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# RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS: LOOKING AT *DATE MY FAMILY* THROUGH AN AFRICAN CONCEPTUAL LENS

## ABSTRACT

*Viewers of reality dating shows on television have found a platform on Twitter to change the manner in which they consume the content of the shows. Audiences of the South African show Date My Family (DMF) use this social media platform to express their views and value judgements about the show and in particular about the performances of those seeking love on the show. The traditionally private act of courtship in an African context is reimagined in the manner in which audiences in these shows have brought the scrutiny of a private act into the public realm. Through an analysis of what was arguably one of the most noteworthy episodes of DMF (featuring Mdu Nyoni), and subsequent value judgements by viewers on Twitter, this article argues that there is nothing inherently surprising about the seeming shift of power to the audience in authenticating contestant performance on South African reality dating shows, and that is in essence an act of a traditional village digitally re-imagined.*

**Keywords:** *Date My Family;* reality television; performativity; African communitarianism; Black Twitter; social media communication; media studies; Ubuntu; digital village

## INTRODUCTION

With most members of society are now digital citizens, despite some lingering controversies (see Grazian 2005; Ginsburg 2008: 130), many commercial organisations have embraced digitisation, moving away gradually from analogue technology (Walker *et al*. 2010: 174). It is also important to note that new media are not simply a consequence of technical inventions, but these new technologies derive from a two-stage process of inventing and "social institutionalizing" (Ströber 2004: 484). Furthermore, society "institutionalises" inventions by discovering new possibilities of communication; it formats new media functions and adapts new media; it develops new economic models; and last, but not least, society accepts new media by creating a new political framework and a new legal order for it (Ströber 2004: 485).

Apart from enabling a participatory culture, user-generated content, connected communities of interest, destruction of the media industry hegemony, as well as fluidity across platforms, new media have other benefits that it offers to the society (Boyd 2008: 19). The implication is that a user culture is created, which in turn promulgates a new urban culture and new ways of life (Mäenpää 2001: 108).

New media, such as social media, can be used to extend the user experience of traditional forms of media, such as reality television. The result is an extension of audience reach and participation in unprecedented ways. The ways in which social media use, in particular Twitter, collide with the commentary on reality television shows is a perfect example of how audiences become more empowered to engage with media content. Of interest here is how viewers of the South African reality dating show, *Date My Family* (DMF), have found a platform to radically change the manner in which they consume the content of the show on and through Twitter. Audiences of DMF use this social media platform as an opportunity to express their views and judgements about the show and, in particular, about the performances of those seeking love on the show. The traditionally private act of courtship in an African context is reimagined in the manner in which DMF audiences have brought the scrutiny of the private act into the public realm. This scrutiny has been evidenced by various episodes in which the impressions that those seeking love on the show have attempted to make on the family and unwittingly on the audience.

Despite love and romance being pervasive and a universally shared pursuit (Singer 2010), there has been little investigation of both of these phenomena in Africa (Thomas & Cole 2009). The situation is even more complex in South Africa given the diversity and cultural differences among its peoples. This article presents itself as an example of how rich African concepts can be fruitfully applied to help us understand and make sense of previously taken for granted public displays of romance and love in South Africa. The epistemological blindness and empirical blindness hitherto given to the subject of romantic relationships in South Africa is challenged through this work.

The article presents analytical and conceptual arguments that Black Twitter is an extension and reification of the public power that the African village has always had in authenticating performativity in private issues of romance. This is done, firstly, by focusing on a previously under-researched area of romantic dating shows in South Africa and, secondly, by doing so through the lens of African communitarianism.

## THE TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA JUXTAPOSITION

Traditional media (such as television) and social media (such as Twitter) have more in common than is readily apparent. These commonalities make juxtaposing and investigating how audiences intersect with the two forms of media potentially fruitful and insightful. As a genre, reality TV hinges on the presupposition of the "ordinary". This is because of the ordinariness of the people featured in the shows (Bonner 2003). The people are ordinary because of their everydayness, instead of being professional actors. That is, the programmes claim to represent real people and situations, a claim that sets reality television apart from fictional stories on television. By participating in

reality shows ordinary people help to define what ordinary means. The content of the shows is also represented as ordinary and focuses on everyday topics, which function to shape the audience's behaviour. An illustration of this ordinariness is offered by reality dating shows such as DMF.

