University of Cincinnati

Date: 9/27/2012

I, Russell L. Spiker Jr., hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

It is entitled:
From My Living Room to Yours: A Grounded Theory Typology of Racial Discussions on YouTube

Student’s name: Russell L. Spiker Jr.

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Jennifer Malat, PhD

Committee member: Annulla Linders, PhD
From My Living Room to Yours:
A Grounded Theory Typology of Racial Discussions on YouTube

November 10, 2012
A thesis submitted to the
Graduate School
of the University of Cincinnati
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in the Department of Sociology
in the College of Arts and Sciences

by

Russell Spiker

B.A. University of North Carolina Asheville
May 2009

Committee Chair: Jennifer Malat, Ph. D.
From My Living Room to Yours:

A Grounded Theory Typology of Racial Discussions on YouTube

ABSTRACT

As online media such as YouTube have become prevalent in social life, it is pertinent to understand the shape of online social spaces. This study proposes a typology of how users talk about race in the most popular social spaces on YouTube. The ways which people discuss race online are described using grounded theory and iterative discussion analysis of racial discussions collected from YouTube’s most popular videos on three days in February, 2012. The categories of discussion are outlined as hostility to racial subjects, overt racism, and racial stereotyping. Possibilities for how these trends are guided by neoliberal racial ideology are discussed. By building on studies of racial discourse in face-to-face interviews and theories of color-blind racism this study furthers sociological understanding about how racial ideology shapes interactions in pseudo-anonymous online contexts. Findings suggest racial discourse is a pertinent topic of investigation in social spaces online for understanding the pervasiveness and complexity of hegemonic racial ideologies.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title Page</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race: Offline and Online</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber-Supremacy: The Manifestation of Overt Racism Online</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analytic Plan</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Presentation of YouTube Comments in the Results</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“You sound like an idiot”: Hostility in Racial Discussions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Ur obviously a no class nigger”: Overt Racism and Stereotypes</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Tables

TABLE 1—Distribution of Racial Discussions across Observed Videos 18
TABLE 2—Occurrences of Major and Minor Racial Themes 19
INTRODUCTION

Online media like YouTube provide a place for connection and discussion through video and text. The immense popularity of YouTube in particular makes it the third most visited website in the world as of April 2012, reaching around 33% of global internet users daily (Alexa.com 2012). Only Google and Facebook, respectively, experience more traffic. The 2009 statistics on presented by the Pew Research Center estimated that 65% of U.S. adults viewed online video each day, primarily YouTube, with 13% of users leaving comments (Madden 2007; Madden 2009). With its wide reach and popularity as a form of amateur media and communication, YouTube provides an under-explored site of social analysis, especially in the fields of social interaction, cultural analysis, and media studies.

The comment areas on YouTube videos are social spaces where users can engage in discussions; in this way it is like a single topical thread in an online forum. Hostility and hate speech are not uncommon in comments (Strangelove 2009). The sociology textbook, *Racial Domination, Racial Progress* (Desmond and Emirbayer 2010) points to the existence of these comments as a commonly known site of racism, so much so that the authors urge, “If you confront someone who believes racism is dead, simply suggest they spend thirty minutes perusing YouTube” (p. 433). The presence of hate speech and blatant racism in such a popular medium beg investigation, yet no research focuses on racial discussions on YouTube.

Recent research which focuses on online racial discussions tends to focus on spaces designed to facilitate racial (specifically racist) discourse. Many studies focus on StormFront, a forum designed to facilitate global connections between white supremacists (e.g. Back 2002; Bowman-Grieve 2009; Daniels 2009; Meddaugh and Kay 2009). This focus illuminates important channels for the propagation of explicit hate groups and their messages, but racial
discourse can also be found in spaces like YouTube, which serve other functions than simply propagating a specific racist ideology. The concept of “cybertypes” (Nakamura 2002), the online version of stereotypes, provides one avenue of investigation into how offline racial perceptions influence online interactions in many contexts.

This paper aims to fill some of the gaps in how users discuss race in the comments sections of YouTube, and what they discuss, to expand upon sociological understanding of race and of the internet. By analyzing discussions from the daily list of most popular videos, this study paints the landscape of racial discussions in the most frequented parts of YouTube. The themes generated from the grounded theory analysis of these discussions creates a typology of discussions characterized by hostility, overt racism, and stereotypes, with very little cooperation. The presence of overt racism suggests that color-blind racial discourse (Bonilla-Silva 2003) does not transfer into YouTube’s social spaces. The nature of online discussions also complicates the boundaries of public and private space in ways which simultaneously confirm and trouble Feagin’s (1991) thesis that racial minorities would experience the most overt racial discrimination in public spaces. Finally, the nearly universal presence of hostility in racial discussions also illuminates the netiquette (online social norms) of YouTube, confirming claims about the assumed whiteness of online viewers and the desire to avoid racial topics (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000). This research pioneers space for the expanded understanding of how online social interaction and race interact in ways which differ from offline contexts, and which will only grow in importance with the incorporation of the internet and online media into everyday life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Race: Offline and Online
Much of the contemporary sociology of race, especially as it pertains to social
interaction, focuses on the social norms and ideologies which inform and guide racial
discussions. Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists* (2003) proposed the idea of “colorblind
racism,” whereby “whites have developed powerful explanations—which have ultimately become
justifications—for contemporary racial inequity which exculpate them from any responsibility for
the status of people of color” (p. 2). Colorblind racism shies away from the name-calling and
dehumanizing of the Jim Crow era (Bonilla-Silva 2003), instead giving whites a way to speak
about race implicitly through subjects with racial undertones. The underlying ideology of
colorblind racism, therefore, is one with proscriptions against explicit racism and even open
racial discussions.

