

Handbook on Youth Activism

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19. Black youth, digital activism, and racial battle fatigue: how Black youth enact hope, humor, and healing online

Tiera Tanksley and Alexis E. Hunter

The 2020 movement for Black Lives, catalyzed by anti-Black police brutality and inflamed by the public execution of George Floyd, has continually revealed the promise and peril of social media technology to serve as a platform of political activism and transformational resistance (Solórzano and Bernal, 2001) for Black youth. As the primary curators of viral justice campaigns, including #BlackLivesMatter, #ICantBreathe and #DefundThePolice, Black youth have become particularly adept at leveraging social media technology to center, challenge, and organize against racism and anti-Black violence (Carney, 2016). Hyper-circulated cyber content, digital fundraising and collective organizing via youth-generated social media pages are just a few of the ways Black youth are operationalizing digital systems to critique and combat anti-Black violence (Tanksley, 2019; 2020).

At the same time, anti-Blackness exists as the “default setting” of internet technology (Benjamin, 2019), and Black social media users must navigate a dizzying matrix of algorithmic oppression every time they log in online (Noble, 2016; 2018b). Not only are Black youth overexposed to racially traumatizing digital content like viral police killings (Tanksley, 2022; Tao and Fischer, 2021; Weinstein et al., 2021), but they are also the group to experience some of the highest rates of race-based digital harassment and content moderation (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016). The consequences of algorithmic bias are profound, and scholars are only just beginning to understand the psychological impacts of racist infrastructures on Black youth (Maxwell, 2016). Not surprisingly, Black youth activists report a plethora of socioemotional and mental health consequences (Tanksley, 2019; 2022; McLeroy, 2022), and the need to strengthen young people’s digital wellness practices to combat activist burnout and racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2011) has become substantial.

In recognizing the ubiquity of digitally mediated racism and the urgency of remediating mental health concerns for Black youth, this chapter examines the landscape of algorithmic oppression for Black activists online. It simultaneously documents how young Black activists employ practices of hope, healing, and digital wellness as they navigate anti-Black digital systems. Grounded in critical race and Black feminist approaches to race, healing and technology, this chapter poses the following research questions:

1. What are common manifestations of algorithmic oppression and anti-Black digital racism that Black youth activists encounter online?
2. What socio-emotional or mental health effects do Black youth experience as a result of digital racism and algorithmic bias?
3. How do Black youth cope with and heal from the socio-emotional or mental health consequences of anti-Blackness either online or offline?

In order to answer these questions, this chapter leverages qualitative interview data with 25 Black youth activists, and offers youth-initiated insights on how to employ self-care, communal coping, and digital wellness strategies online.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As Black youth continue to use social media to engage in activism, more research is needed to understand the impacts that heavy participation in racial justice campaigns and overexposure to racially distressing content have on their socioemotional health and mental wellness. Research on the psychological impacts of digitally mediated racism is quickly emerging (Maxwell, 2016; Tanksley, 2022; Williams, 2021), and scholars have identified a range of associated mental health consequences, including anxiety, depression, stress, and anticipatory body alarm response. Though a majority of these studies focus on highly syndicated, exceedingly gruesome acts of racial violence, such as the extrajudicial killing of Black Americans at the hands of police (Tanksley, 2022; McLeroy, 2022) or the ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians (Mahamid and Berte, 2020), there are countless other forms of digitally mediated trauma that are more obscure and harder to identify. We believe that the cumulative weight of these mundane, seemingly trivial digital assaults produces similar mental health effects and should be thoroughly examined alongside the more graphic and “spectacular” digital assaults.

For instance, Black youth endure some of the highest rates of digital harassment and racist trolling online (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016), and are simultaneously the least likely to have their reports of racist content validated by content moderation protocols. This means that when Black youth are confronted by racist slurs and threats of violence online, they are less likely to be believed and protected than their non-Black peers. At the same time, Black youth are the group most likely to have their posts flagged and deleted for “violating community guidelines”, particularly when that content challenges white supremacy and anti-Black oppression (Murray, 2021). This digital discrimination is coupled with disproportionate contact with race-based content, defined by the Pew Research Center as any post including references to race, racism, or racial justice. Studies show that Black youth’s social media accounts are rife with race-based content, and though not all of this content is violent or gruesome, a vast majority (nearly 60 percent) is politically oriented and centered around issues of social injustice (Pew Research Center, 2017). Cumulatively, these statistics suggest that Black youth are more likely to encounter social media content that is distressing, disturbing or emotionally draining, regardless of whether or not that content was shared with the intent to harm, to entertain, to educate or to organize.