DMF is a South African reality dating show, which airs on Mzansi Magic (DSTV channel 161). It helps single people in their quest for love by sending them on dates with the families of their potential partners. During the date, the singleton gets to know the potential partners through interaction with their family and friends over dinner. An episode is one hour long, and features a home visit to three families. At the end of the show, the singleton picks a preferred partner based on the interaction with the family, and goes on an actual date with this partner (Mopedi 2015).

Viewers of the DMF then go on to Twitter to engage with the content of the show. Twitter, launched in 2006, is described by Jansen *et al*. (2009) as a form of electronic word of mouth. It has recently become the focus of scholarly attention, looking at how this social media platform can be used for various applications, including facilitating communication, informing and mobilising social unrest, and informing political discourse and preceding revolutionary events on the ground. It is the third most popular social networking site in South Africa and has approximately 6.6 million users. In an article on Twitter activism, Bosch (2017) suggests that Twitter has a more intensive engagement than Facebook.

## Questioning performativity on DMF

In an article on DMF, Morapedi (2015) touches on how it is "a freshly brainstormed and culturally relevant concept that isn't based on the success of an American version". This praise of originality, however, is not without criticism. In the same article, he raises the argument that this show makes the audience wonder why so many young people are looking for love on television and questions what ever happened to finding love in "the traditional way".

Morapedi is not the only one questioning the relevance of a public performance of love. Viewers of the show, through the medium of Twitter, have voiced many concerns on specific episodes. One of the most controversial of these episodes, as exemplified by the publicity it drew, was an episode that aired on 15 January 2017. This episode featured businessman Mduduzi 'Mdu' Nyoni as the eligible bachelor. His quest to find love was called into question through what has been dubbed as Black Twitter. It did not take long for #datemyfamily to trend. Shortly after the show Nyoni had to deactivate his social media accounts because of the backlash.

'Black Twitter' refers to a group of Twitter users who are vocal about their unconventional and conscious views on debates and current affairs. These debates are mostly topical, referred to as trending, at that moment in time. Pilane (2014) defines Black Twitter as a cultural identity on Twitter that is focused on issues of interest to the black community. In her article, Pilane also focuses on the South African context of this section of Twitter by providing definitions from prominent scholars. She writes that in South Africa "it is predominantly made up of the young black middle-class so there is a lot of discussion

on pop culture on any given day". While robust discussions on crucial societal matters take place on this platform, there is also a fair share of humour.

While different forms and versions of Black Twitter exist in various countries, it is important to note that each is unique for various reasons. This article only focuses on factors prevalent in the South African context. Like in any village, dynamics differ. Villagers on Black Twitter can be identified by the use of certain hashtags, coined terms, and shared interests and topics. Furthermore, within the South African context, Black Twitter is mostly active in the collective consumption of reality TV on what is dubbed "Sunday Twitter". During this time, there is a spike in tweet activity and conversation. This is also when DMF is aired. In this manner a simulacrum of an African village is formed.

## Surveillance power and African communitarianism

The importance of privacy, although universal, differs in the extent to which it is valued across cultures. The value placed on privacy worldwide has intensified because of Western individualistic culture, which tends to value individual privacy more than non-Western nations and cultures (Tavani 2007). Subsequently, the rules that govern how this privacy is regulated rest on the critical factor of how much it is valued (Metzger 2007). Understanding the growth of this value system of individual privacy in an African context is important in the context of this article as it assists in understanding the dynamics of privacy and surveillance in DMF.