This important shift in U.S. racial ideology, traces its roots to the post-Civil Rights era
and the politics of an era where racial inequality persisted despite a massive social movement on
behalf of racial equality. Specifically, it represents the spread of neoliberal racial ideology (Omi
and Winant 1994), in which “to speak of race is to enter a terrain where racism is hard to avoid.
Better to address racism by ignoring race, at least publicly” (p. 148). This ideology represents a
fairly recent shift in racial formation, the socially negotiated and structurally evident racial
hegemony (Omi and Winant 1994), which enables colorblind racial ideology. The ideology
extends far enough that whiteness rarely becomes salient; race becomes something whites don’t
have (Lewis 2004). As a result, colorblind racial ideology pervades U.S. social institutions.
White middle-class culture is an implicit norm in institutions such as medicine (Good, James,
Good, and Becker 2005; Malat, Clark-Hitt, Burgess, Friedemann-Sanchez, and van Ryn 2010),
politics (Omi and Winant 1994), education (Collins 2008), and the job market (Bertrand and
Mullainathan 2008), leading to a society with high levels of racial segregation and discrimination (Bobo 2001), but low tolerance for any recognition of racial inequality.

Despite the power of the neoliberal racial ideology in shaping social norms about discussing race in politically correct terms, implicit racial attitudes and structural trends both point toward continuing discrimination and inequality. Attitudinal racism continues to be a factor in whites’ feelings about racial minorities (Bobo 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Quillian 2008) even when whites show outward support for racial equality. Recently, the election of Barack Obama demonstrated the power of implicit attitudes by enabling whites to claim a “post-racial” era in the United States while hardening their prejudices (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Effron, Cameron, and Monin 2009; Kaizer, Drury, Spalding, Cheryan, and O’Brien 2009; Marable 2009; Moore and Bell 2010). Here, colorblind ideologies mask deeper prejudices ingrained by the hegemony of the neoliberal racial project (Omi and Winant 1994). These attitudes manifest within a social structure where racial inequality, however undiscussed, remains prevalent and visible.

Structurally, racial discrimination shapes the life chances of minority group members (Kuzawa and Sweet 2009; Oliver and Shapiro 2008; Waters, Tran, Kasinitz, and Mollenkopf 2010), and racial discrimination and segregation remain prevalent (Bobo 2001; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Feagin 1991). Feagin (1991) claims “black women and men face an unusually broad range of discrimination on the street and in public accommodations” (p. 114), a trend which contrasts to the then-blossoming ideology of a post-racial society. Bonilla-Silva’s (1997) theory of structural racism states, “racially motivated behavior, whether or not the actors are conscious of it, is regarded as ‘rational’—that is, as based on the races’ different interests” (p. 475). This proposes a causal link between structural racism and discriminatory behavior, both overt and covert. According to Quillian (2006), “In contrast to the beliefs expressed by most survey
respondents, audit studies of discrimination reveal high levels of discrimination in housing and labor markets” (p. 322). Masked by colorblind ideology, racial stratification in a society affects the distribution of housing and jobs, limiting the availability of resources to nonwhites in the United States.

Most importantly for this study, real-world racial stratification acts as a gatekeeper to the internet; those without access or resources cannot participate in cyber culture. This divide affects access as well as use (Chen and Wellman 2005; Jackson, Zhao, Kolenic III, Fitzgerald, Harold, and Eye 2008). Despite evidence that the racial digital divide is closing somewhat in terms of access (Chen and Wellman 2005; Zickuhr and Smith 2012), our cultural narratives “have constructed a racial ideology about technology. . .by associating whiteness with ‘progress,’ ‘technology,’ and ‘civilization’” (Hobson 2008). Addressing the interaction of race and gender in modes of usage, Jackson et al. (2008) state, “African American females use the internet more intensely and in more diverse ways than does any other group, whereas African American males use it less intensely and in fewer ways than does any other group” (p. 441). The interaction of race and gender provides a particularly interesting problem considering the white male hegemony present in many online spaces (Hobson 2008; Nakamura 2002). Despite increased internet usage by African American women and the closing racial gap, recent studies still show that racial differences persist in access and use.

