent of white adults (Perrin and Anderson, 2019). Research has shown that Black Twitter users are one of the most influential groups on Twitter. Black Twitter users are considered unique because of their ability to highlight problems and organize social justice movements through the platform (Holm, 2019).

Using Nancy Fraser's definition of a counterpublic, Roderick Graham and Shawn Smith (2016) researched if Black Twitter could be understood as a counterpublic. Fraser (1990) defined counterpublic as a place where "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p.67). Graham and Smith (2016) noted that black people have a history of creating their own spaces to perform their identity comfortably away from whites online and off. To determine if Black Twitter can be called a counterpublic, they compared the engagement and thematic content of #BlackTwitter with two other hashtags created by other counterpublics. After collecting thousands of tweets, they concluded that Black Twitter is distinct enough in both categories to be deemed a counterpublic.

André Brock (2012) wrote about black Internet usage on Twitter and referenced the characteristics of Black Twitter, including a culturally relevant hashtag, network participation,

and virality. Brock argued that the hashtag is how mainstream audiences outside of Black Twitter see their conversations, as they have the chance of going viral and making the trending topics page. Still, Brock said that the discourse does not have to necessarily follow this call and response method; most of these posts are not made for popularity but happen to reach the trending topics page because of how dense and tightly connected Black Twitter users are to each other. Lastly, he said that assuming Black Twitter is representative of all black people shows the power of American racial ideology to frame black identity as monoculture (Brock, 2012, p.546).

Meredith Clark (2014) identified more specific markers, a six-stage process, for Black Twitter in her dissertation “To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon ‘Black Twitter’.” Through interviews with Black Twitter users, Clark discovered that most users tweet for themselves along with an imagined, black audience they might inspire by sharing their experiences. Her interviewees said they feel outsiders see Black Twitter as a hostile space. Still, these users seemed to be unfazed by the world’s perception of Black Twitter, for the conversations are mainly intended for the black community.

However, the hashtag remains a big part of the literature about Black Twitter. In “Tweets, Tweepies, and Signifyin’” (2013) by Sarah Florini, Florini discussed how black identity is performed online through a process called “signifyin’.” Florini noted that things like language and cultural competence can be used to identify a member of Black Twitter. Florini used hashtags as an example of signifyin’. Florini then identified Black Twitter’s tendency to use the platform for critique and unity through games of ritual insult. Whatever way black users choose to signify, Florini said they reject color-blind ideologies by doing so.

Trending hashtags can force mainstream audiences to acknowledge black issues. Sherri Williams (2015) briefly elaborated on this with her paper on black feminists’ use of hashtags

after the alleged rape of a black high school girl and the hashtags inspired by the incident.

Williams said Twitter allows users to share things that traditional news media will not pick up and gives these feminists a place to unite and inform (Williams, 2015).

Black Twitter has also been used for debate about diverse experiences in the black community. Raven Maragh (2016) criticized the Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN) for exploiting black women in the 2015 documentary “Light Girls” and encouraging the audience to live tweet. The documentary highlighted colorism in the black community from the perspective of light-skinned black women. Maragh observed that female Black Twitter users critiqued the film for suggesting the struggles of light and dark-skinned black women are equal. By OWN executives creating content targeted at black women and knowing the audience will give feedback to correct problematic narratives or reaffirm them on Twitter, Maragh argued the female Black Twitter users engaged in laborious counterstorytelling (2016).

Candice L. Edrington and Nicole M. Lee (2018) studied how people engage with activist hashtags, specifically with #BlackLivesMatter. Through a content analysis of the hashtag over a four-year period, they discovered that messages that encouraged unity and shared news related to the cause were more likely to be engaged with than tweets promoting action.

Marc Lamont Hill added to the research by studying black citizen journalism (2018). Hill acknowledged how advancements in smartphones have enabled witnesses to take and share troublesome interactions with law enforcement on Twitter. Using Michael Brown as an example, Hill said that Black Twitter activists showed they do not care for respectability politics after many of them continued to defend Brown even after footage of him robbing a convenience store was posted to social media (Hill, 2018).

However, some have questioned the effectiveness of hashtag activism. Candi Carter Olson wrote about the virality of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign (2016), where Nigerians raised awareness for the 276 girls who were kidnapped by the Nigerian terrorist group Boko Haram. Although Carter Olson agreed with others who argued that the spread of unreported information through hashtags is a powerful strategy, she said the popularity of the hashtags are often short-lived. Still, Carter Olson said community clusters can keep the conversation going through agenda-setting and organizing protests, which Carter Olson said is an often-underestimated part of hashtag activism (2016).

Black Twitter aligns with Fraser's definition of counterpublic because it allows for black users to publicly reject the media's representation of the black community. As the work above has shown, members of Black Twitter are able to quickly respond and communicate their thoughts through a hashtagged tweet (Hill, 2018). Because of Black Twitter's virality, allegations of cultural appropriation could spread instantly. My work is different from the existing research because it does not focus on a hashtag created by Black Twitter. As Brock (2012) said, discourse by Black Twitter is not always detectable by a hashtag. Still, my work expands on literature like Maragh's (2016) that shows that Black Twitter is known for responding to narratives about members of their community, regardless of whether they're asked to tweet their thoughts.

I used Critical Race Theory to study Black Twitter's response in regard to race, power, and white privilege in the "7 Rings" video. My research expanded on the idea of Black Twitter being used as a space for critique and commentary specifically for black women who wish to exhibit more control over their representation and receive more recognition for their contributions to pop culture.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory emerged out of the era of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States in the mid-1970s. The theory was created to help explain the more subtle forms of racism and the slow pace of racial law reform (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000). Its predecessor is Critical Legal Studies. Qudsia Mirza (1999) said critical race theorists chose to diverge from Critical Legal Studies because they felt Critical Legal Studies lacked an insightful connection between power and race.

Delgado and Stefancic (2000) identified the following tenets of Critical Race Theory:

1. Racism has been normalized and is a permanent part of society. Therefore, casual forms of racism or microaggressions can be difficult to detect by the offenders.
2. Counterstorytelling, or speaking out against stereotypes and misunderstandings, can assist minorities in challenging Eurocentric narratives and giving them a sense of agency.
3. White elites will promote racial equality if they have something to gain, also referred to as interest convergence.

Critical Race Theory's main elements are race, power, and social, political, and economic structures. The theory is one way of explaining how oppressive power structures and racist narratives created by white elites persist post-slavery and Jim Crow. Critical Legal Studies scholars are most known for using Critical Race Theory to explain how slow the American justice system is in making changes to correct systematic racism and how it affects minorities (Crenshaw et. al., 1996). Mass communication scholars have used it to explain how black people have explored stereotypical narratives about themselves and explain racism's pervasiveness on

social media (Reynolds and Mayweather, 2017; Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018; Righter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014; Dilletta, Benjamin, Carpenter, 2018; Logan, 2016).

After racial slurs against black people were sprayed onto buildings of Main University, a pseudonym for a predominantly white university, in 2016, Rema Reynolds and Darquillius Mayweather (2017) interviewed black students to discuss their responses to the slurs on social media. The researchers used Critical Race Theory to analyze the students' interviews to give students agency in reporting their experiences, avoid "white interpretations of the black experience," and challenge ideas about the black, "uninvolved, and apathetic" (Reynolds and Mayweather, 2017, p.288). The students challenged the apathetic stereotype by describing how they used social media to organize protests as an act of counterstorytelling. The researchers also noted that Critical Race Theory helped explain common sentiments during the interviews: racism is ingrained in American society, and interest convergence is a commonly used tactic.

Mia Moody-Ramirez and Hazel Cole (2018) used Critical Race Theory to examine the popularity of victim-blaming tweets that emerged shortly after the deaths of black males Michael Brown and Eric Garner, both of whom were killed by white police officers in 2014. The researchers used Critical Race Theory to examine how common the denial of color-blindness and the permanence of racism was illustrated on social media. They discovered references to criminal activities of the victims was the most common type of victim-blaming tweet with references to their physical characteristics and race and class coming in second and third respectively. Moody-Ramirez and Cole said the popularity of the tweets could be explained by media framing black men as criminals.