As a response, Black youth are calling attention to the permanence and pervasiveness of platformed racism (Tanksley, 2024), creating Instagram reels, Twitter polls, and Facebook livestream to spark dialogue, share experiences, and collectively theorize about algorithmic anti-Blackness “from the margins” (hooks, 2000). A recent example of this communal theorizing includes a prominent social media debate prompted by Rachel Cargile, a young Black social media activist. Following the gruesome murder of Nia Wilson, a Black girl in Northern California slain by a white supremacist assailant, Cargile created an Instagram post inquiring about Black women’s mental health in the wake of the tragedy. Despite it being positively received by hundreds of Women of Color, the post was flagged and deleted by content moderation algorithms designed to detect hate speech. In response to this algorithmic slight, Cargile

shared a screenshot of the “violation of community guidelines” message she received, and included the following caption:

Someone reported the post as hate speech and Instagram immediately took it down. Do you see this? Do you see how not only are we killed in the streets we also are punished for grieving. We are not seen as human, we are not regarded as beings who live and breathe and feel and are worthy of existence. We are oppressed, then we are killed, then we are silenced.

This secondary post garnered hundreds of responses, and users flooded the comment section with first-hand accounts of algorithmic silencing and the emotional toll that it takes on Black users and social media activists. Cargile’s experience, and those users who shared similar experiences in the comment section, raise an important question, namely: what are the socioemotional and mental health consequences of experiencing algorithmic anti-Blackness for Black youth and social media activists?

Together, these scenarios highlight the ubiquity and diversity of race-related stressors online – both interpersonally and algorithmically – and call for more nuanced examinations of digitally mediated trauma that can illuminate the minutiae of race-related stressors currently mediating Black youth’s experiences online. Pierce’s groundbreaking work on racial microaggressions provides an important rationale for taking a more granular focus, noting “one must not look for the gross and obvious. The subtle, cumulative mini-assault is the substance of today’s racism” (Pierce, 1974, p. 516). We need more scholarship that can expose the minute, everyday manifestations of digital racism that contribute to race-related stress for Black youth and social media activists. By acquiring a more complex understanding of digitally mediated harm beyond highly publicized instances of racial violence, we can develop a more robust approach to digital wellness that recognizes the macro and micro components of digital racism. Doing so can produce a necessary paradigmatic shift, placing the onus of mental health reform onto sociotechnical *systems and structures*, rather than on individual users and youth activists.

Theoretical Framework

In order to illuminate the everyday manifestations of algorithmic oppression facing Black social media activists and the strategies they employ to cope with digitally mediated trauma, we draw upon two emerging theoretical frameworks in the field of education: critical race technology theory (CRTT) in education (Tanksley, 2019; 2023a); and a healing justice framework (Ginwright, 2015b). Grounded in critical theories of race, gender, and technology, CRTT responds to calls for more intersectional, techno-structural examinations of digital technologies within educational research that can expose the intercentricity of racism as the “default setting” of school-based technologies, learning platforms, and digital research contexts (Tanksley, 2016; 2019; 2022; 2023a; forthcoming). This framework disrupts majoritarian “stories” that characterize information technologies as post-racial, apolitical, and democratic and instead acknowledges the power systems embedded within twenty-first-century information systems (Noble, 2018a; Benjamin, 2019; Cottom, 2016; Brock, 2020; Gray and Leonard, 2018; Buolamwini and Gebru; Nkonde, 2019). In doing so, CRTT in education “shifts discourse away from simple arguments about the liberatory possibilities of the internet toward more critical engagements with how the internet is a site of power and control over Black life” (Noble, 2016, p. 2). To date, this work has made more discernible the ways Students of Color intersect with and are intersected by social media and internet technology (Tanksley, 2016;

Tanksley, Lopez and Martinez, 2017). Ultimately, CRTT works to expose the “racialized layers of subordination” (Yosso et al., 2009, p. 663) embedded within information technologies that have historically restricted Students’ of Color access to, representation in, and ownership of information technologies that inevitably influence their educational, socioemotional, and techno-social experiences.

While CRTT can render the existence and subsequent mental health effects of algorithmic racism more visible, a healing justice framework (Ginwright, 2015b) can help illuminate the culturally situated and historically anchored approaches that Black youth use to navigate and survive anti-Black racism. Healing justice was first conceptualized as a way to “restore, rebalance, and reimagine ways we held healing and harm from oppression and colonization in our People of Color, Indigenous, Queer and Trans, disabled, formerly incarcerated, and institutionalized communities” (Greene et al., 2021, p. 6). This framework recognizes that activism and healing must occur simultaneously because, as Ginwright (2015b) states, “both strategies, braided together, make a more complete and durable fabric in our efforts to transform oppression, and hold the power to restore a more humane, and redemptive process toward community change” (p. 35). Healing justice is community oriented, culturally situated, and unapologetically rooted in the ancestral traditions of Black, indigenous, queer, Trans, disabled, and incarcerated communities. Thus, healing justice is a critical departure from the more traditional, race-evasive, and ahistorical constructions of coping and self-care that currently permeate the academy (Healing Collective Trauma, 2013). While conventional scholarship on coping is premised upon individualized approaches to mental health, including talk therapy, mindfulness, medication, and self-help, healing justice sustains and connects Communities of Color to the power, love, and knowledge of their ancestors, and in doing so, offers a more expansive and multifaceted conceptualization of healing that is decolonial, justice oriented, and race-conscious (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2021).