There is an assumption that communal living in preindustrial societies somehow muted individualism (see Henderson 2006). The link to communal living creates the illusion that individuals in preindustrial contexts had no room to carve out any sense of privacy because everything was known about them. This is misleading in that it reduces privacy to physical space. Privacy does not necessarily need physical space in order to be exercised. An individual may still have private thoughts while in the company of significant others. Individuals are both social and personal at once. Humans are both private and public, moving along this continuum as each unique interaction presents itself.

Even within the African context, the precolonial value of communitarianism did not preclude individuality. This, despite the fact that communitarianism in Africa has traditionally emphasised the centrality of the community in the governance of social life and individual identity. The community is conceived of more concretely as a communion of souls with shared beliefs, values, practices and histories. A community is seen as different from a collective, which is an aggregate of individuals. Community members are seen as intertwined and woven into each other's existence by a consistent cord of communal ontologies.

The debate has been whether the commonly held notions by scholars in African thought about communal ontologies preceding individual histories is an extreme assertion or not (see Gyekye 1992). The assertion that the community precedes the individual is based in part on the belief that the individual is born into the community and therefore finds his/her ontology through the communal experience (see Menkiti 1984). The individual

is taught the norms, practices and beliefs, which they come to adopt, by the community; in turn, these find their expression through communal living. Therefore, an individual is not born with personhood – the community gives this to him/her. Menkiti (1986, in Matolino 2009: 161) summarises this thought as follows: "The individual, according to this version of communitarianism cannot exist alone as he or she is wholly constituted by their relations with others in the community". In this way, the viewers of DMF who regularly comment on the show on Twitter can be seen as a community in the service of helping in the process of constituting the personhood of the singles on the show. The individual has a responsibility to advance the common good and values of the community in the execution of the daily duties accorded to them. By doing this, the individual is accorded personhood. This means that an individual can fail at achieving personhood if the community deems the individual to have failed in being communal. Thus, communitarianism is opposed to individualism and not individuality.

Gyekye (1992) asserted that this version of communitarianism presents the danger of stifling individual autonomy and individual rights. He faults the assertion that an individual is wholly constituted by the community. For him, this assertion makes the community the all-domineering structure over individual autonomy. There are implications for privacy in his argument. If an individual is not completely autonomous, then it also means that he/she cannot exercise privacy according to the dictates of his/her needs and wants. The sense of individual privacy would become subsumed in what the community considers important information to be known about the individual. Individual privacy, therefore, would be secondary if it clashes with the greater good of the community. The ability of an individual to challenge and reimagine the community values in different ways than how he/she was socialised is evidence that the individual does indeed have autonomy. By giving voice to the fact of the existence of this autonomy, Gyekye (*ibid*.) suggests that he has offered an alternative way of conceptualising communitarianism. His version, he asserts, recognises that individuals have self-determination and human rights. Therefore, through a challenge of consensus and uniformity, individual autonomy is said to exist.

Eze (2008: 391) also highlights the dangers of consensus in communitarian thought, calling consensus "overwhelmingly tyrannical and totalitarian". Consensus is seen as clashing with individual needs and interests, as common good is more highly prized. The ultimate result is conformity and uniformity. This article considers Gyekye and Eze's concerns as serious, which speak to the need not to overlook the dangers of overemphasising consensus at the expense of the individual, and to give room for autonomy. In the exercise of privacy, a couple would need to either reveal the status of the relationship if this is deemed to be important for preserving harmony, peace and solidarity in the community, or to conceal the status of their relationship if this is deemed as deviating from a shared consensus in the community that such a relationship should be concealed. Either way, the couple would be at the whim of consensus, it would appear. If the community has reached consensus that revealing or concealing is deviating from a shared value, then the individual (or couple) should follow suit.

Individuality has always been accorded a place in African traditional thought. In Africa, the act of giving names to children, and a totem, as well as clan names in preindustrial societies are some examples of the recognition of individuality (cf. Gyekye 1992). An individual's uniqueness and contribution to the collective was never meant to be overshadowed in any way by communal living. Even with the constraints of physical space in the home, moments of solitude could still be found in routine individual tasks, which were assigned.

