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DECOLONIZING THE INTERNET: EXPERIENCES OF (CYBER)BULLYING AND DEVELOPING COLLECTIVE CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN AFROGREEK YOUTH

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Research Context:

Technology perpetuates racism (Hook, 2005; Pitti, 2018; Shih, 2006), and Western scholarship has seldom parted from the Euro-centric denotations and connotations of race (Taborn, 2008; Wright, 2003). The structure of prevalent scholarship's attempt at colorblind research is flawed and colonial. It leaves out the underrepresented and their understanding of how race is embedded in the fabric of the internet (Benjamin, 2023; Daniels, 2015), leaving the onus on them to initiate these conversations. In the field of Critical Race and Internet Research, it is almost always the black and people of color who need to raise their voices for their communities. Hence, the intellectual colonialism paired with the race-insensitive nature of the internet. Similarly, racial (cyber)bullying remains under-researched, especially from the Greek context. A case needs to be made with a growing body of literature focusing on collective action based on racially progressive goals (Brunsting & Postmes, 2002; Byrne, 2007, 2008; Kahn & Kellner, 2004).

This study explores the intricate convergence of the internet as an industry, the cyber(bullying) experiences of AfroGreek youth in Athens, Greece, and experiments with the idea of developing a relationship of resistance to Afrophobia. It uses the internet to craft individual and collective identities for cultivating and fostering **Collective Critical Consciousness**. Developing critical consciousness involves 'reflection and action upon the world to transform it' (Freire, 1978, p. 51). This study focuses on the efficacy of critical consciousness, its relationship to group identity, community humanization, and societal out-turn for the youth involved

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Methodological Framework:

The methodological execution of the empirical research is based on the tenets of Creativity-based Participatory Action Research (PAR). In PAR, people with direct experiences or interests are involved in all or various levels of the project (Lenette, 2019). Inculcating Arts and Crafts in research design is one of the ways that traditional Western research ideals can be decolonized (Clift, 2020; Seppala et al., 2021). This method enriches academic understanding and fosters collective consciousness by empowering the community to contribute actively.

The findings stem from an ethnographic approach, drawing on field notes and follow-up interviews from participatory focus group workshops involving AfroGreek youth as knowledge-holders. These workshops incorporated creative methods: story writing, body mapping, zine-making, and intuitive art-making. The study sample consisted of four focus groups comprising four participants, with one group involving five participants. The outcomes of this research have been disseminated through The Anti-Bullying Collective and were presented in an interactive Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) session at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens in September 2024.

Findings and Brief Discussion:

(i) SOCIAL MEDIA AS BREEDING GROUND FOR (CYBER)BULLYING

The findings indicate that social media serves as a conducive platform for the continuation of traditional bullying through cyberbullying. Knowledge-holders reported that face-to-face incidents, such as name-calling, social exclusion, and derogatory remarks, easily transition to online spaces facilitated by anonymity. Given the lack of accountability, this anonymity was cited as a key factor contributing to a pervasive sense of helplessness. Notably, social media often became a forum for racial attacks, particularly affecting Black girls. Incidents involved the sharing of images and videos from real-world interactions that contained racial and sexist content, prompting misogynoir. A recurring concern was the failure of platforms to promptly remove offensive content. Black girls also highlighted the racist disparity of their normal pictures being labeled as inappropriate and being flagged for community violation.

(ii) RESHAPING THE INTERNET AS A RACE-SENSITIVE INDUSTRY

In exploring possible interventions, most knowledge-holders highlighted the inadequacies of current social media monitoring systems and argued the need for racial sensitivity and diversity-informed perspectives. They critically examined the ineffectiveness of existing reporting mechanisms, which frequently fail to address incidents of racist abuse. The consensus was that the issue is not merely individual but structural, embedded within the design of digital platforms. A dominant proposal was the implementation of predictive algorithms capable of monitoring racially charged language, sentences, and coded messages. These algorithms would include features to alert users if their content contains potential racist undertones, thereby reducing the dissemination of offensive material.

Additionally, the youth proposed the creation of a user-driven platform where victims of cyberbullying could vote on effective strategies for addressing racist content and flag issues directly. A prominent suggestion that emerged was establishing what youth termed "Anti-Bullying Police" for social media. These specialized teams would be tasked with actively monitoring (cyber)bullying and enforcing preventive measures to mitigate future incidents by the same individuals. Overall, the discussions underscored the urgent need for stricter content moderation policies that specifically target racial abuse.



Figure 1: Examples of the content created by youth

(iii) OF CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND 'MAKING' ON THE INTERNET...

The journey of the knowledge-holders during the workshops, particularly in creating artworks, aligns closely with Paulo Freire's concept of Critical Consciousness and its stages (Watts et al., 2003). In the initial stage of this process, corresponding to Freire's idea of *Critical Analysis*, the participants engaged deeply in Race Talk (hooks, 1996) with their shared experiences of racial (cyber)bullying. They recognized that the internet often replicates the biases and prejudices they face. During this phase, they also reflected on their internet habits, strengthening their online security by monitoring who follows them. However, the knowledge-holders collectively acknowledged that preventing (cyber)bullying is not solely an individual responsibility; it requires action from institutions, governments, and society.

The second stage, illuminated by Watts et al., *Political Self-efficacy*, was evident in the youth's efforts to create counter-narratives through artistic expression. They spent considerable time emphasizing the importance of educating themselves on the many facets of racial (cyber)bullying and organizing within their peer groups. The knowledge-

holders independently and collaboratively produced artworks, zines, posters, postcards, and other creative materials that reflected their personal and collective experiences. Many used these activities to individually engage their Greek peers outside of our workshops, so they could illustrate the pervasive nature of the racist interactions they face online. They also helped set up the first Greek youth-led Anti-Bullying Collective.

The final stage of Freire's concept, *Critical Action*, was demonstrated through digital activism. The youth used their zines as starting points for difficult conversations about race and identity. Although instances of direct Critical Action were relatively infrequent, the study aligns with Freire's view that Critical Reflection is a form of action. Nonetheless, the youth shared the content within their social circles and on broader online platforms and helped design the SEL session mentioned earlier. Through this, they sought to reclaim digital spaces and assert their identities online.

Conclusion:

This study highlights the importance of Participatory Action Research with AfroGreek youth and explores how creative expression can lead to the development of collective critical consciousness. While the findings underscore how online platforms reinforce racism and racist interactions, they also reveal how involving youth can help make the internet an inclusive space. It is worth noting that

This decolonial interaction is a powerful tool for challenging harmful dynamics and advocating for more diverse online environments. It offers a framework through which marginalized groups can leverage digital activism to reclaim space on the internet.

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