Resisting media marginalisation: Black women's digital content and collectivity

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Introduction

Calls for continued research regarding the racial dynamics of consumption and market processes highlight gaps in our understanding of how racial subjectivities are experienced in virtual spaces (Grier, Thomas and Johnson 2019; Lindridge, Henderson and Ekpo 2015). Our work examines nuances of the online experiences of Black women in Britain, who are structurally marginalised amidst British mass-media and society. This paper builds upon work which elucidates the role of digital technology and online consumption communities in navigating marketplace discrimination (Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018; Scaraboto and Fischer 2013). It unpacks internet activity concerning under-researched and transnational elements of online Black public spheres. In doing so, this work engages with tensions between the resistant and commercial potential of online content created by Black women, who marketers increasingly identify as digital trendsetters (Nielsen 2017a).

Prior research illuminates the existence of a vibrant Black online presence. Related work outlines digital discourse which is distinctly shaped by Black women (Bailey and Trudy 2018; Cottom 2016; Gray 2016; Jackson 2016), who experience intersectional forms of structural oppression such as the overlapping effects of both sexism and racism (Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010; Crenshaw 2017). In particular, research about the experiences of Black people in the US is testament to the socio-

cultural significance of their digital encounters and online dialogue to do with Black lives. Although such work is occurring (Gabriel 2016; Sobande 2017), there has been comparatively scarce scholarly attention paid to the online experiences of Black people in Britain, let alone Black women specifically.

Following robust research on Black online content and community (Brock 2012; Byrne 2007; Everett 2008; 2009; Steele 2016; 2017), this paper positions Black women in Britain as being part of a global and digitally-connected Black experience, albeit one that is not monolithic or accessible to all Black people. Through analysis of aspects of 23 interviews, this paper examines meaning-making in online settings that can be a source of Black women's resistance, as well as leaving their digital commentary exposed to corporate co-optation. Such discussion is framed in relation to transnational Black digital dynamics (Everett 2009), through which Black women in Britain engage with conversations and cultural references stemming from the US.

This work is steered by the overarching question: how are issues regarding race, Black community and digital content implicated in experiences of media and marketplace marginalisation and resistance? Our paper procedes with writing about racial identities and inequalities in the marketplace, as well as the concept of the oppositional gaze (hooks 1992) and discussion of Black digital contexts (Brock 2012; Byrne 2007; Cottom 2016; Everett 2008; 2009; Gray 2016; Jackson 2016; Steele 2016; 2017). Following on from that is reflection on the notions of digital re-embodiment (Belk 2013) and blurred boundaries between online media production and consumption (prosumption) (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Subsequently, the methodological approach is detailed, and thereafter is analysis of interview participants' perspectives.

Theoretical background

Racial identities and inequalities in the marketplace

The marketplace is rife with resources through which constructions of identity emerge (Brownlie and Hewer 2011; Grier, Thomas and Johnson 2019; Holak 2013; Lindridge, Henderson and Ekpo 2015). Among the most salient issues of identity, ideology and inequality in the marketplace, are those regarding race and ethnicity (Crockett 2008; Henderson, Hakstian and Williams 2016; Harrison, Thomas, and Cross 2017). Related matters include the prevailing force of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism (hooks 1992), which contributes to how Black women have been objectified and oppressed throughout history.

Marketing and media continues to reflect and reinforce colonial power dynamics (Bobo 2001; Bonsu 2009), such as through stereotypical portrayals of Black women which typify how consumption practices can perpetuate social inequalities (Moisander, Peñaloza, and Valtonen 2009). As Hirsch (2018a) reports, a *Guardian* investigation revealed that in 2017 there were whole months when not a single Black person was featured on the cover of Britain's best-selling magazines. Such observations foreground that in comparison, white identities are commonly depicted and treated as a social norm (Davis 2018). Additionally, the work of Gopaldas and Siebert (2018) emphasises how global marketing imagery mirrors the intersectionality of structural marginalisation, such as the interdependent effects of racism and sexism which result in inter-racial and intra-racial social hierarchies (Bailey and Trudy 2018; Crenshaw 2017).

When Black women do become visible in British media and public arenas, they are prime targets for backlash. One case in point is that Labour MP – Diane Abbott, faced nearly 50% of all online harassment aimed at women who are members of

parliament, prior to the 2017 British election (Dhrodia 2017). Another study suggests that Black women are 84% more likely than white women to be mentioned as part of abusive comments on *Twitter* (Amnesty International 2018). Work, such as that of Lindridge, Henderson and Ekpo (2015), maintains the urgent need for wider understanding of the entanglement of racial identities, online settings, and the everyday lives of people. Moreover, Grier, Thomas and Johnson (2019) stress the pertinence of continued studies of issues to do with race and the marketplace, particularly beyond a US setting. Our paper responds to such calls and explores how omnipresent commercial agendas are enmeshed with the everyday online encounters of Black women in Britain.

The porous and interlocking qualities of identities, communities, the internet and consumption, have been the subject of extensive studies, including Scaraboto and Fischer's (2013) research on how influential online 'plus-size' bloggers altered the fashion marketplace. As another systemically marginalised 'consumer group', Black people have turned to the internet in an attempt to avoid and resist discrimination and exclusion that they may experience in offline media and consumption settings (Everett 2008; 2009). Still, cyberspace is a hive of activity within which the complete suspension of racial identification and racist imagery is not possible (Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010; Byrne 2008; Daniels 2009; Noble 2018).

