Article

Spectacularized and Branded Digital (Re)presentations of Black People and Blackness

Francesca Sobande (iD)

Abstract

Digital racism and the online experiences of Black people have been foregrounded in vital contemporary research, particularly Black scholarship and critical race and digital studies. As digital developments occur rapidly there is a need for work which theorizes recent expressions of digital anti-Blackness, including since increased marketing industry interest in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. This paper explores digital racism related to online (re)presentations of Black people and associated racist marketplace logics, digital practices, and (re)mediations of Blackness in the service of brands. Focusing on computer-generated imagery (CGI) racialized online influencers, the spectacularization of Black pain and lives, digital marketing approaches, and digital Blackface, this work contextualizes anti-Black digital racism by reflecting on its connection to centuries of white supremacy and often under-investigated racial capitalism. Overall, this work examines the shape-shifting nature of anti-Black digital racism and commercial components of it which are impacted by intersecting oppressions.

Keywords

black people, digital, influencer, internet, race, social media, twitter, woke-washing

Introduction

This paper analyzes the anti-Black nature of spectacularized digital (re)presentations of Black people and Blackness, with a particular focus on how racist market logics, racial capitalism, and marketing and branding approaches are implicated in this. Such

Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Corresponding Author:
Francesca Sobande, Lecturer in Digital Media Studies, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Two Central Square, Central Square, Cardiff, CF10 1FS, UK.
Email: sobandef@cardiff.ac.uk

work addresses examples of anti-Black digital racism that have emerged in recent years and accounts for the intricacies of the context of 2020. Specifically, this paper includes recognition of how brands have responded to galvanizing BLM organizing in ways that have involved brands opportunistically performing a proximity to Blackness and Black people. As a result, this work contributes to scholarship on digital Blackness, Black people's digital experiences, and brand "woke-washing," by tarrying with how racial capitalism and recent marketing trends and discourses are entangled with anti-Black digital racism. The focus on marketplace dynamics in this article results in its potential to yield insights that are relevant to critical conversations concerning race and anti-Blackness in the discipline of marketing and in related marketing practitioner spheres.

Social media is inescapably shaped by a potent cocktail of racist marketplace logics and anti-Black and colonial legacies. Every day, online hate speech, harassment, and harm feeds and is fuelled by offline abuse and violence. More specifically, due to the pervasiveness of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2000), the ways that Black people's lives are endangered are not confined to offline settings. As "race matters no less in cyberspace than it does 'IRL' (in real life)" (Kolko et al. 2000, 4), social media and countless digital environments can be a hotbed of racism, including the harvesting and propagation of white supremacist politics (Daniels 2009, 2012, 2017). Hence, racist and anti-racist activity in digital space has been a source of detailed analysis; from studies of Twitter discourse and action associated with hashtags (De Kosnik and Feldman 2019; Jackson et al. 2020), to examinations of race, visual cultures, and the internet (Alkalimat 2004; Everett 2009; Nakamura 2008).

The nuances of Black people's digital experiences and types of anti-Black digital racism have relatively scarcely been prioritized in critical digital and media studies. "When Black users have been the focus of analysis, such work is often taken up in the academic world for its insights into race or Black culture, ignoring the insights about technology that are offered through consideration of Black users' practices" (Florini 2019, 6). However, particularly thanks to Black scholars' continued work, including as part of critical race and digital studies (Hamilton 2020), such research and its influence have considerably burgeoned in the years since ground-breaking publications including Alkalimat's (2004) *The African American Experience in Cyberspace: A Resource Guide to the Best Web Sites on Black Culture and History*, as well as Everett's (2009) *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace.*

The significant scholarship of Steele elucidates the role of blogging in the creation of "alternate publics for African Americans online" (Steele 2018, 112) and participation in "the online Black public sphere" (Steele 2016a, 2). In addition, the vital research of Clark (2014, 2015) on "Black Twitter" and "so-called cancel culture" (Clark 2020) leads key contemporary work and theorizing concerning Black people's experiences of social media and how these connect to the societies they are situated in. H. Gray's (2015) wide range of work on depictions of Black people and viral internet culture is another source of insights regarding digital media, Black lives, and the relationship between technology, race, and capitalism. Among other central research projects are Noble's (2018) on oppressive algorithmic forces and how racism is reinforced online,

K. L. Gray's (2015, 2020) on Black cyberfeminism and intersectional tech, as well as Brock's (2012, 2020) on distributed Blackness, Black cultural conversations, and African American cybercultures.

My approach to this paper is inspired by knowledge yielded by the aforementioned scholars, as well as the innovative work of Jackson (2019) and Crockett (2008) on the commodification of Blackness, and the essential research of Benjamin (2019) on race and technology. Drawing on previous studies of "everyday mediated expressions and circuits of Blackness" (H. Gray 2015, 1109), my paper focuses on how images of and ideas about Black people are spectacularized online in ways fundamentally affected by racial capitalism and the marketization of Blackness and BLM discourse. Moreover, influenced by Cottom's (2020, 1) insightful research regarding "where platform capitalism and racial capitalism meet," my paper grapples with how the work and image of Black people is exploited and reframed as part of digital marketing strategies which brands pursue to position themselves as "woke"—invested in addressing racial injustice and interconnected struggles (Sobande 2019a). In other words, my consideration of anti-Black digital racism attends to how racial capitalism and the commodification of Black social justice movements propels such oppression.

