How Cultural Workers Address Racism and Work in the Digital Age

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About

This 2023 report stems from the project "<u>How Cultural Workers Negotiate Racism in the Digital Age</u>" (2020-2021). Jason Roberts (Cardiff University) was a research assistant during this time. Project outputs include <u>an open access article</u> in The Sociological Review.

Illustrations

The cover art illustrations which also feature throughout this report were created by <u>Chris Manson</u>.

Contents

I think in London it's more open-minded. There's a lot more opportunities for people to get into now...

On some days I'm happy to be and consider myself as a Black producer. On other days I want to be me who produces stuff who happens to be Black...

He was like, "you're a good journalist, stick at it". And I was like, "I can't live on freelance money". I think for people like us from Black and Brown, lower income families, it's very difficult to turn down...it's very difficult to wait...

Now, we can talk about it [racism] as much as we want on social media...but the real world is where things get changed.

Podcasts, like music, have removed a lot of gatekeepers and that's a good thing.

I was networking with creatives of completely different disciplines and the only thing we had in common is that we're creatives of colour and in Scotland...

Introduction

Research Questions

- How are Black, Asian, and other people of colour ("creators of colour") in Britain's cultural and creative industries (CCIs) using digital platforms to produce and circulate acts of creativity in ways that might enable them to access paid work?

- To what degree do creators of colour intend for such uses of digital platforms to counter and combat racism in the CCIs (including its intersections with other forms of oppression such as sexism, misogyny, classism, xenophobia, and ableism)?

- How do the affordances of those digital communication technologies (e.g., Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, messenger apps, and websites) both enable and constrain creators of colour in their efforts to reach and build audiences, and combat racism and interconnected oppressions?

Introduction

Research Method and Aims

This research project is based on 30 interviews with aspiring and established workers in sectors of the CCIs, including, but not limited to, journalism, creative writing and publishing, music, art and design, fashion, events, and illustration. Such people's jobs and practices cover a variety of roles and environments, including working as actors, artists, authors, content creators, festival organisers, illustrators, journalists, musicians, and podcasters in England, Scotland, and Wales.

Overall, this project aimed to identify changes in how workers who are Black, Asian, and other people of colour address racism and pursue work in the CCIs in Britain. This report features interview excerpts and key findings.

Note: The researchers use the term "creators of colour" to refer to Black, Asian, and other racialised people who are targets of racism and who are actively involved in paid work in the cultural and creative industries. When using the terms "creators of colour" and "people of colour", the researchers also recognise the specific and nuanced self-identifications and experiences of Black, Asian and other racialised people who are the targets of racism.

Introduction

This research is informed by a wide range of prior studies, but it particularly draws on work that takes seriously "the intersection of platform capitalism and racial capitalism" (Cottom 2020: 441). Accordingly, while this research focuses on the digital experiences of creators of colour, it also critically addresses systemic power regimes (e.g., structural racism) that underpin online platforms.

The next section of the report reflects on the context of the CCIs in Britain, followed by a focus on digital racism. The project findings are then outlined in three subsequent separate yet interlinked sections:

- **Digital Communities and Solidarity**
- **Algorithms and Visibility**
- **Digital Presence and Safety**

The conclusion highlights key findings which are lines of enquiry for future academic, industry, and policy research.
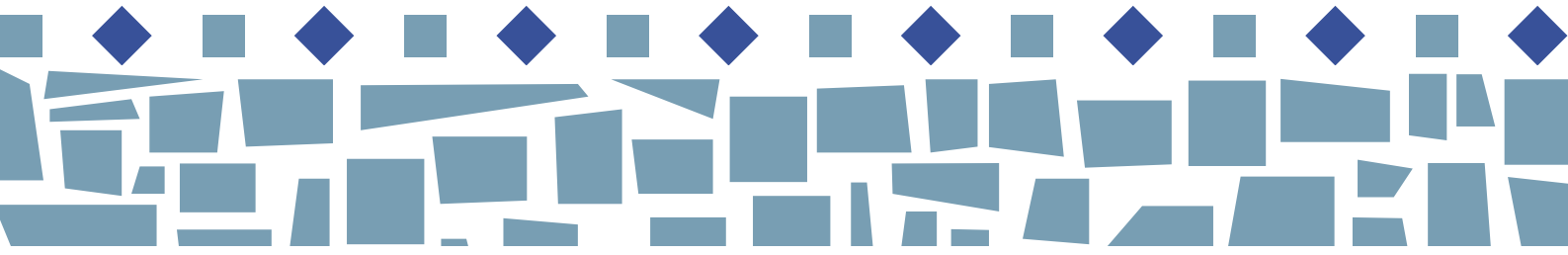
The Cultural and Creative Industries

Power and Publicness

Britain's CCIs encompass various sectors, professions, and forms of creative work and cultural production which contribute to economic, social, and political life. The CCIs are also discursive terrains where the meanings of words including "creativity", "culture", "artist", and "value" are struggled over by people and groups with different interests.