Righter-McDaniels and Hendrickson (2014) used Critical Race Theory to examine the trending hashtag #becauseofhooes. The hashtag had cultural discourse potential because it was a

“black tag,” a hashtag where most of the avatars who used the hashtag were black (Richter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014, p. 175). The researchers found that white and black pop culture icons were described differently. White males were linked to their intelligence and wealth while black males, usually athletes, were linked to athletic ability and casual sexual relationships with women (Richter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014). The researchers said this supports Critical Race Theory’s premise that cultural narratives justify and sustain a white/black binary and a racial hierarchy where whiteness is preferred (Richter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014, p. 178).

Twitter has also been used to differentiate the personal experiences of black and white people. Black travelers have used Twitter for counterstorytelling by bringing attention to their positive and negative experiences with the hashtag #travelingwhileblack (Dillette, Benjamin, Carpenter, 2018). Dillette, Benjamin, and Carpenter (2018) used Critical Race Theory to analyze tweets from these travelers. After analyzing more than 300 tweets, three themes emerged: occurrences of racism, awareness of being black while traveling, and meaningful experiences traveling while black. Although the hashtag included negative experiences, Dillette, Benjamin, and Carpenter (2018) contended that the hashtag is mostly positive because it mostly encourages black travel. The authors saw the hashtag’s popularity as a way for the tourism industry to acknowledge black travelers and provide better experiences for black guests.

Nneka Logan (2016) conducted a case study informed by Critical Race Theory to assess how Black Twitter responded to Starbucks’ public relations campaign, the Race Together Initiative. The Starbucks CEO created the campaign after the influx of protests about race in 2014. The campaign received mixed responses on Twitter. With the #RaceTogether hashtag, some users argued Starbucks is hypocritical and insincere for its lack of locations in

predominantly black neighborhoods and the lack of black hands in campaign advertisements. Others said the campaign was an attack on white people (Logan, 2016). Supporters said other corporations should follow Starbucks' lead (Logan, 2016). Despite the mixed reaction, Logan said Critical Race Theory helps explain how dominant groups struggle with recognizing discrimination, valuing minoring experiences, and committing to racial equality (2016, p.98). Logan concluded that public relations campaigns like this can be used to fight for racial equality.

The scholars above have used Critical Race Theory to examine race and power in relation to mass communication. Specifically, the scholars use Critical Race Theory to explain how black people use Twitter to draw attention to stereotypes (Righter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014) (Moody-Ramirez and Cole, 2018), protest racism (Reynolds and Mayweather, 2017), and reinforce positive experiences (Dillette, Benjamin, Carpenter, 2018). Lastly, Logan (2016) showed how public relations teams can acknowledge race and become minority allies.

Critical Race Theory guided my research on how Black Twitter responded to Ariana Grande's "7 Rings" music video. Critical Race Theory specifically guided my analysis of race in regard to standards of beauty in the music industry, the power of music institutions to put more resources behind white female artists, and the white privilege that allows female artists like Grande to present herself as black without suffering significant consequences.

My research goals were to investigate:

1. questions about Ariana Grande's race in Black Twitter's reactions to Grande's "7 Rings"
2. Black Twitter's discussion of the power of musical institutions and the black female collaborators in the creation of "7 Rings"

3. Black Twitter's response to allegations of Grande using white privilege to appropriate black women

Chapter 3: Methods

Grounded Theory

The purpose of this research was to explore how Black Twitter responded to Ariana Grande allegedly appropriating black women in the “7 Rings” music video. I used Grounded Theory, a qualitative research method, to explore recurring themes in Black Twitter conversations about “7 Rings.” Grounded Theory allows for the research to speak for itself by encouraging the researcher to find thematic categories through coding, categorization, and analysis of data that might explain a specific phenomenon (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Through coding, themes and concepts naturally emerge from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The first step of Grounded Theory is open coding. During open coding, the researcher collects data and notes actions or words that seem relevant to the phenomena being studied; this exhaustive list will later be examined and put into categories and subcategories (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The second step is axial coding, which makes connections to subcategories and categories with the goal of making the categories and properties as specific as possible (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The final step is selective coding. This forces the researcher to find core, developed categories in recurring storylines from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Those who have used Critical Race Theory have seen a positive connection when using it with Grounded Theory. The narratives of people of color can be interpreted and validated through social science research that uses Grounded Theory (Malagon, Huber, and Velez, 2009).

Data Collection

I used Twitter's advanced search to find public tweets relevant to "7 Rings." The advanced search function allows users to find tweets based on specific keywords or hashtags, usernames, language, and dates. I searched for tweets posted between August 31, 2018 to February 17, 2019. This timeline captured some of the most significant moments when Grande was aligned with black culture. The beginning of the timeline, August 31, 2018, captured when Grande sang "Natural Woman" at Aretha Franklin's funeral, where she was criticized for wearing a short dress at a black woman's funeral (Merrett, 2018). In October 2018, Grande broke up with her comedian ex-fiancé Pete Davidson. Before and after the breakup, she received criticism for dating someone who has made jokes at black women's expense. On December 6, 2018, Patti Labelle called Grande "a little white black girl" while presenting her with the Billboard Woman of the Year Award. On January 18, 2019, the song and music video for "7 Rings" was released, and Grande started receiving criticism for appropriating black and Asian culture in the "7 Rings" promotional materials and music video. The next day, Grande was criticized for reposting a black woman's post who said talking about weaves in "7 Rings" ended racism (Ahlgrim, 2019). On February 1, 2019, Grande released her remix of "7 Rings" with the rapper 2 Chainz, who inspired the pink trap house seen in the "7 Rings" video (VIBE Staff, 2019). On February 10, 2019, Grande tweeted a series of angry tweets after her ex-boyfriend, the deceased Mac Miller, lost a Grammy award to black female rapper Cardi B (Kayla, 2019). The timeline stopped on February 17, 2019 because it marked one month after the release of the "7 Rings" song and video.

During my first search (See Table 1), I used the search term "Ariana black" and collected 183 tweets. During my second search, I searched for tweets with the words "Ariana black

women” and collected 231 tweets. I used both of these search terms to find tweets that compared Grande to black women. On my third search, I looked for tweets related to black artist Princess Nokia because she accused Grande of copying the lyrics and beat from her song “Mine” (Strauss, 2019). I also looked for tweets related to black male artist 2 Chainz, who Grande allegedly copied with her pink trap house in the “7 Rings” music video and eventually collaborated with on a “7 Rings” remix (Twitter Moments, 2019). I collected seven tweets with the search terms “Ariana black 2 Chainz” and 17 tweets with “Ariana black Nokia.” At the end of my third search, I made a note to look for tweets related to Grande using black women as props because I found four tweets in my second and third searches describing the black women in the “7 Rings” music video as props. I then collected 11 tweets with the search term “Ariana black props” during my fourth and final search. At the end of my third search, I also made a note to search for “Ariana Soulja Boy” because his name appeared five times in previous searches. Tweets that mentioned Soulja Boy often compared the beat of his 2010 song “Pretty Boy Swag” to Princess Nokia’s “Mine” and Grande’s “7 Rings.” Using the search term “Ariana Soulja Boy,” I collected 18 tweets. I also looked for tweets using the keywords “Ariana niggerfishing.” During my second search, the term “niggerfishing,” another term for “blackfishing,” appeared three times in previous searches. In my separate search for it, I collected 42 tweets. I also collected eight tweets using the search terms “Ariana black songwriters.” Because I realized most tweets related to Grande’s songwriters referred to two of them by name, I did separate searches for “Ariana Tayla Parx” and “Ariana Victoria Monet.” I collected four tweets about Tayla Parx and 18 tweets about Victoria Monet. Lastly, I did a separate search for “Ariana white privilege” because the term appeared three times in my first search. Using that search term, I collected 23 tweets. Combining all four searches, I collected 554 tweets.