Three main focuses are present in the healing justice framework and serve as a guiding framework for this study (Ginwright, 2015b, pp. 39–40):

1. *Restoration* involves “actions and activities that restore collective well-being, meaning and purpose by understanding this as a political act that recognizes the collective nature of wellbeing and moves away from individualistic notions of health.”
2. *Resistance* “involves disrupting and rejecting hegemonic notions of justice, particularly in regards to race.”
3. *Reclamation* is “the capacity to reclaim, redefine, and reimagine a possible future.”

Ultimately, healing justice is more than a theoretical framework; rather, it exists as a radical social movement that aims to foster collective, multi-generational healing and well-being for the racially marginalized, while simultaneously working to transform systems and environments that are producing intersectional harm (Ginwright, 2015b). Though a majority of this scholarship has occurred in offline spaces (Chavez-Diaz and Lee, 2015, Ginwright, 2015a, Greene et al., 2021, Juárez Mendoza, 2020), we believe a healing justice framework has powerful implications for Black youth in digital settings. Thus, in the context of this study, healing justice can reposition the everyday practices of joy, rest, humor, and play that Black youth use to sustain their digital wellness as transformative acts meant to subvert colonial fragmentation of the Black mind, body, and spirit.

When augmented by a healing justice lens, CRTT's guiding tenets can illuminate Black youth's understandings of and approaches to racialized healing within and by way of digital technology. The following tenets inform our study:

1. *The Intercentricity of Socio-Technical Racism:* CRTT in education acknowledges that racism is permanent and deeply ingrained within the very fabric of American society (Bell, 1992; Pérez Huber and Solórzano, 2015), both on and offline, and should therefore be centralized in discussions of racial equity for marginalized youth (Tanksley, 2023a). In the context of this study, CRTT enables us to name and interrogate the range of algorithmic micro-assaults leveraged against Black youth online, from digital harassment and content moderation to the viral Black death and dying, and re-position these technological “glitches” as symptoms of a larger, algorithmically codified disease of white supremacy.
2. *The Challenge to Dominant Ideology:* CRTT in education encourages scholars to interrogate dominant narratives of race, gender, and technology, and challenge oversimplified constructions of social media technologies as post-racial, ungendered, and politically neutral. Together, CRTT and healing justice can take an asset-based approach to youth digital activism, and illuminate the extensive emotional, intellectual and physical labor that goes into navigating and repurposing anti-Black social media technologies to “talk back” and “bring wreck” to offline systems of power. They can also challenge popularized notions of mental health that focus on conventional, individualized approaches to “self-help” and “self-care” that overlook the role of systemic racism and algorithmic oppression in Black youth's approach to digital wellness and mental health.
3. *Commitment to Social-Technical and Algorithmic Justice:* In its struggle toward sociotechnical justice, CRTT aims to abolish algorithmic racism completely, as well as to eliminate all other forms of sociotechnical oppression along axes of class, gender, sexuality, and more (Tanksley, 2023a). When leveraged alongside healing justice, this tenet enables us to complicate oversimplified narratives of Black youth's digital activism that overlook the socioemotional and mental health consequences of engaging in social justice activism within an anti-Black internet structure. It simultaneously pushes us to consider the role that healing plays in Black youth's approach to social media activism, and how communally constructed counter-spaces help foster racialized wellness for youth activists both on and offline.
4. *The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge:* CRTT in education recognizes that the lived experiences of People of Color are legitimate and critical to understanding the current condition of educational inequity (Pérez Huber, 2009; Solórzano and Yosso, 2002) and sociotechnical oppression (Tanksley, 2019). In the content of this study, this tenet enables us to center the everyday experiences, healing practices, and sociotechnical funds of knowledge of young Black social media activists.
5. *The Interdisciplinary Perspective:* CRTT actively integrates race and racism within a sociotechnical context by drawing upon scholarship from ethnic studies, feminist theories, communication studies, digital humanities, and critical science and technology studies (Tanksley, 2016; 2019; 2023a). For the purpose of this study, we draw upon a growing body of Black feminist and critical race technology studies, as well as a growing body of healing justice scholarship in education, psychology, and social work.

Ultimately, a thorough analysis of social media activism for Black youth requires a more complicated approach to digital healing and resistance that can highlight how social media

platforms help, heal, and hinder youth activists in new and familiar ways. Such an analysis would move past one-dimensional examinations of social media as a democratic equalizer to make clear the prevalence and permanence of white supremacy within, beneath, and beyond the computer screen. By leveraging the power of CRTT and healing justice, this study strives to contribute to a nuanced body of youth activism scholarship and foster more liberating and restorative experiences for young Black activists both on and offline.

METHODS

This qualitative study focuses on the socio-technical insights of 25 self-identified Black and Afro-descendant high school students from 11 schools across Southern California. Students were recruited for the study through their participation in a culturally relevant college-bridge program at a large public university in Southern California. As a part of their participation in the residential bridge program, students were required to complete a five-week critical race technology course, which was taught by the first author. After completing the course, students completed semi-structured interviews with the first author about their experiences with and perspectives on technology before and after the course.

