

Black, Brown and Asian cultural workers, creativity and activism: The ambivalence of digital self-branding practices

The Sociological Review

1–19

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00380261231163952

journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Francesca Sobande**

Cardiff University, UK

David Hesmondhalgh

University of Leeds, UK

Anamik Saha

University of Leeds, UK

Abstract

How do cultural and creative workers respond to racism and the politics of representation and respectability in the digital age? In what ways do they engage in forms of community-building and solidarity-making, while managing pressures to build digital presence and personal brands? This article seeks to address these questions via 30 in-depth interviews with Black, Brown and Asian (BBA) workers in the UK cultural and creative industries (CCIs). Focusing on the ambivalence of digital self-branding practices, our work builds on scholarship on inequalities in the CCIs, and on platformization and race. We organize our findings regarding the experiences and values of these workers into three main themes: the positive potential these workers find in the capacity of digital media technologies for forging community and solidarity; the benefits and limitations of using digital media technologies to communicate counternarratives, including exposure of discrimination in CCIs, and adapting and 'gaming' features such as recommendation algorithms; and how they experience and navigate felt pressures to self-brand in contemporary digital contexts. We find a marked ambivalence in the reported experiences of these workers, which generatively complicates existing accounts of digital technology, algorithmic struggles and the UK's CCIs.

Keywords

creative, cultural, digital, platform, race, racism

Corresponding author:

Francesca Sobande, School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 1FS, UK.

Email: sobandef@cardiff.ac.uk

Introduction

In the past five years alone, numerous academic and industry reports have drawn attention to longstanding patterns of racial inequality and exclusion in the UK cultural and creative industries (CCIs), whether music (*Black Lives in Music*, 2021), film (Nwonka & Malik, 2021), publishing (Bold, 2019; Saha & van Lente, 2020), or arts and crafts (Brook et al., 2018; Patel, 2020). This has been undergirded by impactful anti-racist activism on social media that focuses on the CCIs. As a famous example, in 2015 the nomination of white actors for all 20 Academy Award acting nominations for that year led to the launch of #OscarsSoWhite by April Reign on Twitter, which drew international attention to legacies of racism in the film industry (Hoyes, 2021; Ugwu, 2020). The emergence of strong social media responses to inequalities in the CCIs in the UK and US reflects how digital culture is impacting these sectors and understandings of them, but there is a need for more sociological analyses of these matters.

Racism operates across all domains of economy and society but manifests itself in ways shaped by the specifics of each domain, including the conventions and controlling constraints of organizational cultures (Meghji, 2022; Ray, 2019). One crucial way that the CCIs differ from other economic sectors (e.g. healthcare or retailing) is that they are domains where issues of diversity, visibility and racial inequality are very publicly expressed, contested, debated and discussed. This is because the CCIs, as well as forming a growing economic sector, are a key socio-cultural domain where narratives, representations, symbols and images are created and circulated, via art, festivals, film, performances, music, TV, writing and other means.

As we discuss below, in recent years there has been a gradually expanding body of research that has sought to challenge the longstanding neglect in various research traditions of racial inequality in the CCIs (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013; Patel, 2020; Saha, 2017, 2021; Sobande, 2020; Vrikki & Malik, 2019). At the same time, digitalization and platformization have been transforming the dynamics of production and distribution in those industries. Some researchers have interpreted digitalization of media in optimistic terms, arguing that it might lead to significant democratization. Others are much more pessimistic. But in spite of a rising interest in questions of race and racism in the (digitalizing) CCIs, there has been a curious lack of research concerning how people of colour working in those industries in the UK experience, understand and value digital technologies of cultural production and distribution, including social media.

Our article seeks to fill this gap by undertaking sociological research.¹ It uses fieldwork interviews and a theorized understanding, drawing on cultural sociology of the conditions of culture-making and communications, to investigate how digital technologies are being used by Black, Brown and Asian (BBA) cultural workers in ways that shape and resist existing notions of racial identity, political engagement and solidarity. We ask: what informs the varied ways that such cultural workers engage with, and disengage from, digital technologies? We also consider notions of (problematic) ‘inclusion’ and dynamics of ‘respectability’ in relation to CCIs. Our concern is with how creative and cultural workers deal with racism, including in ways that involve them negotiating the politics of representation and respect, while managing their pressures to self-brand

online. Adopting this sociological approach highlights the ambivalence of the digital nature of cultural work for those from marginalized backgrounds.

We begin with a literature review, focusing on two significant bodies of research: studies of digitalization and digital platforms that address questions of race, ethnicity and racism; and sociologically informed studies of the effects of racism and white supremacy in the CCIs – including the media industries. We then discuss our methods, before reporting findings in three areas emerging from our analysis of the interviews: how BBA cultural workers in the UK find positive potential in the capacity of digital media technologies for forging community and solidarity among themselves and among people of colour more generally; the benefits and limitations of using digital media technologies to communicate counternarratives and expose forms of discrimination in CCIs, adapting and ‘gaming’ features such as recommendation algorithms; and how they experience and navigate pressures to self-brand online. Overall, we examine how ambivalence operates amid all of this, and how this complicates binary understandings of the so-called ‘good’ and ‘bad’ digital experiences of Black, Asian and other racialized people in the UK.

Racism, digital technology and platformization in the CCIs

After years of neglect, a significant strand of recent research on digitalization and digital platforms has addressed questions of race, ethnicity and racism (Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies, 2022). There have been vital accounts of the digital experiences of Black women (Bailey, 2021; Steele, 2021), digital (dis)respect (Mackay, 2021), the institutional whiteness and racism of tech organizations and cultures (McIlwain, 2019), and of how the norms and values embedded in everyday technological use have been sculpted by racist ideologies and practices (Benjamin, 2018; Noble, 2018). Indeed, research on race, racism, digital technology and platformization is burgeoning. However, as Hamilton (2020) highlights, an area that requires more development is work which involves ‘a focus on the ways that race and technological systems interact outside of the U.S. context’ (p. 298).