I continue this article with a brief outline of anti-Black racism and how it is (re) mediated by technology, while recognizing that such racism undoubtedly predates social media including Twitter and Instagram. I then chart iterations of anti-Black digital racism, focusing on the rise of computer-generated imagery (CGI) racialized online influencers (Jackson 2018), the online spectacularization of Black pain and lives, brands performing a proximity to Blackness (Crockett 2008; Sobande 2019a), and forms of digital Blackface (Green 2006; Jackson 2017; Jones 2019; Leonard 2004). As part of my analysis there is discussion of several excerpts (attributed to pseudonyms) from in-depth interviews held between 2015–2019 with Black women in Britain about their media experiences (Sobande 2020). I contextualize examples of anti-Black digital racism by reflecting on their historical and relational nature, such as their connection to centuries of societally upheld white supremacy and the particularities of present-day media and marketing industry discussions about BLM. In turn, I argue for the need for policy-related and media and marketing industry interventions concerning digital racism to account for the wide range of ways that anti-Black racism occurs and is encountered online.

Anti-Black [Digital] Racism

At the center of racist ideologies and actions are permutations of white supremacy, such as dehumanizing and deadly notions of the alleged inferiority of racialized people, grounded in bigoted, and, even, genocidal, race science and pseudoscience. Anti-Black racism is racism specifically based on the systemic oppression of Black people of African descent and is connected to colourism—the structural favouring and support of light-skinned individuals, including within Black communities, and the contrastingly severe and violent oppression of dark-skinned people (Amoah 2019; Tate 2009). From explicitly racist language in the comments accompanying Black YouTubers' vlogs, to

sustained efforts to have the social media profiles of Black people deleted, forms of anti-Black digital racism consistently negatively impact the digital experiences and lives of Black people.

Anti-Black racism online is not simply the by-product of digital technologies and practices but is still expressed and enabled in ways inextricably linked to the make-up of such digital activity. Due to the intersecting nature of oppression (Collins 1991; Crenshaw 1989; K. L. Gray 2015), such as the enmeshments of anti-Black racism and heteronormative sexism and misogyny (Bailey 2010, 2021; Bailey and Trudy 2018), Black women face a significant amount of online abuse which is often woefully ignored by institutions (Akiwowo 2018), including organizations that appear to be responsible for mitigating online hate and harassment. The extensive and impactful research and work of Crockett (2014), Harry (2014), and Hudson (2013) highlights the vitriolic misogynoir experienced by Black women online, and how for years trolls on Twitter have posed as Black women and women of colour to spread disinformation and abuse (see hashtag #YourSlipIsShowing, created by Shafiqah Hudson) (Hampton 2019). Relatedly, research indicates that Black women are 84% more likely than white women to be mentioned in abusive Twitter comments (Amnesty International 2018) and the harm that they face online takes many forms. Thus, when seeking to understand types and experiences of anti-Black digital racism it is imperative to account for how they are shaped by power relations concerning anti-Blackness, sexism, and interlinked structural oppression.

Consequently, this paper includes discussion of examples of anti-Black digital racism that specifically involve online depictions created by non-Black people, which emulate the physical appearance of Black women including in potentially profitable ways (Thompson 2018). While there is a myriad of examples of anti-Black digital racism, the ones foregrounded in this article were chosen due to the range of manifestations of anti-Blackness that they signal—including the normalization of the constant sharing of depictions of Black pain and death online (Leonard 2004, 2016; Sutherland 2017), and the anti-Black underpinnings of how Black people's physical appearance is spectacularized and treated as fodder for the creation of CGI influencers that stem from a white gaze (Jackson, 2018, 2019). Further still, the examples discussed are theorized in a way that is sensitive to the specifics of racial capitalism which Cottom (2020, 2) identifies as being "uniquely suited [as a theoretical framework] for the study of race and racism in the digital society."

CGI Black Online Influencers

Put briefly, CGI racialized online influencers are lifelike digital creations that feature on their own social media profiles which portray them as high-profile, racialized, and marketable micro-celebrities for people and brands to consider engaging with. Although they continue to receive relatively scant scholarly attention, CGI online influencers (AKA virtual influencers) and their followers have proliferated since the 2016 creation of Miquela Sousa (AKA Lil Miquela), a Brazilian-American influencer. The overt racialization of such influencers, which is the combined effect of how they

are represented and responded to, demands analysis as part of work regarding the racial dynamics of marketplace issues, including "the interactions between technology, cultural ideology, and technology practice" (Brock 2016, 1013) at a point in time when brands are quick to claim their solidarity with Black people and their support of Black activism.