Interviews with students were semi-structured, lasted around 60 minutes, and focused on the following subtopics: students' experiences with digital activism (e.g., "Have you ever used social media to engage in social justice activism? What sorts of topics do you post about and why?"); their encounters with racially traumatizing content (e.g., "Have you ever seen racially traumatizing content online?" "What sorts of content do you consider to be racially traumatizing?"); their experience with interpersonal or algorithmic racism (e.g., "Have you ever seen, heard about or personally experienced racism online? Was the source of that racism a person or an algorithm?"); the effects of experiencing race-related stressors online (e.g., "When you see racially traumatizing content, how does that make you feel?" "What, if any, are the mental health effects of experiencing the digital racism you discussed?"); and the ways they attempted to cope with or heal from digital trauma (e.g., "How do you heal from racial trauma online?" "Are there spaces online where you can go to for relief or support?").

We utilized a Black feminist and critical race approach to thematic analysis (Noble, 2016), which allowed us to use our outsider-within status (Collins, 1986) to unearth intersectional nuances within the data. After collecting, transcribing, and cleaning the transcripts, we engaged in open-coding, which enabled themes to organically emerge "from the bottom up" (Merriam, 2009). We simultaneously leaned on our theoretical and onto-epistemological expertise to identify four units of analysis, including activism, digital trauma, mental health, and coping.

As we continued to code, we found that these units of analysis became much more nuanced and pronounced, and we had bi-weekly team meetings to discuss our preliminary insights on how these categories were expanding and collapsing. Eventually, we approached data saturation, and went back into the data to code more specifically around three main themes.

FINDINGS

Three main findings emerged related to digital racism, mental health, and racialized healing for Black youth online: (1) engaging in social media activism exposes youth to racially traumatizing content; (2) constant exposure to racially traumatizing content has a range of mental health consequences; and (3) Black youth employ race-conscious and culturally situated strategies of healing to navigate and survive digital racism.

Engaging in Social Media Activism Exposes Youth to Racially Traumatizing Content

As the youth in this study used social media to engage in social justice activism, they were regularly confronted with racially traumatizing content and sentiments online. For instance, after explaining how she posts a lot of racial justice content on her stories, Kamryn notes that her newsfeed is often rife with images of Black people dead and dying. She recalls a slew of graphic murders, saying:

Recently, there was this guy, I do not remember his name, but he got shot in front of his kids, something like that ... And then, recently I've been seeing posts about how this white guy shot ... He was 17, I think, and he shot two protestors, and they haven't done anything about that yet I think. Meanwhile, another guy that was like, not armed, nothing, he just got shot in front of his kids, so I feel like that's one of the many things I've seen involving racism on [social media].

For Olivia, witnessing viral images of Black people dead and dying was particularly traumatizing. She recalls:

There was this one video that was sort of traumatizing. It also involved police and a Black man. He was trying to wiggle away when they were restraining him. One of them, even though they were restraining him, they took out their gun. One of them took out their gun and shot him twice. Shooting him twice made him die.

Christopher captures the pervasiveness of Black death and dying, noting, "I'd say it's been tough, especially from the start, with Ahmaud Arbery, then to Breonna Taylor, to George Floyd. It's been tough to see Black lives continuing to be devalued and killed at rates that were absolutely unjust." Zaria often feels like she can't escape Black death and dying online, and points to the role that suggested content plays in her overexposure to the content. She states:

I see [Black death] a lot on my timeline and on my feed on Instagram and then also on my suggestions, topics page, I always see a lot of different things as well. Just the other day I seen a video of ... I think it was a Black man getting shot by a cop. It blocks it out, but I see it.

Although students felt saddened or angered by images of Black death and dying, they simultaneously felt compelled to engage with these conversations because they felt it was a necessary part of activism. Mike notes:

For me, I know that at the beginning of all of this, I posted something to a couple of my Instagram accounts, just speaking in support of all of these things and giving the reasons as to why we're fighting. And I did that by way of song lyrics. I quoted a few songs that I like a lot that sort of talk about just the fight and what it means to be Black in America, which is to fight, just talking about those. For me, that was honestly all I did for it, and the reason that I didn't do much past that was because

my mental health is just so bad. I really wish that I could do more, but I'm just not mentally there for it. That's something that I sort of struggle with because along with that comes this feeling of guilt because I know that I have a voice and I know that I should be participating in these things, but I just physically cannot bring myself to engage in that on such a deep level.

