Preface

Since the popularization of Internet technologies in the mid-1990s, human identity and collective culture has been dramatically shaped by our continued use and engagement with the digital world. Despite a plethora of scholarship on digital technology, questions remain regarding how these technologies impact personal identity and perceptions of global culture. How does the use of social media, mobile devices, and digital technologies affect our understanding of race/ethnicity, gender, or age? How do these seemingly separate demographic indicators intersect in the digital age to produce culture? And, how do digital technologies impact our ability to learn from, communicate to, and engage with others? This edited volume seeks to address these lingering questions by showcasing scholarship from around the world investigating the intersections of culture and identity in the digital age.

This examination of digital culture and identity begins by adopting the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to an examination of multiple points of identity and difference working together to produce a lived experience and position in culture. First introduced as a theoretical foundation in the early 1990s, intersectionality has proliferated alongside the development of digital technologies such as the Internet, mobile media, and social networks. This relationship is purposeful and fluid to account for the introduction and proliferation of new technologies and facets of identity. For example, Facebook’s 2014 decision to monitor the gender identity of users was complicated by shifting definitions of gender, sex, and sex category. Alongside supporters, digital Drag Queens protested Facebook’s new rules on the basis that they did not reflect contemporary notions of identity and culture. This phenomenon is further reflective of neoliberalism’s priority of hyper-individuality, a framework manifested through race/ethnicity and age. Scholarship notes that our current notions of neoliberalism are supported by the aging of the Millennial Generation, the same group responsible for the popularization of Facebook in the first place. In cases like this it is impossible to ignore the complex intersections of race/ethnicity, age, and gender in the digital age.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Cultural studies asks the question of what is media’s role in a changing society. Generating from Stuart Hall’s work on hierarchy, social discourses, and media narratives, cultural studies integrates primarily qualitative research with larger questions on how culture is depicted, transformed, or presented through technology and media. Books written through the cultural studies perspectives provide case studies of historical roles and forms of culture, such as gender, age, and race/ethnicity. This volume expands upon this vein of research by exploring how these cultures appear in digital technologies.
Previous publications on digital media technologies focus of blogs, social networks, message forums, and digital discussion spaces. Through digital communication in these spaces, users communicate identity information revolving around age, gender, and race/ethnicity. Digital identity literature argues that users have the ability to control how facets of their identity are displayed in these spaces, as well as make decisions to change, modify, or hide other parts. In this way, digital platforms provide an entry into investigating how identity is constructed around technology.

Globalization, advances in media technology, and changes in social policy have called into question traditional definitions and expressions of culture, individual and group identity, and social categorization. Most prevalent is the shift in popular understandings of race/ethnicity, gender, and age as cultural categories for constructing identity and shaping social policy. In a post-race, post-feminist, youth-centered world, this edited volume incorporates timely research investigating the ways in which digital technology has become a new space for forming, shifting, (re)defining, and marking race/ethnicity, gender, and age.

Digital media spaces are actively transitioning individual and collective definitions of identity. By blurring lines between the public and private sphere, and producer and consumer, digital technology has had unprecedented impacts upon society. This research acts as the next phase in the academic investigation of the relationship between culture, identity, and media. The volume builds upon the strides of cultural theorists such as Stuart Hall, Michele Foucault, and Edward Said as well as those who investigate contemporary shifts in human behavior that result from changes in media technology including Marshall McLuhan, George Ritzer, and Nathan Jurgenson. The pieces collected herein serve as intellectual resources to an academic audience.

Many scholars have noted the changing cultural landscape as a result of digital technologies such as blogs, social networks, forums, and online games. Traditionally, race/ethnicity, gender, and age are considered the three largest breakdowns of culture, considering most people identify as a type or category of each. While far from the only cultural categories worth studying (social class is easily another dominant and critical lens), these three categories are identified as being the most complicated in the digital age. These categories are complicated by the evolving norms of online spaces which frequently produce textual representations of users. As a result, these largely visual cultural divisions have evolved and changed to keep up with new channels of communication. Traditionally, these three cultural categories manifest independent of the individual’s control through visual cues and social standards or constructs. However, digital technologies give users unprecedented control over their appearance and the way they communicate their identity. At the same time these shifts occur, there is competing evidence that traditional hierarchies are reproducing and re-appearing online. This calls into question the democratic potential of digital media. Thus, more research is necessary about the way these three cultural divisions manifest in digital spaces.

Finally, this volume addresses the dissipation of traditional notions of nation-state sovereignty that result from rapid globalization. Ultimately, the pieces consider competing and shifting notions of access and freedom of information, the realigning of one’s political identity with those who live in other countries/societies (either/or for living in other countries or digital access) and that we only have digital access to, shifts in both micro and macro level social norms that come from unprecedented interconnectivity, and the necessity of sustained intercultural dialogue, communication, and understanding. As the world becomes increasingly smaller and interrelated, understandings of the self are drastically reconfigured and various understandings of reality work collectively to reshape culture across the globe.
Preface

This book is ideally suited for scholars interested in the fluid and rapidly evolving norms of identity and culture through digital media. The case studies presented herein provide global reflections on the notions of gender, age, and race/ethnicity. The book also serves as a template of how the theoretical framework of cultural studies and intersectionality can be applied to a variety of methodologies, ontological, and epistemological investigations. The language and concepts make it well suited for graduate students beginning their critical investigations of the digital world and scholars who are looking for resources or information about contemporary culture.