Among high-profile CGI racialized online influencers is Shudu (@shudu.gram on Instagram) who has been the subject of many astute online editorials and critiques of the unrealistic image of a Black woman that she conveys (Jackson 2018), as imagined and created by a white man (Cameron-James Wilson) who apparently modelled her on the Princess of South Africa Barbie doll. Shudu's digital presence went viral after attracting interest from celebrities, fashion brands, and people who initially mistook her for a real person. In the space of two years the CGI influencer featured in Vogue and fronted fashion campaigns, as well as gracing the 2019 BAFTA film awards red carpet (Semic 2019). Created with the use of a program called Daz 3-D in 2017, Shudu was allegedly developed with the intention of representing a type of beauty that Wilson often does not see depicted in media (Semic 2019).

Accordingly, in an image posted on 9 July 2019, Shudu is depicted as a luminous mermaid basking amidst waves of water, with accompanying text which states: "The most beautiful thing about the ocean is the diversity within it," paired with hashtags including #shudu #fantasy. The post is one of many that hint at issues related to racial diversity, as symbolized by Shudu. The overtly intentional framing of Shudu as a Black African woman is communicated in different ways, including due to the racially coded nature of names (Benjamin 2019) and the use of visual cues such as earrings in the shape of the continent of Africa which Shudu is pictured wearing in photographs posted on her Instagram in October 2019.

As one of several CGI influencers created by Cameron-James Wilson, Shudu features in an image of three models posted on her Instagram profile on 30 August 2018. The post includes a thank you to Balmain "for giving me the opportunity to diversify the 3D world a little more," and features Shudu standing in between fellow CGI influencers Margot and Zhi. Posts such as these exemplify how CGI Black influencers are digital canvases that their creators can project messages about so-called racial diversity on, while platforming their own work and without even having to involve or pay real Black people. In 2020 discourse on racial diversity and anti-Blackness in media and marketing spheres has intensified in response to the hyper-visibility of BLM and various forms of Black grassroots organizing that tackles anti-Black violence and police brutality. CGI influencers such as Shudu may pique the interest of brands looking for a quick fix solution to diversifying their image or positioning themselves in proximity to Blackness. The prospect of this occurring seems especially likely when reflecting on how the success of virtual influencers has expanded during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. In the words of Ong (2020) for Bloomberg, "Virtual Influencers Make Real Money While Covid Locks Down Human Stars."

Shudu is far from being the only CGI Black online influencer and is not even the only one among the roster of influencers involved in the world's first all-digital modelling agency—The Diigitals. In fact, of the seven models currently represented on the

agency's website at least three of them appear to be racialized as Black. This is emblematic of how the rise of CGI online influencers and their visual construction is bolstered by interrelated issues concerning race, the marketplace, and the commodification of Blackness (Crockett 2008; Henderson et al. 2016; Jackson 2019; Sobande, 2019a). After all, even though frivolity is often ascribed to internet fame and influencer culture (Abidin 2018), related digital practices such as the rise of CGI Black influencers contain a multitude of meanings and contemporary power dynamics to do with race and gender.

Another Black CGI influencer that is part of The Diigitals is Koffi (@koffi.gram on Instagram) whose social media presence at the time of writing this primarily consists of mostly nude images of the glistening dark-skinned "fitness model," resembling the photography of Robert Mapplethorpe which was critiqued for brazenly fetishizing Black men (Mercer 1994). Collectively, Shudu and Koffi have amassed more than 200,000 Instagram followers. Shudu who has a significant portion of these (210,000 followers) compared to Koffi (12,300 followers) has been involved in work with global brands such as Harper's Bazaar Arabia, Ellesse, Samsung, Christian Louboutin, Ferragamo, and British GQ. Part of the appeal of influencers including Shudu and Koffi, from the perspectives of the brands that choose to engage and endorse these creations, may be the opportunity for them to be associated with Blackness without having to substantially support, financially and otherwise, actual Black people.

In the words of Robinson (1983, 9), "[t]he historical development of world capitalism was influenced in a most fundamental way by the particularistic forces of racism and nationalism," such as the dominance of white supremacy and interconnected Western and colonialist conceptualizations of value and entitlement which involve the exploitation of African resources and the oppression of Black African people. While some individuals may believe that it is a reach to imply that the existence of CGI influencers such as Shudu and Koffi reflects such dynamics at the root of racial capitalism, there is ample scope to perceive such influencers as being part of the spectrum of anti-Black and colonialist ways that Black African people and their cultures are treated as a marketable and digitally mediated commodity.

As the social media content and comments of CGI creations including Shudu and Koffi are completely controlled by their creator and others, when choosing to work with such CGI influencers, to a certain extent, brands need not worry about what the influencers might say and do which could bring them into disrepute. Shudu, Koffi and other uncanny CGI Black influencers are digitally rendered depictions of an ultimately agentless and impersonated form of Blackness which can be moulded to fit whatever Instagrammable notion of Black identity and culture brands are in search of.

If influencers including Shudu become normalized what will this mean in terms of how Black identity is digitally depicted and remediated, including in ways that do not involve (m)any real Black people in the process? What effect might the continued popularity of CGI influencers have if brands that are criticized for their lack of racial diversity choose to use digital characters such as Shudu rather than working with and paying (m)any actual Black people? The internet fame attributed to racialized CGI

influencers and mounting media attention that they attract has the potential to disrupt the wider influencer gig economy, as the rise of CGI influencers may yield increasing competition in the form of more controllable, and, possibly, cheaper, alternatives to human influencers.