Unfortunately, Mike was not alone, and multiple other students felt similarly compelled to continually engage in "the fight" despite desperately needing to opt out and "take a break" for the sake of their mental health. Zaria captures the guilt and subsequent pressure that many of the youth in this study experience when wanting to opt out of "the fight" for justice online, saying:

Honestly, it's heartbreaking and I don't even watch the videos all the way. I'll see a little bit, I'm like, "Oh, I already know what's going to happen." So I'll click out of it. But then days later, it'll be a big topic and it's like, "Oh my gosh, let me go back and see what actually happened because I didn't see everything and people are talking about it." ... So it's like, "Oh, let me just watch this, let me see what's going on." But, I don't know. My thoughts on watching the videos have changed because people keep posting it. I don't know if it's a right word to say, "interested," because no one wants to be interested in seeing someone die. I don't know how to say it, but I want to watch it because it's a topic and it's really bad and everybody's posting it and it's just like that.

Zaria's comment sheds light on two crucial, under-analyzed features of racial justice activism online: an unstated social pressure for Black youth to be involved and "up to date" on racial justice activism, and how that pressure is linked to the virality and hyper-visibility of racially traumatizing content.

Constant Exposure to Racially Traumatizing Content has a Range of Mental Health Impacts for Black Youth

Whether due to automated content suggestions, viral hashtags, or in-network friends posting trending content, the youth in this study had a hard time escaping distressing content online. In fact, over-exposure to content documenting Black oppression and suffering – even if it was shared with the intention to raise awareness or promote racial justice – had a slew of mental health effects for the youth activists in this study. For instance, Angel recalls seeing an uptick in socially conscious digital content during the 2020 uprisings, including posts about the historical roots of racist policing, statistics depicting Black men's disproportionate death at the hands of police, and news stories containing inflammatory responses about George Floyd's death by conservative hate groups. Experiencing all of this race-related content was distressing, and Angel admits: "When I first saw stuff, I was just like, 'Dang.' For a moment, I was a little stunned ... I have friends who, for sure, had to take breaks from social media. From talking to people, some people were really going through it." Likewise, Patricia says:

I know, like in the beginning with George Floyd, when it was just circulating and people were seeing the video, I cried watching the video because it is just so heartbreaking that people get away with this types of stuff ... There's so many other innocent minorities and Black people that go through this and it was just truly heartbreaking and I have anxiety and I suffered with depression a little bit. So it was all just a lot on my plate at the moment.

Kamryn feels similarly, noting that the constant influx of information about anti-Black racism in nearly every facet of US society – health care, housing, education, criminal justice and more – is not only overwhelming, but it can feel debilitating. She states:

I feel like [seeing racially distressing content] really damages us because we constantly keep ... It gives us this feeling of the government, and all of that is not made for us.

They're oppressing us, and they're just totally against us. And then, even when we keep on trying to get through to them and be like, "Hey, we're human beings too," they still don't acknowledge that. So I feel like that just really traumatizes people.

Brittany echoes these sentiments and reiterates the compounded trauma of seeing videos of Black people dead and dying, stating, "Seeing those videos, revisiting trauma. Black people suffer from current traumatic stress disorder, where we are consistently living that same experience, where we're continuously seeing Black death, and being desensitized to it."

For many participants, constantly bearing witness to and learning about the landscape of anti-Black racism made them feel overwhelmed, hopeless, and unsure of how to cope with their race-based digital trauma. In describing his experiences with seeing anti-black racism online, Ashton explains:

It really upsets me because it's been going on ever since I was a kid, basically. So, I guess just something that keeps repeating on and on and it doesn't seem to be slowing down or getting any better. So, it kind of just upsets me a lot and puts me in a bad mood.

For Wesley, who encounters a wide range of racially distressing media posts, including racially insensitive comments, live footage capturing racist interactions, and posts that share distressing statistics for the goal of raising consciousness, being online can pose significant challenges for his mental health. He explains:

All this stuff isn't really doing good to my mental health if I'm being real honest. At the start, I was feeling pretty depressed ... There's no rest day for stuff in our country. If it's not stuff happening with Trump, then it's the virus or if it's not the virus then it's police shootings. If it's not that then it's some white person shooting something. It just feels like there's always something bad happening and that's pretty tough to see when there's no good things happening on the news or stuff like that. So, I would definitely say that it affected my mental health ... I've lost my optimism I guess you could say for the world and the country. I didn't really have any, but it's definitely lost because of all this."

Likewise, Bryson admits that being constantly exposed to racially charged content through his friends, his trending topics, or his suggested ads adversely affects his mood. He notes:

I always get really angry, and just really sad and scared ... Just a lot of emotion, but I don't know what to do with this. So I'm just like ... I don't know what to do. But I see this, and I feel awful, but I don't know how to deal with that emotion, I don't know how to put it.

Importantly, the interviews revealed a distinct sense of hopelessness and palpable exhaustion among the youth, who often struggled to articulate, process, and ultimately heal from the ramifications of anti-Black racism and algorithmic oppression online.

Black Youth Enact Race-conscious and Culturally Situated Strategies for Healing from Anti-Black Racism

As a direct response to racial trauma, the youth in this study employed multi-faceted coping strategies that traversed digital and analog spaces and focused on healing in individual and communal ways. When asked whether or not they use social media to engage in healing and mental health support, the youth in this study gave a resounding “no”, explaining that social media is largely unable to support racialized healing for Black youth. Wesley captures this collective sentiment, explaining:

There’s not one part [of social media] where you can completely just de-stress. There’s always stuff happening in the world so there’s no point where I feel like, “Man, let me just go on Twitter and see something nice to like.” My timeline is crazy but there’s no safe place I guess that I can really go to because everything is happening.