OVERVIEW

The first section of this volume explores expressions and impacts of race and ethnicity in digital culture. Race and ethnicity is considered a primary postcolonial cultural categorization due to its socio-historical and contemporary dominance and presence in everyday interpersonal, mediated, and digital communication. Many scholars argue that contemporary society has shifted to a post-racial landscape. However, far from consensus on this issue, the pieces in this volume investigate the continued relevance of race in digital identity and communication. For example, Ho’s, piece on Asian American’s use of YouTube takes a thorough look at the complex descriptions and humor used, they describe Asian immigrants by their first-generation American children. In this context she provides evidence that supports notions of the perpetual foreigner, dual cultural experiences of Asian families, and issues around assimilation, clearly problematizing narratives of a post-race society.

El-Burki and Reynolds explore the use of humor to engage neoliberalist notions of race. A look at pop cultural icon Justin Bieber’s Comedy Central Roast investigates how race becomes fluid and non-consequential space of entertainment among both Bieber and roast participants. In this sense, Justin Bieber and those engaged in the comedic rendition of his career represent contemporary examples of the commodification of blackness and black masculinity by young, attractive white males in popular culture, major media outlets and media content targeted to millennial consumers. Justin Bieber as a brand becomes a consumable package for millennials and an indication that issues of difference are not reflective of persistent inequality but rather simple diversity that normalizes and celebrates cultural appropriation

Zhang’s analysis of Wiebo and WeChat investigates the increasingly important role of social media in engaging a public dialogue around politics and political gatekeepers. With a focus upon the paradoxes produced by the changing relationship between media use and the expression of political dissent in China, Zhang calls attention to the influence of online citizen journalism upon the role of government.

Wigfall’s piece, Nothing Random About Taste: Toni Morrison and the Algorithmic Canon, considers the implications of shifts in media technology for the canonization of authors via the digitization of knowledge. Her piece looks at how new media spaces, such as Tastekid, reconstruct the processes of selecting works, create authoritative lists, and collaborating to canonize the work of American author Toni Morrison.

The final piece in our section on race/ethnicity, Andriakaina’s Public History and Cultural Identity: The 1821 Revolution as Metaphor for the “Greek Crisis” investigates the mass distribution of historical nostalgia during times of financial and social change and uncertainty. Her look at a documentary series, “1821” appearing on Skai channel analyzes media framing of key patriotic events that shape collective consciousness as well as the ways that the Skai channel challenges collective identity through its rendering of key historical events.
The contributions on race and ethnicity address disconnects between the ideals of post-racial world and continued relevance of racial and ethnic identities in the digital age. Collectively these chapters take multifaceted approach to exploring the impact of such identities upon our continued lived and digital experiences.

The second section of the volume explores gender identity as it manifests through digital technologies. Instances such as Facebook’s policy on gender identification present a challenge for those who both conform to traditional male/female norms, as well as those who prefer to self-identify through alternative vocabulary. This section of the volume presents research on the ways in which gender is implicated in digital culture. McLaughlin et al.’s work on women with breast cancer and online support groups confirms that these digital spaces help women process, articulate, and reflect upon their own identity, particularly in the face of a medical crisis. They conclude, that although having a positive or optimistic outlook regarding diagnosis was important, using digital technologies to reflect on changes to their physical bodies also produced a means for the users to cope and re-establish themselves as women.

Neidt’s chapter explores Facebook’s controversial decision to require users to use their real, birth name, as their profile name. As the world’s largest social network, Facebook’s policy to punish or ban anyone using a pseudonym was quickly adopted by other platforms, leaving users who used performer-names (particularly Drag Queens) desperate to find another platform that would embrace their approach to identity. Neidt’s chapter examines the affordances of social network, Ello, as a means to understand how gender identity is conveyed and shaped online. Studying this incident is important to understanding how identity can lead to protest or advocacy in digital spaces, particularly as it relates to controversial issues such as sexual orientation and gender norms.

Kidd and Turner’s piece on #GamerGate presents the complicated scope and intersections of gender in video games and digital gaming. Over the course of summer 2014, #GameGate became one of the most frequently used hashtags on social media as the public engaged in a debate over the role of women in gaming culture. As the masculine norms of gaming and growth of women participating in international competitions coincide, feminist critiques of video games (particularly violent ones) and their inferior treatment of women upset traditional users. While no definitive conclusion regarding the role of women in gaming were reached, Kidd and Turner’s chapter describes the controversy and how gender is articulated and debated within the scope of digital games.

Novoselova’s last chapter in the gender section describes consumer activism in digital and online spaces. Through a thematic analysis of Jezebel.com, Novoselova looks at how consumption and the protest of consumption engages gendered communication online and shapes gender identity. Jezebel.com is controversially labeled a feminist news magazine website, thus asking users to protest or advocate for a particular view engages feminist readers and shapes larger socio-political norms.