The work of scholar and public intellectual Stuart Hall is critical "to understanding and engaging relations of power, to understanding and engaging relations of cultural domination, struggle, and resistance" (Slack and Grossberg 2016: xiv). This report's discussion of the experiences of creators of colour is shaped by the work of Hall (2016) and other academics, activists, artists, and cultural workers who have critically addressed the dynamics between power, culture, and politics.

Discussions at the core of this report also draw on recent research and writing on the impact of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic on the CCIs (Qureshi 2021; Walmsley, Gilmore, and O'Brien 2022), including the pandemic's intensification of precarious work and labour conditions.
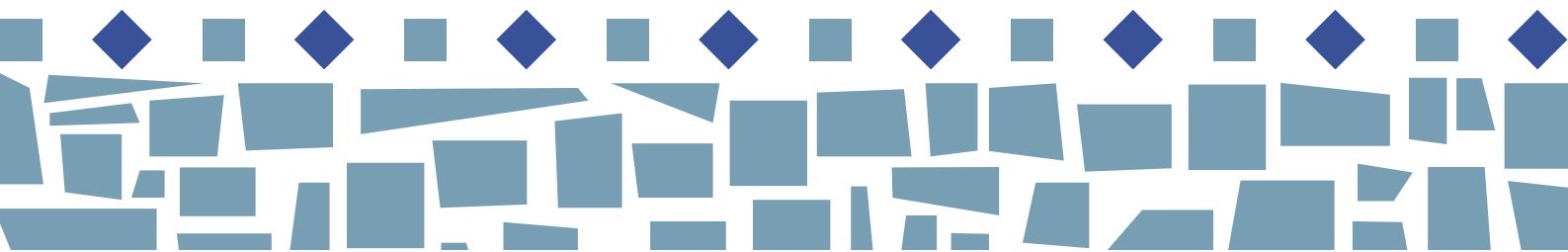
The Cultural and Creative Industries

Inequalities and Inclusivity

The CCIs are impacted by interconnected forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, misogyny, capitalism, ableism, and homophobia. These affect who is regarded, respected, and supported as an artist, cultural producer, and worker in the industry (Brook, O'Brien, and Taylor 2021; Hesmondhalgh and Saha 2013; Saha 2017, 2021; Sobande 2017, 2020).

A crucial way that the CCIs differ from other sectors (e.g., healthcare or retailing) is that they are a public sphere where issues of diversity, visibility, and inequality are publicly expressed, contested, debated and discussed, (e.g., via art, festivals, film, performance, music, TV, writing). There is extensive evidence of racism and intersecting inequalities in the CCIs (O'Brien, Laurison, Miles, and Friedman 2016) which are industries that consist of a predominantly white and middle-class demographic, with men often occupying the most senior, secure, and high-paid roles.

Much industry discussion of inequalities has focused on the topic of "representation", but as our research highlights, a sole focus on ways to include people in the industry cannot adequately address the oppression that creators of colour may face when working in CCIs. After all, some forms of inclusion can be predatory and exclusionary (Cottom 2020).

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The Cultural and Creative Industries

Spaces and Places

As well as being shaped by the physical location of where people live and work (e.g., locally, regionally, nationally, internationally) (Hesmondhalgh 2018; Sobande and hill 2022), people's experiences of pursuing paid work in the creative and cultural industries can be impacted by various digital spaces, internet technologies, and platforms.

Rather than focusing on one key digital platform, our research involved interviewing Black, Asian, and other people of colour about their varied digital experiences of the CCIs. The research interviews also included discussions about which industry resources, networks, and opportunities were or were not available in people's immediate physical surroundings.

In the absence of being able to travel to and participate in meetups at physical sites and locations around the UK, internet technologies can be engaged in ways that complicate ideas about the geographies and mapping of CCI activity and work experiences. An in-depth focus on the geographically defined experiences of Black and Asian people in the CCIs is beyond the focus of this report, but our research findings include reflections on the role of digital spaces in the formation of communities and forms of solidarity that support creators of colour in the UK.

