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The Social Media Movement #PublishingPaidMe

Savannah E. Baggett, University of Florida

Introduction

As someone who works in a public library, I have become familiar with the types of authors that our patrons are interested in. Many customers come into our facility and request authors such as Stephen King, James Patterson, and Nora Roberts. About six months ago, I started noticing a trend in the authors we purchase for our collection. After diving into our collection, I realized that most of our authors have one main thing in common: they are white. After determining this fact, I did some research and discovered that this phenomenon is mostly due to the publishing houses that determine whose work gets published. Many publishing houses receive thousands of manuscripts and are tasked with deciding which ones will make them the most financial gain. To do this, they ask whether or not the topic the author writes about is going to be popular with their target audiences. Also, they may be more inclined to publish a writer's work if they are big name authors. By choosing already popular authors, publishing houses are guaranteeing their profit.

With this in mind, I did a little more digging and uncovered a Twitter movement using the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe. Created by young adult authors L.L McKinney in June of 2020, this hashtag was created to point out the pay disparities that people of color experience in the publishing industry. Many authors, including Jesmyn Ward and N.K. Jemisin, jumped into the conversation and spoke about the money they received for their works and spoke further about the pay discrimination they experienced within the world of publishing.

After unearthing #PublishingPaidMe, I found it intriguing that people of color were using social media platforms, like Twitter, to create these movements in hopes to inform others of the racial discrimination they experience. Because of this, I have decided to follow the conversation while using a Critical Race Theory and Technoculture approach to explain how diverse authors are using Twitter as a cultural conversation in relation to the PublishingPaidMe movement. At the end of this project, I wish to not only reveal this, but to also learn how authors of color are using this hashtag to fight against white normativity in the publishing world.

Discrimination in the Publishing Industry

Race and gender discrimination are a major part of the publishing industry and are the driving forces behind some of the social media movements we see today. Two scholars, Tin Leung and Koleman Strumpf (2021), examine and discuss the racial and gender discrimination seen within the book publishing industry. In the past, it has been known that white women and non-white authors have made significantly less than white male authors (Leung & Strumpf, 2021). Due to

this fact, Leung and Strumpf organized data about author salaries from Census microdata ranging from 1970-2019 and put it in a table. This table shows that "there were large differences in average pay across gender and race in this period and that most of these gaps have increased" (p. 2). This means that not only is this pay discrimination is still happening, but it has actually gotten worse over the years. After separating and analyzing their research, Leung and Strumpf discovered that "[B]lack females, [B]lack males, and white females were paid between \$2,500 and \$7,500 less than white males" (p. 2). As you can see from their research, this pay disparity between these groups is a concept that has been happening for years, but I believe it is still imperative to ask whether this situation can change.

In her article, "Hashtag Highlights Anti-Black Bias," writer Jennifer Baker (2020) points out that although anti-Black bias has been happening for a while, the Black Lives Matter protests during June 2020 have opened people's eyes to the discrimination marginalized groups experience in the publishing industry. According to Baker, many publishing agencies declared their support for the movement, but they still "continually reflected the dearth of Black people working in book publishing as well as the low numbers of Black authors published and supported in the industry" (p. 1). Young adult author L. L. McKinney pointed out this fact and went on social media to ask authors, both Black and white to disclose advances received for their novels. This request created the hashtag movement #PublishingPaidMe. Like McKinney asked, authors started to share how much money they received for their works. Baker states that the "number of six-figure advances received by white writers eclipsed the number for Black writers, particularly in the case of debuts published by major houses" (p. 1). Authors such as N.K. Jemisin, Kiese Laymon, and Jesmyn Ward even hopped into the conversation to share how they feel they have been cheated by the publishing industry.

By involving these big names into the debate, #PublishingPaidMe shows that even the most popular African American authors are experiencing some kind of pay disparity. Leung & Strumpf's and Baker's arguments about the role of discrimination in the book publishing industry is an idea I want to dive deeper into in my research. These articles prove that people of color are being treated differently than their white counterparts. Through my research, I want to not only solidify this fact but determine how authors of color are battling this racism.

