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RACE AND RISK: EXPLORING ONLINE RESPONSES TO THE EURO 2020 FINAL

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Summary Abstract

In July 2021, England lost the Euro 2020 football final to Italy. Following the loss, Black England players were widely racially abused online. As Twitter took down over 1900 offensive posts directed at the players, and commentators condemned the racism, sending supportive messages to players, the controversy continued to generate traffic. How might online platforms reconfigure racism, according to a late-neoliberal logic of assetized attention and identity? How might the football game, as a widely publicized symbolic site which stages a relation between competition, chance, and nationhood, inflect these expressions of racism? In this paper, I analyze online responses to the 2020 Euro finals, with a focus on narratives expressing expectations about posters' and platforms' roles in propagating online racism. I analyze how online platforms express conflicts over race in the reputational terms of status and attention metrics. Extending insights from W.E.B. Du Bois, Cedric Robinson, and Cheryl Harris, I arrive at an account of assetized, late-neoliberal racial capitalism, which recodes racism as the uneven distribution of reputational risk.

Extended Abstract

On July 11, 2021, England faced Italy in the delayed Euro 2020 football final. UK commentators heavily hyped the match, hoping to end England's 55-year stretch without a major trophy. The game ended in a 1-1 tie; in the ensuing penalty shootout, Italy won 3-2. Three England players – Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka – hadn't scored. Soon afterward, Twitter users voiced their fear that these Black players would face extensive racial abuse. Others cited statistics on increased domestic violence following major tournament losses, urged women to stay safe, and posted information on hotlines and shelters (Sandhu, 2021). Twitter later confirmed that it had removed more than 1,900 racist, abusive tweets following the final, most of which had originated in the UK (Griffin, 2021). Reports of racist abuse directed at schoolchildren, linked to the match, followed (BBC Yorkshire, 2021). A vandal defaced a mural of

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Marcus Rashford; this led to fans covering the mural with supportive messages, images of which circulated widely online. The controversy generated widespread criticisms of Twitter's failure to prevent racism from spreading; yet all the while, it continued to generate traffic on the platform. How do online platforms reconfigure racism and anti-racism in widely publicized events such as these, by configuring both personal traits and attention garnered from public debates as assets?

Many scholars have considered online racism surrounding sporting events; analyzed the impact of anti-racist actions in sport; and developed new conceptual frameworks for understanding online racism, such as "platformed racism," "weak tie racism" and "technological redlining" (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Brock, Jr., 2019; Noble, 2018; Evans *et. al*, 2021). Some commentators have extended analyses of racial capitalism to analyze digital culture (McMillan Cottom, 2020). Building on this latter direction, my paper draws from recent debates on assetization in technoscientific capitalism – the process of turning attention, traits, or things into rent-generating assets (Birch and Muniesa, eds, 2020) – to consider online racism as an expression of assetized digital racial capitalism.

Analyzing a range of online responses to the 2020 Euro finals, with a focus on narratives expressing expectations about the level of racism Black players would face, I contextualize these responses within what I call a topological-colonial space: layered, shifting colonial temporalities, from the long history of British empire and its racisms, expressed in recent conflict over immigration in the UK (Kapoor, 2018; Gunaratnam, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2018); to "data colonialism" (Couldry and Mejias, 2019), which sees large tech companies profiting from monopolizing data. I consider how online platforms couch conflicts over race in reputational terms, with likes, comment tallies, and news metacommentaries foregrounding reputation as a platformed asset; and with platforms, players' and posters' reputations placed at risk during public events tinged with nationalist import. Reading the football final's online aftermath in light of W.E.B. Du Bois' account of the compensatory, "public and psychological wage" given to white workers, in the form of deference and courtesy (1935); Cedric Robinson's writing on racial capitalism (2000); and Cheryl I Harris' account of reputation as linked to white privilege (1993), I theorize how assetized, late-neoliberal digital racial capitalism recodes racism as an uneven distribution of online reputational risk.

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