Digital Racism

Beyond Black Squares
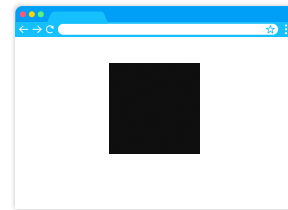
In 2020, after a surge in British discourse about racism, Black Lives Matter (BLM), and anti-racism, "Blackout Tuesday" caught the attention of a range of people and institutions online. On that day (2 June), some CCI organisations participated in posting a simple visual of a black square to signal support of BLM and/or broader racial justice work.

Widely critiqued as an empty gesture that contorted an online campaign that was originally aimed at the music industry, "Blackout Tuesday" has often been deemed an example of superficial understandings of (anti-)racism. In the years since then there has been much public and political discussion of digital racism and ways to address it, including on social media sites such as Twitter (now, X).

Responses to the issue of online abuse include the UK Parliament's Online Safety Bill which currently features a section on racist abuse. Prior to that, charity Glitch UK and the End Violence Against Women Coalition reported on "COVID-19 and the Epidemic of Online Abuse", emphasising that "Black and minoritised women and non-binary people were almost as likely to be abused based on ethnicity as they were to be abused based on gender" (Glitch UK 2020: 22). Since then, Glitch UK (2023) released "The Digital Misogynoir Report" which focuses on working to end the "dehumanising of Black women on social media".

Digital Racism

Algorithms and Affordances of Platforms
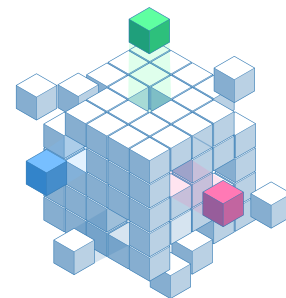
Digital racism and other interconnected forms of oppression such as sexism, colourism, transphobia, and ableism remain rife. Although racism is not the result of digital technology, it occurs in ways that are distinctly shaped by it. Our approach to researching the digital experiences of Black, Asian, and other people of colour in the UK's CCIs was informed by a wide range of research on <u>critical race and digital studies</u>, the platformisation of work, and the CCIs.

Prior studies that have informed our project includes Safiya Umoja Noble's (2018) crucial account of the oppressive nature of algorithms and their reinforcement of structural racism, sexism, and capitalism. Our project is also shaped by the significant research and writing of scholar Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020: 441), who highlights that "Internet technologies are now a totalizing sociopolitical regime and should be central to the study of race and racism".

Accordingly, when researching the digital experiences of creators of colour we reflected on how they are impacted by the affordances and functions of different online platforms and the broader digital culture that they are part of. For example, our research involved consideration of how the changing norms associated with specific platforms (e.g., Instagram) are entangled with different expectations and experiences of them among creators of colour.

Digital Racism

Erasure and Obscurity

Although there is a strong body of research on inequalities in the creative and cultural industries (CCIs), the digital experiences of Black, Asian, and other people of colour have seldom been the focus of work (Saha 2021; Sobande 2017). It is vital that such experiences are not erased or obscured in broader research that is intended to aid a more equitable future for people pursuing forms of paid work in the CCIs.

Meaningful discussion of inequalities in these industries requires specificity, such as by addressing the specific oppressions that impact creators of colour. Aligned with our intention to learn about differences and similarities between how creators of colour address racism in the digital age, research interview questions included the following:

- What uses, if any, have you made of digital technologies in your own career as a creative?
- For some people, digital and social media seems to offer a means for solidarity, others have less positive views. Can you tell us about your views on this and about any relevant experiences you've had?
- Of course there's a lot of debate online about issues concerning creatives, including racism in the cultural industries. Do you find digital and social media helpful/valuable in terms of debates on these and other issues?

Digital Communities and Solidarity

It's enabled me to connect with people who kind of feel the same as me...people I would never have been in contact with... that community...validated the way that I was feeling.

People say if one of us wins, we're all winning but I feel like if more of us are winning, then we're all kind of winning.

It's very heavily trust-based, which I guess is the same in any other community based warning [whisper] network. But, yes, it 100% exists for the indie comics community.

There's always been a sense of [online] community but that obviously massively changed this year, after the death of George Floyd...the sense of community just expanded ... and now there's a huge community of people of colour.