The Study of Critical Race Theory

Originally a term used in legal studies, Edward Taylor (1998) defines Critical Race Theory as a movement that "challenges the experiences of whites as the normative standard and grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences of people of color" (p. 3). Ever since Critical Race Theory was created, academic scholars have taken its definition and applied it to our current world. For this reason, it is important to look at Critical Race Theory through the lens of the academic scholars who we examined in order to better understand the concept. In her "IssaTrap" dissertation, Temptaous McKoy (2019) uses Critical Race Theory, along with Womanist Theory and African American/ Black Rhetorics to "construct Amplification Rhetorics" (p. 49). In her work, McKoy focuses on how Critical Race Theory can be used as a tool to understand how race affects our everyday life. McKoy explains that Critical Race Theory

"spotlights how a group can be marginalized but not coerced, therefore (re)claiming their agency" (p. 52). In other words, even though whiteness is considered normal in today's society, marginalized groups have found ways to fight against this by declaring their rightful place within the world. This reclamation of agency is one of the three tenets described in her description of amplification rhetorics, which is defined by McKoy as the communication practices that speak about the experiences of marginalized groups, including African Americans. McKoy brings in the idea of amplification rhetorics and looks at how African Americans use trap music to define their life and their own personal experiences.

Within her work, McKoy consistently highlights how Critical Race Theory is significant in how an individual recognizes their position in society. Similar to McKoy, Andre Brock (2012) uses this idea and describes how people are also reclaiming their identity in the online world as well. For example, Andre Brock's article, "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation," describes how technology allows African Americans to declare their identity in specific social media platforms, like Twitter. Declaring the phenomenon "Black Twitter," Brock defines the term as Twitter's ability to be seen "as a cultural communication medium" that allows "users to participate in open-ended community building discourses in near real-time" (p. 19). After discovering that African Americans use Twitter more than other ethnic groups, Brock used a critical technoculture discourse analysis (CTDA) approach to study how exactly they are utilizing the platform. Brock noted in his work how African Americans communicated with one another through their own specific language on Twitter. It is through this language and communication with one another that African Americans form a contemporary community of discussion. These discussions then lead to the possibility of movements on different social media platforms, such as that associated with the social media hashtag #PublishingPaidMe.

Given McKoy's and Brock's analysis of Critical Race Theory, this concept can be used to understand marginalized groups in and out of the online world. Critical Race Theory highlights how people of color are "reclaiming their agency" (McKoy 2019, p. 52) within a world filled with racial bias. In McKoy's dissertation, African Americans use music as an outlet to share their experiences with the world. But offline is not the only place where marginalized groups can bond together and share their collective struggles. As Brock points out in his discussion about Black Twitter, African Americans are taking use of the platforms easy accessibility and transforming it into a cultural conversation. It is through McKoy's and Brock's description of Critical Race Theory that I focus my argument about the use of the new Twitter discussion "PublishingPaidMe. While examining the tweets I gathered, I want to determine how the topic of race fits into the hashtag and how it is being used as an argument. By doing so, I hope to see people of color coming together and forming a kind of community that allows them to share their struggles in the publishing industry by using the hashtag. If I do determine that marginalized groups are using Twitter as a cultural conversation, I also would like to establish how people of color are "reclaiming their agency" by utilizing the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe.

The Influence of Technoculture

The interactions between technology and culture can be clearly recognized in topics such as race and feminist studies. As stated in the previous section of this review, Brock describes how technology can be used as a cultural conversation, especially within Twitter. Brock relies on James Carey's definition of communication technologies and states that it is "promoted as value-free information transfer or as an opportunity to transmit culture to those less fortunate" (p. 6). As technology advances, it gains the capability of easily and quickly passing information from person to person. It is because of this ability that Brock believes technology is capable of impacting "racial and cultural identity" (p. 6).