Throughout our work, we use the terms 'mainstream media' and 'mass-media', in reference to high-profile corporate media outlets and content. We acknowledge the contested nature of these concepts, given that online content produced by non-media and non-marketing professionals is continually incorporated into prominent media and marketing endeavours. Our related use of the word 'spectator' is premised on the spectacular quality of media (Debord 1987), which can promote dominant ideologies

and identities regarding race and gender, among others (De Aguiar, Fearfull, and Sanagustín Fons 2016; Gopaldas and DeRoy 2015; Hall 2011; hooks 2009; Schroeder 2002). This paper is also influenced by Burton's research (2009), which articulates the inescapably racialised nature of the marketplace and studies of it, including, as both Davis (2018) and Daniels (2009) affirm, the normative positioning of white identities and the oppositional oppression of Black perspectives. Hence, our work draws on a range of literature rooted in media, marketing and cultural studies, including the Black feminist findings of hooks (1992) on the media spectatorship of Black women.

An oppositional gaze

The concept of the 'oppositional gaze' (hooks 1992) encompasses how intersectional structural oppression that Black women face has resulted in a resistant desire among some of them, to look back and/or away from media deemed as (mis)representing and subjugating them. Theorising the oppositional gaze necessitates acknowledgement of the ephemeral, yet collective quality, of what hooks (1992) observes as being a resistant struggle; involving Black women engaging with media, and disengaging from it, in personal, political and purposeful ways. In addition, the concept of the oppositional gaze involves affirming Black women's agency as cultural readers and producers (Bobo 2001; Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010).

Diawara (1988) too observes how Black people partake in 'resisting spectatorship' as part of efforts to circumvent mass-media, due to anticipation of their often stereotypical and inadequate representation in it. This is not to suggest that all Black women engage with media representations in critical and intentionally oppositional ways (Boylorn 2008), nor that all of those who do, do so consistently.

Nevertheless, given the complexities of present-day online media, there is much to be learnt from acknowledging the existence of the oppositional gaze and thence exploring how it may translate in digital domains.

Resistance exists on a spectrum that spans from highly visible and direct modes of activism, to less discernible oppositional struggles. Our conceptualisation of resistance is sensitive to implicit gestures (Sobande 2018), including people 'subtly disrupting uncontested norms, bending them ever so gently' (Brownlie and Hewer 2007, 232). We recognise the pervasive and profit-oriented underpinnings of much media and marketplace activity, and the social inequalities that this can sustain. As such, our account problematises the limitations of potentially resistant Black online content, given the participation in hierarchical capitalist, racist and sexist infrastructures that media and internet activity often entail (Noble 2018).

Digital re-embodiment and prosumption

An individual's sense of self is 'marked and scored into specificity by its relationship with "otherness"' (Goulding and Saren 2009, 42), and the tools people use to compare themselves to others include the symbols of visual media (Hall 2011; hooks 1992; Schroeder 2002; Schroeder and Borgerson 2005). Technological advancements have facilitated alterations to people's marketplace participation and self-construction. Although a person's online involvement does not negate their embodied existence, their cyberspace presence can be understood as being a recast, or re-embodied, expression of it (Belk 2013).

Online re-embodiment involves manifestations of an individual's self, including in the form of photos, videos and avatars. As Belk (2013) outlines, the online re-

embodiment of a person is connected to various digital dimensions, such as self-revelatory social media practices and the co-construction of self. Influenced by Belk's (2013) research and a rich body of studies of Black digital activity (Brock 2012; Everett 2008; 2009; Cottom 2016; Gray 2016; Jackson 2016; Steele 2016), our paper explores identity work involved in the online experiences of Black women in Britain. It relates to issues regarding marginalisation, resistance, and a transnational Black experience.

The twenty-first century marketplace is one where distinctions between consumers and producers are often unclear (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010), resulting in the terms 'prosumption' and 'prosumers'. Such concepts are exemplified by the rise of online micro-celebrities and influencers (Abidin 2018; Cocker and Cronin 2017), including those who produce popular and profitable digital content related to their consumption habits. In recent years there has been acknowledgment of growing brand interest in the digital output of Black online users, whose work sits at the overlap between production and consumption. For example, influential Black content creators were invited to participate in the YouTube Black summit in Los Angeles in 2016. Despite indication of how the online media habits of Black people are being noted by industry professionals, academic examination of this phenomenon, via the lens of marketplace and consumption studies, is still in its relative infancy. Thus, our work addresses associated issues.

Methodology

Our methodological approach maintains that an individual's life is socially constructed and influenced by myriad meaningful and interconnected experiences (Goulding 2005), of and with people, places and power. Consequentially, we draw on semi-structured

interviews, which aid analysis of how a person's sense of self is impacted upon by self-reflection, their interactions with other people, as well as sociocultural institutions. The first-named author conducted in-depth interviews with 23 Black women (19–47 years-old) of African and Caribbean descent; six of them identified as mixed-race. All participants chose pseudonyms, as part of efforts to maintain their anonymity.