Consequently, the very first step that youth often took to remediate racialized digital trauma was to disconnect from social media to focus on reclaiming and restoring their physical body. For Jackie, dancing provides an invaluable opportunity for healing. She explains, “I love to dance and so I find a lot of joy in dancing at home. I’m alone and I’m dancing to different music that I love ... It’s just like dancing makes me feel really good.” For Angel, engaging in rest and relaxation apart from social media plays an important role in healing. He notes, “I’ve been keeping pretty much on my sleep schedule. If I had nothing to do, I’ll go to sleep, but I’m not going to stay up at night and watch TikToks.” Bryson finds similar ways to disconnect from social media and reconnect with his body. He shares:

Skateboarding is really important to me. I’m not good at it, but it’s like I want to know physical exhaustion and not thinking about anything, just focusing and trying to do this trick even if I don’t get it that day. It’s just something I would select to focus on. It’s really cool.

For Carson, ancestral approaches to healing the body have proved to be particularly helpful. He notes that he’s been:

learning all this stuff, learning to breathe. I didn’t used to know how to really breathe and exhale and make sure my stress goes with it. [I’ve been] drinking smoothies that help me with my body as well. [A Black girl mentor] put me onto this Aztec secret face mask thing, too.

Although a majority of students in this study identified social media as a racially traumatizing space, they nevertheless found themselves leveraging race-conscious and culturally-specific digital enclaves as necessary sites of communal healing. For instance, Jackie explains that although social media writ large can be a racially traumatizing space, Black affinity spaces can be particularly rejuvenating. She explains:

Going on Instagram and seeing all these images and all the injustice, it’s just so much. But for me, I think why I feel less affected by my mental health is that I try to go on Black Twitter and be uplifted by a Black community, and going on different Hispanic sites because I’m Guatemalan, so I love reading about my culture. I think just trying to find the light in this not a great time has been what’s keeping me feeling better so I’m looking for spaces that are going to amplify that good feeling inside. As well, I’m not just looking at the injustice and I’m not just trying to solve that, I have a space for relaxation and rest.

Likewise, Bryson recalls the joy and humor of engaging in Black Twitter, explaining “I spend half of the day looking at memes and just die [laughing].” Kamryn also uses social media to engage in joy and laughter, noting, “Just looking at memes in which there’s funny videos, and there’s also fun stuff definitely on the media, so that helps you sometimes just to sit back and laugh basically.”

When asked about their motivations for using social media to engage in joy, laughter, and humor, participants placed these practices into a rich history of Black resistance. Brittany shares:

I use laughter as a way to cope with traumatic situations, and that is something that is often used within the Black community. There are so many times within my life that I can think about times where I’m like, “Man, I should not really be laughing at that, but it’s hilarious in my head.” It might not be that way to other people. Because literally, I think it influenced the title that I had [for a final paper], which was “Laughter Is the Best Medicine for Black Girls Who Don’t Cry.”

Jackie also engages in collective coping through laughter and humor online. She notes:

Talking to my friends who I know who love me and we’re supporting each other, and we talk about the injustices that we see, but we’re still having fun, laughing about different topics. And going on Instagram and seeing all my beautiful Black melanated friends and posting their pictures. I’m like, “Oh, this is what we love to see.” We’re not being stopped because of racism. We’re not shying away, [but instead] tapping into what our culture is. I love to see that and that’s what really makes me feel good on the inside ... Communicating with people and going on Instagram or Twitter and talking to my friends, or even talking to people that I don’t really know. It’s just really nice to be filled with that good feeling on the inside.

Ultimately, although the youth in this study encountered profuse instances of digital racism and anti-Blackness, they nevertheless found ways to leverage race-conscious and culturally situated healing strategies that helped them navigate and survive digitally mediated trauma.

DISCUSSION

For the students in this study, social media was a complex site of activist potential and racial exhaustion. The youth in this study regularly used words like “necessary” and “important” to describe the role that social media played in racial justice activism, but simultaneously used “traumatizing”, “racist”, and “stressful” to describe their experience engaging in activism on these same platforms. Eric captures this complex duality when he notes:

I would go on Twitter and just type different stuff, how I felt about the situation. So that allowed me to express my thoughts and stuff like that ... So, I feel like that was good, but it just made me just realize how trapped I was. It wasn’t really that good for my mental health at all because I seen a lot of [racialized content] It just felt weird because everybody around was like [sharing race-based content]. I just felt like I was an adult dealing with all this different messed up stuff on the side and I couldn’t really do nothing. I just felt weird because I was angry and “what should I do?” type of thing.