Unfortunately, Brock also brings in the fact that in the United States, technology is mainly used to reinforce the idea of whiteness. Henry Giroux, quoted by Brock, states that "whiteness represents itself as a universal marker for being civilized" (p. 6). This fact still holds true today even in today's society. By holding on to whiteness as the norm, America is not supporting marginalized groups and their needs. On a more positive note, the rise of Black Twitter fights this cultural norm by building a community among African Americans that allow them to bond and communicate with one another. While they can speak with one another, they also have the capability of using technology to reach out to others to further discuss the racial bias they experience in their life. Technology and social media platforms allow for marginalized groups to spread culture quickly and easily to those who were not aware of them before.

As stated previously, even though Brock talks about Twitter as a cultural conversation he still points out the negative aspects of technoculture. In Adrienne Massanari's article, "How Reddit's Algorithm, Governance, and Culture Support Toxic Technocultures" (2017), she does the same but instead focuses on how toxic technocultures can affect gender. Massanari states that toxic technocultures are "unique in their leveraging of sociotechnical platforms as both a channel of coordination and harassment and their seemingly leaderless, amorphous quality" (p. 5). To reinforce her argument, Massanari examines the platform Reddit to discuss the Gamergate phenomenon in which women were victimized and anti-feminist ideas were spread. The idea of #Gamergate came to pass after Eron Gjoni, boyfriend of game designer Zoe Quinn, stated that Quinn's success was due to intimate relationships between her and gaming journalists (Massanari, 2017). After this, word spread, and the hashtag Gamergate was created and used to "delegitimize" and harass women (p. 6).

Massanari's article explains that technology's ability to spread information quickly and vastly is not always good. Both Brock and Massanari explain how technology can used as a cultural conversation, but unlike Brock, Massanari mainly focuses on how these platforms can be dangerous. In her Gamergate example, Massanari explains that these platforms can effortlessly spread hatred just because of how accessible they are. It is due to this that the goal of my research is to determine how people are using the hashtag #PublishingPaidMe and to see how effective it is as a cultural conversation. I can do this by studying the tweets that use the hashtag and determining if and how writers of color are communicating with one another.

Method

In my research, I am using a race and ethnicity viewpoint that combines both the Critical Race Theory and Technoculture Theory as explained by Brock. Through #PublishingPaidMe, members of minority groups are using technology, such as Twitter, to show others their place in the publishing world as underappreciated and underpaid authors. By doing this, authors of color have not only formed their own sense of community within the platform, but they have also created a movement encouraging social change outside of the platform itself, therefore using Twitter as a cultural conversation.

The Racial Divide

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter Movement hit its peak after the deaths of Breonna Taylor (March 13th) and George Floyd (May 25th). After learning about their deaths, hundreds of people took to the streets to speak out about the racial discrimination that minoritized groups experience. To show support for their movement, many publishing agencies stood beside protesters and argued for equality across all races. But as Baker (2020) points out in her article, "Hashtag Highlights Anti-Black Bias," publishing groups still held on to their own racial prejudices within their industry. After noticing the lack of racial representation in the field of publishing, authors started to question how the publishing houses' racism affected them.

How the Hashtag Was Created

Tochi Onyebuchi (2020), a Nigerian-American science fiction writer, took to Twitter on June 5, 2020, calling out publishing houses (Fig. 1). Onyebuchi's tweet tells publishing agencies that their "BLM statements are cute" but that he needs "the same energy" when they "start talking about Black writers and book advances." Onyebuchi ends his argument by joking that his tweet is going to cause a conversation that is as long as a CVS receipt. But Onyebuchi doesn't stop there. On the same day, Onyebuchi retweets his original tweet and starts to call out the "white 'allies' in publishing" (2020). Onyebuchi tells them that if they are "REALLY about that life" then they need "to get ready to have some real uncomfortable convos" about how much money they have received for their books (Fig. 2).