The increased presence of racial minorities online does not necessarily translate to a weakening of the U.S. narrative of whiteness and technological supremacy. Structural racism in the “real world” and its effects on people do not simply vanish when one goes online (Nakamura 2000). In other words, the Veil, which W.E.B. Du Bois (1999[1903]) proposed as a metaphor for the way race colors social interaction and stratification, does not lift when users step into the
virtual world. In an ethnography of the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV), an attempt to create an online mixing space for communities in Blacksburg, Virginia, David Silver (2000) noted the tendency of members to avoid issues of race at all costs. Rather than actively including marginalized community members, within the BEV “issues of race, gender, and sexuality are not only ignored, but rather routed around” (Silver 2000:148). Similarly, Kolko (2000) notes the absence of a “race” characteristic by which to label one’s character on LambdaMOO, a popular multi-user domain (MUD) game where users interact purely through text, but maintains the absence of race as a facet of most MUDs. The omission of race in the creation of online avatars in these cases creates generic, raceless identities (Kolko 2000; Nakamura 2002) which may combine with colorblind ideology to create the illusion that all users are white. That the majority of users choose not to include racial signifiers in their self-descriptions speaks to the appeal of avoiding race online because “in the absence of racial description, all players are assumed to be white” (Nakamura 2002:38). The increasing presence of racial minorities online does not necessarily translate to a change in online meanings attached to race because many conventions of the internet propagate rather than challenge colorblind ideology and assumptions of white racelessness.

Presumed whiteness shows the power of online social norms (called ‘netiquette’) which enforce white privilege and colorblind ideology by avoiding racial topics. The preference to “route around” race (Silver 2000:138) is one way white privilege manifests online; the reactions to violations of this rule of avoidance illustrate a way of reinforcing a colorblind culture. Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman (2000) note a flame war (a hostile ad hominem attack aimed at demoralizing and marginalizing a discussion participant) that resulted from a post about the social construction of race on an academic listserv. The authors contend that the flaming which
erupted did not result from an attempt to counter their constructionist claims with a biological racial theory, but rather from an aversion to racial controversy. The effects of the debate evinced the norms of whiteness and race-avoidance clearly through the community’s treatment of the subject: “For months afterward even the most innocent and ‘safe’ references to race were regularly met with snotty asides about how ‘we don’t want to go into all that again’” (Kolko et al. 2000). An investigation of viewer reactions to models’ profiles on SuicideGirls.com, a softcore website for ‘alternative’ female models, found that in the rare instances when a model of color is included “her body inevitably becomes a signifier of the exotic. . .this ‘othered’ position is put forward as the signifier of her desirability” (Magnet 2007:590). The discourse changed from that of strong, liberated women to descriptions of exotic features and orientalism (Magnet 2007). Particularly noteworthy were the negative comments directed at India, a South Asian model and one of the few nonwhite Suicide girls. Despite how these negative comments broke the norm of positivity and proscriptions against racial discrimination, the issue received little to no attention on the site (Magnet 2007). Assumed whiteness in online spaces leads to an aversion to racial subject matter, including the overt (e.g. self-identified) presence of nonwhite participants. Such interactions make it clear that race constitutes dangerous territory and those who seek to invoke it in spaces where race isn’t salient, and thus defaults to white, risk social exclusion and ridicule.

The online social norms about discussing race mirror the offline norms in interesting ways. The discrimination against models of color on SuicideGirls.com reflects the increased risk of racial discrimination in public spaces noted by Feagin (1991). Netiquette which strives to avoid racial topics and which assumes racelessness (read: whiteness) in online spaces reflects the power of colorblind ideology and the belief that race is something whites don’t have (Bonilla-
The overwhelmingly negative reaction noted by Kolko et. al (2002) in reaction to a social constructionist racial post on a scholarly listserv also reflects a rejection of the belief that race matters, as well as providing a cautionary tale to those who expect academic spaces to be racially enlightened. Structural stratification continues to affect the racial and gendered demographics of internet users, and despite gains for racial minorities with the arrival of smartphones, racial minorities (specifically blacks and Hispanics) retain unequal access to and use of technology (Zickuhr and Smith 2012). In the mainstream online world, race constitutes an absent presence which becomes evident when norms of whiteness are violated. This occurs because users enter virtual social spaces through the lenses of their social selves; the popular metaphor of users as the ghost inhabiting the machine (internet) can be strengthened through the rather compatible use of the Veil (Du Bois 1999[1903]). Since the Veil’s current manifestation is one of normative whiteness and colorblind denial of race’s significance, it is not surprising that online social interaction mirrors these qualities. Users enter the virtual world and interpret it through the Veil of race; after all, a Veil is part of the costume of a ghost.

**Cyber-Supremacy: The Manifestation of Overt Racism Online**

One aspect of online racial ideologies does not fit into the mainstream patterns of neoliberal racial ideologies: the proliferation of exclusive, overtly racist social spaces. Existing scholarship on race online largely focuses on online spaces reserved for overtly racist social groups. This is a very sensible and understandable approach, as these sites are where overt racism is most concentrated and most observable. The existence of global racist communities is a novel development in the history of white supremacy which requires attention on the part of modern race and internet culture scholars. The internet opens gateways for white supremacists to convene and communicate worldwide in a fashion impossible during the era of print media.
(Back 2002), leading to the formation of online communities openly devoted to white supremacy.

