

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

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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 ocularcentrism. 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.

SELF-CATEGORIZATION THEORY AND THE COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY

Self-categorization theory arose from social identity research conducted in social psychology in the 1980s (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). Self-categorization addresses the process by which individuals choose to identify with particular groups. 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. The categories by which individuals label themselves is dependent upon the context, such that a person's gender may supersede the person's race in one setting, but the person's race may become more salient in other social environments. The choices that people make for group belonging have real consequences on thinking and behavior because society is based on a socially structured system (Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Reynolds, 2011).

While self-categorization theory emphasizes individual agency in choosing categorical belonging, the communication theory of identity highlights the importance of communication itself as a means for identification (Jung & Hecht, 2004). Identity is inherently a communicative process (Hecht, 1993). Identity as communication, and communication as identity, are particularly relevant concepts for this study, as Facebook Groups built on race communicate identity beliefs about that race. The creation of a race-based Facebook Group is an enactment and expression of that racial identity. Racial categories are constructed socially, and while racialized groups like Caucasian, African-American, and Asian-American have lasted as important markers in the United States, the meanings attached to such categories have changed with time on legal, historical, cultural, and socioeconomic grounds. For individuals to elect to be part of a racial group is to accept that race as part of a person's social identity, and the communication of markers for such self-identification may occur politically, socially, and now electronically (Turner et al., 1987; Turner & Reynolds, 2011).

For individuals to consider groups with which to identify, they may take into account stereotypes of the group in choosing category membership. In terms of online cultural labels, users may create and join several freeform categories of racialized identification. In doing so, users may choose to emphasize stereotypical characteristics in the Facebook Groups they generate, stereotypes that are based on beliefs about certain groups drawn from local realities of exposure (Hilton & Von Hippel, 1996), or they may invent different categories related to race that reflect identity salience more accurately (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006). Though online culture overlaps with offline understandings of race-related behavior and is captured within user-generated online groups, the Internet introduces more egalitarian access to racialized identification categories by facilitating the creation of cultural markers online through technical affordances, such as webpages, forums, groups, chat rooms, and email lists. On the Internet, a body that reads physically as a certain race is not required as a prerequisite or justification for racialized membership (Burkhalter, 1999).

As part of the online construction of race, identity-based group communication may stay general and ambiguous about the meaning of that race, or the digital communication may focus on more specific racial identities that intersect with gender, class, occupation, religion, age, location, sexuality, hobby, affinity, and more. As a benchmark for analyses of race online, this study examines the creation of Facebook Groups for individuals of color by people of color to determine particular thematic distinctions made about race. The digital expression of race is experiencing different representations as individuals self-categorize as racialized. Facebook Groups are cultural representations of the way that individuals understand their racial group membership

(Rockquemore & Arend, 2002). In this study, I focus on race-based Facebook Groups as sites of cultural identification for Internet users.

Research on the construction of race occurring online today through Facebook Groups is nascent. While Facebook has been the site of study for individual behavior (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008), Facebook Group behavior has been understudied (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009). Facebook Groups provide an online social structure for racialized communication that reflects and reinforces prevailing cultural forces that delineate social boundaries among racial groups. In Facebook Groups, race is a social construct through which individuals may identify as a cultural category. Self-selection is encouraged and facilitated by Facebook searches of racialized Facebook Groups. For example, a search using “Black” as a key term may produce a Facebook Group entitled *Black Gay Christians* (italics are used to set off the names of actual Facebook Groups). The Facebook Group name of *Black Gay Christians* demonstrates how the cultural system has impacted the linguistic rule system in that “Black” as the first adjective listed is given primacy as the most salient cultural identifier, even over “gay” and “Christian” (Bernstein, 1972).

Racial groups are socially constructed and influence everyday interactions (Rockquemore & Arend, 2002). The creators of every Facebook Group decide which features of cultural identity to promote as the focus of that group. Each Facebook Group becomes a cultural site for member belonging, especially for those who identify with groups historically stigmatized by dominant society. Social network sites make finding these groups easy through keyword searches via built-in search engines specific for Facebook Groups. Facebook Groups built upon racial 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). 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, p. 85).

Because racialization is socially constructed, I choose keywords that reflect American understandings of race in popular parlance, e.g., White as analogous to Caucasian and Black as analogous for African-American. These representations of race online afford a critical engagement with presumptions about race that have been taken for granted. White as a racial category has been built upon an “othering” of non-White races, particularly in terms of social control of African-Americans as part of the racist legacy of slavery (Brock, 2006), so I have included both White/Caucasian and Black/African-American to examine cross-cultural differences between the two racial categories online.

