



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

COLONIZERS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF NEXTDOOR USERS' "POSTRACIAL" SURVEILLANCE

Jenny Lee
Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Chloe Ahn
Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

The neighborhood has always been a contested terrain, bounded and maintained through oppressive forces. Histories of the neighborhood reveal the inextricable ties between land ownership and white supremacy, urban planning and carceral logics (Satter, 2009; Goetz et al., 2020). While these legacies are often perpetrated by governing bodies and institutions, individuals have long perpetuated these practices at the local and interpersonal level, as well.

Today, the continued violence of occupying and maintaining place and space is more user-friendly and accessible than ever before with the widespread adoption of surveillance technologies like Ring cameras and hyper-local digital platforms like Nextdoor. But scholarship that investigates the role of individuals in creating, maintaining, or even resisting these digital practices is limited. Critical research on neighborhood platforms is still nascent and has mostly focused on the industry motivations behind these technologies, as well as their potential implications on race, privacy, and self-governance (e.g., Kurwa, 2019). While this institutional approach is essential to internet research, it restricts our understanding of how everyday people use and make sense of their neighborhood tools, and how their experiences translate into and reflect colonial legacies.

Rather than examine the affordances and processes of smart home technologies or neighborhood platforms themselves, our study engages with the level of the user. We investigate how individuals *use* neighborhood platforms – with what language, on what topics, with what reliance on imagery and video, with what adherence to community

Suggested Citation (APA): Lee, J., & Ahn, C. (2022, November). *Colonizers in the Neighborhood: A Content Analysis of Nextdoor Users' "Postracial" Surveillance*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

guidelines – to better understand how colonization in the neighborhood is shaped and practiced in the era of the networked smart home.

Methodology

Our study examines 1,141 user-created posts and 10,605 comments across 17 neighborhoods in and around West Philadelphia. This content was collected on Nextdoor from May 2019 to April 2021. West Philadelphia is a historically Black area with a long history of displacement by wealthy and predominantly white institutions like the University of Pennsylvania (e.g., Ehlenz, 2016). By centering user interactions in and around this region, we offer a relevant case study of a space where residents are witnessing increasing and racialized inequities.

Our date range was selected not to draw strict boundaries of “before” and “after,” but to account for the significance of two simultaneous and ongoing crises – one of police brutality and racism, the other of public health and care. That our analysis spans this time frame allows us to better understand how users have (or have not) grappled with the sociocultural implications of these events, and how their interactions with Nextdoor shift to challenge or maintain colonial logics.

To conduct our content analysis, we used our personal Nextdoor accounts – organically situated among the neighborhoods in and around West Philadelphia – to scrape Nextdoor newsfeed data. Nextdoor’s newsfeed serves as an aggregate collection of posts and comments from users across nearby neighborhoods, making readily public and accessible user content from areas beyond our residential neighborhood. As Nextdoor does not provide an official API to collect data from its platform, we used a Python script designed to collect newsfeed data based on the unique hash values of our own accounts. We restricted data collection to this newsfeed with the justification that this information was publicly available to us as users and residents of the West Philadelphia area. No identifying data was collected, including names and profile pictures – only the content of posts, submission dates, neighborhood names, and social metrics. With these protective measures in mind, and with consultation from our institution’s IRB office as well as AoIR’s Ethical Guidelines (2020), our project did not require IRB approval.

Following examples of research that have utilized social media data from individual feeds (e.g., Clark, 2016; Clark-Parsons, 2021), we further anonymized and made untraceable our data by deleting or replacing words in each user-generated post and comment such that the text retains its meaning but cannot be searched for on Nextdoor. We first categorized our data based on their relevance to race, crime, and boundary-making before coding the relevant content using a combination of open and thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2008).

Findings

We offer empirical evidence to reframe the many references to Nextdoor's racist and colonizing content into a more nuanced examination of "postrace." We find little evidence to support the claim that the platform hosts a significant amount of *explicitly* racist content. Instead of interpreting this finding as an indication that Nextdoor does not host racist interactions, however, we argue that users rely on postracial practices to simultaneously normalize and obscure their anti-Blackness and their settler logics.

We draw from Mukherjee et al.'s (2019) concept of "postrace" – a temporal and cultural movement where "quotidian ideas of racial tolerance and inclusion thrive, where racism does not need racists and is communicated in the form of codes" (Gray, 2019, p. 25). Signifying a breach in a history of obviously violent colonialism, postrace operates, instead, through the cover of technologies, knowledge, and the mundane.

We organize Nextdoor users' postracial practices into three major themes. First, as users navigated a national reckoning with racism, police brutality, and a crisis of care, they increasingly shifted away from explicit racial identifiers to more general "race-neutral" goals of safety and community. Second, users also shied away from using problematic but non-explicit racialized language (e.g., "thugs"), opting to embed their racializing opinions in broader "policy" discussions. Third, even with increased attention on the harms of surveillance technologies on people of color, discussions around monitoring remained relatively consistent.

These themes reflect postracial racism as yet another iteration of colonization in the neighborhood. Increases in rhetoric around safety and community entrench the myth that their meanings and goals are not imbued with essentializing tactics. Similarly, reliance on discussions of politics and policy is an obfuscation and legitimation tactic for propagating racialized stereotypes in the pursuit of larger goals like "democracy." Finally, reliance on surveillance imagery not only portrays these artifacts as unequivocal truth but displays Black bodies as hypervisible anomalies to displace and promotes the carceral structures that undergird these technologies.

References

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2008). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2), 77-101.

Browne, S. (2015). *Dark Matters*. Duke University Press.

Ehlenz, M. M. (2016). Neighborhood revitalization and the anchor institution: Assessing the impact of the University of Pennsylvania's West Philadelphia initiatives on University City. *Urban Affairs Review*, 52(5), 714-750.

franzke, aline shakti, Bechmann, Anja, Zimmer, Michael, Ess, Charles and the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0*. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>

Goetz, E., Williams, R., & Damiano, A. (2020). Whiteness and Urban Planning. *Journal of the American Planning Association* 86(2), 142-156.

Gray, H. (2019). Race after Race. In R. Mukherjee, S. Banet-Weiser, & H. Gray (Eds.), *Racism Postrace* (pp. 23-36). Duke University Press.

Kurwa, R. (2019). Building the Digitally Gated Community: The Case of Nextdoor. *Surveillance & Society* 17(1/2), 111-117.

Mukherjee, R., Banet-Weiser, S., & Gray, H. (2019). *Racism Postrace*. Duke University Press.

Nextdoor (2021, February 10). How moderation works on Nextdoor. *Nextdoor Blog*. <https://blog.nextdoor.com/2021/02/10/how-moderation-works-on-nextdoor/>

Satter, B. (2009). *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America*. Macmillan.

Scharkow, M. (2013). Thematic content analysis using supervised machine learning: An empirical evaluation using German online news. *Quality & Quantity*, 47(2), 761-773.