The potential of white supremacist communities lies in the newfound organizational abilities to promote activism and disseminate amateur produced racist content to a wide audience. StormFront.org, the largest white supremacist community on the internet, is the focus of intense research into the structure and tactics of this relatively new global white supremacist community. Daniels (2009) claims these spaces give white supremacists a place to organize in new ways, allowing for organization and outreach in ways which the pre-digital age did not allow. The potential of large white supremacist communities to produce alternative knowledges through amateur content which emulates professional science is an important facet of these spaces, as it allows white supremacists to create convincing facsimiles which are distributed as authoritative racial scholarship (Back 2002; Daniels 2009; Simi and Futtrell 2006). This is often done through rhetorical appeals of “reverse racism” and threats to white values (Adams and Roscigno 2005; Brown 2006; Meddaugh and Kay 2009) which align with the politics of the New Right (Omi and Winant 1994).

Surprisingly, colorblind and neoliberal racial ideologies are prominently used as tools of persuasion on white supremacist sites. Meddaugh and Kay (2009) show how StormFront’s rules have recently turned away from overt racism in an attempt to appeal more to mainstream white conservatives. Racial slurs, extreme overt racism, and threats of violence can be removed by moderators for violating forum rules (Meddaugh and Kay 2009), which reflects a surprising deployment of colorblind racism by white supremacists. Daniels (2009) shows how white supremacist groups create “educational” websites which present racial topics like the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. or black slavery in subtly racist ways. Back (2002:637) notes one white
supremacist online library containing works by Adorno, noting that “Adorno’s work is used to criticize the involvement of cultural entrepreneurs and then organized into a conspiratorial anti-Semitic view.” Meanwhile, these online sites encourage “lone-wolf” activism online and offline through racial harassment and targeted recruitment (Adams and Roscigno 2006; Bowman-Grieve 2009; Simi and Futrell 2006). This allows the community to advance its extremist goals while maintaining its appeal to politically “mainstream” whites.

Studies which document the power and potential of exclusive racist spaces cannot be underestimated. However, they document only a small part of the racial landscape online. StormFront has approximately 150,000 registered members (Daniels 2009), a relatively small number given the scope and size of other websites. Despite “commonsense” mentions of racism on YouTube (Desmond and Emirbayer 2010; Strangelove 2009), research on the topic appears to be nonexistent. This study explores racial discussions and interactions on YouTube because it is in many ways very different from sites like StormFront; it is open, very popular, and globally mainstream. The rationale for the site of this study is to examine the way racial ideologies inform discussions in a global, popular, and mainstream website, taking the study of racial ideology online beyond the most secluded and extremist corners of the internet.

Context: Social Norms and Interaction on YouTube

Given the site chosen for this research, this section presents a brief review of the effect of online environments on communication. Social spaces online often contain a set of community guidelines, or “netiquette,” that represent formal rules dictating appropriate conduct (Pankoke-Babatsz and Jeffrey 2002). Stressing the importance of including norms in researching online behavior, Farrell and Schwartzberg (2008) note “blogs, online discussion groups, and other such forums of communication may appear chaotic and anarchic, but are characterized by informal
rules which shape conversation” (p. 357). On YouTube, these rules exist under the “Terms and Conditions” subsection titled “Community Guidelines” (YouTube.com 2012). These guidelines explicitly forbid the kind of behavior examined in this study, most notably through the following rules (author’s emphasis in italics):

- We encourage free speech and defend everyone’s right to express unpopular points of view. But we don’t permit hate speech (speech which attacks or deems a group based on race or ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender, age, veteran status, and sexual orientation/gender identity).
- Things like predatory behavior, stalking, threats, harassment, intimidation, invading privacy, revealing other people’s personal information, and inciting others to commit violent acts or to violate the Terms of Use are taken very seriously. Anyone caught doing these things may be permanently banned from YouTube.

These rules outline both the unacceptable behaviors and the possible sanctions (permanent banning from YouTube). Further down the page, the guidelines define their terms more specifically and threaten content removal and account bans for violation. However, threatening behaviors, racism, sexism, and sexual harassment are part of the YouTube experience for many viewers, and despite a 24-hour reviewing staff, much of the behavior goes unattended (Strangelove 2010). This possibly results from the massive size of YouTube, which makes it incredibly difficult to monitor all content. Such behavior is possibly the result of unique factors specific to the online environment.

Research on racial discussions online is limited and still in development. One study of adolescents in monitored and unmonitored chat rooms suggests that while most references to race and ethnicity are positive, “chat participants nonetheless had a 19 percent chance of being
exposed to remarks about a racial or ethnic group (potentially their own) in a session of monitored chat and a 59 percent chance in unmonitored chat” (Tynes, Reynolds, and Greenfield 2004: 681). The same authors also note that racial hostility does not follow the typical offline pattern; racial hostility occurred just as often toward whites as toward minority groups. The lower incidence rate of racial hostility in monitored rooms speaks to the power of social controls (Tynes et al. 2004), but the statistic of 19% makes it difficult to call negative interactions uncommon. Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) suggest that these findings show how the relative absence of social controls online can increase the expression of hostility which one would not express openly in offline contexts. Drawing on these findings, the context of YouTube has superficial monitoring, but users see clear examples of unpunished violations on a regular basis which may loosen the norm-inducing behavior of moderation.