The effects of racism and whiteness in the media and CCIs have been analysed in significant sociologically informed studies in the US (Gray, 2005, 2013), and have been foregrounded in recent accounts of these matters in the UK (Saha, 2017, 2021). Some of these studies have considered efforts to counter oppressive aspects of the CCIs and media, including through the successful creation of counternarratives and alternative forms of cultural production that challenge racism and its various intersections (Sobande, 2020). Yet so far, research regarding the digital experiences of Black, Asian and racialized people in the UK CCIs remains relatively scarce, particularly work which is explicitly informed by sociology and critical race and digital studies. Exceptions include the insightful articles ‘Sociological podcasting: Radical hope, care and solidarity in a time of crisis’ (Lewis et al., 2021), and ‘Voicing lived-experience and anti-racism: Podcasting as a space at the margins for subaltern counterpublics’ (Vrikki & Malik, 2019). Informed by such work, and Noble’s (2018) crucial study of algorithmic oppression, we consider how the digital experiences of BBA cultural workers in the UK are impacted by expressions of individual and collective agency, as well as the force of platforms and structural power regimes that they are embedded in.

The 2000s were marked by speculation over the potential benefits of digitalization on cultural production and distribution (Turkle, 2017). There was widespread hope that the domination of multinational entertainment corporations would be diminished, in part by threats to intellectual property and in part by the empowerment of ordinary users, who might be able to reach audiences without the need for well-resourced intermediaries (Christian, 2018). By the 2010s, however, the uncertainties of the 2000s began to be resolved as, in various cultural industries, digital platforms began to assume important new roles alongside longstanding ‘legacy’ organizations (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013). Platforms represent a new phase in digitalization of cultural production (and of other terrains) because, to a far greater extent than early digital forms such as websites, platforms ‘facilitate, aggregate, monetize, and govern interactions between end-users and content and service providers’ (Poell et al., 2022, p. 5); this control over interactions between users and providers defines them.

In television, international platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video became huge forces not only in distribution but also in production, outstripping the budgets of the networks of commercial and public service channels and independent production companies that had formed the ecology of television in many countries from the 1980s to around 2010–2015 (Lobato, 2019; Lotz, 2017). In music, Spotify and other streaming platforms became the main way that audiences experience music, and musicians and music businesses seek to reach those audiences. All cultural industries were affected by the rise of social media platforms and by the unique role of YouTube (Burgess & Green, 2009) which enabled some cultural workers to reach a wider and more global audience than before. These and other developments mean that many think of the 2010s as a decade when digitalization evolved into the ‘platformization’ of culture. In the context of cultural production, Poell et al. (2022, p. 5) write, platformization can be understood as ‘the penetration of digital platforms’ economic, infrastructural and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around these platforms’.

As Hamilton (2020) highlights, ‘early research on race and the internet’ (p. 293) included studies that promoted ‘a colorblind utopia’ (p. 293). Recent research on the platformization of culture, as well as the relationship between race and digital culture, has been considerably more critical than the earlier more speculative work on digitalization. Scholars and commentators from various fields have emphasized the newly powerful role of vast tech corporations in the cultural industries, including their ability to gather and mobilize huge amounts of data and to evade adequate government regulation (Zuboff, 2019). They have pointed to how interfaces and opaque algorithms control more and more aspects of people’s cultural lives, such as recommendation systems that influence the cultural choices that their users make (Gillespie, 2017). Some of this work connects with versions of internet studies that can be seen as kindred to work on media and communication.

Here, critics have identified how social media encourage practices oriented towards self-promotion and personal branding that, in the views of critical scholars, extend commerce into ever more intimate domains of life (Hearn & Banet-Weiser, 2020). They have criticized the way that social media and related digital forms have enabled a proliferation of hate speech and the inadequate response of those platforms (Nikunen et al., 2021;

Titley, 2019). On the other hand, more optimistic commentators have stressed the ability to enable the formation of oppositional counterpublics and to encourage the dissemination of vernacular creativity – often, it is claimed, coming from more diverse sets of producers than was possible under older media systems (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Additionally, research has highlighted the powerful role of digital technology, the use of hashtags and social media in activism (Jackson et al., 2020).

This recent work has generally paid little attention to how digitalization and platformization might be reshaping dynamics of race-making and racism in the contemporary CCIs. There are some significant exceptions to the neglect we have noted, however, which have helped us define issues for further investigation in the research we have undertaken. One important contribution is that of the African-American media scholar Herman Gray, who in 2013 identified a shift in the way that representation and recognition operated in Black American freedom struggles. Gray queried ‘what a demand for media visibility for subordinate and marginalized communities can deliver in terms of social justice when the legal capacities, cultural assumptions, and social circumstances that produced the necessity for this recognition in the first place have changed’ (Gray, 2013, p. 771).

To be clear, Gray (2013) was writing from a position fiercely critical of any ‘post-race’ framings of contemporary societies. Rather, his concern was that in ‘the new racial regimes’ that have arisen in a period when ‘the free market reigns’, and a market calculus is pervasively applied to social relations, ‘the self-crafting entrepreneurial subject’ rather than collective flourishing becomes a dominant model of identity and recognition. In this situation, struggles for recognition and distinction no longer take place through the state, civil society and ‘mass’ media such as film and broadcasting, but in multiplatform digital spaces where ‘specific racial, gender, sexual and ethnic stereotypes and exaggeration, isolation and exclusion do not form the basis of collective struggles over representation and invisibility’ (p. 789). Gray’s argument was that under these new regimes of representation, ‘identities based on race, gender, and sexual orientations are markers of distinction for branding, display, and consumption’ (2013, p. 780). He was in effect describing the new politics of recognition that emerge in the context of neoliberalism.