A final example of communitarianism is the moral ethic of harmony espoused in most African and Southern African societies, known as Ubuntu (Metz 2007; Metz & Gaie 2010; Sesanti 2010; Mboti 2015). The value of Ubuntu is usually summed up in the phrase, "I am because you are", and is usually associated with an emphasis on the communal taking precedence over the individual. However, a closer reading of this principle reveals that the emphasis is actually on the actions of the individual that affect another. The only way the other can become a good human being is if the individual plays his/her role in ensuring friendliness and prompting acts of humanity towards his/her fellow citizens. This does not negate that the actions of the individual, in turn, are affected by his/her actions toward his/her fellow human being. The point here is that the moral ethic of Ubuntu recognises the power of the individual to affect another (Diagne 2009: 15). If the African moral ethic recognises the individual, then by implication the privacy of the individual is recognised.

Within the African – and particularly the South African – context of this study, the consideration of the dynamics of culture in the role of pursuing love and romance is important. The cultural landscape of Africa, particularly of South Africa, has been shaped largely by colonialism's attempts at subverting indigenous cultures (Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008). The eclectic nature of contemporary culture in South Africa was also shaped by the processes of apartheid, which ensured a quest for unity in diversity in the new South Africa (Kriger & Zegeye 2001; Garuba & Raditlhalo 2008).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology used for this study was an interpretive analysis of tweets shared by viewers. Tweets were obtained through an online ethnographic design. This method, according to Skågeby (2011), provides the researcher with multiple options on data collection and analysis online. For this study, a small-scale sample of 150 tweets were collected and analysed. These were obtained from organic searches on the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API) using hashtags such as #DateMyFamily and #MduNyoni. These tweets were the ones mostly retweeted or quoted by news sources related to the Mdu Nyoni episode.

The selected sample size is not uncommon in studies of this nature. In a similar small-scale study that used Twitter to study audience engagement, Barbour (2016) used a sample of 72 tweets. Her main objective and focus was not on the number of tweets, but rather on the behaviour of audiences consuming media through Twitter. Thus, the purpose of this small-scale online ethnographic sample was not to study the entire

season of DMF, but rather to study the re-imagination of an African village within the digital context at the hand of one episode.

The inductive analysis section of this study rested on the constant comparative technique, which saw themes from the tweets being identified and elaborated upon as the analysis progressed. The analytic process of content analysis, which is associated with Charmaz (1995: 37-45), was adapted for the purpose of this study. This is because the researchers sought to go beyond simple categories and make theoretical contributions through the analysis. Charmaz's process is conversant with theory-building as it is founded on the principles of grounded theory. Grounded theory itself relies on a bundle of "specific techniques in flexible and different ways, with the aim of generating theoretical insights from qualitative data […] moving from specific instances to general" (Bloor & Wood 2006: 95).

The process involved coding the tweets as the first major analytic phase of the research process employing thematic analysis. Second came focused coding, which entailed taking earlier codes that continually reappeared in the initial coding and using those codes to sift through large amounts of data. Thus, the focused coding was less open-ended and more directed than the line-by-line coding. It was also considerably more selective and more conceptual. The focused coding allowed the researchers to create and to try out categories for capturing data. Lastly, memos were written on common themes in the tweets, which assisted in looking at the coding as a process to explore, rather than as solely a way to sort data into topics. Memo-writing consisted of taking the categories apart by breaking them into their components.

## FINDINGS

The content analysis conducted on the tweets from the sampled episode of DMF indicated a thematic pattern based on the following themes: performativity, surveillance and communality.

