
Digital Whitespaces

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Background

This case study examines how certain digital spaces—social media platforms, video games, and podcasting—may be considered “whitespace.” Scholars have identified ways that digital technology, both in theory and in practice, is intertwined with normative whiteness (i.e., the idea that a white racial identity is the norm and ultimately a source of power in society). Whiteness is built on the idea of a racial hierarchy and privileges people racialized as white at the expense of people of color. We will explore what a “whitespace” is and then examine how three different digital spaces may be racialized as white.

Whitespace(s) as a Sociological Concept

Largely inspired by Elijah Anderson’s (2015) “The White Space”, an emerging field in the sociology of race and ethnicity studies different aspects of society that are racialized as “whitespaces.” Anderson introduces the concept of “whitespace” as a counter to “The Ghetto,” a space racialized in a way that links Blackness with derelict buildings, poverty, and violence. This iconic version of the “ghetto” shows up in the white imagination: TV shows, movies, news stories, etc. White people typically avoid—consciously or not—Black spaces, viewing them as a threat to safety. On the flip side, Black people often find themselves in whitespaces, which includes but may also go deeper than a space with majority white people. There is often more actual threat to Black people’s safety and well-being in whitespaces than for white people in Black spaces. Even when not actively unsafe, there is a hyper awareness of Blackness within whitespaces, as illustrated by the quote from Zora Neale Hurston: “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” (2022).

Anderson (2015) argues that, instead of deconstructing spaces like the imagined ghetto, we should instead look at the ways that many societal spaces have been racialized to benefit whiteness, which also allows us to think beyond the white-Black binary. Scholars have argued that spaces are racialized in a way that favors white people, reifies white supremacy, and upholds white privilege in everyday, tacit ways (Anderson, 2015; Moore, 2008). These recent discussions hearken back to W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Souls of White Folk," which emphasizes the "discovery of personal whiteness" and the role whiteness plays in how we have built and operate within our society (1920). White people have been unaware of how whiteness operates in spaces, organizations, and institutions, but people of color develop a double consciousness as they navigate whiteness within white spaces (Anderson, 2015; Du Bois, 1920).

The critical study of whiteness looks at "spaces" through a broad lens, including everything from bird watching (Embrick & Moore, 2020), craft beer brewing (Chapman and Brunsma, 2020), skiing (Harrison, 2013), and academia (Brunsma et al., 2020). Wendy Moore (2020) characterizes the contemporary white institutional space—whiteness—as signifying white institutional/ized power in the organization, unequal distribution of power along racial lines, practices of colorblind racism within the organizational culture, and discourses and ideologies that protect whiteness and obscure racism. There is a duality that happens in white spaces where the institution privileges whiteness while actively veiling racism/racial inequality (Moore 2020). Within the context of higher education, one study frames this duality as the simultaneous minimization of race through "color-blind" rhetoric and activation of race with threatening arguments (Carter & Lippard, 2020). Whiteness exists to maintain and reproduce whiteness (Embrick & Moore, 2020; Moore, 2020). Within its boundaries, whiteness promotes the value of white dominion over non-white and especially Black, Indigenous, and People of Color's (BIPOC) bodies.

Digital Whitenesses

This case study explores digital whitenesses, including social media, video games, and podcasts, to discuss how seemingly race-neutral digital spaces may play a role in reproducing racism. As the field of whitenesses is still emerging, few studies have looked at the way that digital and online spaces may be racialized (Cave et al., 2024), though there are scholars who have considered racialization and racial discrimination in online contexts (Beard et al., 2025; English et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2008). This scholarship builds on robust studies about how

racialization takes place in media and technology, including everything from sensors in automatic hand dryers to racial profiling in criminal database systems.

There are opportunities for scholars to further investigate the roles of algorithms, moderation policies, and platform governance in reinforcing digital whiteness. This case study provides a foundational discussion of how digital spaces may be racialized to benefit whiteness, the consequences of digital whitespaces, how such spaces may reproduce racism, and what forms of resistance have emerged within these spaces. To do so, we will look at examples from the following digital spaces: social media, video games and gaming culture, and podcasts. We will also consider the consequences of the racialization of digital spaces and opportunities for resistance and intervention.

With this discussion, it is important to consider how these issues impact us as individuals and communities. Similarly, it is important to reflect on the roles that we may play in maintaining digital whitespace. These issues may feel bigger than us, but, as adrienne maree brown notes in her book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, “small is all” (2017). Developing a lens through which to see how race and racism play out in the digital sphere is a critical starting point for disrupting racism and creating more equitable and inclusive spaces.