By multiplatform digital spaces, Gray (2013) refers to ‘social network sites’ such as Twitter and Facebook and ‘user-generated content sites and distribution platforms’ such as Instagram and YouTube. More recent work by sociologist and writer Tressie McMillan Cottom (2021) provides further perspective by emphasizing how the study of race and racism in ‘the digital society’ requires theorization of internet technologies as key characteristics of contemporary political economy. Cottom accordingly identifies two key ‘turns’ in the political economy of race, ethnicity and racism: the role of internet technologies in creating networks of capital and labour that bring with them new forms of exploitation and global racial hierarchies; and the privatization of public and economic life, on grounds that are unprecedentedly *opaque*. A key feature of these dynamics, in terms of our concerns here, is Cottom’s notion of *predatory inclusion*: ‘the logic, organization and technique of including marginalized consumer-citizens into ostensibly democratizing mobility schemes on extractive terms’, in the spheres of education, credit schemes, small-business lending and the gig economy (Cottom, 2021, p. 443). Like Gray, then, Cottom provides a generatively critical perspective on the relationship of

digital technologies to contemporary dynamics of race and racism. Both emphasize dynamics of privatization, mediated opacity and precarity as significant downsides to any potential of digital technologies to empower members of marginalized racialized groups in their projects of cultural expression and information.

Other scholars detect a more hopeful set of possibilities afforded by digital technologies for racialized groups, including cultural workers in the digital era, and/or creative ways in which such groups can appropriate the possibilities of networked computing. André Brock, for example, has written of how Black digital practice makes use of internet technologies to ‘extol the joys and pains of everyday life – the hair tutorials, the dance videos, the tweetstorms and more’, thereby transforming ‘technocultural beliefs about how information, computers and communication technologies should be used’ (Brock, 2020, p. 6). Brock (2020, p. 6) sees Twitter as transformed by Black culture and content, which has significantly contributed to its formation as an online venue for ‘shared pathos and catharsis’. In the context of Britain, Black feminist studies highlight how digital technologies are used in ways that contribute to the creative and cultural productions of Black women, including their knowledge production and archiving efforts (Sobande, 2017, 2020). However, such work also highlights that digital spaces contribute to an ‘economy of Black suffering’ (Palmer, 2020, p. 514) where abuse and pain inflicted on Black people – particularly Black women – is treated as a source of entertainment that platforms profit from.

A number of researchers use conceptualizations of ‘subaltern counterpublics’ to understand related digital affordances and agencies, a term Nancy Fraser developed to signal ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’ (Fraser, 1997, p. 81). Vrikki and Malik use this concept to suggest that Black and Asian podcasters in the UK provide ‘a rare space’ for articulating the lived experiences of Black and Asian communities, ‘whilst also challenging broader patterns of racialized disenfranchisement, including in the creative industries’ (2019, p. 273). Meanwhile, via the action research initiative of establishing a web TV channel, Open TV, Christian et al. (2020) analyse the potential of digital media to provide bridges between different marginalized groups, ‘platforming intersectionality’ by making use of social media to spread word about their programming. While these various authors, and others emphasize some downsides to digital media, there is also recognition of the opportunities that are afforded by them.

Our own approach here adds to this emergent body of scholarship in a particular way: by speaking to people of colour working in Britain in the CCIs about how they have ‘used’ and been impacted by digital platforms and other digital media technologies, and about the degree to which they have felt those technologies have enhanced or constrained their efforts to build careers as cultural workers.² Such a sociological approach adds nuance to the more critical and more optimistic readings of the affordances of digital media, including forms of production and dissemination for BBA cultural workers. Our account emphasizes the complex outcomes deriving from the use of these technologies.

Our distinctive approach is to emphasize ambivalence rather than assume that platforms reproduce racisms or enable challenges to them. This does not diminish the reality of harms aided by platforms. Rather, as we will demonstrate, our interviews analyse

digital platforms as a site of struggle between the institutions and organizations that have historically dominated CCIs and BBA cultural workers who still experience precarious and insecure labour conditions but are able to reach audiences and create communities in new ways. The political economy of digital media and the new infrastructural context have transformed the conditions of what Stuart Hall (1981), drawing from Gramsci, refers to as a war of position in the context of popular culture. But in other ways racial legacies of the past continue to mould the present. Emphasizing the structural nature of power relations is essential to work such as ours which challenges any notion of Britain being a ‘post-racial’ place (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Hence, our discussion of how cultural workers respond to racism and the politics of representation in the digital age involves consideration of how entwined histories and ongoing iterations of racism, capitalism and colonialism buttress Britain. In this way, we situate our study within the sub-field of sociology of race and racism that has analysed these formations specifically in relation to media and cultural production (Fatsis, 2019; James, 2015; Nwonka & Malik, 2018; Parker & Song, 2006).

Methodology

Our research commenced in September 2020 during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic which exacerbated entrenched inequalities and precarity faced by BBA cultural workers (Qureshi, 2021). Although we initially intended to do in-person research interviews, aligned with the ‘lockdown’ and social distancing measures at the time, all interviews occurred online via the video platform Zoom. Between November 2020 and August 2021, we interviewed 30 Black, Brown and Asian people working in UK CCIs, recruited from a mixture of personal contacts and ‘snowballing’. Their jobs and practices cover a wide range of roles and environments, including experience of working as actors, artists, authors, content creators, festival organizers, illustrators, journalists, musicians and podcasters across parts of England, Scotland and Wales.

Our research team included Jason Roberts (a research assistant at Cardiff University, from November 2020–July 2021). The racial and ethnic identities of interview respondents included individuals who are ‘South Asian’, ‘British/Asian’ or ‘Scottish/Asian’ ($n = 10$); ‘Indian’ ($n = 4$) – including ‘Welsh/Indian’ and ‘Scottish Indian’; ‘Black’ ($n = 7$), ‘British/Chinese’ ($n = 1$); and ‘mixed-race’ ($n = 8$) – including ‘Chinese/Scottish’, ‘Pakistani/White’, ‘Black/White’ and ‘Indian/White’. We chose to use the term ‘Black, Brown and Asian (BBA) cultural workers’ in our article to reflect the range of different racialized and work experiences that our research is inclusive of, and which interview respondents articulated. The transcripts from each in-depth interview were interpretively and iteratively coded with the use of NVivo qualitative data analysis software which involved us individually analysing the transcription material, in addition to collaboratively doing so during online team meetings. Such meetings enabled us to share our initial individual analyses of interview transcripts and collectively discuss and refine analytic codes that would eventually lead to our shared understanding of key themes that were apparent from the research interviews.