We are fairly like-minded, we are fairly forthright in our opinions and I think that forms a kind of closer community that is still professional but fairly informal.
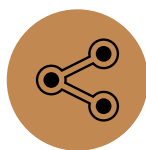
Because they have formed this community, they feel empowered, and they often do so by railing against what they perceive to be "social justice warriors" interfering with how they perceive comics should be.

Communities or Networks?

Key topics covered during the research interviews included experiences of networking and community-building. Although the terms "communities" and "networks" may invoke some similar ideas about feelings of belonging, connectedness, and shared values, there are distinct differences between community-building and networking.

As the research interviews highlighted, although formal networks for creators of colour can be a source of personal and professional support, some can still be experienced in ways that are devoid of the sense of relationality, openness, and collectiveness that may be more closely associated with grassroots forms of community-building.

In other words, while national and institutionally affiliated networks for creators of colour were commented on positively by interview participants, more informal experiences of digital community were mentioned as providing senses of solidarity and access to "whisper networks" that are often less available through more formal channels.

> Twitter has been the main route for me finding work and making contacts ...there is a lot of hustle involved...a balancing act...I have found that the strongest connections I have are artists, and other creatives who I have connected with on Twitter...I have a very strong community... and it helps because, personally, I actually feel quite isolated in the real world.
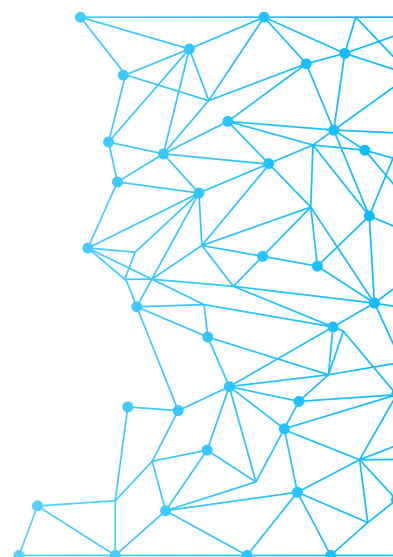
Twitter (before X)

During the interviews, people shared about experiences of racist and sexist abuse on Twitter. But there was also much discussion of how Twitter has enabled creators of colour to publicly hold individuals and organisations accountable for their racist and sexist actions in the CCIs.

Some interview participants attributed part of the platform's power to the strength of the "online phenomenon 'Black Twitter' " (Clark 2014: viii), such as "Black discursive accountability praxes" (Clark 2020: 91) of calling out racist organisations and individuals. Others pointed to their use of Twitter as an alternative "gallery space" and open counterpublic.

Since our research occurred (2020-21), Twitter has significantly shifted. It was acquired by Elon Musk (2022), who rebranded the platform as X (2023), ushering in a wave of contentious changes. Subsequently, there has been a decline in Twitter's traffic and users. While Bluesky, a different platform, has been deemed a promising alternative, its current invite only model may prohibit the sense of open and accessible digital community that many interview respondents ascribed to Twitter.

> There's a lot of Black artists on Twitter as well, because on social media, we have more dominance from what I've seen as opposed to in the [CCI] institutions. So you can't take the traditional gallery space away from us and now try and take social media away from us as well.

The Politics of "Professionalism"

As we discuss in detail in our article <u>"Black, Brown and Asian Cultural Workers, Creativity and Activism: The Ambivalence of Digital Branding"</u> (Sobande, Hesmondhalgh, and Saha 2023), industry notions of so-called "respectability" and "professionalism" are impacted by the intersections of race, gender, class, and different yet interconnected structural power relations which shape societal ideas about "civility".

The oppressive politics of "respectability" and "professionalism" are implicated in digital self-branding pressures faced by creators of colour, some of whom may feel forced to "self-edit" (Pictan, Marwick, and boyd 2018) in an attempt to mitigate the prospect of them being perceived as "messy" or "difficult" by the predominantly white CCIs.