In addition to Black women who relocated to Britain from Africa and the Caribbean (n=9), those interviewed included Black women who were born in Britain (n=13), and one who moved to Britain from elsewhere in Europe (total n=23). To recruit the participants, emails were sent to organisations and groups in Britain concerned with race, gender, and African-Caribbean people. Information was also circulated among family and friends, resulting in four participants, all of whom had only been met briefly prior to their interviews. Although this paper focuses on the words of 10 of the interview participants, such views expressed have been singled out for inclusion because they epitomise dominant sentiments or discourses that emerged across the interviews.

In line with feminist methodologies, that the first-named author has personal experience of the research subject (as a Black and mixed woman) is regarded as being beneficial to this work (Bobo 2001; Woodruffe 1996). Such an 'insider/outsider' (Collins 1986; Sekhon and Szmigin 2011) position facilitated a level of intimacy, which prompted some of those interviewed to use words such as 'we' and 'us', while gesturing to the research interviewer. Echoing the view of scholars such as Kilomba (2010) and Maynard (2002), and without denying the value of research conducted with mixed gender/racial groups, we maintain that this matching between the research interviewer

and those spoken to can mitigate certain potentially exploitative research power dynamics.

As the initial focus of the research was on Black women's television viewing habits, discussions about digital media iteratively emerged. Given that 21 participants were under 33 years-old and had grown up with the normalisation of new technologies and social media (Parsons 2009), it is perhaps unsurprising that an emphasis on online activity surfaced. More generally, interviews involved identifying participants' everyday encounters with both overt and covert forms of racial and gendered stereotyping (Fearfull and Kamenou 2010).

Interview transcription and analysis involved the research interviewer recording participants' verbatim statements and para-linguistic mannerisms (Hycner 1985). The open-coding thematic analysis of transcripts was guided by a theoretical framework based on critical studies of race, media, the internet and the marketplace (Burton 2002; Collins 1986; Cottom 2016; Gabriel 2016; Gray 2016; Hall 2011; Jackson 2016; Noble 2018). Such an approach involved analytically combing through transcripts as part of the generation of codes and categories. Engagement with threads that ran between the narratives of interview participants revealed key themes related to how their identities as Black women shape their engagement with media and vice versa.

Discussion of findings

Findings have been categorised thematically and are examined in the following sections: (1) Recognising media marginalisation: searching for Black British women (2) Responding to media marginalisation: glocalising Black American online narratives, (3)

Resisting media marginalisation: re-embodied collectiveness and corporate co-optation, and (4) Reworking mainstream media: from the digital screen to the television industry.

Recognising media marginalisation: searching for Black British women

All of the interview participants mentioned their efforts to avoid certain media outlets which they feel distribute stereotypical images of Black women and uphold racist and sexist ideologies. This notion included many dismissing the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), as well as magazines. As will be further unpacked, participants' dismissal of mainstream media was often part of broader and strategic attempts to seek out images, of and by Black women, elsewhere (Sobande 2017). The scant media representation of Black women in Britain emphasises how they are normatively situated outside of the socially constructed parameters of Britishness, which are more closely tied to white identities (Burton 2009; Hirsch 2018b). Participants, including Sasha-Barrow, who is 36 years-old and is a postgraduate research student and artist in Scotland, explicitly referred to the 'white imaginary' and 'white mainstream media', when critiquing British mass-media.

Ralph-Angel, who is 30 years-old and is a photographer and social sciences graduate in Scotland made similar comments. Ralph-Angel said:

> When it comes to mainstream white media, that's when you need to start questioning how they are representing people of colour […] I just stopped watching the BBC and CNN and other stuff […] and all this mainstream white media.

Across all interviews there was discussion about the 'whiteness' of British mass-media, which suggests the continued need to consider how whiteness functions as part of media and marketing discourse (Daniels 2009; Davis 2017). All of those interviewed resolutely expressed disappointment concerning the (mis)representation of Black women in British media.

Participants' stressed their desire to see more than just same-race actors depicted in media. Lucy highlighted this when speaking about how Black Scottish women are especially absent on-screen. Her observation signposts how national hierarchal relations can also underpin the representation of Black women in British mass-media, including the rarity of images of Black women in regions outside of England. Lucy said:

I think that the Scottish thing was really important […] 'cause you'd never see anyone on TV who looked like *us*, and speaks like us […] and had I seen that, I think […] oh my god, it would have been the most amazing thing ever! (Lucy)

Comparably, Rachel who is 21 years-old and works in England, said:

…it would be nice to see like, people who are Black and in Wales […] and you never hear about their experience, or what it's like to live in Wales or like, Ireland or Scotland, or stuff like that.

Interview participants' comments signalled their irritation with how Black women are(not) depicted in media, including when Rachel stated:

> I think there's a lack of representation. I mean about nine months ago we had a discussion at my uni about the representation of Black people in the media. There's not much there and the type of characters that are out there are quite stereotypical.