Aside from the fact she was created before Koffi, part of Shudu's comparatively more expansive popularity may be due to gendered and raced undercurrents of media depictions, the marketplace, and surrounding spectacle. Due to intersecting power relations related to race, gender, and sexuality, since the early days of the creation of media representations Black women have often been objectified and exoticized in images of them created by, and, for, others (Collins 1991). Shudu's digital presence and continued appeal to international brands, despite criticism that has been expressed, particularly by Black women, is not simply testament to how normalized the commodification of Blackness is. More precisely, Shudu and her relative success is symbolic of the simultaneous and co-constitutive fixation on and disregard for Black women that has long been intrinsic to consumer culture and the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal framework which cradles it (hooks 2000).

As Benjamin (2019, 2) notes, "Blackness is routinely conflated with cultural deficiency, poverty, and pathology." At the same time, it is frequently surreptitiously and overtly monitored and treated by commercial entities as an infinite source of (un) attainable cultural "coolness" (Crockett 2008; Jackson 2019; Tulloch 2016; Walker 2012) that brands are desperate to emulate and embody in their quest to be framed as "woke" (Sobande 2019a). To some, the link between anti-Black racism and the development of CGI influencers such as Shudu and Koffi may seem tenuous. Regardless, when recognizing that the structurally antagonistic and dehumanizing treatment of Black people is multifaceted, not always directed at specific individuals, and, arguably, can be marketized, the anti-Black credentials of such digital creations seem far from being opaque.

[The Business of] Spectacularizing Black Pain and Lives

While CGI Black influencers can be perceived as an example of anti-Black digital racism, this paper's initial focus on some of their content and commercial functions should not be mistaken for a disregard of how images and the online experiences of actual Black people are impacted by anti-Black digital racism. In the paragraphs that follow I turn my attention to the latter of these issues to consider how Black pain and Black lives are spectacularized and instrumentalized online.

Throughout history, due to the insidiousness of white supremacy and anti-Black racism, Black people's experiences of pain, death and murder have been spectacularized in societies, and have even been treated as a source of entertainment (Sutherland 2017). The spectacularization of Black pain and lives in the form of media content that is circulated and continually deconstructed and reconstructed online is one of many types of anti-Black racism that is remediated by digital technologies and networked culture. Russell's (2020) video essay "BLACK MEME" offers a crucial exploration of "the construct, culture, and material of the 'meme' as mapped to black

visual culture from 1900 to present day" and expresses "the impact of blackness, black life, and black social death on contemporary conceptions of virality borne in the age of the Internet."

The increasing availability, accessibility, and affordability of various digital devices with camera and video-recording capabilities has enabled some Black people to document aspects of their lives and distribute footage and important counter-narratives which highlight their experiences of structurally enforced violence. However, once made available online such content is often used and engaged with in notably anti-Black ways which are tethered to ongoing demand for "the viral circulation of the images of Black people in the new media ecology" (H. Gray 2015, 1108). Media content depicting the everyday lives of Black people and their experiences of pain, even, death, is often spectacularized online by individuals and institutions who post, share, remix, reframe and comment on such content in ways embedded in the anti-Black market logics of digital virality, clickbait culture, and the clout that may be afforded to brands that allude to their interest in Black and racial justice work but without substantially supporting such endeavours.

When I interviewed Bobino who is a Black woman in her thirties based in England, she spoke at length about her efforts to avoid horrific digital content which depicts Black suffering and death, and which often appears online. Many Black women who I interviewed discussed their love of aspects of social media, particularly, Black Twitter (Clark 2014, 2015), Black cyberfeminism (K.L. Gray 2015), and the work of Black bloggers and vloggers (Sobande 2017; Steele 2016a, 2016b, 2018). Some of their digital experiences reflect forms of joy that Lu and Steele (2019, 823) describe as part of their detailed work on "cross-platform resilience and (re)invention of Black oral culture online."

Still, even when acknowledging how social media and the internet benefits their lives, like Bobino, many who I interviewed also described their digital experiences as involving attempts to moderate their exposure to traumatic online depictions of Black people being harmed. Bobino referred to social media as being a "trap," partly due to the traumatic digital depictions that Black people are exposed to. She said:

> I can look down my Twitter timeline for instance and see the actual. . .see those images of atrocity. . .Black people spectactularized. . .their death. . .I can't watch these videos of inhumane practices that we are continuing to carry out as a country. . .I can't look through my timeline and not feel complicit. . .so I don't really engage with Twitter anymore.

The leading work of Roberts (2019) on commercial content moderators explicates how constant exposure to extremely disturbing content can have a distinctly detrimental effect on people's lives and health. Relatedly, Bobino's comments emphasize how the digital encounters of Black people can be traumatic due to others' normalized continual posting and sharing of depictions of their experiences of pain and death, much of which becomes couched in explicitly anti-Black social media comments and white supremacist responses to such material. Acknowledging this is not at all to suggest that Black people's video recording and social media-related efforts to survive

and document abuse they face are inherently anti-Black or are in vain. Rather, it is how such content may be spectacularized by others, institutions, and the workings of algorithms (Noble 2018) that can result in it being remediated in ways that are simultaneously produced by and oil the cogs of the anti-Black digital racism machine.