The CCIs depend on forms of self-expression — from acting, comedy, and painting to fashion, music, and photography, but racist ideas about what constitutes "respectability" and "professionalism" oppress creators of colour in many ways which can prohibit them from creating work that they want to, and expressing and sharing it on their own terms.
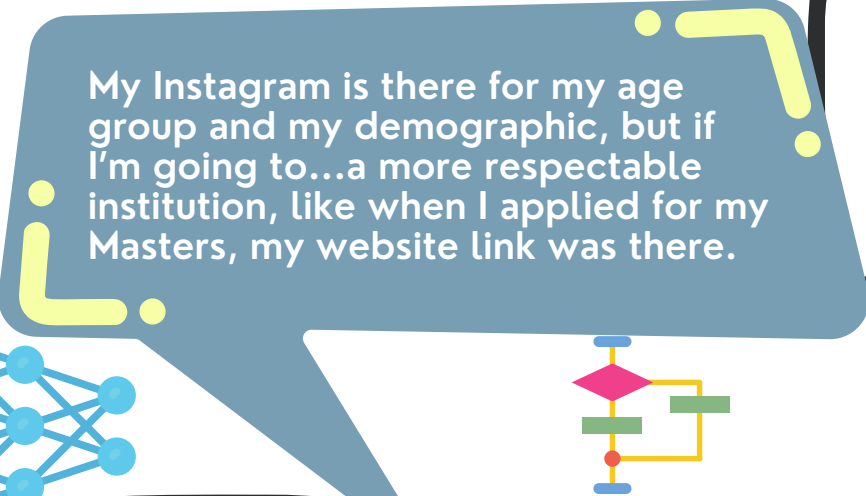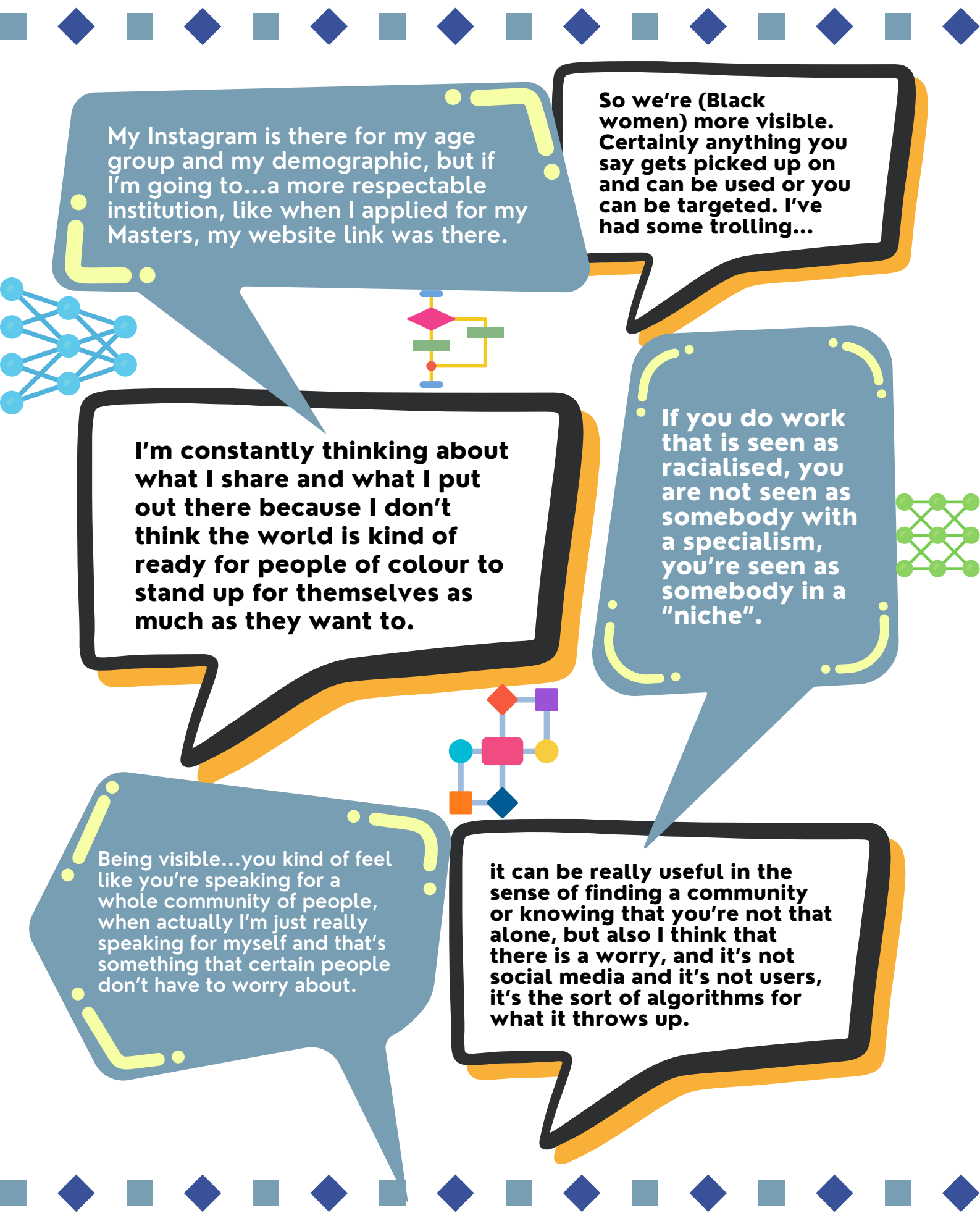
Social media is meant to be your authentic self and when you are further policing how you present yourself as a person of colour, striking a balance is difficult because you don't want to be seen as messy...unprofessional...