Numerous online articles reflect acknowledgement of and frustration at the dearth of on-screen images of Black women in British mass-media: 'Who Stole all the Black Women from Britain?' (Dabiri 2013), 'Where are the TV roles for black British female actors?' (Abajingin 2013); 'The US is making movies led by black women. Why isn't Britain?' (Bello 2017), and 'Social Media Has Done For Black British Women In One Decade What TV Couldn't In Thirty Years' (Wilson-Ojo 2017). Recently, there has been increasing industry recognition of the impactful media and marketplace participation of Black women, including as part of Nielsen's (2017a) report on 'African-American Women: Our Science, Their Magic'. However, the representation of Black women is rarely a priority for media and marketing professionals. Furthermore, there is a deficit of similar market research to that which Nielsen (2017a; 2017b) conducted, in a British context. This reflects that Black women in Britain are still less likely to be regarded as being part of a critical and culturally influential mass, than Black women in the US. Yet, as is outlined throughout this paper, they are far from being passive consumers.

All of the participants interviewed as part of the research presented in this paper spoke of their use of social media and online content-sharing platforms, with the most popular ones appearing to be *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Facebook* and *Instagram*. There was also mention of the now defunct video-sharing platform *Vine*, which became synonymous with the viral content of Black online users (Giorgis 2015). The extracts featured in our paper underscore participants' engagement with US digital media. Still, several spoke of the importance to them of seeing images of Black women in media from Africa. Ola, who is 19 years-old and is a business undergraduate student in Scotland, wistfully said:

…now looking back to when I was younger [in Nigeria], it's like […] oh wow, what a difference from like seeing just Black women on the TV all the time, to not seeing any.

Such remarks suggest the need for marketers and media professionals to comprehend the particularities of race, ethnicity, diaspora and cultural identity, when trying to appeal to audiences that are often exclusively categorised as 'Black'. If they ignore a need on the part of Black women (or men), it should then come as no surprise that such individuals cast their spectatorship net further than the mainstream, thereby arguably trying to cope with their mass-media marginalisation, by curating and creating content on their own terms.

Responding to media marginalisation: glocalising Black American online narratives

The concept of glocalisation relates to the synthesis of both local and global qualities, including in ways that can result in a degree of international and regional appeal (Hollensen 2017). In some respects, online technologies liberate individuals from the restrictions of geographical borders and create a perceived borderless virtual place, where they can feel connected to people much further afield (Belk 2013; Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018).

Scholars such as Byrne (2007, 323), pinpoint some of the ways that people take part in online activity as a means of 'strengthening ties within the black community' in the US. The work of Steele (2016; 2017) on blogging, and Brock (2012) on Black Twitter, reiterates this idea and demonstrates how digital spaces can lend themselves to the construction of Black countercultural narratives and publics. This section of our paper focuses on how Black women in Britain relationally engage with the digital content and commentary of Black people in the US, including in ways that can foster their identification with the global Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement, as well as their adoption of phrases associated with African American Vernacular English (AAVE).

Representations of Black people in US content seem to play a significant role in the media experiences of all of those interviewed, although their narratives indicate a sense of discord regarding the hegemony of such images, as Rachel insinuated:

Really, I think I just ignored British TV. You'll be like 'oh there's like a Black person or a Black woman on TV!' but they're not necessarily like you, or a lot of the time our images come from America, so there's kind of this culture of like, American Black women, that has kind of been fed to us in Britain. We

don't get to kind of hear like, the Black British voice. A lot of the time people

think about one type of Black woman […] American women. England looks

towards America and like […] I think that naturally growing up, 'cause I was

like fed a lot of American TV, my instinct was to go and find the American

Black women [on *YouTube*], so that was just the path.

Ruby, who is 24 years-old and is a screen writer/script editor in England, was also very

animated when speaking about digital content created by Black people, including those

in the US. Ruby said:

When I think of *YouTube* in terms of like vloggers[1] […] when I think of

Black *YouTube* content or creators, I think of like, really funny vines and

like meme-worthy things, or like Black *Twitter* or hair tutorials, or makeup

tutorials for darker skin tones […] and in America there are some really

cool *YouTube* vloggers.

In response to the marginalisation of Black women in British mass-media, participants

such as Rachel, Ruby and Solene DuBois, have to some extent, glocalised online

commentary about Black people, which originates in the US. Excerpts from their

interviews point to the online co-construction of a transnational Black experience, that

digital dialogue between Black people around the world can amount to (Everett 2009).

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[1] People who construct video blogs (vlogs) are referred to as vloggers (video bloggers)

Solene DuBois, who is 26 years-old and works in public relations in England, said that she 'loves entertainment TV and watches all of the American imports' but infrequently watches British television. Solene DuBois spoke candidly about reading the comments attached to online videos available through *Black & Sexy TV*, which disseminates content featuring Black people and produced by them. Participants such as Solene DuBois spoke of learning different phrases associated with African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and its significant cultural influence beyond the US. When discussing her participation in US online forums aimed at Black people, including those available through *Black & Sexy TV*, Solene DuBois said:

> I'd spend all my time reading the comments. That almost gives me a view into the mind-set […] because it is majority Black American women, and it's been hilarious learning all these cultural references! It's given me maybe a view of America, that you know […] I've never been to the US but my idea of Black women in the US was maybe set in a certain way before I watched this stuff, and then I just realised like, oh we're all the same and they are normal […]

Solene DuBois spoke of having consistently engaged with *Black & Sexy TV* since it morphed into a paid subscription-based format, because the images it provides contrast with the (mis)representation of Black people in British mass-media. Therefore, part of the potentially resistant media practices of Black women in Britain, includes their rejection of British mainstream media, as well as their active, and possibly financial, support of online alternatives.