Case Study

In this section, I outline three different digital spaces that may be racialized to benefit whiteness. Digital spaces exist at an intersection of humanity and technology, both of which can introduce race, racialization, and racism: everything from subtle biases to overt hate speech. As you read through these examples, reflect on your own experiences in each of these spaces. How have you learned about race and what society values in terms of race in these spaces? Have you heard different perspectives about race in digital spaces? What makes digital spaces a unique space for discourse about race and racism?

Social Media Platform Moderation

At this point, social media is part of almost everyone's life, for better or for worse. People use different social media platforms in different ways: as a space to connect with others that we may or may not know in real life, to find people with shared interests, to engage anonymously or as ourselves. Regardless of which social media platforms we use and how, such spaces become yet another place for the construction, maintenance, and reproduction of social identities and

norms. In other words, social media is a space shaped by and that shapes race. While the platforms that we use and the ways that we use them vary significantly, several studies have looked at how racism and whiteness show up on social media platforms in ways that differ from our offline lives.

One such study looks at racial narratives on Twitter (now X), especially in the context of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that escalated in the summer of 2020 (Agudelo & Olbrych, 2022). By examining tweets that utilized hashtags commonly associated with the counter-Black Lives Matter movement—*#AllLivesMatter*, *#BlueLivesMatter*, and *#WhiteLivesMatter*—the authors identified two recurring themes in the content and context of the posts. The first is a narrative portraying white individuals as victims of racism, or so-called "reverse racism," by arguing that movements focused on one racial group (Black people) are discriminatory against other racial groups (in this example, white people). This narrative often employs color-blind rhetoric to minimize the existence of systemic racism. The second theme the authors identify involves depicting BLM activists and supporters as criminals, which plays into problematic stereotypes, especially of Black men (for more on the criminality stereotype, see the documentary *13th*). In tweets that fit into this theme, individuals used dehumanizing language, inaccurately portrayed protests, and sought to delegitimize and discredit individuals and the overall movement.

In this analysis, the scholars argue that tweets with the counter-BLM movement hashtags contributed to the reproduction of racism on social media by normalizing white victimization, perpetuating color-blind racism, and undermining the impacts of BLM activists' calls for racial justice and equality. Instead of acknowledging that the Black Lives Matter movement's goals were focused on improving the lives of Black people and communities, individuals turned to social media to frame white people as victims. Doing so turned the focus away from systemic racial inequalities, such as the disproportionate killing of Black individuals at the hands of police officers, and back to whiteness. The authors of this article use the concept "ambient digital racism" (ADR) to characterize the subtle, often unnoticed racial discourses that occur on social media platforms. Indeed, this study emphasizes how many social media policies and moderation around hate speech and racism do not account for less overt forms, including color-blind racism.

How and why do social media platforms contribute to the reproduction of whiteness? Another study outlines specific factors that contribute to the unique environment in which social media perpetuates whiteness, seeking to develop answers to such a question (Frey et al., 2022). They focus on adolescents, demonstrating how youth experience the socialization of race within a digital context. First, social media platforms, like so many other sources of socialization, present whiteness as the default, the norm. Social media does this with other identities, too, like body size, age/ageing, wealth, etc. Presenting one identity as the default effectively renders other identities as less visible or marginal. The implicit message here, that we often uncritically receive while scrolling mindlessly, is an othering of people who do not fit into whiteness. For adolescents, this is occurring at a critical moment of development, which can be detrimental to the well-being of youth of color.

A second factor that this article identifies is weak-tie racism. This refers to the types of connections we form on- and offline. Social media allows us to interact with people who we are close with and trust as well as with people we don't know very well. Because of this peculiar context, social media fosters the spread of racist ideologies and stereotypes without critique or challenge. So, a user may share an original or co-opted post that promotes racism—overtly or covertly—without feeling like that post reflects themselves. There are certainly silos in social media where we connect and engage only with people who share our ideologies. This leads us to the false belief that those ideologies are widely held, whether or not that is true. Weak-tie racism, though, refers specifically to how loosely we may be connected to the people on social media platforms sharing "racist" posts. Because of this loose connection, we may feel less inclined to address the person. Alternatively, we may feel more inclined to confront the person and do so with minimal civility because of the distance that the digital world creates between us as people.