I think that if you're white, you're afforded a bit more quirky or a bit more sarcastic or a bit more offbeat...I couldn't get away with that attitude on an online space without being seen as difficult.
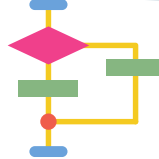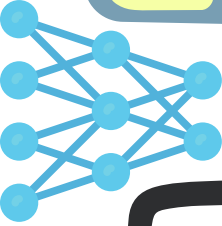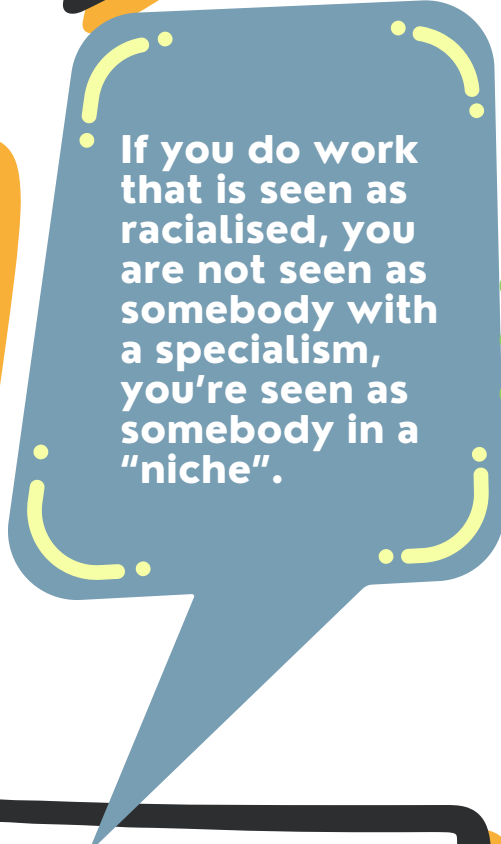
My Instagram is there for my age group and my demographic, but if I'm going to...a more respectable institution, like when I applied for my Masters, my website link was there.
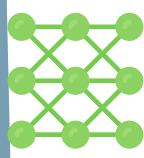
So we're (Black women) more visible. Certainly anything you say gets picked up on and can be used or you can be targeted. I've had some trolling...

I'm constantly thinking about what I share and what I put out there because I don't think the world is kind of ready for people of colour to stand up for themselves as much as they want to.

If you do work that is seen as racialised, you are not seen as somebody with a specialism, you're seen as somebody in a "niche".

Being visible...you kind of feel like you're speaking for a whole community of people, when actually I'm just really speaking for myself and that's something that certain people don't have to worry about.

it can be really useful in the sense of finding a community or knowing that you're not that alone, but also I think that there is a worry, and it's not social media and it's not users, it's the sort of algorithms for what it throws up.

Guessing or Gaming?

A few people interviewed felt that they had a strong sense of how algorithms impact their online visibility on certain platforms.

An author spoke about fostering online interactions to boost their work via algorithms. Aware of biases implicated in algorithms that oppress Black people, an artist shared their efforts to counteract this: "Any time I see someone's work, I'll always repost it and try and get them as much exposure as possible, to try and break the algorithms because a lot of Black artists have come to Instagram to showcase their work".

Another person discussed the racist underpinnings of forms of "shadowbanning" — how online platforms minimise and obstruct the visibility of Black people online: "If you look at Instagram, that bans images of black bodies that are naked in any way, or says like a face of a Black woman is offensive, by their algorithms. So we're not even being seen on social media in the same way that our white counterparts are. So that hinders our ability to transition into these new digital spheres and to succeed and to strive and to be seen".