Table 1

Search term	Number of tweets collected
Ariana black	183
Ariana black women	231
Ariana black 2 Chainz	7
Ariana black Nokia	17
Ariana black props	11
Ariana Soulja Boy	18
Ariana niggerfishing	42
Ariana black songwriters	8
Ariana Tayla Parx	4
Ariana Victoria Monet	18
Ariana white privilege	23
Total	554

Chapter 4: Analysis

My analysis is divided into three parts: open codes, axial codes, and selective codes. In the first section, I identified 12 open codes (See Appendix A) and properties of each code. Those open codes are “Distancing Herself from Whiteness,” “Inclusion of Black Creatives,” “Comparisons to White Female Artists Who Have Been Accused of Cultural Appropriation,”

“Lack of Support for Black Female Artists,” “Ariana Isn't Black,” “Ariana Is Black,” “Listen to Black Women,” “Cultural Inspiration, Not Appropriation,” “Claiming Whiteness,” “Lack of Respect for Black Hair,” “Blame for Black Woman Phase,” and “History of Anti-Blackness.” In the second section, I narrowed the 12 open codes to four axial codes (See Appendix B). Those axial codes are: “Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain,” “Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations,” “Demanding Black Women Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect,” and “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness.” In the third and final section, I condensed the four axial codes to one selective code: “Blackfishing for Financial Gain.”

Open Codes

Grounded Theory requires that multiple voices and opinions are included and interpreted to build theory (Corbin and Strauss, 1994). I created 12 open codes and assigned some tweets to more than one code. To create the open codes, I took note of common themes and language that emerged from the tweets (See Appendix A). Then, I grouped the open codes based on subject and properties like support or critique of Grande. For example, the open code “Distancing Herself from Whiteness” included tweets that used strong language to condemn Grande for blackfishing and white privilege. In contrast, the open code “Claiming Whiteness” included tweets that defended Grande’s tan and often said Grande never claimed to be anything other than white.

Axial Codes

I then condensed the open codes into four axial codes: “Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain,” “Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss

Cultural Appropriation Allegations,” “Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect,” and “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness.” The axial codes were created by grouping tweets with the same subject matter together, regardless of opposition or support to Grande. Titles were given based on the overall sentiment of the code. The first axial code, “Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain” included tweets from four open codes that discussed white privilege, blackfishing, and control of the conversation surrounding cultural appropriation. The second axial code, “Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations,” included tweets from two open codes that discussed the amount of recognition black collaborators in the music industry receive when they work with white artists like Grande. The third axial code, “Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect,” included tweets from three open codes centered around the contributions black female artists have made in pop culture and the lack of respect they receive. The final axial code, “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness” included tweets from three open codes about how Black Twitter users perceive Grande’s race. In the following sections, I provide examples of each axial code.

Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain

The first axial code included 214 tweets from the following open codes: “Distancing Herself from Whiteness,” “Claiming Whiteness,” and “Comparisons to White Female Artists Who Have Been Accused of Cultural Appropriation.” All of the tweets in this axial code discussed how Grande along with other white female artists have distanced themselves physically or stylistically from whiteness by adapting black styles. Many tweets discussed white privilege, a key tenet of Critical Race Theory.

Tweets in this axial code largely depended on commentary about Grande's tan. Many discussed blackfishing, which has also been referred to as niggerfishing. Defined by Michael Harriot in 2018, niggerfishing is the practice of presenting yourself as black on the Internet through dark makeup or tans. The tweets criticized Grande's tan and drew attention to Grande looking like a black woman. Some examples refer to Grande's tanning habits as blackface. For example, one Twitter user said,

Appropriana @approp_riana 16 Feb 2019

Before you post "Ariana IS a POC because-" or "italians are actually black because-" ... don't! Most italians identify as/are white and fully benefit from white privilege in the USA. It's wrong for her to try to distance herself from her whiteness NOW to suit her image.

Here, the Twitter user conveyed that Grande wearing a dark tan and using traditionally black styles of music is an example of white privilege because she's doing it to solely benefit from it socially and financially. The tweets below also point to white privilege and blackfishing.

Brown Skin Girl With Skin Like Pearls @AnimeOtaku1723 12 Feb 2019

Why am I just now finding out that Ariana Grande has been blackfishing this entire time?? I legit thought she was Latin but apparently she's Italian, ie white. She went from legitimately white to a full shade darker than an actual black woman. She did this right in our faces!

careycardi @careyfreddie1 13 Feb 2019

If anyone is racist is Ariana making a song talking about her stealing a genre that isn't her own and acting like she's black that's modern black face.

Both Twitter users conveyed that Grande attempted to trick listeners and viewers that she was a black or brown woman and seemed to associate her tan and adoption of a traditionally black genre as an example of cultural appropriation and white privilege. Some Twitter users noted that Grande has used black culture specifically for financial gain. For example, one Twitter user said,

Leigh @leigherin88 13 Feb 2019

How is Ariana not blackfishing? She's a white woman that makes money off black culture. Also, it's 100% not your place to say Cardi B can't call herself black. She has a mixed heritage and that should be enough.

Another Twitter user said:

scoops troop @bleezeblocks 12 Feb 2019

ariana medium's new album is so disappointing. like she isnt even trying hide the fact that shes blatantly ripping off black ppls music/flow, darkening her skin, and using botched AAVE. she not the only 1 tho so many pop artists do this.

@bleezeblocks tweet, specifically the language referencing Grande “ripping off black ppls music/flow” connects to CRT’s idea of interest convergence, the idea that white people will work with minorities if their interests align or if white people have the most to gain. Despite blackness not being associated with goodness, things created by black people can be used by nonblack people to add a cool factor (Rodriguez, 2006). Specifically, Grande has been accused of copying the beats from black artists like Soulja Boy and Princess Nokia to create “7 Rings” and failing to acknowledge the similarities between the songs or give the artists a percentage of her earnings. As @leigherin88 said, Grande “makes money off of black culture.”

Other tweets in the axial code validated Grande’s tanning and dismissed accusations of blackfishing and cultural appropriation.

• **ANISHA** • @AnishaWilson 12 Feb 2019

CAN EVERYONE LEAVE ARIANA ALONE!? now she's a "blackfish" which idk isn't even a thing?

This tweet symbolized white privilege, for part of the privilege is to be able to voice an opinion that is seen as universally accepted as a widely-known truth (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Other tweets like the following rejected the notion that things like weaves and hair extensions belong to one racial group.

Bebecita @OhNoSofia 19 Jan 2019

A race does not own the right to buy hair extensions or wigs or etc... like fuck man y'all really gonna stretch that far saying Ariana is dissin black women by saying she buys her own hair?? WHICH SHE HAS BEEN DOING SINCE VICTORIOUS.

This tweet also exhibited white privilege by assuming a color-blind attitude by saying that a race cannot own the right to buy hair extensions or wigs, which ultimately dismisses black women who want credit for the popularity of weaves.

Some users also compared Grande's action to white female artists who have also been accused of cultural appropriation like Iggy Azalea, Miley Cyrus, and Gwen Stefani. Most of the tweets argued about which white female artist received the most negative feedback for their cultural appropriation and why. The following tweet compares Grande to Stefani, who infamously used Asian culture in the early 2000s.

lil rupunzel ass bitch @prettypinto 15 Feb 2019

People hate Ariana grande because she's using Asian and black culture but don't say shit about Gwen stefani using Asian and Latina culture lol wuuuut.

Another tweet questioned if Grande received less criticism than Cyrus because she darkened her skin.

alexis @uikge13 Feb 2019

My biggest question is why people don't care when Ariana does it but shit themselves over Miley. Is it really because Ms. Cyrus stayed the same color throughout her career?

The tweet below responded to a *BuzzFeed* article about Grande being accused of appropriation in “7 Rings” and emphasized the normalization of white female pop artists who appropriate black culture.

Diane Exavier @peacheslechat 15 Feb 2019

I don't have feelings either way abt Ariana, but I wish this article would just say “we allow cultural appropriation for people we like.” Fans don't really find issue w/ what she's doing bc “bops,” but homegirl's foundation shade gets darker every time we see her. So what's that?

The tweet conveyed that whiteness is the norm, and white female pop artists have yet to see any damage done to their careers because a few people attempt to cancel them online. As both @peacheslechat and @uikge13 said, cultural appropriation seems to get excused if the listener is a fan of the artist accused.

The last group of tweets in the axial code “Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain” discussed Grande's history of behaviors that could be perceived as anti-black. These tweets are a combination of discussions about Grande coming out against black women, being out of touch with Black Twitter and culture, and dating her ex-fiancé Pete Davidson. For example, when black female rapper Cardi B won

a Grammy over Grande's deceased ex-boyfriend Mac Miller and Grande tweeted a series of angry tweets without mentioning Cardi B directly, some Twitter users speculated that she was exhibiting misogynoir.

