BLACK WOMEN EXERCISERS, ASIAN WOMEN ARTISTS, WHITE WOMEN DATERS, AND LATINA LESBIANS: HOW RACE AND GENDER MATTER IN FACEBOOK GROUPS

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Introduction

In this paper, I contribute to the "new cultural politics of difference" by focusing on modern, organic representations of race and gender on the Internet (West, 1993). Facebook groups reflect a contemporary way for users to demonstrate membership in cultural groups that are salient to them, including ones based on race and gender. Internet-based displays of intersectional membership via Facebook groups reflect the ongoing significance of race with gender. Together, race and gender may be understood as part of "culture" or "the sum of the available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences" (Hall, 1980: 59).

Facebook groups as cultural classifications

Facebook groups are cultural representations of the ways that individuals understand their intersectional group membership (Rockquemore & Arend, 2002). Facebook groups serve as voluntary communities open to Internet users that desire homophilic relationships. Facebook groups exist as online examples of individual agency in their founding and then transform into institutionalized, online forces that shape and reflect the agency of each additional individual through her choice to augment that Facebook group. Social network sites make finding these groups easy through keyword searches via built-in search engines specific for Facebook groups. Facebook groups constructed upon ethnic belonging contribute to the prevalent cultural practice of the automaticity of race as a basis for social categorization (Hewstone, Hantzi, & Johnston, 1991). In other words, Facebook groups are formed as a function of "societal culture" (Erez & Earley, 1993: 69). Because Facebook groups come into existence at the behest of individuals and because Facebook groups consist mainly of digital text, they become an ideal site for cultural study as "the culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles" (Geertz, 2005: 85).

Self-categorization and intersectional identity theory

Self-identification of the individual with a group provides the individual with a social identity as the individual acknowledges and affirms belonging to that group as part of the individual's own identity (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). Intersectional identity research highlights how race and gender operate simultaneously in terms of subjectivities, experiences, and identities. Rather than a single, central category, intersectionality calls for analysis along multiple dimensions (Nash, 2008). The act of a woman subscribing to intersectional identity groups online is deliberate, political, and meaningful. In this study, I focus on intersectionality- based Facebook Groups as sites of cultural identification for Internet users.

Research design

While Facebook has been the site of study for individual behavior, Facebook group behavior has been understudied (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). This study is among the first to center analysis upon the group, rather than individual, level of Facebook users. Within this paper, I adopt a critical humanist perspective in that I view culture as interpretive and socially- constructed, which means culture is open to power struggles, contested meanings, and evolving identifications (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Through critical discourse analyses, I examine how

intersectional identities reproduce oppression found within dominant discourse and how intersectional identities present counter-narratives to stereotypical depictions involving women of color by the mass media. Within Facebook, I examine groups that feature racialized and gendered words corresponding to the major racialized groups in the United States among women: White women, Black women, Asian-American women, and Latinas. For a study involving women of color online, Facebook is an ideal social network. Women are more likely than men to use Facebook and spend greater time there (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). In addition, while 13% of American Internet users are Latina and 10% of online users in the United States are Black, 14% of Facebook users are Latina and 11% of Facebook users are African-American (Koh, 2014; Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013).

Study results

Overwhelmingly within Facebook groups, the combination of race and gender creates a narrative around finding, courting, and marrying women of all races by straight men and women. Rather than objectification of women depicted in such a sexualized manner, Facebook groups emphasize the commonality of interracial dating and unify like-minded others who identify as White Women Who Love Their Black Men, Black Women and White Men, Latino/a and Black Love, and Black Men + Asian Women = Love. Some romantic groups specified additional identity components besides race and gender to their sexuality, like religion (Christian Black Women for Christian White Men) and age (Black Women and White Men 40 Plus).

By far, Black women are represented in Facebook groups more strongly than any other racialized group: Facebook groups for Black women numbered well over 1,000. In

contrast, White women Facebook groups totaled 162, Latina Facebook groups equaled 75, and Asian- American women Facebook groups numbered only 32. Inventing (call) and joining (response) intersectionality-based groups may be an electronic implementation of church culture as a strategy of action in the Black community, spurring diverse classification creation and subscription, including occupation, creativity, spirituality, and beauty (Pattillo-McCoy, 1998).

Nearly a third of all Asian-American women's Facebook groups focused on solidifying American women of Asian descent as a viable racial classification, e.g., Asian American Women's Alliance and Asian-American's Women's Circle. In contrast to Asian-American women's discourse, Latina online identity construction included lesbianism (Latina Lesbians) and lesbianism in specific states (LesbyAnas Latinas En Texas). Nearly all of the Facebook Groups that referenced White women did so as a racialized and gendered category that spoke to dating attractions and sexual preference, e.g., Freaky White Women for Black Men, Asian Men and White Women Only, and White Women Who Love Their Hot Chocolate [meaning race, not the drink].

Conclusions

While scholars utilize intersectionality as a critical framework for research, my study examines how intersectionality appears in practice online. The discourses on the politics surrounding culture are changing, forcing Internet representations of race and gender to follow suit. This study explores how the intersection of race with gender matters online.

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