A day after Onyebuchi released his tweet, McKinney, a Black young adult author, tweeted asking fellow authors if they needed a hashtag. If was then that McKinney (2020) created #PublishingPaidMe. With this hashtag, authors (both people of color and white) could connect with one another on Twitter (see Fig. 3). Ever since #PublishingPaidMe was created, authors have released the amount they have made from their books. Eventually, a spreadsheet was made by Twitter user @recitrachel that asked authors what genre their books were as well as their age, race, disability status, and sexual orientation. Naturally, the spreadsheet also asks authors to share their publishers and the amount they made from their works. The spreadsheet containing this information is located here: #PUBLISHINGPAIDME - Google Sheets. In addition to the spreadsheet, a Twitter page was created on June 6, 2020, titled "Authors release their figures to illustrate pay disparities in the industry." While you can find Onyebuchi's tweet located here, authors take the opportunity to explain advance payouts and how advances are



Figure 1: Onyebuchi calls out the publishing houses.



Figure 2: Onyebuchi retweets his original tweet and adds to his argument.



Figure 3: Twitter uses the hashtag to promote a story on publishing disparity.

calculated to the public. Then finally, there is a section specifically dedicated to authors sharing their rates. The Twitter page, along with the spreadsheet that was created, highlights the pay disparity among white authors and authors of color. In doing so, it also shows how white writing is considered the norm among publishing houses.

If we look back at Taylor's definition from earlier, Critical Race Theory challenges whiteness as the cultural norm by grounding its "conceptual framework in the distinctive experiences ofpeople of color" (p.3). Beginning with Onyebuchi, thousands of authors have started to share not only their pay rates, but their collective experiences with the publishing industry. By coming together and fighting back against the racism displayed by the industry, authors of color are therefore "reclaiming their agency" (McKoy 2019, p.52).

The Fight against White Normativity

Though it is obvious that pay disparity exists, it is important to recognize how people of color are fighting back. Similar to Brock's example, people of color are using Twitter as a cultural conversation that allows them to bond together and discuss their shared experiences. In this case, the conversation began with Onyebuchi and started to spread after McKinney created



Figure 4: Zink shares her pay information in several tweets.

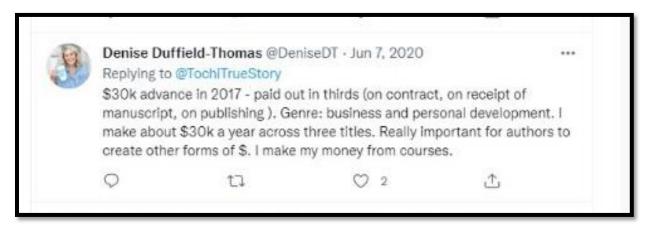


Figure 5: Duffield-Thomas also shares information about her pay.

#PublishingPaidMe. Onyebuchi encourages authors (white and people of color) to share the amounts they received from their book. Within the same day after Onyebuchi's tweet was published, authors like Michelle Zink and Denise Duffield-Thomas began to share the amounts they received for their works (Figs. 4 and 5). After that, hundreds of authors started to share their salary and show their support for authors of color.



Figure 6: McKinney shares what the hashtag reveals.

Some authors shared their book advance information, but others furthered the conversation by using the hashtag to discuss the racial implications on Twitter. In order to better understand the argument, I gathered ten tweets from Twitter from people using the hashtag. Using these tweets, Twitter users are furthering the conversation of race and how the publishing industry's racism impacts others.

While #PublishingPaidMe currently describes the pay disparity between white authors and writers of color, it is important to note that this was not always the case. Originally created to display the disparity between white and Black authors, the conversation grew into something bigger as more authors of color realized how much they were being discriminated against as well. In the words of McKinney (@elleonwords), creator of #PublishingPaidMe, the hashtag was first formed to show the "disparity between Black authors and non-Black authors specifically — born from the context of events during Summer 2020" (2020). Soon enough, McKinney writes, the hashtag expanded, with "the gap between white authors and authors of color being revealed as a result" (Fig. 6). This tweet in itself ties back to Brock's discussion on the influence of technoculture and how technology can bond marginalized groups together, therefore leading the conversation to be bigger than initially thought.