By including Asian and Asian-Americans, I address a population often overlooked in communication studies, a field criticized as Eurocentric (Miike, 2006; Nakayama & Peñaloza, 1993). Previous research has shown that more than European-, Latin-, and African-based cultures, Asian-based cultures are characterized as high-context and collectivistic in that Asian-based cultures are verbally more understated and indirect (Leetz, 2003). Thus, the high-context Asian/Asian-American group may provide discernible contrast in cultural identification claims, different from other online racialized groups characterized as low-context, including Black/African-American and White/Caucasian. For example, high-context cultures tend to be more oriented towards the collective and avoid confrontation, so Asian-centric Facebook Groups may emphasize social harmony (Kim, Pan, & Park, 1998). For this study of low and high-context cultures online, I chose White/Caucasian, Black/African-American, and Asian/Asian-American as significantly different, culturally distinct, self-created classifications for the communication of identity across racialized groups of people.

The current study centers upon the group-level rather than individual-level Facebook users. This study also qualifies as both *emic* in examining cultural communication within a racialized category and *etic* in contrasting communication across cultural divisions based on race (Kim, 2001). The main research question addresses how race is defined on the Internet as a group category of cultural self-identification. Through this study, I examine digital identities surrounding race that are intertwined with racial classification. The essential question of what it means to be Black, Asian, and White online has not yet been explored in the research site of Facebook Groups, even though people continue to seek out online spaces premised upon racial identity (Daniels, 2012). The uses of racial identity online as captured by Facebook Groups provide critical insight into digital representations of race that are no longer tied to the body but that are still attached to offline expectations about racialized behavior that may reinforce stereotypic ideals, reaffirm Whiteness as normative, or depict the “othering” of races (Daniels, 2012; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006; Nakamura, 2002). The choices for digital racial identification have not been studied in a systematic way to determine how racialized group categorization is constructed in the world’s most popular online social network. Sociality is increasingly moving online, and the Internet is a place where race matters because offline behavior and online behavior are enmeshed and imbricated (Daniels, 2012; Sassen, 2002). Examining how race is represented online may reflect on how racial identity is configured in contemporary times through the mediation of computer tools.

METHOD

According to Facebook, groups are “close circles of people that share and keep in touch on Facebook” (Facebook, 2013b). This definition of groups is similar to Facebook’s description of friends: “Friends are people you connect and share with on Facebook” (Facebook, 2013b). Unlike Facebook Pages, Facebook Groups may be created by anyone around any shared interest and may grow to an unbounded size (Facebook, 2013b). Because Facebook Groups are created by individuals, they provide a suitable, natural field for studying how racialized communication is formed by online social network users. In other words, a Facebook Group may feature race in its title because its founder decided to make race a salient factor in the group’s name and purpose. Facebook Group creators have a vested interest in creating accurate names for their group to facilitate public searches by potential members seeking their group’s focus.

Facebook users are welcome to join groups that they find via a Facebook search. Both open and closed Facebook Groups appear in search results; secret Facebook Groups are exempt from Facebook searches. Open Facebook Groups allow immediate membership into a group; closed Facebook Groups require that an existing member of the group approves of the pending membership before new users are allowed to read posts or to contribute posts to the group. Both open and closed Facebook Groups allow instant access to group descriptions, group size, and group member names and pictures, which makes demographic information about racialized Facebook Groups available to the public without delay.

In a study by Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009), who examined Facebook Groups from the point of view of motivation, the unit of analysis was individual. That study also utilized surveys as its method. In contrast, my unit of analysis is the Facebook Group itself, and I rely on thematic analysis as a qualitative method to scrutinize Facebook Groups as typical Facebook users encounter them. In other words, I search for Facebook Groups as a regular Facebook user does, by entering keywords based on race.

In the present study, I focus on common keywords used to identify race in American culture: Asian, Asian-American, Black, African-American, White, and Caucasian (Glenn, 1999). Often, Asian, Black, and White are used as discursive shortcuts for the politically correct terms of Asian-American, African-American, and Caucasian. Through this study, I delve into the presumption that the meaning of “Asian,” “Black,” and “White,” matches “Asian-American,” “African-American,” and “Caucasian,” by reviewing Facebook Group categories to see how they correspond to one another. For example, the composition of Facebook Group labels between Asian and Asian-American should be similar if Asian is supposed to map onto Asian-American. I approach finding these groups as other Facebook users do: by entering one of six racialized words (White/Caucasian, Black/African-American, and Asian/Asian-American) into Facebook’s search box. I am then presented with Facebook’s results of relevant Facebook Groups. By accessing the groups that appear in a simple search on Facebook, I experience the findings as other online users do when they perform similar explorations for race-based groups. I analyzed the themes around Facebook Groups that contained the following racialized keywords in American culture: Asian, Black, White, Asian-American, African-American, and Caucasian. Thematic analyses are an appropriate method for detecting patterns (themes) within Facebook Group data because thematic analysis may be used as “a method that works both to reflect reality and to unpack or unravel the surface of reality” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). In this study, the themes are manifest and directly observable in the Facebook Group descriptions. They are the cultural creations of various races whose depictions of race contribute to different constructions of race online (Boyatzis, 1998).