Online interactions appear to follow different norms from their offline counterparts, but for multiple reasons including identifiability and neoliberal ideology. Traditional deindividuation models suggest that anonymity (real or perceived) disinhibits people from offline social norms (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984), but offline social ties and loyalties remain in interesting ways. The Social Psychology Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), which accounts for the interaction of the medium of communication and the social contexts in which it occurs, is frequently used in social psychological studies of computer-mediated communication (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 1998). In a SIDE focused study of computer-mediated communications, Douglas and McGarty (2001:412) find “in-group members are more likely to describe anonymous out-group members abstractly when they themselves are identifiable to an in-group audience,” an effect accounted for partially by the norms of the in-group. Another SIDE study suggested that deindividuated participants in a computer-mediated discussion are more likely to
consider in-group perceptions of their arguments than are individuated participants (Lee 2007). Rather than suggesting complete social disconnection, these studies suggest our social group identification can become even more important online. YouTube contains multitudes of in-groups and out-groups pertaining to divisions such as age, race, gender, and sexuality but also for politics, fandoms, hobbies, etc. (Strangelove 2010). These combine to make YouTube’s in-groups and out-groups much more complex than the small discussion groups in small-group studies.

Supplementing studies of small-group interactions and norms online, sociological inquiry brings in the effect of larger ideologies, such as neoliberalism, which shape these behaviors. Capitalism and neoliberal society enable online consumption behaviors, which take place in a context of late modernity (Agger 2004). Amateur content production on YouTube often follows the standards of professionally made content, and the extreme popularity of corporate content suggests that the site operates as an extension of consumer culture (Miller 2009; Strangelove 2010). Scholarly research should temper both the idealistic and dystopian views of the internet by illuminating its complexities as potentially empowering for amateur producers but situated in a context of corporate social control.

While many studies correctly point out that corporate ownership limits the potential of the internet as a subversive space, most still overlook how the neoliberal discourse on inequality also shapes online interactions. Nakamura (2002; 2009) notes the influence of neoliberal ideology in shaping racial discourse, suggesting that online identity freedom from the offline social world is an illusion. Showcasing the complex attributes of the internet, Nakamura (2009) shows how amateur content production about Chinese World of Warcraft players combines old racial stereotypes with new ‘cybertypes’ of Chinese gold farmers as cheaters and nonhuman.
Despite the often overtly racist nature of these videos, Nakamura (2009) notes that viewers and commenters defend these videos with direct references to colorblind racism. Studies of the Blacksburg Electronic Village (Silver 2000) and early Multi-User Dungeons (Kolko 2000) document online norms about avoiding discussing race which follow the neoliberal model of suggesting that race is a divisive issue. These norms of avoidance, when broken, can erupt in hostility and abuse (Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000). While not all online social norms derive directly from offline influences, and while all are contextually negotiated, the argument of this paper connects discussions of race online with larger neoliberal patterns of race avoidance (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2003) which erupt in hostility when violated.

While online contexts certainly provide unique situations for norm formation and enforcement, research does not suggest these processes are divorced from patterned behavior offline. In this paper I maintain that online hostility about racial topics results partially from the violation of norms of race avoidance and partially from the ability to express attitudes in a disinhibited environment. Using this framework, researchers can draw more solid connections between offline and online contexts, draping the ghost in the machine with any number of veils to see how attitudes translate when taken into virtual spaces.

METHODS

Data collection on the internet requires researchers to use methods which combine traditional sociological inquiry with methods which are adapted to the nature of online content. Mitra and Cohen (1999) stress the opportunity present with online texts for researchers to improve and adapt methodologies for hypertext. Similarly, in Cyber-Racism Daniels (2009:195) notes “there is not, as of yet, a well-developed sociological method for studying patterned human behavior involving the Internet. Hine (2000:10), writing about virtual ethnography, proposes thinking of
research sites online as defined by “connection rather than location,” citing shared experience rather than geographic similarity as a context for inquiry. Specific to YouTube, Strangelove’s (2010:9) ethnographic study notes that “no one text can authoritatively represent the people, communities, and culture of the ‘Tube.” Research methods online require careful thought and revision, with attention to the multitude of contexts and areas of inquiry possible on the internet.

Data

Due to the size of YouTube, the variability of its social spaces, and the lack of methods for studying online phenomena, this study used a grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) approach which viewed comment discussions similarly to conversations observed in a field site. Methodologically, this also addresses Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) concern about the limitations of survey research in assessing racial attitudes by viewing interactions between users rather than soliciting attitudes from respondents. Since YouTube comments are publicly available to anyone with an internet connection, this approach resembles the study of public documents more than that of interview data. Still, to protect the online identities of discussion participants, results presented below do not contain posters’ usernames; pseudonyms are used.