Shady Cool Lady @JeffGoldblum95 11 Feb 2019

Full offense: Ariana needs to think deeper about things when she says them. This was a monumental moment in musical history for black women, keep your comments about your ex to yourself for a minute. Let her have the moment she deserves..

Another tweet said Grande was disappointed that Mac Miller's white privilege did not prevail.

that' kid travis @thatkidtexas 10 Feb 2019

Ariana Grande white entitlement and privilege is on full display, how she expect Mac to be giving an award that his music didn't earn; just because he passed away? Cardi deserved that Grammy, Ariana Grande is just another trash white girl appropriating Black culture!

These tweets could also be read as Grande believing in reverse discrimination, a case where Grande victimizes herself and Mac Miller's family for Mac Miller losing to a black woman. Others thought her tweets showed her allyship with black women was performative.

Revival @tayepurks 11 Feb 2019

And now listen I love Ariana Grande but don't get it twisted she wants to act like she's so here for black people and our culture but then gets salty when a black women wins a rap award over Mac Miller's deceased ass? Hello hunty rap is literally our cultural music. Thank u, next

In the same vein, some users criticized her for not speaking up against ex-fiancé and comedian Pete Davidson. For example, users criticized Davidson for a 2016 radio interview, where he said he wasn't interested in dating black women, but Grande yelled at him like a black woman when they were together at the time (diaspora7, 2018).

a rat with a cough @hauntedyxxngi 15 Dec 2018

I just wanna remind you guys that when Pete was being called out for his jokes about black women & sex workers, not once did Ariana grande speak out & defend us. But she had time to say something about Kanye & imma leave it at that. Watch the people you let into your circle.

Lastly, the following tweet written during the live broadcasting of Aretha Franklin's funeral to showed how disconnected Grande is from black culture in regards to respectful dress.

Candice C. Robinson @SocScholarCR 31 Aug 2018

Sociology me: Women can wear whatever they want, whenever they want!!

Raised in a Black church by Southern Black women me:

[@ArianaGrande](#) needs some stockings and length on that skirt while in church

[#ArethaFranklin](#) [#Arethahomegoing](#)

Overall, the tweets sorted into the "Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain" category were a critique of Grande using her white privilege to adopt black styles, e.g. hair styles, music genres, language, and skin, while still enjoying the luxuries of whiteness, such as easier access to resources and support in the music industry and being seen as beautiful. The next axial code explored how Black Twitter discussed the black collaborators who contribute to Grande's sound and style.

Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations

The second axial code included 117 tweets from the open codes: “Inclusion of Black Creatives” and “Cultural Inspiration, Not Appropriation.” All tweets in this code acknowledged Grande’s black collaborators and influences. The tweets made sure Grande’s black influences, friends, and business partners aren’t referred to as props. This axial code is consistent with Critical Race Theory’s interest convergence tenet, which states that people in power are willing to collaborate with those not in power if they gain something from the collaboration. In this case, these tweets communicated that Grande is merely inspired by black culture because of her proximity to black people. Most also believed her intentions were good because Grande had given her black collaborators songwriting credit and had occasionally performed alongside them in the past. By working with these collaborators, Grande has gained style influenced by black culture and financial success. By working with Grande, her collaborators have gained profits and some recognition.

Many tweets talked about Grande giving credit to her black collaborators, including her black songwriters and friends Tayla Parx and Victoria Monet, who have performed “7 Rings” alongside her and was reportedly inspired Grande during the songwriting process.

A user discussed Grande giving credit to black collaborators in the following tweet:

ol’ what’s her name @OhDionne 16 Feb 2019

not to mention I feel like ariana's sound is fun to listen to bc she works with black ppl, vs iggy who's sound was white-made from start to finish. "thank u next" bops bc of tayla parx, victoria monet, and tommy brown. and ari stays giving them credit for everything.

Another tweet from one of *Buzzfeed*’s Twitter accounts gave Grande credit for doing more than most white artists simply by giving the black people she works with credit:

BuzzFeed News @BuzzFeedNews 16 Feb 2019

Reader: Black artists aren't often given the same opportunities to profit from their music as white artists like Ariana Grande. But she's been careful to give credit where credit is due, which is more than many other white artists can say.

However, the tweet from *Buzzfeed* not only pointed to the imbalance in power and influence black artists have in the industry, but also pointed to slow racial progress. Other tweets gave Grande credit for promoting intersectionality.

katelyn bts 10/06/18, 5/23/19 @vmon_af 11 Feb 2019

Also Ari has always been an advocate for INTERSECTIONAL feminism—the imagery in her latest music videos can show it, AND she made a black woman god in her last supper-themed GIAW performance when she could have made herself the center of attention. WE STAN.

The aforementioned tweet referenced Grande getting praise for going against the standard of beauty: whiteness. This could be read as Grande using her power and white privilege for good by giving opportunities to black artists, but it could also be seen as an inauthentic gesture if she doesn't continue to do this in the future. The next tweet by @gstitans pointed to the problem of inclusion not being an individual problem, but a systematic one.

eze @gstitans 4 Feb 2019

and the problem is this. and it's true. ariana probably doesn't have the same oppression that a black women does. but what can she do? she had always been collaborating with black people and supported them. not a racist at all

The tweet connected to CRT's tenet that racism is a permanent part of society and that society is ill-equipped to fix problems of race and power (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). The following

tweet by *Complex*'s Twitter account pointed to the validation that Grande received from one of her black female collaborators in an interview with *Vulture*.

Complex @Complex 11 Feb 2019

Ariana Grande's [#7Rings](#) co-writer, Tayla Parx, says the song isn't guilty of appropriation. "(Ariana's) allowed to fuse everything. I think it's important. It's important to fuse all of these things to really bring us together."

<https://trib.al/VrLAW4m>

Although Tayla Parx supported Grande, this tweet subtly implied the white privilege Grande has to fuse music styles and adopt a color blind attitude that ignores the black creators who came before her in hip-hop, specifically the artists who she has been accused of stealing from like 2 Chainz, Princess Nokia, and Soulja Boy. Other tweets made the distinction between Grande's black friends being her collaborators and not props. The following tweet was a response to a tweet by *Afropunk* that advertised an article saying Grande is another white performer needing black culture to maintain her success.

#SheisMileyCyrus @DEM_Mustangs16 22 Jan 2019

This article was not necessary. People be so damn sensitive & overthinking too much. Miley & Ariana are not using black women as "props". Like Miley stated before those are her friends. Ariana had her friends in the video. Just shut up.

The tweet by @DEM_Mustangs16 mentioned Miley Cyrus, who twerked with black women in her "We Can't Stop" music video in 2014 and was accused of using the women as props and appropriating black culture (Blaec, 2017). The tweet communicated that both Grande and Cyrus were unfairly accused of using black women as props. Once

again, Twitter users like this one pointed to cultural appropriation being a common problem between white female artists and black women.

Other tweets made a distinction between cultural inspiration and appropriation. Some of the tweets said nonblack people can use elements of other cultures as long as they are respectful and give credit. However, others said Grande herself isn't inspired by black female artists; it's Grande's black female songwriters who are. For example, one tweet said,

The username was an emoji and won't copy here. @esterluv 19 Jan 2019

people asking why Ariana's music and visuals lately look like something outta Rihanna, Nicki & Mariah's vision board, it's because black women are writing her music. Tayla Parx & Victoria Monet helped write thank u, next & 7rings.

Black Queens did that.

While many were quick to note that Grande is using black songwriters, they also noted that the songwriters not being on camera makes Grande appear inauthentic. For example, one Twitter user said:

I Miss Conecuh @BluntStatement 18 Jan 2019

So apparently Ariana Grande's main writers are black women and they tried to give her a new sound, which is fine, but it comes off as a rip off of 2Chains, Soulja Boy, and princess nokia. interesting.

Other users commented on her proximity to black people and how they could be the reason why Grande uses hip-hop and R&B and African American Vernacular English in her music, interviews, and daily life.

No username. @Mariah__Cara 24 Jan 2019

I know Ariana got a circle of black women who hype her head up and say it's okay to use AAVE because she's "one of the girls." So I'm not blaming Ariana entirely for her missteps. It's black people's fault too for joking about her being "black." Someone needs to pull her side.