The second argument I uncovered was from Twitter users stating that publishers do not endorse the books written by authors of color like they do for white authors. Twitter user Haleh Agar (@HalehAgar) believes that low book advances lead to less buzz about a book. With less buzz, the works of diverse authors will not reach bookshops, therefore decreasing the amount of money they make from sales (Fig. 7). Agar writes that "it's not enough to just publish POC" but that they need to "publish them WELL" (2020). This argument was again brought up in the third tweet I found written by Melanie Conklin (@MLConklin). Melanie Conklin (@MLConklin) states that publishing agents, editors, and houses will "undervalue diverse writers" if they believe that the title will not sell (2020). As a result, the book will get low sales along with "a low advance" and "no marketing support" (Fig. 8). According to @MLConklin, "anything can sell if they invest in it." Another interesting point that she brings up is that agents/editors/houses



Figure 7: Agar proclaims the importance of the #PublishingPaidMe hashtag.



Figure 8: Conklin states that publishers must invest in diverse authors.

tend to not take responsibility for not supporting the book enough. Instead, they blame the author's writing for the lack of sales. By using the hashtag, Conklin is calling out publishing houses and telling them that their racism and lack of support for a diverse author's work is the real reason that it is not successful.

Another discussion brought up using #PublishingPaidMe was how white authors seem to receive more money after their first book is published (Figs. 9 and 10). A Twitter user, Kerstin Hall (@Kerstin_Hall), tweeted that "authors often only hit the big advances on their fifth book or later" (2020). A second Twitter user, JJ Bola (@JJ_Bola), states that "white writers can still get a bigger advance for their second book, even after the first book has flopped." Whether the biggest advance comes from after the second or fifth book, these users agree that authors of color are receiving less money from their books. @Kerstin_Hall asks Twitter "who has the resources to keep trying...and who is forced to quit." @JJ_Bola points out a similar argument

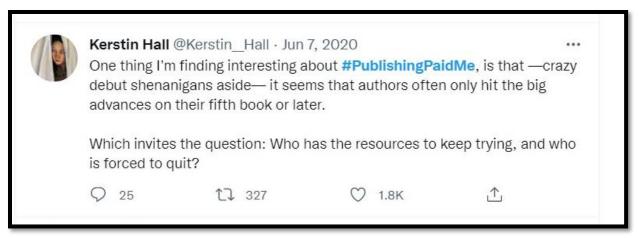


Figure 9: Hall states how long people wait until they receive big advances.



Figure 10: Bola notes white authors are given chances even after their books fail.

and states that "Black writers aren't given the opportunity to fail." Even if the work of white writer fails, that author still receives an advance big enough for them to continue their writing. Authors of color, on the other hand, do not have this luxury. The tweets by @HalehAgar and @MLConklin show us that publishing houses do not create enough buzz about a diverse author's work, which in turn lowers the advance received by those authors. The tweets by Hall and Bola then show that with a low advance, a book has a higher chance of failure, and so diverse authors may not have the chance to keep writing.

Another tweet that I looked at is one by Dr. Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, or @ILoveCopyright, who tweeted how the publishing industry's racism can be recognized by a "negative cycle" (2020). If we look at the chart below (Fig. 11), the cycle starts out by describing how people of color are not represented enough in children's books. This lack of representation discourages children of color from being an author. The children of color who do grow up to be authors are forced to face challenges in the publishing industry and may not even get their works published. The few authors of color who do succeed in getting their works published still do not get paid enough compared to their white counterparts. By looking at the previous arguments, it can be seen that some authors of color do not make enough to live off of writing. Therefore, the cycle