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Solene Dubois' words convey how Black women in Britain may tap into online conversations led by Black people in the US, in ways which can contribute to them experiencing a sense of Black cross-continental community, as she hinted at when she said: 'we're all the same'. However, participants also recognised tensions between Black online users in the US and Britain, including as part of *Twitter* debates to do with their differences, which are sometimes dubbed as being #diasporawars. That said, participants' glocalisation of the online narratives of Black people in the US, is further evidenced by how many of them seek out content related to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement, which developed in the US to tackle systemic violence and police brutality faced by Black people.

Mass-media coverage of BLM in Britain remains scant compared to its documentation in the US. Temi, who is 26 years-old and is a postgraduate research student in Scotland, referenced this when she said:

> In America, to do with Black Lives Matter […] now it's coming back into the news over here [UK] but when it first happened, with like Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland, it really wasn't over in the UK news that much. It wasn't featured *at all*. It's only now that it's really been featured.

In the absence of common coverage of BLM in British mass-media, social media becomes the means through which Black women in Britain, such as Temi and Ralph-Angel, may actively learn of BLM activity; in ways suggestive of the sense of 'global Black family' that the movement is rooted in.

Many participants referenced 'staying woke', when speaking about becoming more aware of socio-political injustices affecting Black people, through their engagement with online media yielded by Black people in the US. As such, Ralph-Angel said: 'Now the world is, you know […] more woke [laughs] more aware'. Similarly, Nymeria, who is 27 years-old and is an artist and art school graduate from Scotland, said: 'The ones [YouTubers] that I *do* watch are usually the ones that are woke and have an understanding of intersectionality'. Remarks to do with 'staying woke' were also made by Temi, who referred to it as being 'such an American expression'.

The way that many of those interviewed have taken up language associated with AAVE and Black social justice activism in the US, via their social media usage, reflects how some Black women in Britain feel more connected to digital discussions led by Black online users in the US, than ideas and identities documented in British mass-media. Such activity also reinforces Byrne's (2007) claim that online social network sites are used by Black people in ways which can cultivate forms of civic engagement, but the extent to which digital Black political sentiments translates into offline action can vary considerably.

Another participant, whose online habits indicate how Black women in Britain use digital media created by Black people in the US, is Annie, who is 19 years-old and is a business undergraduate student in England. Annie discussed the website – *Lipstick Alley*, which is marketed on *Google Play* as being about 'News, Sports, Celebrity Gossip from an African American perspective'. Annie said:

It's a Black forum for African American women […] I mean, it's not as good as it used to be back in the day, 'cause they used to have quite a few trolls […] I guess because I found it at aged probably 14 or 15, and they just have *every* forum. The forum has like every alley you could think about, from politics to Black Lives Matter, to beauty, to celebrity gossip, to this, to that, to everything, and then they used to have a lot of 'tea spillers' as they'd say […] so people who'd work in the industries, who would drop some gossip and they'd say either 'you can sip it' or 'you can spit it out' […] but some of the things that they said did come true and you had a lot of insightful things on there. Through that, I became quite aware of you know, groups like […] you know, where to buy Black-owned makeup and jewellery and you know, some of these TV shows. They would tell you about it. Like, 'this one is coming out, look out for it' and 'this one's quite good and look out for this' […] so it means that you really get an in-depth idea of what's going on around you and where to pick and choose […] people giving their own experiences and different things, so that's quite helpful as well.

Annie's use of the words 'back in the day', indicate a sense of community-based nostalgia (Holak 2013) related to her participation in this Black digital space. It seems that *Lipstick Alley* helps her to source marketplace advice from Black women in the US and stay connected to aspects of a global Black consciousness. Comparably, other interview participants spoke about tuning into the video blogs (vlogs) of Black women in the US, to learn more about BLM, Black-owned businesses, and to gain consumer tips that are specific to them. Such examples illustrate how Black people around the

world participate in online networks, including as a coping mechanism regarding their experiences of marginalisation (Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018), and as ways to share and harvest their collective knowledge (Cottom 2016; Gray 2016; Jackson 2016).

Resisting marginalisation: re-embodied collectiveness and corporate co-optation

The online activity of 19 of the 23 interview participants seemed to have been motivated by wanting to support alternatives to mainstream British media, namely online content produced by, about, and for Black people (particularly Black women). Motivations behind the internet activity of other participants were more ambiguous and they did not make as declarative statements about how social media provides images and experiences which are absent from British mass-media. Taking into consideration that 'political intent is not a precursor to political action' (Gabriel 2016, 1623), it is imperative to recognise that some of the experiences of the interview participants referenced in our paper, are reflective of counterhegemonic media practices.

Over the last several years, numerous creative, digital and media-oriented organisations, outlets and collectives led by Black women in Britain, have gained noticeable traction. These include *Media Diversified*, which is a non-profit founded in 2013 by Samantha Asumadu, tackling the under-representation of Black people and people of colour in media; as writers and content creators themselves, as well as the focus of media. When speaking at length about online spaces that foreground the voices of Black women, Solene DuBois said:

I think there's been a move to, like, have Black female [online] spaces for *themselves* and, like, […] we're a community.