Overall, each of us conducted intra-textual analysis to identify key topics, themes and perspectives foregrounded in each interview, before also completing inter-textual

analysis by tacking back and forth between all interview transcripts to identify recurring topics, themes and perspectives that featured in many of the interviews. Our analysis was informed by the theoretical framework at the core of our research which is shaped by studies of racism, digital technology, platformization, counterpublics, respectability and inequalities in the CCIs. Such analysis was particularly informed by research regarding the sociology of race and racism, which involves recognizing differences between how people are racialized and the ways that this impacts their lives and others' perceptions of them. We now present our main findings.

Facilitating community and solidarity among creatives of colour

Many of our respondents discussed positive aspects of digital technologies in terms of their potential to facilitate community and solidarity between BBA cultural workers, and more generally among people of colour. A British South Asian actor felt that, in terms of its potential use for sharing information and perspectives on problems regarding race, digital and social media were 'invaluable, to be honest' and especially so 'with BLM' during 2020 when 'there was so much going on, a lot of people reaching out via Twitter and then through that via email with petitions, with letters, with open calls, with Zooms and things like that and that was really heartening, I must say'. He found that use of social media to highlight other people's experience had 'been the best thing':

For me, hearing about other people's stories and stuff like that, I found really moving, instructive and invaluable I think. So in that way, certainly it's been an education and social media has done that.

A mixed-race British South Asian journalist working for a global online media news and debate outlet told us that the site and the social media associated with it had helped build a 'really nice strong online community, an international network of people that are interested in human rights and want to read these stories', which particularly concern women, and especially women from beyond Europe and North America. Also, a mixed-race illustrator and comics writer who identifies as Cantonese and Scottish reflected powerfully on the relationship between his offline and online experiences of community:

I actually feel quite isolated in the real world, because I am mixed race. [. . .] I find that creative Twitter is a very interesting place because you do need to be professional to an extent, but a lot of us are a lot more direct than we would be in any other professional capacity, because I would interact with people on Twitter in a way that I wouldn't necessarily interact with, say, somebody at my day job.

He felt that on Twitter he was able to be 'a lot more honest than I would necessarily be in an office setting, and I think that has the effect of building stronger bonds'. This concerned the ability to form connections with racialized people who have similar creative goals: 'I feel like I can express my opinions a lot more within that creative sphere', which he calls 'creative Twitter'.

This leads to another important theme in our research, on how digital platforms help BBA cultural workers build creative communities. A woman of Pakistani heritage who is an events programmer told us that ‘digital’ had been good for a number of writers’ networks that she was involved in creating and maintaining:

It’s been good for making connections. It’s also been really good for having access to people that maybe it would be a lot more difficult to fly over. So it was good for us to be able to get American authors and have them Zoom in and do stuff.

One respondent spoke about how she proactively uses hashtags to find other Black cultural workers:

You can have a hashtag that’s like a Black photographer or Black creative or Black UK creative, so you’re in the same country at least. So, I think positively you can defo find your community that way.

This ability to create or join communities is also evoked by a British East Asian woman:

I have really been thinking about algorithms in general and on YouTube specifically, and I’ve kind of realised that over the last year, I’ve been introduced to so many creatives from Asian backgrounds that I never was aware of before, [. . .] I think that it can work really positively in that way. It seems quite trivial just to be able to see an Asian person on TV but it doesn’t happen much and it’s actually had a really massive impact on the kind of way I feel about myself.

For this respondent who belongs to a community that historically has been one of the most under-represented in UK media (Yeh & Thorpe, 2018), finding the work of other East Asian cultural workers via YouTube’s recommendations, and using particular tags and search terms, has clearly generated a powerful form of recognition.

Building on this point some of our interviewees spoke in detail about how they use digital technologies, including tagging and other data metrics to promote their work. One British South Asian writer, who had found relative success as a self-published author, described how he used Facebook ads to target specific audiences for his crime novel. In response to the question ‘How would you do that; would you do that by locale or likes?’, he said:

You can do it by locale and age. So I had a pretty broad age range [. . .] and then you look at their interests. So a lot of it was people who read other crime novels but then people who are interested in Bollywood and stuff like that. If I could find those tags, I would use them and then just put the ads out.

The respondent in effect describes how he *racially profiles* potential customers through their likes – in this instance searching for ‘Bollywood’ to identify South Asians. While digital race scholars have criticized the major platforms for segmenting – or rather, constructing – audiences by race/ethnicity based on users’ likes, the process of which can contain reductive assumptions about race (Benjamin, 2018), this interview suggests that some cultural workers from marginalized communities employ the same logics to sell

their work and reach particular communities as part of marketing practices that, perhaps, at times, tap into elements of ‘the illusions of corporate identity politics’ (Jackson, 2021).

All the interview segments we have discussed highlight how digital platforms play a crucial role in facilitating community, in their ability to collapse physical distance and bring together BBA cultural workers who otherwise can feel isolated in their own offline worlds. This of course is a common theme in research into online communities. But we want to make two further points. Firstly, the forms of branding around identity that are encouraged by digital platforms (which is an object of concern of those digital race scholars most attuned to the new racial regimes produced by the neoliberal infrastructure of the internet) are in these examples precisely how BBA cultural workers find other like-minded people, including as part of the formation of counternarratives. This is an issue we shall return to.

Secondly, we note a conflation between political solidarity and creative identification. Or put another way, the practice of networking is based upon identifying other people who have similar experiences of building creative careers *as racialized*. The point is that these types of communities have professional and political benefits for their members. (Perhaps the cynicism that some BBA cultural workers might share about the practice of networking or entrepreneurial practices is mitigated by foregrounding racial solidarity.) As will become apparent, the convergence of professional and activist goals is a key theme in our research. Thus, racialized hashtags (Jackson et al., 2020; Sharma, 2013) might be considered essentializing, but they are how BBA cultural workers produce communities, helping them to locate other producers – as well as potential consumers of their content.