The article discusses how social media features (e.g., algorithms) create a context that amplifies and reinforces our biases, including racial biases. This idea more closely aligns with the concept of silos within our social media platforms: your "For You Page" looks different from my "For You Page." The platforms' algorithms, along with the moderation of platforms, prioritize certain content and create echo chambers that can and do lead to the continuous circulation of content. One reason social media platforms rely on these kinds of features is because they want you to keep coming back, to keep using their platform. So, they will keep showing you content that the algorithm suggests you are most likely to engage with.

The authors of this article argue that social media creates spaces where users of all ages, but particularly adolescents, learn and perform racial identities, a concept they call "racialized pedagogical zones." Social media is a space where we "do race," often unconsciously. While digital interactions may feel passive or impersonal, they effectively involve active participation in the same kind of racial socialization that occurs in offline interactions. Social media has become a tool to socialize white youth into whiteness, and yet another space where we all collectively learn about and "do" race.

Video Games and Gaming Culture

Though distinctly different from social media, video games become another digital whitespace in which race and racism are enacted and reproduced. This is a less studied phenomenon, though there are several scholars concerned with how players engage in racialization through avatar creation, exclusionary gaming spaces, and voice chat for online games.

One of the first studies to engage with understanding racial expression in video games is "Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters" (Dietrich, 2013). This article focuses on role-playing video games (RPGs) and massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORGs) in which players create an avatar, or character image. This study analyzed over 80 games from 2010, examining the options available during character creation and ultimately finding that the vast majority of games only offer white, or Anglo, racial appearances for avatars. This limited offering reinforces the idea that whiteness is the norm, even in a digital space that creates new worlds and opportunities for imagination.

In a follow-up article, the author considers whether advances in technology, cultural shifts, and movements like Black Lives Matter have influenced inclusivity in avatar creation (Dietrich, 2023). He found that there have been some improvements in the availability of skin tones, hairstyles and textures, and facial features beyond a white-centric norm. However, many games still fell short in offering comprehensive options for authentic racial representation, suggesting that the gaming industry continues to uphold normative whiteness. The article also notes that, although this particular study has not analyzed fantasy "races" (such as orcs, elves, and dwarves), others have argued that, in some cases, these fictional races draw from stereotypical—and potentially harmful—characteristics of racial minority groups in our society. In other words, some fantasy

games may effectively equate “human” with white racial characteristics and “non-human” with non-white racial characteristics.

Gaming culture tends to center white, heterosexual men as the norm for gamers, and there is an emerging field of literature that considers gaming “from the margins” by looking at how women, queer people, and people of color participate in and create space in video game culture. This is an area where further research, advocacy, and interventions are needed. For example, if games do provide more comprehensive racial features in avatar creation, what are the implications of white players creating and playing as a Black character? At what point could that become a form of digital Blackface? This case study presents questions such as these in the closing section.

Podcasts and Digital Audio Spaces

Podcasts are the final digital whitespace that this case study discusses. Are podcasts white? Journalists, public sociologists, and podcasters have considered this question and ultimately found that podcasts have a history of being very “white” in terms of their hosts and listeners (Brekke, 2020; Friess, 2017; Morgan, 2015, 2016). Those demographics have changed over time so that the percentage of hosts’ and listeners’ racial identities is not as disproportionately white today. Is podcasting still a whitespace? This is perhaps the least studied digital space of the three presented here, even as the numbers of podcasts and active podcast listeners have grown.

Some studies have focused on the use of podcasting as a medium for counter-narratives, a term used to describe narratives that go against the “norm,” which in this context is a *white* norm (Jenkins & Myers, 2022). In other words, podcasts may be a useful tool for telling stories that are not framed by whiteness. However, if podcast hosts and listeners are predominantly white (and male), it is likely that the predominant perspective in podcasts is white and that there are ways of gatekeeping in podcast networks that benefit whiteness. If white voices are amplified in podcasts, what does that suggest about the kinds of stories that are being told? If voices from people of color are quieter—perhaps intentionally suppressed—in podcasts, what does that suggest about the kinds of stories that are being told?