Plantain Baby who I interviewed and who is in her twenties and based in England critiqued the rise of "click-bait culture" which she views as being dependent on distorted, disparaging and discriminatory depictions of Black people, as well as media institutions' self-serving use of documentation of Black women's experiences of tragedy, to chase audience numbers and money. Plantain Baby's perspective is indicative of many Black women's justified suspicion of the mainstream media industries which exploit and subjugate Black people in ways inherently shaped by the interconnections of anti-Blackness, sexism, misogyny, classism, colourism, and other intersecting forms of oppression.

Another Black woman in Britain who I interviewed was Storm who is also in her twenties and based in England. She recognized that social media and content-sharing platforms such as Twitter and YouTube have expanded opportunities for Black people to depict themselves and communicate their experiences which are often actively excluded and denied by mainstream media gatekeepers (Clark 2014; Jackson et al. 2020). Storm pointed out that although social media can provide "helpful opportunities" for Black people to produce and share media, many of such digital spaces are also sites of racist content that is harmful to them (Daniels 2009, 2012, 2017). Storm, as did most of the women who I interviewed (Sobande 2020), spoke of the specific threats posed to Black women online and how their digital visibility frequently entails them dealing with abuse shaped by anti-Black racism, sexism, and other knotted forms of oppression (Akiwowo 2018; Jones 2019).

In addition to speaking about the spectacularization of Black pain and lives on social media, Bobino reflected on examples of how brands, including creative and cultural industry organizations, (mis)use (re)presentations of Black people as part of their digital presence to create the illusion that they are connected to and supportive of Black communities. Bobino discussed examples of institutions using images of Black lives to superficially "diversify" their marketing campaigns, position themselves as being adjacent to the "coolness" that may be associated with certain Black identities and aesthetics (Crockett 2008; Jackson 2019; Tulloch 2016; Walker 2012), and, resultingly, distract from the institutionally anti-Black nature of said organisations. In the months since interviewing Bobino her words have remained with me when witnessing brands hastily post empty statements and share shallow social media content in response to BLM activity in 2020.

Bobino spoke about arts and culture institutions' instrumental use of images of Black people who often looked "like they were minding their own business," unaware that (re)presentations of them would end up on the social media page of the institution behind the venue that they once were at. Tokenistic use of depictions of Black people as part of the digital presence and image of brands may not be an obvious example of anti-Black digital racism. Nevertheless, especially when this occurs as part of public relations attempts to mask the venomously anti-Black locus of the brand itself,

conceptualizing such activities as being embroiled in the web of digital racism seems necessary, as does further research regarding anti-Blackness, racial capitalism, and the stock image economy.

Due to the prominence of meme and digital remix culture in many contemporary interactions (Mina 2019; Russell 2020; Sobande 2019b), paired with centuries of Black people's objectification being societally condoned, the spectacularization of Black lives online includes the decontextualization and recontextualization of video footage of Black people. Depictions of them, including in anguish and when grieving, continue to be treated as fodder for social media reaction content. On many occasions photographs and videos of Black people, sometimes in distress, have been used as part of the creation of a Graphics Interchange Format (GIF) (Shand-Baptiste 2020). These GIFs are commonly intended to be humorous but may be used in ways that involve complete disregard of the original context in which such Black people are depicted, and indicate much disinterest in their possible upset in response to images of them being remixed in this way. Such digital activity can involve a Black person's mannerisms, facial expressions, image, and overall humanity being treated as though it is nothing more than a mere digital commodity and means to communicate online.

As racism is structural, how it operates far exceeds the visible actions of explicitly racist individuals. Anti-Black digital racism can swiftly morph from the use of racist language and slurs by people online, to the flippant creation of GIFs and memes that become a shorthand for expressing certain emotions. Anti-Black racism is present in routinizing digital practices that involve institutions enabling the casual online sharing of images of Black people in pain, including as part of what they believe are anti-racist actions. Therefore, meaningful attempts to counter anti-Black digital racism require an understanding of the different ways that it manifests and moves, both in the content of social media users and the structures of institutions and platforms that fuel the circulation of such material.

Digital Blackface

The topic of Blackface remains a contentious one with its roots in white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and the systemic oppression of Black people throughout history. Blackface involves the caricaturing of Black individuals, such as in the form of nineteenth century minstrelsy performances which reduce Black people and their experiences to racist and stereotypical mannerisms, offensive aesthetic markers and unequivocally anti-Black portrayals. Twenty-first century media discourse on Blackface gathered momentum in 2015, when it was publicly revealed that former NAACP chapter president Rachel Dolezal had been identifying and attempting to present herself as a Black woman for years, despite being a white woman. The example of Dolezal illustrates the potential ways that non-Black people may endeavour to create a self-image and/or self-brand related to Black culture and social justice issues, including by engaging in forms of Blackface.