> **Regularly updating boosts the book in the rankings, it shows the book to more people. it's all about manipulating the algorithm. So the more people that interact with your book in terms of comments, the more Wattpad's algorithm thinks, oh this book is popular...**

Instagram

Often associated with photography, aesthetics, and visual culture, Instagram is a platform that can function as a portfolio of creative work. Instagram's initial focus on visual representations, rather than discussion, has been leveraged by some organisations that seek to project an image of them as inclusive. As highlighted below, a journalist discussed the stark contrast between the Instagram presence of publications that are notorious for dismissing the pitches and work of people of colour.

Although Instagram has been less associated with social and political commentary than platforms such as X (formerly known as Twitter), as an actor commented, the platform has experienced "a new wave of... and I've only noticed it this year (2021) really, of having a political discussion on Instagram through posts". For this reason, and the void that may be left by Twitter's transformation into X, Instagram may play an increasing role in how creators of colour callout racism in the CCIs.

While some interview participants praised the potential to use Instagram as part of anti-racist work, others were sceptical of its merits.

> The woman was like, no, I don't think this [pitch] is right for us. Even though they have a section, like a dedicated Instagram for people of colour which to me is questionable.

Recommendation and Recognition

When reflecting on recommended content on digital platforms, some interview participants critiqued the ways that elements of influencer culture and activism appear to collide in the form of Instagram trends.

An actor who was doubtful about the potential benefits of using Instagram to address racism critiqued the trend of pastel palette infographics and images on Instagram that appear to cutify issues of injustice and structural oppression: "people shouldn't be dying and they'll [people posting trending content about this] all be like [here's] this really pretty image that's shared a million times on Instagram".

The viral nature of such posts contrasts with the shadowbanning and suppression of online visibility that Black and Asian people may face when calling out racism in ways that move beyond simple infographics and soundbites that resemble Instagram's innocuous aesthetic. Overall, the experiences of creators of colour who attempt to address racism online are impacted by who and what digital platforms recognise and recommend, and who and what they dismiss and disrupt.

> I'm constantly in a flux of what I want to put on my social media and I want to do in terms of I want to share all of these insightful things about race within the industry, but there's always that struggle of who's looking at it, and who in the industry isn't ready to see it yet?

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Digital Presence and Safety

I've always been kept private on Instagram, I've kind of protected myself from that kind of thing and that was probably the first experience where I felt like this can actually be quite hurtful and quite scary.

The trolls I don't respond to because what's the point? ...Most of the people that do troll actually aren't people who were ever going to listen in the first place.

I have this fear of being trolled or being hated, and I know some people are really, really good at just being active on social media and just letting it slide and just dealing with that kind of stuff and being fine with it. I'm not very good at that.

I remember posting about it and getting a troll...So I feel like I've always been quite cautious in that sense and as an activist.

The worst I had from Wattpad was sexual harassment, to be honest... I think it's pretty typical of somebody who has got a big following, or is relatively well-known.

REPORT ABUSE

They've had a lot of hate online from trolls like, "why should I give you my money" or whatever, but the work they're doing is really, really important and amazing and it's all about highlighting creators of colour.

Power or Pressure?

There were many similarities and differences between the digital experiences of the 30 people who were interviewed. While some people discussed the significant role of digital platforms in creating and sharing their work, others spoke of how they actively disengage from digital spaces to protect their privacy, peace, and professional prospects.

Pressures to foster a digital presence appears to have been experienced by all research participants, but the extent to which such a presence is central to them securing paid work is impacted by factors such as location, sector norms, and (in)access to financial security and industry networks offline.

> I'm seeing people now having more agency online and actually people are respecting that. People are not challenging that. Obviously you get some people that are trolling which is part of the online community but I think that people are comfortable now, more so than ever, in speaking about their truth.

TikTok

At the time of the research interviews (2020-21), TikTok was quickly becoming a key digital platform for the marketing and sharing of content related to a range of work and sectors that are part of the creative and cultural industries (e.g., BookTok, InteriorTok), including by enabling some budding cultural critics to attract the attention of industry organisations.

TikTok was far from being perceived as free of racism, but some of the people who were interviewed described it as being a digital space that was less saturated than others, presenting them with more of an opportunity to "stand out from the crowd" due to its relative newness at that time.

> The older the platform gets, this is the pattern of it, the more resilient it is to organic new users trying to build a user base. So the biggest spaces now to build user bases and users and followers is LinkedIn and TikTok because they're changing their approach to try and get more people onto their site, stay on there, etc
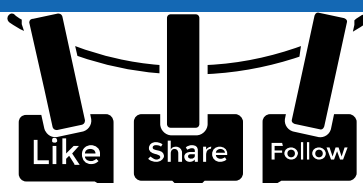
Addressing Abuse

The relationship between digital technology and structural oppression extends beyond people's use of social media to perpetuate racist abuse. As was discussed during the research interviews, digital platforms can aid vital "whisper networks" that enable Black, Asian, and other people of colour to keep each other informed about the racist, sexist, and abusive actions of different individuals and institutions in the CCIs.