The tweet by @Mariah_Cara24 blamed black women for giving Grande access to black culture and gave Grande the privilege of being clueless and culturally unaware. The next Twitter user gave Grande credit for working with black women and made the issue of appropriation more about misogyny.

Username is an emoji @euphoricleoking 18 Jan 2019

Ariana wrote 7 rings with her friends, 2 of them are black women. of course the song is gonna have some rap/trap influence. fuck out of here! go destroy 6ixnine or some other MALE who steals from black culture 24/7.

The next tweet said white people have the privilege to have an opinion on traditionally black music because they consume it the most.

WRITER KOLA BOOF @KolaBoof3 10 Feb 2019

Anybody who LISTENS to Rap Music....has damn right to comment on it. White folks are the biggest customers of Rap Music. ARIANA has more cultural significance to Black America than Cardi B. ever will just for being born here.

[@tysandsnyc](#) [@therealrahdigga](#).

The implication of @KolaBoof3's tweet is that white rap listeners should have more influence and opinions about rap because they consume hip-hop more than black people. This tweet exemplified white privilege because it aggressively states that music belongs to everyone. Another tweet suggested that Grande could be unconsciously using black styles.

Amanda Ball is life @aamanda_bee 18 Jan 2019

I don't think its cultural appropriation and I hope she wouldn't be that dumb. What i do think is happening is Ariana is surrounding herself with black women and taking in their style.

Here, Grande is given the benefit of the doubt by making her alleged appropriation seem unconscious, which is an example of white privilege.

In summary, the axial code “Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations” was a defense of Grande’s music style. The users in this section often mentioned Grande’s black collaborators by name, claimed that Grande respects them, and argued that she is allowed to be inspired by them. The next axial code explored how Black Twitter discussed the lack of support black women receive as artists and contributors to pop culture.

Demanding Black Women Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect

The third axial code included 158 tweets. It included the open codes “Lack of Support for Black Female Artists,” “Lack of Respect for Black Hair,” and “Listen to Black Women.” In this code, Twitter users compared the amount of resources and support white female artists receive in comparison to black female artists. All tweets in this category exhibited Critical Race Theory’s counterstorytelling tenet, which basically states that minority groups will take control of narratives about themselves if they feel misrepresented.

Some tweets addressed the confusion over black women not having much success in the music industry despite making similar music to popular, white artists like Grande. An example would be the following tweet.

J0D&N @AUDEN500 15 Feb 2019

It's not a coincidence that so many black artists have been told that their music is not marketable and their labels have been blocking their releases just for Ariana Grande to get a #1 with that exact same music. It's not a coincidence at all lol.

This tweet by @AUDEN500 not only pointed out Grande being afforded opportunities because she's white, but it also pointed out that musical institutions are complicit in upholding white superiority in music. The tweet suggested that by putting more time and resources into white artists who make similar music to black artists, music executives do not give black artists power to spread the music they created simply because black is not seen as marketable. Other tweets in this axial code pointed to how traditionally black styles of music are seen as acceptable because a white person is singing. Grande being more popular than some of the black women who inspired her or sing similarly to her is an example of white privilege because she has the advantage of being associated with good qualities simply because of the color of her skin. Other tweets blamed fanbases for ignoring the black women who sound similar to Grande.

Splenda Daddy J-Low™ @Jorge14125 20 Jan 2019

More importantly it's clear that Ariana is using black women as the blue print for her success so the fact that you're going to say that she's better than artist like Rihanna when she's the blueprint for Ariana's success shows that y'all need to credit black women for her success.

Notably, this tweet took pressure off Grande and the institution that gives her the resources to be more successful than black women and put it on fans to know who her black collaborators and inspirations are. Interestingly enough, a Twitter user pointed out that the music institution commonly works against black women like Princess Nokia. In an attempt to uplift Princess Nokia and acknowledge her struggle in the industry as a black woman, the following user made

the discussion about misogyny and girl power. By doing so, the tweet ultimately weakened the idea of the music industry upholding white supremacy.

casey @sextinaquafina 19 Jan 2019

Regardless if Ariana did rip off Princess Nokia, PN is a talented black woman who's built a career for herself in an industry that was against her from the beginning, rapping about issues that matter and doesn't deserve the slander. Pls stop pitting women against each other x.

Specifically regarding "7 Rings," some Twitter users called out Grande for weakening Princess Nokia's message about being proud of her hair in her song "Mine".

keri @keribear101 18 Jan 2019

Nokia is a lesser known artist and her message meant something to a lot of black/women that get shit for their hair. Ariana took that, turned it into her own song with her own message (that I have no issue with) but then proceeded to reap the benefits.

Although Princess Nokia and Grande share a similar message of being proud of their hair in their music, @keribear101 suggested that Grande received more credit because she made the act of getting hair extensions empowering to both black and white women, despite black women being criticized for having fake hair inside and outside the music industry. Other Twitter users said Grande could have used her platform to uplift black women by featuring them more in the music video or featuring a black female artist on the song. The tweets communicated that had this been done, a black female rapper would have profited off of the song and made the rap influences in "7 Rings" seem more authentic. Some users specifically said Victoria Monet, Grande's friend and songwriter, should have been given a chance to sing or rap on the song. Some tweets blamed

Grande for Monet not reaching her full potential and being able to build a successful music career. The following tweet talked about Grande using her power and resources to help Monet get signed to a record label.

ليلا @leelamazarei 17 Jan 2019

I feel bad. Victoria Monet is like Ariana's real life stan that follows her around it's great to be supportive but to constantly tweet about her work. Ariana can't hook her up w/ a label?

The user suggested Grande should help get Monet more opportunities. The next tweet described Monet's low potential to be a successful independent artist after working with Grande.

E. @edwnmndz 14 Jan 2019

victoria monet won't have anything to release once ariana is done sucking her dry.

The following two tweets blamed Monet for putting more effort into Grande's career than her own.

No username @godisacollin 22 Jan 2019

if victoria monet keeps putting all this effort into ariana's career, she'll never have one of her own

★슈퍼엠★ @burakkuhani 29 Jan 2019

Seeing Victoria Monet be background for Ariana reminds me of nearly every relationship I've had with a white woman

The tweet by @burakkuhani described Monet as being Grande's black sidekick. The sentiment of that tweet is that black women being in the background is normal inside and outside of the music industry.

Other tweets talked about the lack of respect for black women who wear weaves and hair extensions. After Grande bragged about wearing hair extensions in "7 Rings," some Black Twitter users responded to nonblack users who said white women can wear weaves because black women straighten their hair or wear blonde wigs. For instance, the next tweet referenced assimilation and blackfishing, which is a play on the term "catfish." Blackfishing is another word for "niggerfishing" in that it can be defined as a modern form of blackface with the help of dark makeup or a tan (Rasool, 2018).

s @ScarlettJimmy 15 Feb 2019

I know you didn't compare black women having to assimilate into society to a person changing their appearance simply for aesthetic reasons. I'm ambiguous on the whole Ariana blackfish debate, but this comparison is just ignorant

The tweet by @ScarlettJimmy referenced the lack of power black women have had in the past by pointing out the changes to their beauty routines they have had to make by wearing straight hair not only to be seen as beautiful, but also to be seen as worthy of a job. The next tweet highlighted the differences in beauty standards between black and white women:

Ashley Khan @ashleykhanmusic 3 Feb 2019

She can write lyrics about buying her weave and boujee and shows how rich she is, but when black women do that they're considered ratchet and not naturally beautiful. And THEN claims she's destigmatizing stereotypes by doing that

Some tweets also talked about black women reclaiming their hair, specifically extensions. For example, one tweet said:

keni anwar @keni_anwar 23 Jan 2019

ariana grande is trying to take black women's narrative talking about "...my hair, gee thanks. just bought it" white women in all history have had no need to reclaim their hair bitch i'm sick.

Still, some Twitter users made the argument that the issue of who wears weaves and who made them popular and why they're important culturally shouldn't be an issue. The following tweet praised Grande for destigmatizing weaves.