In a similar vein, Ruby asserted:

…it's really important that we carve out our own narratives and that we don't shy away from creating spaces for ourselves.

The participants' focus on online self-representation and re-embodied solidarity is aligned with the concept of a digital oppositional gaze (Boylorn 2008; Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010; hooks 1992), as well as forms of discursive activism, which Gabriel (2016) identifies among Black women in Britain who are bloggers.

Mamanyigma, who is 25 years-old, works in the not-for-profit sector in Scotland, and identifies as being mixed-race, alluded to how internet activity has fueled the self-representation of Black women:

I think online, women of colour have a better reign or control over their own stories, so they can just produce and put it out there. Whereas obviously in print and television, they're controlled by mostly white men who aren't interested in our stories or narratives […] online, you come across so many amazing filmmakers, so just one example would be *Ackee and Saltfish*, which is about the Black British experience […] and even online, you have things like *gal-dem*, which I like to access mostly every few days, just to get *that*

narrative […] so I feel that women of colour have a better control over the stories that are put out there online, in comparison to those in print.

The comments of participants such as Mamanyigma indicate how some Black women are identifying and creating alternatives to mainstream British media, particularly online. *Black in the Day*, which 'is a submission based archive' with an educational focus 'for future generations', is another example of moves to document the lives of Black people in Britain, via their own visual and cultural artifacts.

Lisa's interview extract exemplifies how digital dialogue can provide opportunities for Black people in Britain to articulate their concerns beyond a hegemonic and patriarchal white societal gaze (Burton 2002; Crenshaw 2017; Hall 2011). Lisa, who was born and brought up in England, is 19 years-old and is a sciences undergraduate student. Lisa explained some of the ways that she makes use of social media to connect with other Black women and to find relatable content. Lisa said:

I follow quite a few of my Black friends [on Twitter] who are women […] and they're slightly older than me so they, like, know more about, well, […] they circulate more about, sort of like, Black women in media and Black women in television and film and stuff like that, so I try to keep on top of what's going on. It's really, like, accessible obviously […] it's really, like, open, so […] if I follow one Black woman who I know, and she's retweeted something from someone *she* knows, then I might follow *them*, and then you can sort of build up a community, where you don't really know everyone well enough to just meet up and have a chat […] but you can, sort of like, share stuff with people

you haven't met before and you know that they'll be interested […] so it's a nice place to go to, like, […] say all of the ideas that you have about something […] 'cause in real life it's difficult to start conversations that are quite critical of things […] especially with people who may not be interested in it […] or understand the experiences […] yeah it's useful […] it's just a useful outlet I think for all of the stuff you want to discuss.

For Black women in Britain, such as Annie, Solene DuBois, Rachel, Ruby and Lisa, producing and engaging with online content created by and featuring Black women, provides linkages between the thoughts, lived experiences and cultural memories of Black African-Caribbean women in Britain and elsewhere.

Consumer culture 'can be highly symbolic and often the meanings that consumers create collectively can be beyond the control of marketers' (Parsons and Maclaran 2009, 11). The ascent of social media has resulted in marketers not only attempting to control consumer meaning-making, but also trying to incorporate user-generated content into their own advertising. While this can involve influential social media users and micro-celebrities (Abidin 2018; Cocker and Cronin 2017) participating in business partnerships and receiving payment for their prosumer posts, brands' use of the content of online users does not always involve them securing the consent of the original creator or crediting them. The digital content creation, and arguably, the digital labour, of Black women, is therefore consistently at risk of simultaneously being erased and (mis)used (Bailey and Trudy 2018).

As Ruby spoke of, the online activity of Black women is not protected from possible corporate co-optation:

…you have someone like Akilah […] Akilah who is having to campaign and be like 'hey, are you stealing content?' to Buzzfeed […] A lot of the time I see content being made by women of colour and it just being taken away from them.

Ruby is involved in a collective of women of colour, who:

…didn't really think that we had a platform to share our voices and didn't see representation of ourselves as normal young women of colour within the media', so created a 'kind of hub'.

Ruby also said:

I don't see many Black women on British TV or film but if I do see them, they're, like, throw away characters. A friend of mine created a little report on Black women for a channel and it had like 20-something million views shared, and they said as soon as the idea was pitched, they knew it would pick up, because Black women share and create the most content about themselves […] so when we get approached by all these huge like, arts organisations, to do stuff […] sometimes I feel like […] are they actually doing it 'cause they really want to help us and want our voices to be heard, or are they tapping into a market or a group that they can't connect with?

The scepticism expressed by Ruby is not surprising given the potential for cynical inclusion practices within management, as expressed by 'gurus' such as Kaplan (Kaplan and Donovan 2013). Gowler (2015), drawing on a survey of 1,800 managers conducted by HR Magazine reported that, while 52% of all managers expressed their belief that diversity is 'very' or 'extremely' important, 38% of junior managers and 5% of senior managers view assessment of diversity as a 'tick box' exercise – an aggregate of 26%. We would argue that, in these figures, the 38% is of primary importance because these are the managers who will be making the more important decisions in the future. Paraphrasing Ruby above, their apparent lack of commitment to 'wanting to help the voices of people such as those participating in our study to be heard' should be a matter for serious concern, and not simply due to the possible business implications of this, but more pertinently, given the social ramifications.