To examine how race actually appears on Facebook in the specific domain of Facebook Groups, I captured the first ten Facebook Groups for each of the aforementioned six racial categories on February 4, 2013. These groups varied in size of membership and in date of founding. I recorded the groups as they appeared in order based on Facebook’s search algorithms. As an example, two Facebook Groups that were racially categorized as Black are shown below in Figure 1.

RESULTS

Caucasian is Not the Same as White in Online Cultural Classifications

Overwhelmingly, White and Caucasian Facebook Groups made no identification claims based on actual race. Rather, the first ten groups from keyword searches using White and Caucasian reflected identities unrelated to race. For Caucasian, rather than meaning race, the theme that emerged was Caucasus as a geographical region, specifically the site for a breed of dog known as the Caucasian Shepherd Dog, which is popular in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and North-

Figure 1. An example of Black Facebook groups



ern Caucasus. Similarly, though White is often used in the place of Caucasian for race, white referred to the color, not the race, within online identities, specifically white angels, white doves, and white knights. This White privilege of absence of racial meanings attached to the word “White” reflects the power position of Caucasian online users who do not have to think about their dominance, until and unless diversity is introduced, usually by a minority who raises the issue of privilege. In other words, the absence of race in the top ten Facebook Groups related to Whites and Caucasians belie how race appears invisible as a reflection of its lack of salience to online users belonging to those groups, which directly contrasts against online users of color (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; McIntosh, 2003).

Black and African-American as Online Cultural Classifications Overlap

Unlike the categorizations that focused on the dominant group of Whites, Black and Asian online identities reflected self-categorization by individuals drawn to cultural representations that emphasized actual race. Black as a cultural category online focused on religion (*Black Atheists* and *Black Gay Christians*), intelligence (*Black Nerds Network Group*), sexuality (*Black Gay Christians*), politics (*Black Panther*), and games (*Black Dragon*, a chess group). A strong theme that emerged from Black Facebook Groups was an emphasis on intelligence and nerdiness. Nearly all of the cultural depictions of Blackness online focused on the single component of Black as a racial classification; two notable exceptions are *Black Gay Christians* which combines sexuality with religion and race and *Black Girls RUN!* which highlights gender, along with race and hobby.

While Blackness online manifests in diverse cultural categories, the online identity communication surrounding African-Americans was limited mostly to occupation, including military (*African American Army Officers*, *African American Army Senior NonCommissioned Officers*, and *African American Warrant Officers (All Branches)*), fitness (*African American Beachbody Coach Connection*), writing (*African American Authors*), and artistry (*African American Art Retreat*). Of the top ten findings, African-American religious groups focused on Muslims (*African American Muslim Link*) instead of atheism and Christianity for Blacks online, and African-American sexuality used “pride” (*African American Shore Pride*) to describe sexual orientation instead of “gay,” as opposed to the *Black Gay Christians* Facebook Group that the search for Black groups produced.

Asian is Not Similar to Asian-American in Online Cultural Classifications

Often, Asian is used as shorthand for Asian-American (Palumbo-Liu, 1999), as Black is used for African-American and White is used for Caucasian. The discursive practice of emphasizing Asian over Asian-American propagates Asian-Americans as the “forever immigrant” (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). Within Facebook Groups, “the perpetual foreigner” image was not attached to Asian-Americans. In fact, very little overlap was found between the constructions of Asian and Asian-American. The two terms did not map on to one another, despite popular parlance for the usage of Asian to represent Asian-Americans. Nearly every Facebook Group associated with Asians reflected belonging to Asia as a continent, not Asian as a racial group. Like the emphasis on geographic location of Caucasus for Caucasians, Asian online is a shortcut for living and residing in Asia, not a characterization of Asian descent in other countries.