## Performativity

The nature of DMF suggests that the bachelor not only learns more about his potential date through the family, but the family also get to know the bachelor. When Mdu Nyoni visited the first of the families to find out more about his potential date with their loved one, his presentation of himself raised suspicion with viewers. The viewers of the show, who are active on Twitter, almost immediately pointed out the inconsistencies in Mdu's behaviour on screen. The first issue that was raised through Black Twitter was that Mdu kept switching from a British accent to a South African accent. This "code switching" happened through the entire episode:

> #DateMyFamily fake us we are your accent - @mmathaha1

> Bra Mdu's accent flies from SA to England to the USA in 3 minutes #DateMyFamily - @TrevorBZungu

The second inconsistency raised by viewers on Black Twitter, regarding how Mdu was portraying his identity to the three families, was the incoherency in his life story. To one family, Mdu said he was an orphan who fended for himself, yet to another family he said that his older brother took him in and he stayed with him in London. Viewers were left uncertain as to what to make of this irreconcilable detail about Mdu's life story as it related to his upbringing. For viewers engaging with the show through Twitter, it was too major an error not to comment on it.

A third and final detail that did not add up in what Mdu said in his interaction with the three families was about where he stays and what he does for a living. He mentioned three different places of residence in his conversations with the families. Mdu further said that he is a businessman, but was not forthcoming about the details of his business.

## Surveillance

Viewers of DMF watching this particular episode did not allow the confusing portrayal by Mdu to leave them in suspense. These viewers showed how technological affordances allow for acts of symmetrical surveillance to take place. Viewers took it upon themselves to find out the "facts" about Mdu's life in order to make sense of the inconsistent details he presented on screen. The surveillance function displayed through Black Twitter also came with its own linguistic norms to go with the entire "ritual". Terms such as "Twitter detectives", "files" and "dirt" were used by users to identify the actions that come with uncovering truths about an unreliable contestant on DMF. The prevalence of the jargon makes for clever word play, which is a symbolic tie of this community. Figure 1 below shows what tweets of this nature look like:



**FIGURE 1**

In the case of Mdu Nyoni, the viewers found out that he is not an orphan and he does not own a business, as claimed, but works as a technician. The "detectives"

went on to share pictures and screen shots of private WhatsApp conversations on their Twitter handles using the DMF hashtag to make it easier to collate all the "files". Through this collaborative surveillance effort, it became apparent that viewers were justified in questioning Mdu's performativity on the show. The inconsistencies turned out to be untruths that Mdu told about himself for reasons that remained unknown to the viewers. The technological affordances of social media made the process of surveillance, and the sharing of this information, an expedient one. Black Twitter had shown its potential to authenticate performances on DMF through acts of surveillance.

## Communality

The acts of surveillance that take place among users of Black Twitter in the quest to authenticate the performance on DMF are facilitated through interaction and dialogue amongst these users. Users seem to be bound by not only a common quest to uncover what they consider to be the truth but a set of practices that comes with this mandate. They have found a communal space through Black Twitter in which to actively interrogate individual performance on screen, and enact remedial action where necessary. The practices that come with this community, as suggested in the previous theme, centre on the use of linguistic and semiotic practices from jargon to memes. Hence, those outside this community would struggle to decipher some of the cultural practices on Black Twitter. Figure 2 depicts one user's post with the comment, "Mdu sprinkling us with your British accent…" with an accompanying picture of "salt bae".
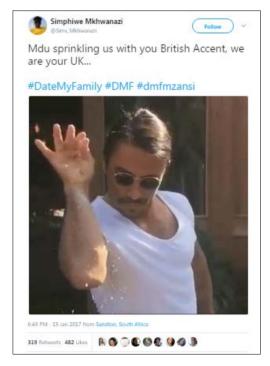


**FIGURE 2**

Those who are strangers to Black Twitter would struggle to recognise that "salt bae" was trending on Twitter just a few months before the Mdu Nyoni episode on DMF. Thus, the continuity is enacted through the use of "salt bae" that only the "residents" of this village will understand.

Although the users of Black Twitter who watch DMF are strangers, in the sense that they might never have met face-to-face, their quest to uncover what they consider the truth seems to bring them together. Geographic boundaries are broken down as these previously distant souls use a shared discourse and morality to communicate on issues of love and identity, as seen on DMF. The community takes its role seriously because DMF's format is reality television. There is a sense that the issues tackled here have existential impact broader than the show itself. If the contestants are there to find love, surely this is something any African community should take seriously. This seriousness is evidenced by how Mdu Nyoni's personal phone numbers and social media account details were shared by users on Black Twitter in order to confront the apparent lies. The legality of the actions of the members of this "Twitter community" was not considered as part of this study, but could be an important consideration for further study.