Benefits and limitations of digital technologies when communicating counternarratives

What we have presented so far appears to align with optimistic versions of the potential of digital platforms. But our respondents very rarely valorized digital technologies and even positive expressions felt guarded. In the remainder of the article, we stress the ambivalence of our respondents’ reflections on their digital creative practices and experiences.

In the previous section we discussed how our respondents use hashtags and automated recommendation systems to find other BBA cultural workers. But we also encountered a strong awareness of how such systems can bury or marginalize content made by racialized producers. One narrative that emerged from our interviews was how BBA cultural workers attempt to ‘game’ algorithmic culture. Take the following account from a Black visual artist of their engagement with Instagram:

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 and there’s a lot of Black artists on Twitter as well.

The respondent’s reference to *breaking* algorithms suggests that this is not simply an exercise of championing work to their own followers. Instead, it involves disrupting the

cultural hegemony of ‘organic’ recommendations by helping fellow Black artists rise through user feeds via likes and reposts of their content, giving them more visibility as their posts are deemed more ‘relevant’.

Another respondent similarly spoke about ‘gaming’ algorithms:

I’ve been trying to do a little bit more research in trying to game the algorithm. I found a little bit more success in that photographs seem to help but again there’s the ongoing discussion about how does Twitter’s cropping algorithm work?

This interviewee speaks to the ‘ongoing’ work of trying to understand how Twitter’s notoriously opaque algorithms function (the respondent finds that using photographs help tweets get impressions). Also, their reference to ‘ongoing discussion’ alludes to how such research is an act of collaboration within a community of creators.

Another way in which ambivalence was strongly expressed in our respondents’ reflections on digital creative practice was in their accounts of how online spaces were deemed as safe or dangerous, specifically in relation to highlighting racism in media. The subject here is how digital media technologies can contribute to counternarratives that challenge industrial and societal inequalities, including by using social media to call out racism. In the words of a Black man who is a creative practitioner whose practice includes podcasting:

It’s also about creating that kind of online safe space in which we can speak and share our truths and speak about the realities of living in Scotland, not just from the difficulties and injustices in the creative industries of Scotland but just our day to day lives. So, I think there’s a bit of a mix of possibly activism as well, highlighting people, also the wider white audience about this is our lived reality.

As mentioned, a key theme in our article is how digital technologies and platforms such as Twitter shape the convergence of professional and activist goals, including efforts to hold individuals and institutions in the CCIs accountable for their complicity in ongoing inequalities (Okojie, 2021). While the words of those who we interviewed allude to how digital technologies can enable practices of accountability and the creation and impactful sharing of counternarratives, they also illuminate challenges and risks involved in BBA cultural workers being vocal about inequalities online. These matters are evident when turning to the words of a Black woman journalist and producer:

I’d hate to feel like oh my gosh, maybe I’m not going to be able to pay my rent next week because I could get fired for criticizing or critiquing a particular publication. I’d hate to live with that. It’s also quite violent when you think about it. If someone day in and day out are thinking, oh my gosh, I can’t say something because I could lose my job, that is a pretty scary situation to be in and that’s not something that I’d like. But again my main purpose of my writing is just to spotlight people from marginalized backgrounds, that is the main thing that I want to do for now.

Similar sentiments were shared by a mixed-race Black actor who expressed wariness about posting material on social media that could be perceived as being critical of industry professionals with the power to hire:

So there was an article exploring that [industry inequalities] that said casting directors are the people who need to step up and it's, do I share that? Because then I'm kind of telling off the people who I follow on Twitter and Instagram because I want them to give me a job eventually.

An awareness of the backlash that BBA cultural workers can face online was voiced by many of the people who we interviewed, including comments such as the following:

. . . I think there's a very scary space out there and I've been subject, sadly, to the term cyber bullying in that sense, which I wouldn't wish on anybody.

The Pakistani events programmer introduced earlier shared her thoughts on pressures to be both outspoken and circumspect, which are shaped by 'the political economy of gendered and sexualised racism in contemporary Britain' (Palmer, 2020, p. 508). She spoke about how CCI organizations cynically use social media in ways that can mitigate critique of them and quell counternarratives that call them out:

It's been very interesting to see how communication migrates in that way because there was that sort of big push towards. . . there was that big moment of all these organisations making Black Lives Matter statements and you see. . . I feel sometimes social media can be used as a form of putting the lamb's blood on the door a la Moses, of making sure you've said the right thing so that you can avoid the plague of locusts.

The use here of a powerful Biblical metaphor evokes recent writing on 'woke-washing' and 'woke-capitalism' and how brands present themselves as feminist and anti-racist to appeal to consumers (Kanai & Gill, 2021; Sobande, 2019; Sobande et al., 2022). But here, it refers to the fears that media and cultural organizations have of not appearing to, in this instance, support Black Lives Matter protests.

Our research suggests, then, that digital platforms can facilitate counternarratives from marginalized cultural producers, who can talk directly back to cultural institutions in a way that was not possible pre-digital media, or at least, in a way that now has greater force. But respondents also expressed fears over the costs of publicly criticizing individuals and institutions who are also potential employers. We suggest that this is particularly pronounced for BBA cultural workers who work in a more precarious state, certainly than their white, middle-class counterparts. Interviewees also noted how CCIs are able to deflect criticisms through strategic online practices. Thus, while respondents speak to how digital technologies have enabled their ability to expose ongoing inequalities in media, there is a strong sense given as well of where power remains located, that is, within established media/cultural organizations.