When news about Dolezal came to light, questions that were pondered over included: "How have forms of Blackface changed over time and what does Blackface look like and do in contemporary society?." Considering what happens on social

media and in digital spaces illuminates some of the ways that forms of Blackface have developed in tandem with the ascent of digital technologies and networked culture. The term "digital Blackface" encompasses online depictions and practices which echo the anti-Black underpinnings of minstrelsy shows involving non-Black people "dressing up" and "performing" as though they are Black. Whether it be the posts of social media users or the carefully constructed digital presence of brands, there are many examples of how non-Black individuals and institutions are capitalizing on digital (re) presentations of Black people and (mis)using signifiers associated with Blackness due to the cultural cachet that is sometimes attached to them (Crockett 2008; Green 2006; Jackson 2019; Tulloch 2016; Walker 2012).

Digital Blackface, which often relies on mimicking and/or mocking Black people and Black culture, is a digital expression of societally engrained oppression that Black people face; treated as an objectified "type of commodity, a labor tool" (Henderson et al. 2016, 4). In a Teen Vogue op-ed, Jackson (2017) wrote about the need to talk about digital Blackface in reaction GIFS. That same year, other media outlets picked up this topic of discussion and posed the question to non-Black people, "is it OK to use Black emojis and GIFS"? (Princewill 2017). Potential connections between examples of digital Blackface and capitalistic clout linked to non-Black people's and brands' awareness and support of certain social justice issues may not be immediately obvious. However, upon closer inspection it is apparent that marketized notions of activism and commodified conceptualizations of liberationist politics increasingly play a part in branding strategies (Sobande 2020)—including those of high-profile commercial entities such as Nike which have often positioned themselves in relation to signifiers of Blackness (Crockett 2008).

Certain examples of digital Blackface reflect how some brands' and non-Black people's participation in online spaces involves them strategically (re)presenting themselves as being racially ambiguous, and, specifically, falsely alluding to their (non-existent) Blackness—including, at times, as part of attempts to be associated with marketized ideas related to Black social justice activism. Some social media users are manipulating their physical appearance and editing their photographs to appear Black online. In certain cases, this may be due to tacit knowledge of the marketability of non-Black individuals appearing to embody an exoticized aesthetic that in some ways may resemble the physical appearance of Black people, especially, Black women (Jackson 2019).

The phenomenon of non-Black social media users, particularly white women, (re) presenting themselves online and posting selfies in ways that involve an altered aesthetic that makes them appear as though they may be Black, has incisively been referred to as Blackfishing—a term originated and explained by Thompson (2018) and Deja (Rasool 2018), with variations of the term including "N*ggerfishing." Blackfishing, which may be regarded as a type of digital Blackface, exemplifies how some non-Black social media users attempt to tap into the profitable online influencer industry by toying with people's perception of their racial identity, emulating a Black aesthetic, and, potentially, profiting from the commodification and mimicry of Blackness. Blackfishing centers on impersonations of Black women by white women (Thompson 2018) and other non-Black people, and is demonstrative of the persistence

of attempts to capitalize on and copy the features and style of Black women (Jackson 2019), who throughout history have often been treated by others as mere means to commercial ends.

Voracious anti-Black digital racism and its many faces and forms are ever-changing. All the same, expressions of anti-Black digital racism are born of deeply entrenched structural oppression that spans centuries and continues to be seeded by imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2000). The pages of this paper foreground issues pertaining to CGI racialized online influencers, the spectactularization of Black pain and lives, the digital branding of institutions, and forms of digital Blackface. Yet, these examples just scratch the surface of the reach and range of types of anti-Black digital racism which will likely continue to be dismissed by many entities and institutions with the power to intervene.

Conclusion

In this paper I account for how Black people's use of social media and video-recording as part of efforts to survive and document their experiences of brutality can be remediated online by others and institutions, including as part of anti-Black viral and clickbait cultures (H. Gray 2015). In addition, I consider the socio-political and racial capitalist implications of digital content created and shared online by brands and people who are not Black, and which involves their (mis)use of images of Black people and visual signifiers associated with Blackness (Jackson 2019). As such, this work contributes to expanding scholarship concerning the shape-shifting nature of digital racism, namely, anti-Blackness, and entangled commercial logics related to (re)presentations of Black people and emulations of Blackness amidst the ascent of media and marketing discourse on BLM.

Anti-Black digital racism and the spectacularized online (re)presentation of Black people continues to be impacted by the affordances of different social media platforms and the popularity of digital remix culture in many contemporary societies. Although new and changing digital technologies and trends affect how racism occurs online, oppressive dynamics at the crux of it are nearly as old as time. Extant research has explored examples of what has been referred to as the commodification of "Black bodies" within digital culture. However, what is at stake regarding aspects of digital racism and the spectacularization of Black people online concerns much more than just their physicality or perceived parts of them.

It is dismissiveness of the humanity of Black people that often lurks and lies within types of anti-Black digital racism directed at them, including by those who attempt to mimic and commodify Blackness with an ease and casualness that is indicative of the extractive ways that many have treated Black people for centuries. Accordingly, there is a need to ensure that Black lives and the experiences of Black people, as articulated by them, are not rendered invisible in research related to online (re)presentations of Black people created by others and associated forms of digital racism. This paper is intended to be part of approaches to addressing these issues in ways that account for the perspectives of Black people, as expressed by them, and the under-examined role

of racial capitalism which drives many branding and consumer culture strategies that are associated with Blackness. Future research may benefit from a longitudinal focus on Black people's digital experiences on different platforms and in different countries, and consideration of potential strategies that are used as part of their efforts to moderate their exposure to racist and traumatic content.