The findings of this study echo current scholarship detailing the myriad of mental health concerns that arise from encountering distressing content and hostile experiences online. For instance, the youth participants reported mental health struggles that are in line with current

scholarship, including sleeplessness, anxiety, depression, and chronic worry (Coyne et al., 2020; Odgers and Jensen, 2020). These findings also echo scholarship detailing the emotional and psychological strain that digital activism can have on youth activists, who often report increased levels of racial battle fatigue and activist burn-out as a result of heavy participation in politicized conversations and collective organizing online (Conner et al., 2021; Tanksley, 2019; 2022). Additionally, the student narratives in this study exposed anti-blackness as a distinct and pervasive form of online racism, which places Black users at a unique risk for encountering racially distressing digital content and developing related mental health concerns (Tao and Fischer, 2021; Volpe et al., 2021). This finding supports Del Toro and Wang's (2022) scholarship, which found that Black youth not only suffer disproportionate rates of anxiety and depression as a result of online racism compared to other racial groups surveyed, but that the effects of these interactions are more significant and longer lasting.

Although there is a growing body of scholarship denoting the mental health consequences of encountering racially traumatizing content online (Maxwell, 2016; Perkins et al., 2022), this research adds important nuance to this body by broadening the scope of what Black youth consider to be "racially distressing" experiences or "trauma-including" content online. In addition to graphic videos of Black people dead and dying, the youth in this study also identified racist slurs and sentiments, shadowbanning and biased content moderation practices, and the inability to escape race-related content in their suggested content feeds as primary causes of their mental health struggles. Importantly, the types of content identified as "racially distressing" were broad in terms of their assumed intent, and youth felt overwhelmed by the cumulative weight of race-based content rather than the intended purpose of individual posts.

This means that digital content meant to harm (e.g., posts using racist slurs to discuss George Floyd), to entertain (e.g., videos of comedians trying to make light of racism in America), to organize (e.g. crowdsourcing accounts meant to raise funds for just causes), to educate (e.g., posts detailing the historic roots of racist policing) and/or to inform (e.g., news stories providing live trial updates) contributed to a racially distressing *digital environment*, and youth often felt overwhelmed by the inability to "fully escape" or disconnect from topics of race, racism and white supremacy online. This finding is important, as it broadens the scope of "racially distressing content" to include content that is shared with good or even activist intentions.

While the extant literature has documented the impacts of hostile interactions at the user level, including comment trolling or cyberbullying (Okumu et al., 2020; Urano et al., 2020; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2007), this study adds important considerations about algorithmic processes that mediate youth mental health. In addition to encountering distressing content posted by in-network friends, the youth in this study struggled to navigate racially biased algorithmic processes, including suggested content, sponsored ads, and trending topics, that left them over-exposed and hyper-vulnerable to racially distressing content and experiences. In many cases, youth didn't have to actively search out, click on, or interact with race-based posts to see a steadily increasing amount of racialized content on their profiles. Consequently, the youth in this study reported feeling anxious, depressed, scared, angry, hopeless, and helpless after encountering vast amounts of racially distressing content online.

While the perils of social media for Black youth remain high with repeated exposure to racially distressing content and experiences, this research simultaneously denotes the incredible ways Black youth are reclaiming and recreating digital spaces that foster joy, restoration, and healing from racialized violence. As a direct response to racial trauma, the youth in this study employed self-care and coping strategies that used culturally situated and

community-oriented strategies to heal the individual self. These strategies often focused on healing the body (e.g., exercise, dancing, smoothies), the mind (e.g., unplugging, sleeping, breathing), and the soul (e.g., prayer, laughter, joyful hobbies). Black Twitter was identified by multiple participants as an important source of joy and laughter, and participants regularly cited Black cultural content, including memes, GIFs, and “clapback” threads as indispensable sources of racialized healing.

Together, CRTT and healing justice highlight the various ways these digital counter-spaces engage in restoration, resistance, and reclamation, and emphasize the historic importance of humor as healing and joy as resistance in Black digital communities (Brock, 2020). Importantly, the healing strategies shared by youth in this study provide a preliminary glimpse into just how powerful and important race-conscious digital media spaces can be for Black youth’s mental health and digital wellness.

Leveraging CRTT to Expose Algorithmic Oppression

Youth encountered a range of race-related stressors, including race-based trolling, digital harassment, content moderation, and over-exposure to graphic or violent images. Though the participants felt that this type of racially distressing content was “important to see”, they simultaneously felt overwhelmed by the sheer volume of race-based content that evidenced Black suffering and oppression. Participants often found it improbable and even impossible to move through social media platforms without encountering distressing content, and consequently felt compelled to engage when content “went viral” or came up in their “suggestions pages”. This finding is important, and stands apart from conventional scholarship suggesting that Black youth endure higher rates of online racial discrimination and sustain higher rates of mental health concerns as a result of *racially or culturally motivated user behaviors*, such as spending more time online, seeking out race-related content more regularly, and engaging in high rates of intragroup racial dialogue. Quite differently, this study shows that *algorithmic racism* is a primary catalyst for Black youth’s distressing experiences online. That is, the presence of anti-black infrastructures, including racially biased content moderation algorithms, platform monetization systems, and machine learning algorithms that determine rank and visibility of content according to racialized profit motives (Noble, 2018b; Tanksley, 2022; 2023b) play a definitive, yet largely invisible role in shaping the digital environment that Black youth navigate when they log online.