Experiencing and navigating pressures to self-brand online

The comments from interviewees in the previous section on several occasions allude to the issue of self-branding. This was a topic that saw the greatest expression of ambivalence in relation to experience of digital technologies. We got a clear sense from our interviews that building an online profile is an unavoidable aspect of being a creative of

colour in contemporary times, to make oneself visible. And this is a very specific feature of using digital platforms; as one British South Asian designer/coder put it, having a brand is important to getting exposure on online platforms so that the ‘algorithm knows who you are and knows who to market you to’. As stated, most of our respondents expressed feelings of discomfort towards such practices. One issue that arose was the politics of using one’s racial identity as a brand; for instance, one respondent was critical of other musicians who are ‘leaning on their identity as a way to sort of push their music’. But in this final part of the article, we want to focus more on this issue of self-branding as an unavoidable aspect of digital creative work, and what our respondents’ feelings on the topic reveal about the digital reality for BBA cultural workers and their ambivalence regarding various digital practices.

While Herman Gray (2013) critiques the ascendancy of the racial neoliberal subject on digital platforms where racial identity becomes a lifestyle or brand, our interviews with BBA cultural workers in the UK produce a rather complicated picture. To reiterate, our respondents gave a strong sense that self-branding, despite their distaste for it, is an inevitable part of being a creative in contemporary times. This was particularly evident in our interviews with creatives who work, or are trying to work, with ‘legacy media’ – a somewhat dismissive term widely used by social media advocates and commentators for cultural and creative industries that existed before digitalization (such as television, book publishing or music recording). For instance, one mixed-race Black woman who is an actor described being told by her agents in the US ‘to take my social media more seriously’ to build her brand and her career. A similar experience was shared by a British South Asian author in the following quote:

I think publishers, it makes them feel secure if they know that you have a strong digital presence [. . .] if you’re working actively at building your own brand digitally. [But] I don’t know how much use all this stuff has been in selling books. Yesterday Twitter sent me this email and it said that my profile had had 12,000 visits in a month, which is not a lot, but still it’s only one month. How many of them would actually buy a book? Five? I don’t know. A thousand, I don’t know. [. . .] But I think nonetheless, my publishers were quite happy with me for having that brand, that platform, and that made it easier to get a deal.

In our interview with this author, he described how he effectively relaunched his career through building a digital profile through social media, and here he admitted that ‘having that brand’ helped him get a book deal. This suggests that a social media presence – and a strong brand – offers publishers a sense of security when signing a new author, even if there is no evidence that it leads directly to sales. While this experience is not unique to BBA cultural workers, we argue that since already risk-averse creative managers regard artists from racialized backgrounds as a riskier investment (Hesmondhalgh & Saha, 2013), then this pressure to self-brand is more pronounced for such workers.

Many of our respondents expressed negative feelings around the pressure to self-brand and self-market on social media. Again, this is not unique to BBA cultural workers. However, it does impact upon them in particular ways. For instance, our respondents often described feelings of having to be careful about what they post – especially when it comes to issues of race – because of the danger of alienating potential audiences. One

South Asian author described managing her social media as a process of ‘self-editing’ for the sake of ‘protecting my own identity or preserving a certain brand of who I am’. A Black podcaster spoke of how a cousin warned them about tackling issues of race on social media, telling them ‘*you’re being a bit too much for some of these white people. Don’t ruin your brand*’, provoking a defiant response from the interviewee, ‘this is our lived reality [. . .] I don’t really care if somebody says that’s a bit too Black for me’. Echoing the comments in the previous section, a Black journalist we spoke to described the pressure of becoming an ‘influencer’ in order to engage white editors, and then her fears over not being able to express her opinions as a person of colour: ‘how do you become an influencer without possibly alienating certain brands? I say brands. . . publishing houses, all the magazines we dub them brands.’ The tone of these comments suggests stress and anxiety, and it was not surprising many of our respondents discussed managing an online profile in relation to the costs of mental health.

Indeed, a common theme in the discourses we encountered around building a personal online brand was discussed in terms of some people wanting to appear ‘respectable’. This was particularly the case in our interviews with women of colour. For instance, the following respondent refers to the pressure of respectability politics for racialized individuals:

. . . 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, you don’t want to be seen as unprofessional. [. . .] But I also feel like in publishing, in the arts, there’s that unspoken kind of sense of like [what] is acceptable [. . .] I think that if you’re white, you’re afforded a bit more quirky or a bit more sarcastic or a bit more offbeat.

This point about the importance of appearing ‘professional’ is echoed in the following comment from a Black woman with a background in journalism and broadcasting:

I kind of have a measured, professional tweeting that’s probably quite bland compared to others but I do that and then anyone who takes issue with what I say and if they troll me or whatever, I block them – block and delete. But it’s challenging because if you’re outspoken, you get trolled and obviously it’s very unpleasant, having experience of it is really unpleasant and really upsetting.

On the surface the interviewee’s reference to wanting to avoid being ‘outspoken’ about social justice issues (to the extent that they now fear that their profile might appear ‘quite bland’) is to prevent trolling, but it is also about wanting to present themselves in a respectable way, as ‘professional’. The previous respondent makes the same point when they refer to a potential employer ‘thinking you’re not right for certain opportunities if you’re messy’. They add:

Weakness looks different when you’re racialized. I think that that happens a lot, like if you struggle it looks different or there’s not the assumption that you’re plucky and endearing. [. . .] I’m talking about respectability politics here as well.

The last part of the quote is an explicit reference to respectability politics, and the work of Pitcan et al. (2018) on the topic of respectability in the digital world is particularly relevant to our research. The two quotes above evoke Pitcan et al.'s description of the 'self-editing that individuals engage in online through a lens that incorporates race, class, and gender' (p. 175) – a form of impression management designed to mitigate the effects of systemic racism. They add that people located in the most 'tenuous social positions' are at particular risk if they do not manage their online brands in what is deemed an appropriate way. One of the respondents above speaks quite explicitly about how white people are able to appear more 'quirky', 'sarcastic' and 'offbeat' in their online personas, a privilege which they suggest is denied to racialized people. Pitcan et al.'s research, as well as other studies of digital (dis)respect (Mackay, 2021), reflect our findings in terms of how ideas, expressions and experiences of both respect and disrespect play out as part of the digital activity of creatives of colour in Britain who deal with racism and intersecting oppressions. Creating an online brand to promote work is an unavoidable aspect of being a creative in modern times, but it comes with greater risk for creatives of colour in comparison to their white counterparts.

