Black Nerds, Asian Activists, and Caucasian Dogs: Online Race-based Cultural Group Identities within Facebook Groups

Jenny Ungbha Korn, Department of Communication, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on modern representations of race on the Internet. As race continues to be used as a meaningful category for understanding the social world, Internet-based displays of racial membership reflect the ongoing significance of race. Concurrent with Facebook's growth in popularity has been the development in ways that racial identity has been expressed online. While Facebook has been the site of study for individual behavior, Facebook Group behavior is still understudied. The author applies the communication theory of identity and self-categorization theory to digital expressions of race as examples of cultural markers of identification. Thematic analysis is used to examine intra-racial and cross-racial variances across cultural groups that are self-identified as White/Caucasian, Black/African-American, and Asian/Asian-American. The results indicate that users of colors create online representations of race that are different and counter to those found in mass media.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Facebook, Group Identity, Race, Stereotypes, Thematic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Race is commonly used as a means for identification; yet, race is often tied to traditional cues reflecting body and physicality. In the physical world, race privileges oculartecentrism. Frequently presumed to manifest in skin pigmentation, race often operates based on optically perceived skin color (Rottenberg, 2003). Racial identity refers mainly to the subjective understanding of oneself as a racialized person, and the recognition that one is both similar to and different from other people (Omi & Winant, 1994). With the advent of the Internet, racial identity development (see, for example, Gillem, Cohn, & Thorne, 2001) is not confined to the physical world but finds its way to electronic forums (Kendall, 1998). The online environment renders embodiment less visible, which complicates manifestations of racial categorizations. The appearance of racial

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categories in digital spaces reflects offline understandings about the appropriateness, timeliness, and pertinence of race as a defining axis for individual and collective behavior. In the context of the Internet, the lack of a user’s physical appearance removes ocularcentric cues into race, which begs the question of how racial identification manifests online. While race manifests online in individual identity performance (Kendall, 1998; Nakamura, 2008), how is race defined as a group category of cultural self-identification online?

Facebook Groups serve as voluntary communities open to Internet users that desire homophilic relationships based on various areas of identification. Facebook Groups exist as a way to align with an online identity publicly and to signal it to others who share the identity through online interactions. I choose Facebook because of its popularity as the world’s most active online social network. The ubiquity of this network is staggering: Facebook is available in more than 70 languages and has more than one billion monthly active users (Facebook, 2013a). Facebook is the dominant online social network site in the United States, with 67% of online American adults using Facebook (Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013). As of December 31, 2014, Facebook provided the following snapshot of statistics on its website:

- 864 million daily active users
- 703 million mobile daily active users
- 1.35 billion monthly active users
- 1.12 billion mobile monthly active users

Concurrent with Facebook’s growth in popularity has been the development in ways that racial identity has been expressed online. Among the diverse applications and services provided by the Facebook platform, Facebook Groups is a particularly popular, useful, and public element that allows group updates, discussion forums, mass polling, and conversation threads based on common interests and activities (Facebook, 2013a; Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Facebook Groups reflect contemporary themes by users demonstrating membership in online groups that are salient to them, including ones based on race. Race continues to serve as a meaningful category for understanding the social world (Chao, Hong, & Chiu, 2013), so Internet-based displays of racial membership via Facebook Group categorization reflect the ongoing significance of racialized identity. Facebook Groups surrounding race exist as open categories with which online individuals may self-select to identify as a cultural marker for their racial identification within Facebook. This study is among the first to focus on Facebook Groups as a site for digital communication, cultural identification, social categorization, and racial self-classification. For this study, I examine the types of Facebook Groups created by and for Whites/Caucasians, Blacks/African-Americans, and Asians/Asian-Americans, all racialized terms that are used commonly in the United States but are rarely defined (Bhopal & Donaldson, 1998).

Within this paper, I adopt a critical humanist perspective as I view culture as interpretive, socially constructed, and open to power struggles, contested meanings, and evolving identifications (Martin & Nakayama, 1999). Communication and identity 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, p. 59). Online expressions of racial identity by communities of color within Facebook Groups are therefore important representations of today’s cultural awareness of what is identified as a particular race.

In the rest of this paper, I present a brief review of self-categorization and the communication theory of identity as my theoretical frameworks, followed by an explication of both theories specifically within race online and within racialized Facebook Groups. I then discuss major themes that emerge from the analysis before concluding with future directions for research.
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