SammeSeas @daylightcurfew_ 18 Jan 2019

Her "appropriation" of buying hair is making it a REGULAR FUCKING THING, LIKE THE FUCKING REGULAR SHIT IT IS!! instead of secluding it to ONE GROUP! ALL FEMALES WEAR FAKE HAIR!!! Ariana aimed to use her platform to say, own your fake hair, and it's not just a black girl thing

By @daylightcurfew_ trying to argue that wearing weaves is for everyone, white privilege is apparent. Whiteness does not allow for black women to share the unique struggles they've faced without being seen as oversensitive. Lastly, some tweets discussed Grande's white privilege of being seen as more desirable in "7 Rings" in comparison to black women.

nana bday afterparty (๑>๓<๑) @killviaem 19 Jan 2019

just admit y'all rather consume black women originated things from non black bitches and GO. 7 rings was trash and ariana's black friends need to call out her blatant black girl caricature she got on or they just as bad as she is

Another tweet said Grande could have called out the double standards of beauty for white and black women, but it's her white privilege that allows her to not acknowledge it publicly.

resident hot girl @ebonyphonix 19 Jan 2019

ariana really could have used her platform to be like “interesting that y’all love these lyrics about me buying my hair but y’all bash black women for the exact same thing

The last group of tweets called for nonblack people to step back from the conversation and allow black women to control the conversation on the possible cultural appropriation in “7 Rings.” Some Black Twitter users said that they can tell the rest of the world is late on the conversation on blackfishing due to differences in language. One user tweeted:

Dear Friend, Franko @MeBeepMe 15 Feb 2019

oh no... I see someone wrote a think piece on Ariana grande , bc 1- non black ppl r showing up in my IG abt it, and 2- they're not calling it “niggerfishing” so I KNOW that it was filtered thru black twitter a few months back.

Although black and white people discussed Grande blackfishing, black women received more criticism for calling her out. For example, one tweet said:

why his name coochie @internvivien 10 Feb 2019

havent any strong opinions on ariana but i think it's so funny how whenever black women express discomfort abt her whole image it's always people who aren't black women who tell them to shut up/stop hatin/it's not that serious like ok fools

As Delgado and Stefancic (2017) wrote, minorities fighting back against derogatory language and stereotypes makes them be perceived as humorless and oversensitive. Other Twitter users

said they want to be allies for black women by giving them the platform to speak out against Grande.

Veronigga Mars, Private Eye. @DariaanMichelle 31 Aug 2018

i love ariana, and while i don't agree with every single thing in this thread...she needs to address this seriously w/o victimizing herself. this is a serious problem, & she needs to acknowledge why her actions are offending ppl. i refuse to speak over black women abt this issue

This tweet by @DariaanMichelle acknowledged that Grande is afforded the privilege of playing the victim because of her whiteness. It also suggested that Grande responding to the cultural appropriation and blackfishing allegations from black women would be an example of Grande using her privilege for good. The next tweet blamed nonblack fans who didn't listen to black women initially.

six pack of coke zero @kevdaug2000 30 Jan 2019

ppl are understandably @ ariana grande for appropriating Japanese culture with that tattoo but black women have been vocal about her appropriating black culture for A LONG TIME and no one really batted an eye. Funny how black folks r ignored yet again on issues. We gotta do better

The Twitter user @kevdaug2000 expressed that opinions from black people are undervalued and those from nonblack people are amplified. The following tweet advocated for Grande using her privilege to actively seek out why her tanning habits and "7 Rings" song lyrics could be seen as offensive to black women.

The username is an emoji. @kat_is_a_kat 19 Jan 2019

It's not the responsibility of black women to educate white women on cultural appropriation or call them out- but if the internet hasn't gotten to Ariana Grande yet, when is someone close to her going to tell her that she can't keep doing this blackface? Will she listen to a bw?

Overall, tweets in the third axial code "Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect," blamed nonblack people for using their power to undermine black women who complain about racial issues, like cultural appropriation in the music industry. The last axial code explored how Black Twitter perceived Grande's race and who can be blamed for the confusion about her racial identity.

Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness

The last axial code included 103 tweets from the open codes: "Ariana Is Black," "Ariana Isn't Black," and "Blame for Black Woman Phase." These tweets relied on Grande's physical appearance. Tweets in this axial code grappled with race, specifically being described by your relation or opposition to whiteness and the white/black binary.

Many tweets compared Grande to black artists and implied Grande is a black woman. For example, the following tweet referenced a lyric in a Grande song featuring black female rapper Nicki Minaj:

Emoji. @trapdoll 18 Jan 2019

nicki minaj's mind amazes me sis really said how many years ago that ariana runs
pop now look at her. both black women we stan

Another Twitter user said black women have the ability and desire to tan:

RGB @rosegoldbird 3 Dec 2018

why are y'all so obsessed with Ariana's complexion lately? Black women tan too, damn!

Through those tweets, Twitter users gave Grande power to be associated with blackness because of her collaborations with black women and physical appearance. The next tweet acknowledged how Grande was called a black woman by black singer Patti Labelle because of her singing voice during the Billboard Awards. The user implied that Labelle gave black women permission to refer to nonblack women like Grande as black based on talent.

` @Osnapitziiivan 6 Dec 2018

ITS OFFICIAL Y'ALL, PATTI FCKN LABELLE SAID ARIANA IS A BLACK WOMEN

Other tweets were more emotional and included stronger language to discourage others from calling Grande a black woman. For example, tweets like the following acknowledged Grande's race and ethnicity and how her darkened skin color doesn't reflect the idea of a typical white Italian American.

diana? @dianalajandre 14 Feb 2019

Ariana Grande was born WHITE believe it or not- i know this bitch can SNATCH, but yeah, shes italian, which is basically white. And now, Ari looks like a dark skinned Latina or a light skinned Black girl i mean

Tweets like the one from @dianalajandre showed how Grande might easily pass for a black or brown woman, which makes the conversation about cultural appropriation appear to be more complicated or confusing. If users believed Grande to be a black or brown woman, they might

not have understood why she's being accused of appropriation. Some tweets compared her skin color to a black woman.

jstor_sci-hub_slut @Paprikatjuscha 12 Feb 2019

it gets problematic na eh, i didn't know Ariana Grande is Italian and she's white(brunette) neither Latina nor black descent but she's darker than Nicki Minaj. GRABE @.@

Some pointed out the different beauty standards for white and black women.

ON A BREAK || chéri respects bts @sweetcheri 21 Jan 2019

call me a salty black woman but please stop calling ariana grande a black girl or a black queen. that sht is not cute or funny. maybe yall should start calling ACTUAL black women queens more before giving that praise to someone who's not even our race. the disrespect.

This user condemned those who call white women like Grande a black queen because black women are traditionally not seen as beautiful. The user further expressed the disappointment and confusion black women might feel when they see nonblack women be referred to as beautiful black women. This gives the impression that blackness is beautiful on nonblack people. Other tweets mentioned how Grande is associated with blackness while continuing to not face the hardships that are associated with being black, which is an example of white privilege. The following tweet is an example.

Kno yo own SCRENGTH! @BrwnBU_Tea_Brit 3 Dec 2018

No Ariana Grande is not black ... Love her to death... but no... she isn't black ... and she haven't had to deal with the struggles of black women either... therefore.. just listen to her music and enjoy it and leave her in her category mmmmkay?

Still, there were a few tweets that defended Grande by stating she has never claimed to be black.

Demi/5H Stan @TellMeYouLove_5 20 Jan 2019

She constantly mentions her Italian heritage. People really want her to be problematic. And before you try to make any assumptions, I am a black woman.

Who has constantly watched Ariana praise black women in music and acknowledge her appreciation for black culture

Despite Grande never stating she identifies as a black woman, appearance matters in society. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) wrote that people are described in relation or opposition to whiteness.

The last group of tweets in this axial code blamed black people for calling Grande black. One tweet specifically called out Labelle.

sierra @nkbcoa 19 Jan 2019

Ariana stay ways from any and every post that is calling you a black women. That joke has gone to far. Even black legends such as Patti have been calling her that.

And it just needs to stop because y'all took it to far

Some tweets don't call out anyone specific, but the tweets seem to be aimed at anyone on Twitter who referred to Grande as black. The following tweet blames users who called Grande black for fans believing she is black.

Queen in the North @MimiDahlings 18 Jan 2019

You guys have been making jokes about Ariana being black and calling her

“Africana grande” and what not to the point where her stans are starting to believe

it's true and think it's okay to put her on the same pedestal as real black women
and it's disgusting

In a response to a *Hello Giggles* article claiming that Grande did appropriate in the “7 Rings” video, the next tweet talked about Grande’s fans being confused about Grande’s race because of Black Twitter users.