Conclusion

Our article provides an empirical insight into the digital practices of BBA cultural workers in the UK and their engagement with digital platforms based on interviewing these individuals – an approach that remains rare in research on these topics. In the first part of the article, we reflected on some of the few examples of scholarship on digital platforms, CCIs and race, and identified contrasting perspectives on the supposed affordances of digital platforms. Our interview data produce a nuanced account of the digital practices of BBA cultural workers, which emphasizes the ambivalence of their experiences.

For instance, our interviews highlight the positive effects of how BBA cultural workers use digital technologies to generate creative networks of solidarity that allow them to produce dynamic and oppositional works which support their racialized communities. Racialized hashtags, as reductive as they sometimes may be, offer routes into tapping into networks of cultural workers who share similar experiences. Moreover, social media allows BBA cultural workers to produce counternarratives, at times with significant magnitude, that expose inequalities and racist practices within CCIs. But our interviews revealed an awareness of the personal costs of challenging racist behaviours on professional social media accounts, and of how in response CCI organizations attempt to appear more invested in social justice issues, to deflect any negative feedback. Clearly, digital media technologies have not decentralized power as much as utopian accounts of the internet predicted.

In addition, conducting interviews on how BBA cultural workers use platforms sheds a different light on what Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) poignantly called 'algorithms of oppression'. Shaped by such work, we conceptualize algorithmic culture as a site of struggle, where BBA cultural workers, aware of the oppressive effects of algorithms, try to game platforms for their own ends, sometimes commercial, sometimes anti-racist, a lot of the times both. Our interviews also provide a strong sense of the pressures experienced by

such workers to present and construct their identities in ways where the dynamics identified by Gray (2005, 2013) and Cottom (2021) might be apparent.

While the emphasis on entrepreneurial self-branding may have features of inclusivity and participation (in the way that it helps marginalized groups locate each other leading to solidarity), the critiques offered by Gray and Cottom remain apposite: that this happens on certain terms that ultimately reinforce existing patterns of structural power and may contribute to branding practices amounting to ‘corporate identity politics’ (Jackson, 2021). This was evident in respondents’ accounts of needing to appear professional and respectable online, and we agree with Pitcan et al. (2018) that while digital media can provide new opportunities for mobility this can come with a cost of greater risk for those from marginalized communities. Additionally, our interviews suggest that BBA cultural workers in the UK are acutely aware of these dynamics and are constantly reflecting on how they can transform self-branding practices, which are an unavoidable dimension of participation in digital platforms, in a way that fulfils creative, professional and political goals.

Indeed, we suggest that the convergence between creativity and activism was one way that BBA cultural workers resist, or at least, try to make meaningful, forms of self-promotion that such platforms encourage and that they find uncomfortable. Particularly due to the combined impact of the COVID-19 crisis and the UK government’s increasing efforts to obstruct in-person protests, the future of activism is likely to involve even more forms of online dissent and resistance. Thus, there is a need for more research on online activism in the CCIs, including to support efforts to maintain the safety, wellbeing and rights of BBA cultural workers. We have found considerable complexity and ambivalence in their digital experiences in the UK. But while we framed our analysis in terms of the limitations and benefits of digital technologies for racialized cultural workers, we assert that the balance of power in CCIs, regardless of the radical technological transformation that they have gone through in the form of platformization, remains overwhelmingly tilted in favour of dominant groups (white, male, middle class). Ultimately, digital media emerge as sites of struggle for cultural workers, rather than as monolithic forces determining what they do.

Data statement

Data supporting this study cannot be made available due to the data containing potentially identifying information.

Funding

As part of the Digital Futures at Work Research Centre (Digit), this work was supported by the UK Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/S012532/1], which is gratefully acknowledged. For more information about the research project ‘How Cultural Workers Negotiate Racism in the Digital Age’, please visit: <https://digit-research.org/creators-of-colour/>

Notes

1. All authors contributed equally to the article, but Francesca Sobande is named first because they were PI on the ESRC-funded project that provided the means to undertake the research.

2. Although we asked open questions that did not specify particular digital technologies, we found that our interviewees often, though by no means exclusively, chose to answer our questions about ‘digital’ media in terms of their experiences and perceptions of social media.

References

- Bailey, M. (2021). *Misogynoir transformed: Black women’s digital resistance*. New York University Press.
- Benjamin, R. (2018). *Race after technology: Abolitionist tools for the new Jim Code*. Polity Press.
- Black Lives in Music. (2021). *Being Black in the UK music industry*. <https://blim.org.uk/report/>
- Bold, M. R. (2019) *Representation of people of colour among children’s book authors and illustrators*. Book Trust. <https://cdn.booktrust.org.uk/globalassets/resources/represents/booktrust-represents-diversity-childrens-authors-illustrators-report.pdf>
- Brock, A. (2020). *Distributed Blackness: African American cybercultures*. New York University Press.
- Brook, O., O’Brien, D., & Taylor, M. (2018). *Panic! It’s an arts emergency: Panic! Social class, taste and inequalities in the creative industries*. <https://createlondon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Panic-Social-Class-Taste-and-Inequalities-in-the-Creative-Industries1.pdf>
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2009). *YouTube: Online video and participatory culture*. Polity Press.
- Center for Critical Race and Digital Studies. (2022). Research. www.criticalracedigitalstudies.com/research
- Christian, A. J. (2018). *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the rise of web television*. New York University Press.
- Christian, A. J., Day, F., Díaz, M., & Peterson-Salahuddin, C. (2020). Platforming intersectionality: Networked solidarity and the limits of corporate social media. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120933301>
- Cottom, T. M. (2021). Where platform capitalism and racial capitalism meet: The sociology of race and racism in the digital society. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(4), 441–449.
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). Creator governance in social media entertainment. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883428>
- Fatsis, L. (2019). Policing the beats: The criminalisation of UK drill and grime music by the London Metropolitan Police. *The Sociological Review*, 67(6), 1300–1316.
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus: Critical reflections on the ‘postsocialist’ condition*. Routledge.
- Gillespie, D. (2017). Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum’s Google problem, and Google’s Santorum problem. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 63–80.
- Gray, H. (2005). *Cultural moves: African Americans and the politics of representation*. University of California Press.
- Gray, H. (2013). Subject(ed) to recognition. *American Quarterly*, 65(4), 771–798.
- Hall, S. (1981). Notes on deconstructing ‘the popular’. In R. Samuel (Ed.), *People’s history and socialist theory. History workshop series* (pp. 227–240). Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hamilton, A. M. (2020). A genealogy of critical race and digital studies: Past, present, and future. *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(3), 292–301.
- Hearn, A., & Banet-Weiser, S. (2020). The beguiling: Glamour in/as platformed cultural production. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119898779>
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Saha, A. (2013). Race, ethnicity and cultural production. *Popular Communication*, 11(3), 179–195.
- Hoyes, M. (2021). The power of data: BFI, Black Star, and the true landscape of diversity in the UK film industry. In C. J. Nwonka & A. Saha (Eds.), *Black film, British cinema II* (pp. 204–214). Goldsmiths Press.