Here, CRTT can provide critical insight into this phenomenon by placing content virality, automated content suggestions, and algorithmically curated “timelines”, “newsfeeds”, and “Explore pages” into a larger matrix of algorithmic oppression. As a digital microcosm of offline racial logics, anti-blackness exists as the default setting and organizing logic of digital technology (Benjamin, 2019), and racially disparaging content is often “pushed to the top of the information pile” because of its historically-anchored popularity and profitability (Noble, 2014). Historically, the state-sanctioned killing of Black people has always been a wildly popular form of entertainment, and white patrons would often pay top dollar to attend showcases of Black death and dying, including public lynchings and Mandingo fights. CRTT recognizes how these historic practices have been digitally updated and identifies digital interest convergence as the reason social media platforms can hyper-circulate graphic, modern day lynchings and simultaneously block content meant to interrogate white supremacy – all while purporting to be “democratic” and “race neutral”. In the era of Big Tech, machine learning

algorithms quietly ensure that most grotesque, racially violent, and “click worthy” content is competitively priced, easily found, and readily accessible via keyword auctions and content monetization programs. Research into the inner workings of virality and content moderation make this reality increasingly clear, and according to Google Trends, the state-sanctioned killings of Black Americans are some of the most popular search queries in Google’s history (Tanksley, 2023b). Whether it’s George Floyd, Philando Castile, or Eric Brown, the most popular keyword searches for victims of police brutality are always the same: death video, chokehold, shooting video, dead body (Tanksley, 2023b). Here we can see the monetary incentives for viral Black death begin to emerge: when images of Black people being killed by police garner over 2.4 million clicks in 24 hours, and the average “Cost per click” for related content can range from \$1–\$6 per click, the virality of Black death is not only incentivized, but nearly guaranteed.

The virality of Black death is further ensured by racially disparate content moderation policies, which are often designed in ways that protect – rather than deter – anti-black racism and hate speech. For instance, leaked content moderation training manuals from Facebook show that “white males” were identified as a protected category that should be shielded from hate speech, but that “Asian women” and “Black children” were subgroups that did not require similar protections (Angwin et al., 2017). As ProPublica writes:

Facebook deletes curses, slurs, calls for violence and several other types of attacks only when they are directed at “protected categories” ... It gives users broader latitude when they write about “subsets” of protected categories. White men are considered a group because both traits are protected, while female drivers and black children, like radicalized Muslims, are subsets, because one of their characteristics is not protected.

By these rules, a post admonishing white men for murdering Black people would immediately be flagged as hate speech, while race and gendered slurs against Black youth would be upheld as “legitimate political expression”. With these racial logics at the forefront, it is not altogether surprising why the youth in this study feel over-exposed to and under-protected from racially distressing content and experiences online.

By exposing the inner working of algorithmic oppression and the dissemination of racially traumatizing content as technological microaggressions (Tanksley, 2022), CRTT reveals the emotional labor and associated trauma that Black youth endure when attempting to organize against racial oppression within anti-Black digital environments, and the urgency to create sustainable, long-lasting systems of support and healing within and by way of digital technology (Schueller et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

The present study’s use of CRTT offers important contributions to the field by illuminating how anti-Black algorithms – not the individual actions or usage statistics of users – determine Black youth’s exposure to racially traumatizing content and interactions online. This is a crucial finding because it means that Black youth don’t have to actively seek out or engage with race-based content *or* spend more than a couple of minutes online to be exposed to racially distressing content at disorienting rates. The implications of this are far-reaching and stand apart from extant literature that prioritizes altering the behaviors and actions of youth

online as a protective factor against racism; instead, it argues that a vitally important step to addressing youth mental health online is to make systemic, structural change to algorithmic underpinnings of social media, including data mining, learning algorithms, and content moderation processes. Until anti-blackness is abolished as the central, organizing logic of social media and internet technology (Noble, 2018a; Benjamin, 2019), then Black youth will continue to be at significant risk of online racial discrimination and mental health consequences.

Finally, the youth stories shared in this chapter echo current scholarship documenting the socioemotional effects of anti-black racism, and the need for structural changes to both mental health supports and social media platforms that can protect and support Black youth and social media activists. As our research shows, digital platforms are not systemically equipped to sustain or promote long-standing or holistic healing due to algorithmic racism and digital anti-Blackness. Yet, through their creativity and ingenuity, Black youth are surviving these oppressive systems and structures by embodying old and new traditions of Black fugitivity that create transformative – albeit temporary – ruptures in the dissemination of traumatizing content. Future scholarship should continue to explore how Youth of Color are navigating, surviving, and thriving within anti-Black digital systems, and also how they dream up, design, and deploy alternative platforms that support Black life and living within its content, its user interface, and its algorithmic infrastructure.

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