## DISCUSSION

Making a good impression, by the bachelor on the families and the families on the bachelor, is one of the presuppositions of the DMF format. Conversing and getting to know the potential date through the family is the reason why the date happens with the family over a meal. When a contestant does not seem to be forthcoming to the family in the information they he gives about himself, this potentially seems to undermine the whole aim of the show. Presenting a coherent narrative of the self forms the backbone of any attempt to get to know another. Performing otherwise, in this instance by contestant Mdu Nyoni, seems to be at the heart of why the suspicions of the users on Black Twitter were raised and subsequent questions about Mdu's performance were raised on this social media platform.

Because Mdu did not seem to be true to himself, the community (through Black Twitter) took it upon itself to help him present what they considered to be the truest version of himself. Akin to the value of Ubuntu that undergirds African communitarianism, Black Twitter as a reification of the African community becomes the custodian of authenticating the individual experience. There is a moral duty to make the individual the best version of himself/herself that (s)he can be. The maxim "I am because you are" is seen in how users collaborate to bring about what they consider to be the truth, and thus they do not allow a contestant to be relegated to the shadows of falsehood.

Surveillance in this context makes sense because in order to authenticate truth, an investigation must occur. Scrutinising the life of a contestant is not an act that is strange, given the norms of African communitarianism. Private acts that find themselves in the public realm of reality television, such as in the case of finding love on DMF, call for the seriousness that they indicate. In other words, the private act of courtship, which now finds itself within the public confines, is an invitation for the community

to become involved. In a traditional African setting, a couple would only involve the families and community in the final act of engagement. The subversion of this norm through DMF invites the digital village, in the form of Black Twitter, to partake in the act of negotiating love. Communitarianism, although it places the community at the centre of the formations of personhood, leaves room for the individual to exercise moral excellence in reaching the full potential of personhood. In other words, provision is made in communitarian thought for autonomy because the individual still has to attain excellence in his/her discharge of the duties that rest upon him/her.

However, this should not equate to an uncritical celebration of Black Twitter as a panacea, reminiscent of the traditional African village. African communitarianism in its monolithic abuse of power at times did call for the sacrificing of the individual to the gods. This is obviously inconsistent with the value of Ubuntu. In the same vein, Black Twitter users sometimes make their comments too personal, doing that which is less than humane, and in some instances could be considered defamatory. Despite this concern, this study fruitfully employed the lens of African communitarianism to study how social media can help us understand how culture both reinvents itself and shapes communication channels in ways never thought possible.

## CONCLUSION

A few limitations, which will be important in informing how future research in this area evolves, are worth noting. To begin with, the fact that it is a study in the social media landscape was a challenge. As Pilane (2015) mentions, not the entire population is on Twitter. Thus, there are people who viewed this episode, but did not engage on Twitter. Their views remain unaccounted for. Twitter is a space that excludes those affected by the digital divide. Secondly, due to technical challenges, not all tweets directed at the episode were reviewed. This ultimately means that the study did not take into account the input of all the participants who were engaged in the conversation. In her study, Barbour (2016) highlights that opinions expressed on social media platforms are made by only a fraction of active users.

Through an analysis of Mdu Nyoni's performativity and the subsequent value judgement by viewers on Twitter, this article argues that there is nothing inherently surprising about the apparent shift of power to the audience in authenticating contestant performance on DMF. This study thus argues that Black Twitter is simply an extension and reification of the African village. That being said, the authors are well aware of the negative space that it occupies in society. This is evident in cases of racism, cyber bullying, as well as homophobic hate speech. Despite this, Black Twitter also exists as one of the most effective platforms for activism for this generation. This cyber village takes action for the rights of women, and it fights against racism and various forms of oppression. Thus, communal surveillance of characters such as Mdu Nyoni is an act of a traditional village digitally re-imagined.

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