The rise of prosumer capitalism with the expansion of social media and online content-sharing, has powered forms of market exploitation and control that are characterised by unpaid and unacknowledged labour (Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). There is no shortage of examples of how the digital labour of Black women influences commercial and cultural trends (Nielsen 2017a), including the concepts of 'woke' marketing and social media 'wokefluencers', that have become embedded in industry rhetoric (Richmond 2017). As Ruby hinted at, the online contributions of Black women who represent themselves in ways that mainstream media rarely do, can lead to their digital re-embodied and resistant presence being mined for marketing inspiration, and their work being monetised without them being compensated. As such, this paper emphasises how digital environments can simultaneously aid and

limit potentially oppositional media practices; stressing the restricted nature of online experiences that may be regarded as liberating.

Elements of interview participants' experiences arguably reflect a digital oppositional gaze (hooks 1992) and indicate online attempts to challenge their structural marginalisation amidst media and marketplace spheres (Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018). Yet, any potentially resistant and liberating qualities of such experiences can be denuded through forms of corporate co-optation; Black women's online content being (mis)used and (mis)appropriated by commercial entities that fail to credit or consult the creator(s) of the original source.

Reworking media: from the digital screen to the television industry

Based on key themes that emerged from the interviews and which are discussed in this paper, a conceptualisation (see Figure 1) of factors is proposed, which shape the interview participants' views of media depictions of Black women. This is not to suggest that all Black women interpret media in the same and critical way (Boylorn 2008; hooks 1992). Instead, the conceptualisation summarises elements of potential interpretations of media images of Black women, in relation to their spectator gaze. As such, the conceptualisation focuses on the authorship of media; the intended audience; the media outlet; and the authenticity or relatability of such content, while recognising the unstable and fluid nature of notions of authenticity:

[Figure 1. displayed here]

Sobande, F., Fearfull, A., and Brownlie, D. (Forthcoming, 2019) "Resisting media marginalisation: Black women's digital content and collectivity" – to be published in *Consumption Markets & Culture*.

The inception of the oppositional gaze occurred (hooks 1992) prior to social media, yet, as the interview excerpts in our paper suggest, the concept's relevance remains steadfast (Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010). This paper contributes to understandings of how the oppositional gaze (hooks 1992) can take shape in digital contexts, within which 'Do it Yourself' (DIY) culture and prosumption plays a significant part. The online activities of interview participants are part of alternative and digital public spaces that enable their critique of dominant media and marketplace culture, which as Lucy asserted, they often perceive as being 'white' (Burton 2002; Steele 2016). The oppositional qualities of such spectatorship are embedded in Black women's refusal to identify with media images that they feel (mis)represent and negatively impact them, as well as their efforts to seek out (and create) self-relevant alternatives and which can reach audiences beyond national borders.

The interview participants' frustration regarding how Black women are (mis)represented in mainstream media, included concern with how mass-media co-opt the authentic feel and resistant potential of online content created by Black women. An example of how the online media of Black women has influenced mainstream media, can be found in the evolution of the US web-series – *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. The words of interview participants framed their engagement with it as being similar to feeling the warmth of an inside joke that mainstream media had not cottoned onto. The web-series gained so much attention that its creator – Issa Rae

(2015) released an autobiographical book of the same name. Rae also went on to develop the Golden Globe Award nominated Home Box Office (HBO) television-network series – *Insecure* (2016–present).

Solene DuBois mentioned coming across *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, featuring its author-star – Issa Rae, as the character of Jay:

> This was a few years ago, but when I was at university, I discovered this web-series called *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and it's just my favourite thing *ever* [laughs] […] so [Issa Rae] has written and directed it and the programme is, kind of like, a whole statement, you know, that Black women can be like multi-dimensional […] awkward and, like, things that aren't stereotypically Black. I've never ever seen a representation of, you know, […] of an awkward Black woman. I remember watching it thinking like 'oh my god! There are people like me!' [laughs] 'cause I used to be super awkward when I grew up as well […] I think it was in 2011 when I first watched it. That programme […] I was really, really affected by it, because it was just the first time. It was you know […] making Black women *normal*. Like, a lot of Black women I know […] we're normal, you know! We like to be normal […] and the fact is that you wouldn't know it from TV programmes.

Mamanyigma also spoke about watching every episode of the same web-series, as did several other participants, including Rachel, who remarked:

[…] recently I've been looking for kind of web-series, so one of the recent ones I watched was *Awkward Black Girl* by Issa Rae. She stars and directs in that and that was the most relatable thing I have ever seen and I'm so, so thankful for it! I can't think of anyone who is more Jay […] Like, *Awkward Black Girl* is the definition of me! [laughs].