Abbey Bugatti @Yo_AbbaAbba 18 Jan 2019

I love Ariana but I do agree w this. BUT there's also tweets calling Ariana “Afro-Italian,” including her in memes w Black women, Black people tweeting “she’s ours,” and other things like this. This just might just be an effect of stan culture? No disrespect! I’m just confused ig

As a whole, the last axial code “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness” displayed the discourse about Grande being seen as black as either empowering or insulting to black women. At the same time, some of those tweets blamed the black community for stating Grande is a black woman.

The four axial codes, “Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations,” “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness,” “Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain,” and “Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect” provided a mixture of tweets that defended and critiqued Grande and “7 Rings.” Grounded Theory requires the coder to become increasingly sensitive to the data to consider recurring themes and storylines in the data to suggest systematic statements about plausible relationships (Corbin and Strauss, 1994). Through comparing the language in tweets in the axial codes, I determined that most of the

tweets expressed concern over why white artists like Grande appropriate black women. I then created one selective code: “Blackfishing for Financial Gain.”

Selective Code

The tweets that led to the selective code, “Blackfishing for Financial Gain” pointed to blackfishing being a common problem ingrained in the music industry as a whole instead of Grande herself. The tweets suggested that “7 Rings” seemed to inspire conversation about the many ways that cultural appropriation could be exemplified: tans, dark makeup, adopting traditionally black genres and hairstyles, etc. The tweets conveyed that the music industry gives white artists like Grande the power to monetarily benefit from her black-inspired music, and her white privilege allows her the privilege of not publicly addressing concerns from black women without consequences.

The following tweet was a response to an article by *The Tab* with the headline “Ariana Grande is a blackfish and these are the receipts” and subheadline “She’s making a profit out of racial ambiguity.”

aussiemusiclamb @ageofmusiclamb 11 Feb 2019

Alot of truth to this.".. Ariana emulates actual Black women for clout, but will wash all the fake tan off for a cover in Vogue. She's picking and choosing random bits of other people's cultures for financial gain, which is the epitome of white privilege.”

The tweet by @ageofmusiclamb spoke to how Grande changes her image depending on her location. For example, if she wants to look cool “for clout” for a music video, she will emulate a black woman. However, her image completely changed when she appeared on the July 2019 cover of *Vogue* magazine, where her skin appears to be lighter than her

music video tan. Although the tweet doesn't say why that might be, it could be to portray a softer image. Another tweet conveyed a similar message one month earlier than

@ageofmusiclamb's tweet:

Keys @keyrodi 20 Jan 2019

Ariana Grande in 7 Rings is no different than Iggy Azalea & Miley Cyrus in the past, as it's clear that the singer's aesthetic directly emulates & relies on Black women's likeness to position herself in a space that she has no business.

[#ArianaSoWhite](#)

Although the sentiment of the messages was the same, @keyrodi mentioning other artists pointed to blackfishing in the music industry to be a persistent problem. However, like previous parts of my analysis discussed, some Twitter users thought Grande giving credit to her black collaborators was indicative of her being an ally to the black community. For instance, the following tweet critiqued how Twitter users feel about black women being represented in music videos.

chuu day★ @SEOKJIVU 18 Jan 2019

when artists don't include black girls in the videos y'all call them racist but when ariana includes them somehow she is using them as props people need to shut the fuck up just say that you don't like ariana grande and go

Specifically, when it comes to Grande including black women in music videos like "7 Rings," @SEOKJIVU noticed that Twitter users want black women to be included more often but struggle with trusting that Grande's inclusion is sincere. Another Twitter user conveyed the distrust of Grande and pointed to the larger problem of representation of black women in the

music industry. As @rae_beingem said, Grande including black women isn't going to resolve the music industry's racist, inclusion problem.

Carefree @rae_beingem 19 Jan 2019

Ariana, giving 1,2 recognition to black women in your music videos/
performances and adopting urban culture does not mean you are resolving racism.
Humble yourself sis

As the next tweet stated, Grande's promotion of weaves, one part of black culture in "7 Rings," doesn't destigmatize the stereotypes black women face. If anything, it showed her privilege.

Ashley Khan @ashleykhanmusic 3 Feb 2019

She can write lyrics about buying her weave and boujee and shows how rich she
is, but when black women do that they're considered ratchet and not naturally
beautiful. And THEN claims she's destigmatizing stereotypes by doing that

The last tweet encompassed all three key elements of Critical Race Theory: privilege, race, and power. As @ashleykhanmusic conveyed, Grande has the privilege to not be seen as undesirable when she wears or sings about her weaves because she is a white woman. The user highlighted how black women are not given the same privilege and are scrutinized for wearing weaves. The user also seemed to not believe that Grande can change how black women with weaves are perceived. As Critical Race Theory explains, racism is a prevalent problem that will never go away (Delgado and Stefancic, 2000). Racial progress is slow, and one person in the music industry like Grande cannot change the industry's treatment of black women overnight. Overall, my findings revealed that Grande has the privilege to financially benefit from a system that doesn't support black women.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Critical Race Theory guided my analysis of the tweets pertaining to race, white privilege, and power in the “7 Rings” video. The theory helped explain what some Twitter users conveyed regarding the “7 Rings” video: White women in the music industry can gain success by imitating black culture, specifically music styles and aesthetics created and made popular by black women. Despite Grande including black women in the songwriting process, many Twitter users found that her allyship with black women was inauthentic because her black collaborators remained behind the scenes. The tweets conveyed that Grande has more power than black women in the music industry because whiteness is preferred.

During my research, I aimed to investigate the following:

1. questions about Ariana Grande’s race in Black Twitter’s reactions to Grande’s “7 Rings”
2. Black Twitter’s discussion of the power of musical institutions and the black female collaborators in the creation of “7 Rings”
3. Black Twitter’s response to allegations of Grande using white privilege to appropriate black woman

The role of race in Black Twitter’s reactions to “7 Rings”

Two axial codes, “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness” and “Normalizing Using White Privilege for Financial Gain,” assisted me in investigating the first research goal. The first code, “Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness” included tweets that discussed debating if Grande is a black, white, or brown woman. The tweets that claimed Grande was black often did so while comparing her to another black woman. Some tweets also conveyed that Grande earned her membership into the black community because of her musical talent that is inspired by traditionally black genres. Tweets that claimed Grande was

white mentioned Grande has the privilege of looking like a black woman for financial and social gain and the advancement of her career. These tweets demonstrated that although Grande is occasionally described as a black woman, her whiteness ultimately affords her the privilege of not dealing with the racism that black women in the music industry deal with. The lack of support black women in the music industry receive could be because of their race although white artists like Grande find success imitating black women. As Twitter user @killviaem said, some people would rather consume black culture from white women. Although some users blamed black women like Patti Labelle for the confusion about Grande's race, Critical Race Theory explains that whiteness has always been preferred in society (Righter-McDaniels and Hendrickson, 2014).

The second axial code, "Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain," included tweets comparing Grande to other white female pop artists who have been accused of cultural appropriation. The category pointed to cultural appropriation being a common problem in the music industry. Similarly, critical race theorists describe racism as normal, systematic, and ingrained in society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). Although most of the tweets that compared Grande to other white artists wanted to compare the amount of backlash the artists received, the tweets showed that like racism, white female artists engaging in cultural appropriation is normal. Other tweets discussed the ways that Grande has distanced herself from whiteness: physically with her tan, stylistically by adopting black genres of music, and linguistically when she uses African American Vernacular English. However, the main focus of the tweets was on her tan, and many users referred to Grande as a blackfish. Critical Race Theory helped explain how white privilege gives Grande the opportunity to look like a black

woman without being criticized as much as black women. As @ageofmusiclamb said, Grande's ability to pick and choose pieces of black culture is a sign of white privilege.

In summary, the tweets within the two axial codes, "Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness" and "Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain," assisted with my first research goal by pointing to Grande's white privilege. Grande being a racially ambiguous white woman who uses black styles in "7 Rings" seemed to have led many Black Twitter users to describe her as inauthentic. Those who condemned her for appropriation were met with critiques that said Grande appropriating black culture by singing about wearing weaves, for example, was not possible because communities cannot claim ownership of hair. As Delgado and Stefancic said (2017), whiteness causes some to not think from a white viewpoint but a universally valid one that lacks perspective.