As the profile of CGI racialized influencers and their movements into mainstream consumer culture picks up pace, there is also a need for further studies that analyze such digital creations, how they capture the interest of brands and consumer audiences, and the ways that marketized notions of racial identity are caught up in this. The examples discussed in this paper demonstrate the multifaceted nature of oppressive digital activity and the need for a sensitivity to different forms of digital racism as part of serious efforts to tackle it and improve the online experiences and lives of Black people.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iD

Francesca Sobande 🆔 https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4788-4099

References

Abidin, Crystal. 2018. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Bingley: Emerald.
Akiwowo, Seyi. 2018. "Amnesty's Latest Research into Online Abuse Finally Confirms What Black Women Have Known for Over a Decade." https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/amnesty-online-abuse-women-twitter_uk_5c1a0a2fe4b02d2cae8ea0c1.
Alkalimat, Abdul. 2004. *The African American Experience in Cyberspace: A Resource Guide to the Best Web Sites on Black Culture and History*. London: Pluto Press.
Amnesty International. 2018. "Women Abused on Twitter Every 30 Seconds—New Study." https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/women-abused-twitter-every-30-seconds-new-study.
Amoah, Susuana. 2019. "NoShade: A Critical Analysis of Digital Influencer Activism Against Shadeism in the Beauty Industry." https://www.academia.edu/39881809/NoShade_A_Critical_Analysis_of_Digital_Influencer_Activism_Against_Shadeism_in_the_Beauty_Industry.
Bailey, Moya. 2010. "They Aren't Talking About Me. . ." http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/2010/03/14/they-arent-talking-about-me/.
Bailey, Moya. 2021. *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
Bailey, Moya, and Trudy. 2018. "On Misogynoir: Citation, Erasure, and Plagiarism." *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (4): 762–8.

Benjamin, Ruha. 2019. *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Brock, André. 2012. "From the Blackhand Side: Twitter as a Cultural Conversation." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56 (4): 529–49.

Brock, André. 2016. "Critical Technocultural Discourse Analysis." *New Media & Society* 20 (3): 1012–30.

Brock, André. 2020. *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Clark, Meredith D. 2014. *To Tweet Our Own Cause: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Online Phenomenon 'Black Twitter'*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Graduate School. doi:10.17615/7bfs-rp55.

Clark, Meredith D. 2015. "Black Twitter: Building Connection Through Cultural Conversation." In *Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks*, edited by N. Rambukkana, 205–2017. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Clark, Meredith D. 2020. "DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called 'cancel culture'." *Communication and the Public* 5 (3–4): 88–92.

Collins, Patricia Hill. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge.

Cottom, Tressie McMillan. 2020. "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6 (4): 441–9.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1): 139–67.

Crockett, David. 2008. "Marketing Blackness: How Advertisers Use Race to Sell Products." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8 (2): 245–68.

Crockett, I'Nasah. 2014. "'Raving Amazons': Antiblackness and Misogynoir in Social Media." https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/raving-amazons-antiblackness-and-misogynoir-in-social-media.

Daniels, Jessie. 2009. *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy Online and the New Attack on Civil Rights*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.

Daniels, Jessie. 2012. "Race and Racism in Internet Studies: A Review and Critique". *New Media & Society* 15 (5): 695–719.

Daniels, Jessie. 2017. "Twitter and White Supremacy, A Love Story." https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/10/19/twitter-and-white-supremacy-love-story.

De Kosnik, Abigail and Feldman, Keith P. eds. 2019. *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Everett, Anna. 2009. *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Florini, Sarah. 2019. *Beyond Hashtags: Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks*. New York, NY: New York University.

Gray, Herman. 2015. "The Feel of Life: Resonance, Race, and Representation." *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1108–19.

Gray, Kishonna L. 2015. "Race, Gender, & Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory." In *Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0: The Intersection of Audiences and Production in Contemporary Theory*, edited by Rebecca Ann Lind, 175–92. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Gray, Kishonna L. 2020. *Intersectional Tech: Black Users in Digital Gaming*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Green, Joshua Lumpkin. 2006. "Digital Blackface: The Repackaging of the Black Masculine Image." Electronic thesis dissertation, Miami University.

Hamilton, Amber M. 2020. "A Genealogy of Critical Race and Digital Studies: Past, Present, and Future." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6 (3): 292–301.

Hampton, Rachelle. 2019. "The Black Feminists Who Saw the Alt-right Threat Coming." https://slate.com/technology/2019/04/black-feminists-alt-right-twitter-gamergate.html.

Harry, Sydette. 2014. "Everyone Watches, Nobody Sees: How Black Women Disrupt Surveillance Theory." https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/everyone-watches-nobody-sees-how-black-women-disrupt-surveillance-theory.

Henderson, Geraldine Rosa, Hakstian, Anne-Marie, and Williams, Jerome D. eds. 2016. *Consumer Equality: Race and the American Marketplace* (Racism in American Institutions). Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

hooks, bell. 2000. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto Press.