Like Blackness online, Asians as a cultural category online also featured sexuality as a significant axis of identification. Sexual orientation of *men* played a primary role in the social construction of Asians as a group with nearly half of the top ten listings affiliated with sexuality: *Asian Facebook User*, *Asian Boy*, *Asian Woof! Woof!*, and *Asian Cockfighting Club*. In creating and finding community for queer Asians, Asian males use Facebook Groups to elide

the stigma often attached to cultural understandings of homosexuality (Poon & Ho, 2008). For example, from its title, *Asian Facebook User* does not state sexuality explicitly, but its content implies its focus upon gay Asian males. Similarly, clever titles like *Asian Boy*, *Asian Woof! Woof!*, and *Asian Cockfighting Club* could refer to any male associated with the continent of Asia, an affinity club for dog lovers, or an organization for fans of the sport of cockfighting. In reality, all of the aforementioned groups focus on Asian gay males, attractive Asian gay males (“woof” is insider cultural jargon that references males good-looking enough to make a gay man remark, “woof”), and queer Asian males whose cited body parts may be used in same-sex play, respectively. Through strategic naming constructions, Asian Facebook Groups highlight male queerness. This emphasis on sexuality was found in online identities by and about Asians, but not in digital identities by and about Asian-Americans.

In contrast to Asian depictions online, all of the Asian-American Facebook Groups focused upon establishing Asian-American as a political category, working to increase visibility of Asian-Americans within cultural classifications of occupation, military, religion, athletics, and education. Asian-American as an online category mirrored diversity in activism (*Asian American Association*), occupation (*Asian American Journalists Association*), military (*Asian American Veterans*), religion (*Asian American Campus Ministry*), athletics (*Asian American Fencers*), and education (*Asian American Student Association*). Joining these groups is a deliberate act of political consciousness around race. Membership in these Facebook Groups reflects an awareness of belonging to a larger cultural group of Americans of Asian descent.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION: COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL CULTURAL CLASSIFICATIONS OF RACE ONLINE

Identity negotiations and cultural communications increasingly include computer-mediated interactions. As noted, this study focuses on modern representations of race on the Internet. Race has historically been an organizing principle in many societies, and its persistence as a cultural marker online manifests via user creation and contribution to racialized group identity on Facebook. Through this study, I contribute to the “new cultural politics of difference” by focusing on modern, organic representations of race on the Internet (West, 1993). I apply self-categorization theory and the communication theory of identity not to individuals, but to racialized groups online, as examples of cultural markers of identification (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). The examples found in Facebook Groups built around race reflect societal understandings of identities that are salient to race, ones that are attached to religion, sexuality, occupation, and politics. Users self-define what it means to be Black/African-American, White/Caucasian, and Asian/Asian-American by creating and joining online groups that reflect the behaviors correlated with their category membership. By analyzing differences across Facebook Groups, I conduct a contemporary study on cross-racial variance across online identity group culture. I also examine how closely the identities resemble one another within racialized group categories.

Of the six Facebook Groups examined, only the Asian-based Facebook Group reflected high-context culture. An explanation may derive from the medium itself. The design of Facebook may encourage low-context communication in the social construction of American understandings of race online. In other words, American individuals may create and self-select racialized categories that are necessarily directly stated because the structure of Facebook Groups fosters low-context culture in general, particularly through explicit keywords used by its search engine to identify racialized groups (Leetz, 2003; Würtz, 2005).

In contrast to the American context of race, Asian-based Facebook Groups present a strategic use of indirect, high-context naming practices by Asian males. The prevalence of homosexuality within the Asian identification category belies a strong stigma among gay Asian men that leads them to find online communities, rather than physical ones, within which to develop their racial and sexual identities (Poon & Ho, 2008). The analysis demonstrates that digital culture around race reflects empowerment by users of color to create their own identification practices. Online representations of race are examples of interactive culture in which culture, identity, and communication are interconnected, with individual users of color self-categorizing as racialized and producing digital identities about race that communicates agency.

Blacks create and self-select into Facebook groups that emphasize representations of Blackness that are different and counter to the negative depictions of Blacks by mass media. Among the key constructions of Blackness featured within Facebook Groups are chess, nerdiness, and intelligence. Similarly, Asian-Americans may self-identify with racialized groups online that accentuate political agency, which directly contrasts American media portrayals of Asians as apolitical. The cultural conversation of race on Facebook, like Twitter, is being defined by individuals of color (Brock, 2012; Guo & Lee, 2013; Hogg & Reid, 2006; Mastro & Kopacz, 2006).

Social habits are reaffirmed by cultural values and norms (Erez & Earley, 1993). The salience of identities depends on the context, and racial identification often shifts according to situation (Lee & Bean, 2012), so this study looked at one snapshot of digital communication in time during February of 2013 when these Facebook Groups existed and arose from Facebook's search. Future research may use these same racial names across different time periods to examine how much variance is introduced in Facebook Group identity in other temporal segments.

Overall, the results suggest that as more users of color construct their own depictions of race online, those racial categorizations will feature counter-stereotypical axes of racial identity, in contrast to popular media representations that portray communities of color negatively. The multiple discourses on the politics surrounding cultural signifiers are changing, and digital representations of race are reflecting modern understandings of today's racial identities, as created by individuals of color themselves.

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