Data collection for this study occurred during February, 2012. Days for collection were chosen at random over an interval of seven days, starting on February 8, then February 20, and February 26. Comments were retrieved on these dates from YouTube.com’s top ten most viewed videos for the day. To maintain efficiency, the “View all comments” link (which is embedded above every video’s comments section) was used and comments were sorted by thread. This means that replies are hierarchically arranged below the parent comment rather than listed chronologically.
After finding the total page count of comments for a given video, the range of pages was entered into a random number generator. Two hundred comments were then collected in chronological order from the bottom of the randomly chosen page. Videos were excluded if most of the comments were not in English because of limited translating ability. In some cases, videos had fewer than 200 total comments; in these cases the full body of comments was recorded and used in the analysis. Data collection and data analysis overlapped, thus allowing the data collection to end when the point of saturation was reached. In total, 23 videos were used for study.

The collection strategy targeted top ten videos to focus on what most YouTube users experience. This strategy also allowed me to select videos without regard to racial content, which otherwise might have led to a sample skewed in the direction of overt racial commentary. Random dates and pages were used to avoid intentional selection bias as well as to randomize the chronological placement of selected comments in case order affected the content of discussions. The ultimate goal of this collection plan was to allow for analysis of the discussions occurring in the most popular spaces on YouTube on a given day.

Analytic Plan

Data analysis used an iterative approach based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), allowing the themes within the data to emerge. Data was first analyzed to establish emergent categories, then again to solidify these categories and discover their properties (Glaser and Strauss 1967), where applicable. This enabled the development of a typology of themes in racial discussions on YouTube based primarily on the emergent categories.

NVivo 9 qualitative analysis software was used to keep the large amount of data and codes manageable. This allowed for the separation of discussions into categories as well as
establishing which discussions illustrated the properties of those categories. Furthermore, it allowed for a very rough estimate of how much percentage of the space occupied by the 200 comments was taken up by racial discussions.

Comment discussions, operationally defined as any comment and its set of replies, were the unit of analysis. Entire discussions were coded for their content. Stand alone comments were also coded into the same categories, but were not used in the construction of the typology. Discussions and comments which contained no racial content were separated on the first iteration of coding, and those with questionably or tenuously racial subject matter were also separated and excluded from analysis to avoid ambiguity.

After the third period of data collection, new categories and properties ceased to emerge. The third iteration of coding the entire set of data revealed no further emergent themes, marking the point of diminishing returns. Following the coding, the categories containing the most discussions across the widest number of videos were used to construct the typology. The categories which were idiosyncratic to certain videos and those which made up a very small portion of the total comments were excluded in the interest of increased generalizability.

RESULTS

Thirty-four discussions from 9 videos contained racial discussions. Table 1 shows the distribution of racial discussions across the observed videos. The prominence of racial discussions, in a rough percentage of the total space taken up by the discussion, was also observed. In videos with racial discussions, the range of percentages was from 0.56% to 53.13% (Table 1). The average space taken up by discussions for videos in which they occurred was 18.34%, or roughly one-fifth of the observed space.
### TABLE 1—Distribution of Racial Discussions Across Observed Videos

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Video</th>
<th>Discussions</th>
<th>Number of Racial Comments in Discussions</th>
<th>Racial Discussions: Percent of Comment Space</th>
<th>Total Comments Observed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8.35%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.56%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>53.13%</td>
<td>204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6.20%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.52%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.21%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>29.25%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7.24%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>46.60%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>4358</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three major themes of discussion emerged as the most prominent and consistent across discussions: hostility, overt racism, and racial stereotyping. Two minor themes were also observed: claims of racism and “N” slurs (the use of “nigger,” “nigga,” or “negro” in discussions). Major themes were distinguished from minor themes because of their structuring effect on the discussion: claims of racism tended to originate discussions, but not characterize them. These themes overlapped to some degree, with every major theme occurring in at least
### TABLE 2—Occurrences of Major and Minor Racial Themes (Videos with Racial Discussions N = 9; Total Video N = 24)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Themes</th>
<th>Number of Videos</th>
<th>Number of Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostility</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overt Racism</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Minor Themes</th>
<th>Number of Videos</th>
<th>Number of Discussions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claims of Racism</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N- Slurs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nigger”</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Nigga”</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Negro”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Describes the number of videos where discussions contained the stated theme.

bDescribes the number of discussions in which this theme occurred.

There were a total of 23 videos observed, with nine containing racial discussions in the comments; there were 34 racial discussions generated by, or in some cases attached to, these 9 videos (Table 1). Themes were considered present in a video only if they were occurred in a discussion; single, unanswered comments were not included in the analysis. Hostility, the first major theme, occurred in seven videos and 20 discussions (Table 2). The properties of hostility included ad hominem attacks as well as threats of violence. The second, overt racism, dealt with racial slurs and comparisons to animals, and occurred in five videos and 16 discussions (Table 2). A minor theme accounting for variations on the word “nigger,” the most commonly used racial slur in the discussions, is also included in this section. Variations on “nigger” occurred in three videos and eight discussions (Table 2). “Nigger” was the most prevalent, present in three
of 23 videos and eight discussions, and “negro” was present in one discussion (Table 2).