The role of power in Black Twitter's discussion of "7 Rings"

The findings of the axial codes "Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations" and "Demanding Black Women Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect" provided evidence of how power of musical institutions and black collaborators is discussed. The first axial code "Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations" included tweets that discussed Grande giving opportunities to black female artists. These tweets often used her collaborations with black artists as a gauge for the legitimacy of her allyship with black women. Users who tweeted in this category didn't believe Grande was being performative through including black women in the songwriting process or by appearing in her music videos and live performances. They also thought black women wouldn't work with Grande if Grande was being unfair to them by not giving them credit for their work. It seemed that the Twitter users in this category assumed black

women are not struggling from a power imbalance. These users were describing examples of interest convergence, a theme of Critical Race Theory that describes the partnership between dominant and minority groups. However, this partnership usually results in the dominant group, white people, gaining more than the minority group. Tweets specifically about her black songwriters like Victoria Monet conveyed the small social and financial gains they received in comparison to Grande. Convergence was also communicated in tweets about Grande using inspiration from black artists 2 Chainz, Princess Nokia, and Soulja Boy. By using similar beats and aesthetics as those artists, Grande profited off of their work without giving them credit. It was then up to the artists, Black Twitter users, and the media to reveal the similarities. Only then did it seem like the artists received credit for the work that inspired “7 Rings.”

The second axial code, “Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect,” included tweets that discussed the lack of power black female artists have in the music industry. For example, tweets in this category discussed Grande receiving more than her black female friends and collaborators. Grande using these black collaborators and friends for musical inspiration ultimately gives her more fame and financial success. Her black female friends and collaborators, specifically the less famous ones like Victoria Monet and Tayla Parx, received recognition in the songwriting credits, occasionally perform alongside Grande, and gain a profit, but do not see as much success as Grande in their own, independent music ventures. Some tweets also discussed one specific “7 Rings” lyric about Grande buying her hair extensions. While some claimed Grande was destigmatizing the act, they noted that black women aren’t seen as beautiful when they brag about doing the same thing. Because of this, many Black Twitter users tweeted about black women reclaiming the narrative about buying weaves. Several tweets in this axial code argued the conversation about appropriation should be

led by black women. Therefore, the tweets in this axial code were examples of Black Twitter counterstorytelling.

Overall, these axial codes helped meet my second research goal by showing how Grande's use of power can be interpreted in two ways. Tweets in the first axial code, "Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation Allegations," applauded Grande for including black collaborators in the music production process. However, the tweets in the axial code "Demanding Black Women to Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect" conveyed that inclusion wasn't enough through counterstorytelling. Some tweets also critiqued Grande for not informing her audience of how differently black women are treated in the music industry. In conclusion, while Grande has the power to include black women, she also has the power and privilege to ignore or be ignorant of their race-related struggles.

How Black Twitter responded to Grande allegedly appropriating black women

My final research goal addressed the appropriation of black women, specifically the narrative surrounding hair extensions. The findings in the axial code "Demanding Black Women Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect" provided me with evidence for this category because it included tweets about black women wearing hair extensions. Those tweets expressed disapproval of Grande seeming to reclaim hair extensions as a sign of wealth and empowerment, while black women are seen as ghetto or ratchet for wearing them. The tweets also worked to distinguish between assimilation and appropriation. Moreover, they made the argument that Grande appropriates black female culture and aesthetics for fun and financial gain while black women might wear straight hair extensions to conform to white standards of beauty. These responses by Black Twitter were examples of counterstorytelling. In addition, some users called for people to simply listen to black women. They argued the importance of

counterstorytelling and allowing black people share their feelings about Grande's appropriation without being labeled as oversensitive. Users in this category seemed to believe that failing to allow black women to dominate the conversation would only silence them.

In conclusion, these tweets conveyed that Grande claiming a narrative that is traditionally claimed by black women is insulting. Many users wondered if Grande would listen to one of her black female friends about why she is perceived as problematic. Until Grande addresses these issues publicly, she will continue to be perceived by some as a lackluster ally to black women.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The literature on black women, representation in music, cultural appropriation, and Black Twitter is broad. My research on "7 Rings" expanded the research on cultural appropriation specifically by analyzing Black Twitter's response to the cultural appropriation of black women in music. The tweets I found supported literature that explores how white privilege might play a role in the lack of credit for black collaborators and the lack of support black women receive in the music industry. The tweets conveyed a need for black women to receive more respect for their contributions to popular culture. The tweets also provided evidence for a call to an end to cultural appropriation. Furthermore, my analysis allowed me to discover tweets that criticized blackfishing, a relatively new term. The tweets suggested that blackfishing could be a new way to appropriate black women.

Although I found tweets that vehemently spoke out against Grande's appropriation in the "7 Rings" music video, I did not take note of how popular the tweets were. Because I did not take the number of likes and retweets into account during data collection, I could not provide evidence of how popular ideas expressed in the tweets, regardless if they were for or against

Grande, actually were. Similar studies about cultural appropriation and counterpublics on Twitter could include data on likes and retweets to further demonstrate the popularity of tweets from counterpublics.

My research identified a gap in the existing literature about blackfishing, also known as niggerfishing. The tweets from Black Twitter allowed me to identify language suggesting that blackfishing could be considered another way to appropriate black women and another form of blackface. Some tweets in my research indicated that the term “niggerfishing” is a term exclusively used by Black Twitter. While it’s unclear when exactly this term was coined, future research could explore if there is a specific type of black woman nonblack people attempt to emulate physically and further explore what is desirable about traditionally black features on nonblack women.

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Appendix A

Open Codes	Properties	Tweets Collected
Distancing Herself from Whiteness	Brown/black face, Niggerfishing/blackfishing and tanning Using other cultures for financial gain Condemnation of white privilege	110
Inclusion of Black Creatives	Acknowledging black songwriters and producers Distinction between friends and props Gauge for authentic relationships and allyship with black creatives	72
Comparisons to White Female Artists Who Have Been Accused of Cultural Appropriation	Picking and choosing who to attack/criticize Unfairness White privilege Time and culture differences affecting severity of attacks	41
Lack of Support for Black Female Artists	Suffering from a low number of opportunities, resources, and profit Comparisons of talent between them and white female artists Recognition Inclusion	41
Ariana Isn't Black	Culture vulture Discovering her race and ethnicity Comparisons of skin color between hers and black artists Against joking about her being black	36

Ariana Is Black	Comparisons to black artists Jokes Collaborations with black female artists	35
Listen to Black Women	Reactions to commentary from nonblack people Difference in language Ownership of conversations Need for allies Desire to learn	46
Cultural Inspiration, Not Appropriation	Explanations Credit to black collaborators and black influences Physical proximity to black friends Argument for hair extensions not being exclusive to the black female community	45
Claiming Whiteness	Validation for tanning No cultural boundaries Never saying she's black Erasing stigma about black women and hair extensions	30
Lack of Respect for Black Hair	Difference in reactions depending on race Assimilation v. appropriation Reclaiming hair Lack of allyship Disapproval of using black aesthetics for financial gain	71
Blame for Black Woman Phase	Assigns blame for Ariana is black jokes and suggests black women are the problem Regret Shame Deserved disrespect	32
History of Anti-Blackness	Out of touch with Black Twitter Against black artists White privilege	33

	Lack of awareness Association with anti-black people	
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Appendix B

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Tweets Collected
Distancing Herself from Whiteness Claiming Whiteness Comparisons to White Female Artists Who Have Been Accused of Cultural Appropriation History of Anti-Blackness.	Normalizing Using White Privilege to Blackfish for Financial Gain	214
Inclusion of Black Creatives Cultural Inspiration, Not Appropriation	Using Collaborations with Black Artists to Dismiss Cultural Appropriation	117
Lack of Support for Black Female Artists Lack of Respect for Black Hair Listen to Black Women	Demanding Black Women Receive More Recognition, Resources, and Respect	158
Ariana Isn't Black Ariana Is black	Giving Grande Power to Move In and Out of Blackness	103

Blame for Black Woman Phase		
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