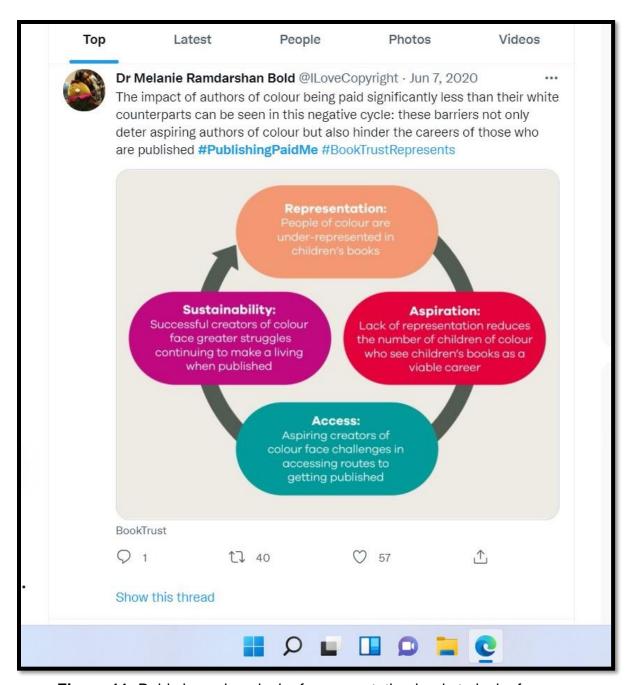


Figure 11: Bold shows how lack of representation leads to lack of access.

continues with the children who see the lack of people of color in the books they read. With this visualization, @ILoveCopyright states that "these barriers not only deter aspiring authors of color, but also hinder the career of those who are published." Bold's tweet displays the negative implications stemming from this pay discrimination. Bold dives deep into these effects and shows how the lack of representation of people of color in books directly influences the struggles authors of color endure in the publishing industry. In the third part of the cycle under "Access," Bold states that "aspiring creators of color face challenges in accessing routes to

getting published." This negative cycle of racism in the publishing industry further highlights what authors of color undergo while trying to publish their work.

But one aspect that Bold does not cover in her tweet is the emotional impact that they experience. Therefore, two tweets, one by Rebekah Weatherspoon (@RdotSpoon) and the other by Ashley Woodfolk (@AshWrites), are analyzed here to help better understand what they go through as authors of color (Figs. 12 and 13). The first tweet by Weatherspoon reveals that they are having "crippling anxiety about starting [their] next project because of what [they] learned from #PublishingPaidMe" (2020). Aware of the racial discrimination seen in the publishing industry, authors of color are becoming more hesitant to create and publish their works, for fear that they will be underpaid and underappreciated. While Weatherspoon speaks of their own emotional toll as a writer, Woodfolk go into deeper detail as to what it means to be an author of color fighting to be seen in the publishing world. Woodfolk informs other Twitter users that writers of color have been "told to wait, to be quiet, to be grateful" so that when they did "by some miracle get an opportunity," they would "be grateful for whatever money [they] got for [their] work, even if it wasn't fair" (2020). Authors like Witherspoon are already hesitant to start their authorial journey lest they not be paid enough, but when authors of color do get their work published, they are told to take what they can get. With the anxiety and emotional burden it takes being an author of color, it is no wonder why a hashtag like #PublishingPaidMe was needed.



Figure 12: Weatherspoon expresses anxiety after learning about others' experiences.

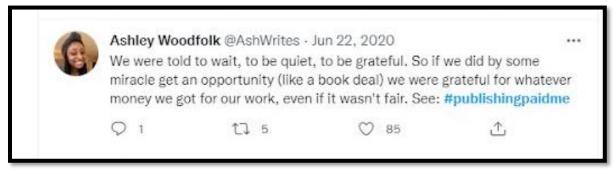


Figure 13: Woodfolk states that Black authors are expected to be grateful even when things are unfair.

Through the racial discrimination and the emotional toll it carries, there is a light to be seen, as #PublishingPaidMe has led to some changes in the field. Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah (@NK_Adjei), author of *Friday Black*, refers back to McKinney (@elleonwords) and her creation of the movement. In doing so, Adjei-Brenyah speaks on the newfound transparency the hashtag has presented and even talks about how "[his] contract has been changed to better reflect the worth of the work" (2020). Ending his tweet, Adjei-Brenyah calls out to the writers who were involved in the movement, for they "were vulnerable and transparent in that moment." In addition to speaking on how the hashtag affected him, he gives credit to the authors who were brave enough to share their salaries in order to bring to light the pay disparity (Fig. 14).