“Nigga,” though present in unanswered comments in three videos, was never used in a
discussion. The third category, racial stereotyping, was present in four videos and 14 discussions
(Table 2). Racial stereotypes did not necessarily appeal directly to overt statements of racism.
However, stereotypes most often coincided with discussions which included overt racism,
making the two difficult to separate when presenting examples. For this reason, stereotypes and
overt racism are presented in the same section, thought discussed separately.

The minor theme, claims of racism, bears special mention. Though it does not constitute
a major theme of discussion, it occurred in eight videos and 22 discussions (Table 2); it was the
most common theme as well as the way most racial discussions began. However, though claims
of racism often started discussions, they did not constitute discussion types because they did not
thematically characterize the entire discussion. Discussions which begin with a claim of racism
will be noted during the description of the other themes.

The Presentation of YouTube Comments in the Results

This is an example of the structure of the comment discussions presented in the results:

1) This is a comment on YouTube.

Commenter 1

2) @Commenter1 I am responding to your comment on YouTube

Commenter 2

3) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
I am not responding to your comments. Please visit my channel.

Commenter 3

In these examples, each number followed by parentheses denotes a new comment. The body of
the comment is the text of the commenter. Indented below the comment is the pseudonym of the
commenter. In the second comment, the body begins with “@Commenter1” (read: “at
Commenter 1”). This is a feature of YouTube to denote who is the subject of a reply comment.
The third comment begins with the text “This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam.” This
occurs when a post has been flagged as spam by multiple users and has been hidden as a result of
YouTube’s moderation system. The comment system gives users the ability to view comments
marked as spam, denoting its “flagged” status with that added line.

The numbering and indentations have been added for ease of reading, and only the
timestamps have been removed for ease of reading. Timestamps are of limited use because they
do not give an exact time of commenting, only an approximate number of hours or days. As a
result, they were not part of the analysis. The comment structure presented in these results
otherwise preserves the visual structure of YouTube comment threads.

“You sound like an idiot”: Hostility in Racial Discussions

Hostile responses occurred frequently throughout racially themed discussions. There
were two major trends in hostility: hostile responses to claims of racism and hostile responses to
racism. In the first, commenters used insults such as ‘idiot’ and ‘moron’ alongside evidence to
disqualify the perception of racism as preposterous. In the second, commenters responded to
racist remarks by insulting the intelligence and moral worth of the perceived racist poster but did
not provide counterexamples.

The following example, taken from a discussion of the M&Ms Super Bowl commercial
in which the red M&M strips down to his brown interior, illustrates the trend for claims of
racism:

1) Does this commercial convey subliminal racism? Brown shells, brown people?

BoringGuy
2) @BoringGuy You sound like an idiot

IcyHeart

3) @BoringGuy HOLY CRAP. THAT MEANS POOP IS RACIST NOW

MH15K21

4) @BoringGuy shut the fuck please

AfghaniRoyal

This was paired with another discussion related to the original post in which more concrete examples accompanied insults on the poster’s intelligence.

1) @BoringGuy what are you talking about chocolate is brown

IslamicTouch

2) @IslamicHealer Did you notice the disapproving looks and scorn from the “normal people” i.e. the whites in the club in regards to over sexualized behavior of the “browns”?

BoringGuy

3) BoringGuy...the voice of the brown M&M is Bebe Neuwirth. She was Lilith on Cheers...and she’s white...moron.

fig677action

4) @fig677action Yes, and Al Jolson was just an entertainer as well . . . But it was more out in the open back then.

BoringGuy

5) @BoringGuy or maybe its because he took off his “clothes” and began to dance and wiggle lol plus the m&m was red originally they cant make them any other color cuz chocolate is brown

IslamicTouch

6) @BoringGuy ...oh please tell me you’re serious. You are actually calling racism on M&M’s. and comparing it to Al Jolson? Bebe Neuwirth can’t be the voice of the brown M&M because she’s white? Really? You do know that Al Jolson was applauded by black people, because they said as a jewish man, he also understood discrimination. He was
known for his contributions to helping fight racism, and introducing jazz and blues music to white people. And by the way ...IT’S AN M&M COMMERCIAL

fig677action

This example illustrates a pattern seen frequently with claims of racism, where an original commenter makes a claim about perceived racism and other users respond with hostility. Though many of the argument include examples of why the original poster is wrong, most also insult the original poster’s intelligence. Across all discussions where hostility targeted a claim of racism, insulting the poster’s intelligence is the dominant trend.

One other noteworthy trend in responding to claims of racism is the use of color-blind rhetoric. Color-blind arguments were used more often to counter claims of racism rather than to respond to racist remarks. When used to counter claims of racism, comments using color-blind rhetoric still followed the general trend of hostile responses. The first example, from a discussion of Whitney Houston’s funeral, illustrates how hostility and color-blind rhetoric were used together.