Together, the four chapters in the gender section explore the controversies of gender and identity in online spaces. While far from a census of all digital media, the focus on social networks, online journalism, and gaming represents an effort to look at a variety of spaces and their intersections with other areas of culture.

The third section of the volume includes pieces that reflect on age as a component of digital culture and identity. Age, generation, and age cohort are vital categories of identity as they help individuals build collective identity surrounding their cultural associations. However, recent literature suggests that as digital media proliferates, the ability to conform to generational norms or seek out other members of an age cohort becomes challenged or shaped by the digital spaces this interaction exists within. This presents a very complicated task for researchers looking into how digital interactions may shape per-
sonal identity or larger generational patterns. Other research suggests that the variety of digital media available to today’s youth has further isolated and perhaps limited the group’s ability to interact physically or conform to traditional values and behaviors. Thus, the question remains, what effect does the proliferation of digital media have on age identity and generational groups? The three chapters in this section not only address this critical question, but provide unique insights into the myriad of ways that age is ever-present online.

Novak and Richmond’s chapter on the role of intergenerational communication on Tumblr documents the ways that digital media serves as a vent or forum for age groups to criticize and address the perceived weakness of each other. Through a discussion of older feminists, hundreds of thousands users on Tumblr shared their frustration with other women and earlier feminist movements through visual and text-based posts. This analysis presents the discourses of intergenerational communication as facilitated through the Tumblr social network.

Second, Mou’s work on how youth view widely-circulated male and female digital-fashion advertisements, demonstrates the ongoing importance of cultural studies to intersectionality studies. The chapter concludes by examining the effectiveness of advertising strategies on youth, especially as they regard sexual appeals, provocation, and the viral nature of advertising.

Finally, Wright’s work on cyberbullying and its relationship to gender and age identities presents ongoing research into the more-harmful potential of digital communication. The implications of anonymity and the online disinhibition effect are tested within the study as the author draws conclusions regarding predictors of cyberbullying and its victims. The researcher concludes that there is a relationship between age and ethnicity when looking at who is likely to bully and who is likely to be a victim of bullying. Importantly, this chapter provides an in-depth look at an ongoing social-cultural problem, using intersectionality to examine how the complexities of digital identity may play a role.

The chapters of the age section primarily look at how youth groups use and engage with digital media. However, each chapter also delineates how these younger users interact or communicate with older populations, through social media, direct messaging, and viral advertising content. As we move forward explore how digital media impacts the maturation process and ageing, looking at these spaces of intergenerational communication are key.

Finally, the volume concludes with a section on intersectionality and the applications of the theory to specific digital case studies. Five chapters take on the challenge of presenting the intersections of all three cultural categories: race/ethnicity, gender, and age. As a true demonstration of intersectional research aims, Eckert and Steiner’s chapter explores the many instances of feminism in digital spaces, especially looking for places of feminist critique and discourse on race/ethnicity and age. Their chapter look at how the label “feminist” is used in social media, as a way of looking into claims of participatory culture and democracy as they relate to the contemporary placement and hierarchy of genders in digital spaces. They conclude that contemporary feminism largely intersections with questions of race/ethnicity and age to help its practitioners form their own sense of self and group identity.

Akmam and Huq’s chapter examines how digital technologies serve as an extension of the self, often bearing consequences and benefits for users. Thus, internet culture and digital media serve as an object world that can be learned and shared through communication. Selfies, or digital photos taken of oneself, serve as way to express and insert users into the object world, thus shaping and reflecting the norms and cultural values of the space. While selfies were once an adaptation of digital technologies to fit the needs of the users, today’s digital technologies (such as forward facing cameras) are now designed with this use in mind. Akmam’s work in this chapter looks at the appropriation of technologies, such as the digital camera, to inserts users into the digital world.
As a follow up, Ndi’s chapter similarly looks at selfies, but this time how the actual photo may serve as a contemporary form of self-representation and how collections of selfies may help establish group or shared cultural norms. Through a historical look at the evolution of self-photography, Ndi proposes that selfies are emblematic of the primacy of visual signifiers in digital culture, further emphasizing a connection (or rather a fluidity) between the physical and virtual realms.

Finally, the volume concludes with Cline’s theoretical investigation of faith, spirituality, and ontology in digital culture. After exploring websites and platforms that are committed to giving users a closer connection to religion (ex: Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), Cline concludes that these digital spaces reify cultural and religious practices, further bridging the spiritual and virtual.

Throughout the case studies presented in this volume remains a commitment to explore the variety of platforms, media, and technologies that help shape and reflect 21st century identity and culture. While the digital world continues to expand, grow, and change, the theories and analyses presented within this volume reflect some of the most compelling and relevant ways that age, gender, and race/ethnicity intersect. As such the scholarship in this volume acts as an important contribution to the field of cultural studies, communication, and media studies as well as the development of inquiry, research and understanding of the subject of identity and culture in the digital age.