Hudson, Shafiqah. 2013. "'Negro Bed Wench?' Negro, Please." https://www.ebony.com/news/negro-bed-wench-negro-please-405/.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. 2017. "We Need to Talk About Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs." https://www.teenvogue.com/story/digital-blackface-reaction-gifs.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. 2018. "Shudu Gram is a White Man's Digital Projection of Real-life Black Womanhood." https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/shudu-gram-is-a-white-mans-digital-projection-of-real-life-black-womanhood.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. 2019. *White Negroes: When Cornrows were in Vogue . . . and Other Thoughts on Cultural Appropriation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Jackson, Sarah J., Bailey, Moya, and Foucault Welles, Brooke. 2020. *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Jones, Feminista. 2019. *Reclaiming Our Space: How Black Feminists Are Changing The World From The Tweets to the Streets*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Kolko, Beth E., Nakamura, Lisa, and Rodman, Gilbert B. eds. 2000. *Race in Cyberspace*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Leonard, David J. 2004. "High Tech Blackface—Race, Sports Video Games and Becoming the Other." *Intelligent Agent* 4 (4.2): 1–5.

Leonard, David J. 2016. "Illegible Black Death, Legible White Pain: Denied Media, Mourning, and Mobilization in an Era of 'Post-racial' Gun Violence." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 12 (2): 101–9.

Lu, Jessica H. and Steele, Catherine Knight. 2019. "'Joy is Resistance': Cross-platform Resilience and (Re)invention of Black Oral Culture Online." *Information, Communication & Society* 22 (6): 823–37.

Mercer, Kobena. 1994. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. New York: Routledge.

Mina, An Xiao. 2019. *Memes to Movements: How The World's Most Viral Media is Changing Social Protest and Power*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Nakamura, Lisa. 2008. *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Noble, Safiya Umoja. 2018 *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Ong, Thuy. 2020. "Virtual Influencers Make Real Money While Covid Locks Down Human Stars." https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-10-29/lil-miquela-lol-s-seraphine-virtual-influencers-make-more-real-money-than-ever.

Princewill, Victoria. 2017. "Is it OK to Use Black Emojis and Gifs?" [video]. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/video_and_audio/headlines/40931479/is-it-ok-to-use-black-emojis-and-gifs.

Rasool, Amira. 2018. "Some White Influencers are Being Accused of 'Blackfishing,' or Using Makeup to Appear Black." https://www.teenvogue.com/story/blackfish-niggerfish-white-influencers-using-makeup-to-appear-black.

Roberts, Sarah T. 2019. *Behind the Screen: Content Moderation in the Shadows of Social Media*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Robinson, Cedric J. 1983. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press.

Russell, Legacy. 2020. "BLACK MEME" [video essay]. https://externalpages.org/legacy-russell/black-meme.html.

Semic, Sara. 2019. "Meet the Man Behind the World's First Digital Supermodel." https://www.elle.com/uk/fashion/a28394357/man-behind-worlds-first-digital-supermodel.

Shand-Baptiste, Kuba. 2020. "The Viral Stars of Black Twitter are Finally Being Recognised—and That's Worth Celebrating." https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/black-twitter-memes-instagram-kayla-nicole-jones-anthony-spice-adams-antoine-dodson-a9266721.html.

Sobande, Francesca. 2017. "Watching Me Watching You: Black Women in Britain on YouTube." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20 (6): 655–71.

Sobande, Francesca. 2019a. "Woke-washing: 'intersectional' femvertising and branding 'woke' bravery." *European Journal of Marketing* 54 (11): 2723–45.

Sobande, Francesca. 2019b. "Memes, digital remix culture and (re)mediating British politics and public life." *IPPR Progressive Review* 26 (2): 151–60.

Sobande, Francesca. 2020. *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Steele, Catherine Knight. 2016a. "The Digital Barbershop: Blogs and Online Oral Culture Within the African American Community." *Social Media + Society* 2 (4): 1–10.

Steele, Catherine Knight. 2016b. "Signifyin', Bitching, and Blogging: Black Women and Resistance Discourse Online." In *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class and Culture Online*, edited by Safiya Umoja Noble and Brendesha M. Tynes, 73–93. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Steele, Catherine Knight. 2018. "Black Bloggers and Their Varied Publics: The Everyday Politics of Black Discourse Online." *Television & New Media* 19 (2): 112–27.

Sutherland, Tonia. 2017. "Making a Killing: On Race, Ritual, and (Re)membering in Digital Culture." *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture (PDT&C)* 46 (1): 32–40.

Tate, Shirley Anne. 2009. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Thompson, Wanna. 2018. "How White Women on Instagram are Profiting Off Black Women." https://www.papermag.com/white-women-blackfishing-instagram-2619714094.html.

Tulloch, Carol. 2016. *The Birth of Cool: Style Narratives of the African Diaspora*. London: Bloomsbury.

Walker, Rebecca, ed. 2012. *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*. Berkley, CA: Soft Skull Press.

Author Biography

Dr. Francesca Sobande is a lecturer in digital media studies at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. She is author of The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).