The intersections of anti-Black racism, sexism, and misogyny (misogynoir) (Bailey 2021) result in Black women facing specific forms of punitive and discriminatory responses when speaking out about abuse, including sexual harassment. While "whisper networks" are no solution to protection, some function in ways intended to provide some sense of safety.
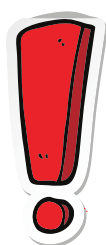
It is actually really valuable for this whisper network to happen. And it's not just abusive work practices, you hear about people warning of sexual abusers, of emotional abusers...

#@*&!!!

Like Share Follow
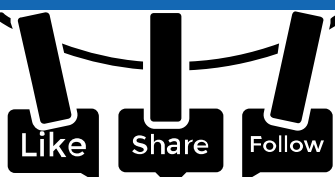
Conclusions

Conclusions: Research Findings

The ways that cultural and creative workers respond to racism and the politics of representation and respectability in the digital age are complex and includes strategies of digital participation and disengagement. While forms of community-building and solidarity-making can be part of such digital experiences, the constantly shifting nature of digital platforms can result in a sense of fragility if involvement in community is solely dependent on specific sites (e.g., Twitter before X).

Our research highlights tensions between the pressures and experiences of digital self-branding practices. Building on scholarship on inequalities in the CCIs, and the relationship between digital platforms and racism, we find a marked ambivalence in the reported experiences of Black, Asian, and other people of colour working in Britain's CCIs.
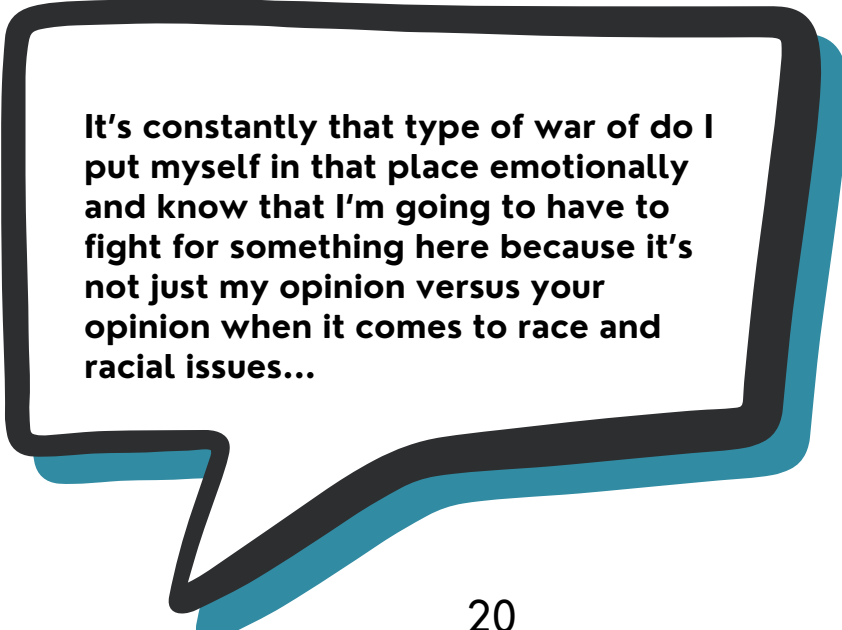
Social media plays a central part in some people's experiences of paid work and community participation in the CCIs, but it has a more peripheral role in other people's career trajectory, forms of solidarity, and organising efforts.

Conclusions: Research Findings

The convergence of creativity and activism is one way that creators of colour may try to resist, or at least attempt to make meaningful, forms of digital presence and self-promotion that platforms and the CCIs encourage. However, the online content and commentary of Black and Asian people should not be assumed as inherently activist, anti-racist, or resistant.

To understand and support the digital experiences of Black, Asian, and other people of colour in the CCIs, it is important to move beyond a binary framing of digital platforms as either inherently "good" or "bad", and to grapple with the specific affordances, functions, and norms of certain sites and sectors.

> **It's constantly that type of war of do I put myself in that place emotionally and know that I'm going to have to fight for something here because it's not just my opinion versus your opinion when it comes to race and racial issues...**

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