As Warner (2016, n.p.n.) acknowledges, the transition to mainstream television that *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* has undergone, yielded 'tensions in generating audience comfort through the split lens of universality and cultural specificity', such as due to the pursuit of mass-appeal and a cross-over audience (Grier, Brumbaugh, and Thornton 2006; Nielsen 2017b). Ruby's thoughts support such claims:

[…] I'm really excited for her and I like this idea of, just like, showing this revolutionary thing of multifaceted, nuanced three-dimensional Black women! I was really happy when I heard that Issa Rae got her HBO deal […] it's just this idea that *this* can actually happen. I haven't seen *Insecure* and I know that with *Awkward Black Girl* it was so funny and it was so awkward and it was so, like, this could happen to anyone, and it was very light-hearted and didn't take itself too seriously […] so with *Insecure* now having a big budget and being set in LA as well […] I think that the narrative will still be the same because she is at the centre of it, she's writing it and starring in it so she's got it sorted, but I would have loved to have known what the politics were in, like, the writers' room. Like, does she ever pitch something and someone says actually 'no, I'm putting money into this and I don't like this'. Like I've had my friends

who are writers, tell me they've been told 'oh, this racism isn't funny enough,

it's a bit too on the nose. Can it be a bit more LOL?', rather than serious.

The success of *Insecure* (Rae 2015), which grew from a web-series, evidences how

online content created by Black women is increasingly influencing mainstream media

landscapes. Although, as Ruby suggests, as the DIY digital contributions of Black

women move into more mainstream domains, their once relatable and countercultural

credentials, may diminish, or come to be seen as part of a cynical attempt to appease

and attract 'diverse' audiences**.**

Conclusion

In response to calls for more research regarding race, the marketplace, experiences of

marginalisation and associated coping mechanisms (Crockett, Grier, and Williams

2003; Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018; Grier, Thomas and

Johnson 2019), our paper focuses on the media experiences of Black women in

Britain. Further still, it is shaped by Davis' (2018) observation of the limited nature of

research regarding the role of digital and social media in encounters related to race,

inequality and contemporary marketing.

This work explores how the digital experiences of Black women in Britain are

impacted by the particularities of their lives and the media landscape there, as well as

the influence of African American online and popular culture. Such analysis extends

upon recognition of how 'research and practice reveal that race is a key site of

hierarchy upon which global marketplaces rest' (Grier, Thomas and Johnson 2019,

93). It does so by accounting for how hierarchical global consumer culture relations (the hegemony of US media) can also influence how racial subjectivities are experienced and expressed online. Interview participants' interest in, and adoption of, Black cultural references, content, and phrases stemming from the US, is a prime example of this.

Our paper builds on extant studies of Black digital spaces and narratives of technology consumption (Brock 2012; Cottom 2016; Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018; Steele 2016; 2017). In addition, it elucidates aspects of the constrained nature of self-representation and resistant opportunities for such structurally marginalised online users; specifically, Black women (Brock, Kvasny and Hales 2010). As such, this research illustrates that when people turn to the internet in response to experiences of marketplace marginalisation, attempts to 'temporarily seek refuge online' (Ekpo, DeBerry-Spence, Henderson and Cherian 2018, 2018, 11) are mediated by transnational dynamics (in this case, dialogue between Black people in Britain and the US), as well as the prospect of corporate co-optation of their digital discussions, and, even, their online labour. The themes outlined demonstrate that despite digital domains presenting opportunities to resist, rework and respond to the normative whiteness of much mainstream mass-media, they can also be sites of struggles between the countercultural intentions of online users, and the commercial agendas of omnipresent corporations.

As the worries of participants such as Ruby capture, there are considerable risks accompanying the online re-embodiment of Black women and their digital media production and spectatorship (Dhrodia 2017); the possibility of corporate extraction of information and their ideas, from content that may have even been motivated by an

intention to challenge mass-media, and to steer financial resources to Black content producers. However, the experiences of interview participants are also demonstrative of how the internet can, to some extent, facilitate Black women's control over their representation, within the context of precarious open-access digital ecologies which leave them vulnerable to others' profit-driven interests.

In the present-day, many Black women in Britain are only ever a click away from seeking out media content from elsewhere, and in ways that can contribute to inter-cultural Black digital discourse, which reflects connections between Black spectators and markets around the world. This goes some way towards expanding conversations concerning the interconnectedness of Black consumer experiences across the globe, and the need for more nuanced understandings of transnational Black media and marketplace activity.

While other social groups also use the internet as part of their dismissal and challenging of the marketplace status quo (Scaraboto and Fischer 2013), the particular experiences of the Black women interviewed as part of this paper indicate how such activities can be imbued with the digital construction of Black community. Our work addresses how aspects of identity and cultural affiliation (Sekhon and Szmigin 2011) enable the creation of online content and commentary which yields a sense of inclusion and potentially somewhat global collectiveness for Black women in Britain.

This analysis contributes to knowledge of consumption, markets and culture, by highlighting under-theorised and transnational facets of the relationship between race, media and the virtual marketplace. Such findings emphasise how conceptualisations of Black digital dialogue and digital blackness, contain within them a multitude of overlapping inter-cultural and intra-racial global relations. This raises

questions that are worthy of continued consideration as part of further work that focuses on a digital oppositional gaze and online experiences beyond the boundaries of 'global powers' such as Britain and the US. Among such future research avenues is analysis of the direction of flows of digital content, communication and cultural references between systemically marginalised internet users around the world.

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