Like Adjei-Brenyah, John Manuel Arias draws attention "to everyone who pushed despite it potentially damaging [their] careers" (2020). But instead of focusing on just #PublishingPaidMe, Arias speaks about several movements seen on Twitter. According to Arias, Twitter has "proved itself the platform of industry change" (Fig. 15). If we look back to McKinney's tweet from earlier, it is shown how technoculture allowed the hashtag to move from representing Black authors to authors of color as a whole. Within this transformation, we are able to see the change caused as the result. While not all authors are getting the pay they deserve like Adjei-Brenyah, it shows the possibility of a radical improvement in the publishing industry. With Twitter becoming a platform for social change, authors of color now have a tool against the racial discrimination they experience in the field.



Figure 14: Adjei-Brenyah expresses love for those who were transparent.



Figure 15: Arias brings together several hashtags making a difference.

As stated earlier, Taylor (1998) believes that Critical Race Theory fights against white normativity by discussing the lives and experiences of people of color. By using #PublishingPaidMe, a community has been built on Twitter that focuses on the support of authors of color. But while some authors are sharing their advances and pay rates, some Twitter users are diving deeper into the discussion of how race fits within the publishing world. After analyzing the tweets above, I have realized how users are using Twitter as a cultural conversation. By using Twitter to discuss the racism shown by the publishing industry, users are spreading knowledge to others. It is at this point that Critical Race Theory and Technoculture Theory converge. While authors of color are coming together to reclaim their place in the writerly world, they are also sharing racial and cultural awareness through the use of a simple hashtag.

Conclusion/Implications

I began this project to better understand how authors of color were using #PublishingPaidMe as a cultural conversation and how this conversation describes their experiences working in the publishing industry. Even though white authors are considered the standard, diverse authors have used Twitter to fight back and spread awareness to others. In doing so, Twitter users have further discussed just how differently authors of color are being treated that white authors. In my research, I have discovered that diverse authors are not only getting paid less, but that they are shown less support from publishing houses, editors, and agents. In addition, it is clear that this lack of support and racial discrimination is taking a strong emotional toll on authors of color. It is my hope that this hashtag will cause change within the publishing world, because if not, authors of color will not get the representation they deserve.

If I were to do this project differently, I would have analyzed more tweets to find out what other conversations about race were taking place. While I took a race and ethnicity viewpoint, it is possible to take a feminist study to better understand how and if women of color are being paid less than men. Also, I could have taken a disability standpoint in which I would analyze tweets to determine if authors of color that have a disability are experiencing a pay disparity as well. By taking a feminist and disability methodology, I might be able to see how these conversations are being talked about on Twitter.

By taking a race and ethnicity viewpoint that mixes both Critical Race Theory and Technoculture Theory though, I was able to examine how #PublishingPaidMe began and how it grew. Originally a hashtag created for black authors, it soon became relevant to all authors of color. Through #PublishingPaidMe, these authors were allowed to create a community in which they could discuss and fight back against the publishing industry's pay discrimination. In doing so, other authors and book supporters have jumped in, creating a social movement within Twitter. The success of this movement can be seen in the case of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, whose pay has been altered because of the movement. Soon enough, it may be possible to see more and more authors of color receiving the pay they deserve for their work.

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Savannah E. Baggett (She/Her) is an undergraduate student at the University of Florida who is working to obtain her bachelor's degree in English with a minor in mass communication. For the past five years, she has been working as a library technician assistant, which not only fuels her love for books but also allows her to connect with her community. In addition to her love for novels, Savannah adores Marvel movies and spends any free time she has watching them. After graduation, she hopes to either become a teacher or work in the book publishing industry.