An edited volume about the history and development of radio suggests that digital audio spaces, including podcasts, continue to inform and entertain the masses; one of the chapters takes a critical approach to explaining how and why podcasting in particular upholds whiteness (Brekke,

2020). Radio broadcasting has a racialized history, and this chapter argues that podcasting inherited a similar racial bias. Structural whiteness in podcasting manifests as an industry dominated by white creators and perspectives. However, the whiteness in podcasting goes beyond that, according to this chapter. Whiteness also shows up as a way of framing: “strategic sound design to center a sonic whiteness that places the ‘facts’ at odds with the [minority racial group] narrative” (Brekke, 2020, p. 175). A similar statement could be made about the industry standards and practices in social media and video games. For podcasting, though, the impact of a white framing overlaps with one of the most common purposes of podcasting: to inform. When we listen to an informational/informative podcast, we are more likely to accept the framing as fact. In this way, podcasts may play a particularly critical role in the creation and reproduction of a digital whitespace.

Discussion and Reflection

We can think about digital whitespaces as specific online communities that explicitly and implicitly normalize and benefit whiteness. There are also broader examples—social media platforms, video gaming culture, and podcasting—that maintain and reproduce whiteness more generally. A digital whitespace is one that recreates the racial hierarchy of our society within the context of digital technology. This goes beyond *who* is in or of the space (e.g., are there more white people than people of color?) to consider *what* the space supports, facilitates, and recreates. As digital technology has developed over time, it has done so within the context of a distinctly racialized society, initially reflecting that racialization and now reproducing the racialization (Cave et al., 2024).

The consequences of digital whitespace vary, but we can think about psychological and social effects, political implications, and economic disparities. For example, racialized digital spaces may impact the mental health of users who do not fit into the narrative of normative whiteness, as people do not see themselves in that space, experience interpersonal racism (e.g., racial slurs directed at them by other users in the space), or are denied access to spaces because of their racial identity. Additionally, digital spaces are increasingly where political activism and discourse occur. If these spaces are reproducing a racial hierarchy with whiteness at the top, that will—and already does—impact policy, political discourse, and activism/community organizing efforts, as it did with the Black Lives Matter movement. In terms of economic disparities, the digital sphere has become a space of entrepreneurship and monetization that

likely benefits white creators over creators of color because of the systemic barriers in place that privilege whiteness.

Despite all of these consequences—or perhaps because of them—digital spaces have also become a place for resistance and intervention. There are ample examples of user-led resistance, where users and creators of color utilize the digital sphere to find affinity with others at the margins of the mainstream and develop counterpublics. There is always opportunity for increased platform accountability and governance, ethical algorithms, and equitable content moderation. For example, during the Black Lives Matter movement, Twitter was not set up to address color-blind racism, but increased accountability and equitable content moderation could have responded accordingly, as discourse on the platform shifted over time. Another example of resistance and interventions is the emergence of social media platforms, gaming communities, and podcasts that are intentionally separate from digital whiteness. These spaces can become alternatives for people at the margins of digital whiteness to connect, organize, and disrupt narratives of normative whiteness.

There are various ways to consider and conceptualize how digital spaces may benefit whiteness. Because of the nature of digital spaces, this is particularly important and nuanced. Digital whiteness, by design, create echo chambers that make it difficult to connect and communicate with people who do not align with us ideologically. Digital whiteness can create anonymity and weak ties that foster the continuous reproduction of a racial hierarchy and racism. Digital spaces are full of possibility, but we have to start with an acknowledgement and analysis of the ways that this particular whiteness shapes us and can be shaped by us.

1. How do digital spaces socialize us into understanding race in our society? What have you learned about race in a digital context? What are the implications of adolescents participating in online discourse that teaches them about race?
2. Choose one of the three digital whiteness spaces in which you find yourself most engaged. Have you ever noticed overt or covert racism in that space? What messages about race did you learn from that experience? If you haven't noticed racism in a digital space, why do you think that is? Consider the various factors discussed in this case study as you reflect.

3. How do digital platforms reinforce whiteness through moderation policies and algorithmic bias? Where is the line between freedom of speech and hate speech on digital platforms?
4. What is an effect of digital whitespaces on political discourse and activism that you have noticed? What are potential long-term effects of digital spaces that uphold a racial hierarchy in our society?
5. How can marginalized communities reclaim space within the digital landscape? Are alternative spaces enough or should digital spaces accommodate voices, perspectives, and people who do not align with whiteness?
6. What responsibility should tech companies have in dismantling/disrupting digital whitespaces? What responsibility should governments have to regulate digital spaces? What responsibility do individuals have in digital whitespaces?

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