- Jackson, L. M. (2021). Dave Chappelle, Netflix, and the illusions of corporate identity politics. *New Yorker*. www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/dave-chappelle-netflix-and-the-illusions-of-corporate-identity-politics
- Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Welles, B. F. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press.
- James, M. (2015). Nihilism and urban multiculturalism in outer East London. *The Sociological Review*, 63(3), 699–719.
- Joseph-Salisbury, R. (2019). Does anybody really care what a racist says? Anti-racism in ‘post-racial’ times. *The Sociological Review*, 67(1), 63–78.
- Kanai, A., & Gill, R. (2021). Woke? Affect, neoliberalism, marginalised identities and consumer culture. *New Formations: A Journal of Culture/Theory/Politics*, 102, 10–27.
- Lewis, C., Regis, T., & Ofori-Addo, G. (2021). Sociological podcasting: Radical hope, care and solidarity in a time of crisis. *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture*, 79, 94–109.
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations*. New York University Press.
- Lotz, A. D. (2017). *Portals: A treatise on internet-distributed television*. University of Michigan Library.
- Mackay, K. K. (2021, May 7). Digital Black lives: Performing (dis)respect and joy online. *The Sociological Review Magazine*. <https://thesociologicalreview.org/magazine/may-2021/digital-social-life/digital-black-lives/>
- McIlwain, C. (2019). *Black software: The internet & racial justice, from the AfroNet to Black Lives Matter*. Oxford University Press.
- Meghji, A. (2022). *The racialized social system: Critical race theory as social theory*. Polity Press.
- Nikunen, K., Hokka, J., & Nelimarkka, M. (2021). Affective practice of soldiering: How sharing images is used to spread extremist and racist ethos on Soldiers of Odin Facebook site. *Television & New Media*, 22(2), 166–185.
- Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. New York University Press.
- Nwonka, C. J., & Malik, S. (2018). Cultural discourses and practices of institutionalised diversity in the UK film sector: ‘Just get something black made’. *The Sociological Review*, 66(6), 1111–1127.
- Nwonka, C., & Malik, S. (2021). *Racial diversity initiatives in UK film and TV*. <https://filmtvcharity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Racial-Diversity-Initiatives-in-UK-Film-and-TV-FilmandTVCharity.pdf>
- Okojie, I. (2021). *Dwaal*. <https://lucywritersplatform.com/2021/10/04/dwaal-by-irenos-en-okojie/>
- Palmer, L. A. (2020). Diane Abbott, misogynoir and the politics of Black British feminism’s anti-colonial imperatives: ‘In Britain too, it’s as if we don’t exist’. *The Sociological Review*, 68(3), 508–523.
- Parker, D., & Song, M. (2006). New ethnicities online: Reflexive racialisation and the internet. *The Sociological Review*, 54(3), 575–594.
- Patel, K. (2020). Race and craft in the Covid spotlight. *Soundings*, 75(Summer), 24–27.
- Pitcan, M., Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2018). Performing a vanilla self: Respectability politics, social class, and the digital world. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 23(3), 163–179.
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Polity Press.
- Qureshi, A. (2021). *People of colour and the creative industries in Scotland: A post-2020 reflection*. <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2021/02/28/people-of-colour-and-the-creative-industries-in-scotland-a-post-2020-reflection/>
- Ray, V. (2019). A theory of racialized organizations. *American Sociological Review*, 84(1), 26–53.
- Saha, A. (2017). *Race and the cultural industries*. Polity Press.

- Saha, A. (2021). *Race, culture and media*. Sage.
- Saha, A., & van Lente, S. (2020). *RE:THINKING – 'Diversity' in publishing*. www.spreadtheword.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Rethinking_diversity_in-publishing_WEB.pdf
- Sharma, S. (2013). Black Twitter? Racial hashtags, networks and contagion. *New Formations*, 78(1), 46–64.
- Sobande, F. (2017). Watching me watching you: Black women in Britain on YouTube. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 655–671.
- Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: 'intersectional' femvertising and branding 'woke' bravery. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(11), 2723–2745.
- Sobande, F. (2020). *The digital lives of Black women in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sobande, F., Kanai, A., & Zeng, N. (2022). The hypervisibility and discourses of 'wokeness' in digital culture. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(8), 1576–1587.
- Steele, C. K. (2021). *Digital Black feminism*. New York University Press.
- Titley, G. (2019). *Racism and media*. Sage.
- Turkle, S. (2017). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Basic Books.
- Ugwu, R. (2020, February 6). The hashtag that changed the Oscars: An oral history. *The New York Times*. www.nytimes.com/2020/02/06/movies/oscarssowwhite-history.html
- Vrikki, P., & Malik, S. (2019). Voicing lived-experience and anti-racism: Podcasting as a space at the margins for subaltern counterpublics. *Popular Communication*, 17(4), 273–287.
- Yeh, D., & Thorpe, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Contesting British Chinese culture*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. Profile Books.