1) @ Unknown Comment leave it alone I mean this is about whitney Houston not r Kelly he did the damn thing it’s funny if r Kelly was a white man they forget about his pass and never mentioned it but he’s black so let’s continue to talk

LOCKJ3119

2) @ LOCKJ3119 Fuck that racial shit. u are ignorant. He’s a man. A human. That’s it.

ROBJAKE312

The comment by LOCKJ3119 is drawing attention to previous discussions which targeted R. Kelly for his past legal troubles. The original comment was unavailable in the thread, but several discussions which occurred before the observation period featured similar themes. The response to the racial content of the post is simultaneously insulting and color-blind. The accompanying insults to the target’s intelligence reinforce the idea that only someone ‘ignorant’ would think
race plays a role. This acts as a way to dismiss race as even a possibility, killing the discussion before it starts.

A further example of this pattern occurred in a discussion about M.I.A.’s controversial middle finger during a performance at the Super Bowl:

1) OptimusPrime she is not even black you racist pig she is indian and nikki and m.i.a are not circus clowns you jealous piece of sh------- all of you are racist jerks .....madonna knows exactly what she’s doing back in the middle 80’s maddona was doing the same sh---- so get your facts right

xxNotoriouSxx

2) @xxNotoriouSxx shes not indian shes tamil

art12

3) @xxNotoriouSxx All of us are racist jerks? Who? You are the one generalizing. I haven’t seen anyone bring race into it other than getting her race wrong. Don’t pull the race card.

TheTop1

This discussion starts with a hostile reaction to the general theme of the comments, which focused heavily on race and mostly classified M.I.A. as black. TheTop1’s response is interesting because of the color-blind rhetoric employed. It is worth noting that this instance of ‘race card’ rhetoric is one of two times it was deployed in all the videos, both in this video and by the same account. Further, both instances were used in response to commenters claiming that other posts were racist.

The above examples highlight one of the emergent patterns in the discussions, but another form of hostility targeted commenters who used racial slurs or made racially hostile statements. The following illustrates one example, taken from a much larger series of discussions of the M.I.A. video which included over 100 comments

1) Way to set black people back another 30 years idiot. ;) you’re a real gem
CoolDJBen

2) @CoolDJBen she’s not black

MyVids

3) @CoolDJBen That was prolly the smartest comment on here. Pat yourself on the back.

CounterOffensive

4) @CoolDJBen ur an idiot. shes not black u stupid fuk

EmotionRising

5) @EmotionRising fuck* shes white as you are intelligent

CoolDJBen

This particular discussion was a branch off of another discussion, in which CounterOffensive was the primary target of hostility for using racial slurs. Hostile reactions mostly focused on insults and one threat of violence. Following are a few examples to illustrate users’ reactions to racist language.

1) thinking gives people like CounterOffensive brain cancer.

BrokenPencil

2) Ooooh! Is that a threat from a RACIST ASSHOLE?! Please do give me your address, and I will find you myself.

Happiness331

3) loolll... oooohh ohhh ur scaryyyyyy. Actually, I’d be more scared for my kids b/c you’re a pedophile.

CaliGirl

In a video of two boxers being interviewed after a brawl outside the ring, similar patterns of responding to perceived racism occurred:

1) Normal behavior from Monkeys....STOP IMMIGRATION NOW
ArtPatron

2) @ArtPatron Normal behavior from white trash as yourself.. stop breeding!

MGRjr

3) @MGRjr Are you aware David Hayes mum is white? Im sure your parents are very proud of their 31 year old son leaving pathetic racist comments on youtube

MarxBros

4) @MarxBros My parents are dead, plus I admit, I am anti-white... you got a problem with that? P.S. Haye identifies himself as Black.

MGRjr

5) @ArtPatron whats with all the racist twats like you using this as an excuse to flaunt you Nazi opinions- maybe we should be deporting old fashioned disrespectful cunts like you

IglooDude

The two types of hostile reactions to comments shown above occurred very frequently when racial subjects arose. Only one discussion of all collected did not elicit some type of hostile reaction, either insulting or threatening.

“Ur obviously a no class nigger”: Overt Racism and Stereotypes

Overt racism and racial slurs occur frequently throughout racial discussions, and are often intermingled with hostility. In this sample, the word “nigger” is used 21 times in eight discussions; three of the uses were quoting what another commenter said as a means of exposing the comments as racist. “Negro” appears three times in one discussion.

In most discussions, the use of racial slurs was restricted to one or two commenters using the racial slurs and others reacting with hostility. The largest discussion, which occupied around 54% of the comment space for the video, provided several examples of how users react to the use of racial slurs. This excerpt illustrates one exchange which fed into the larger discussion.
1) M.I.A. IS FLAWLESS AND I LOVE HER DANCING AND SINGING. HATERS WE DON’T GIVE A SHIIIII

   EmotionRising

2) @EmotionRising you are obviosly a no class nigger like she is

   CounterOffensive

3) @CounterOffensive raicts bich. go to fukin hell. shes not black btw. shes sri lanken and ur a kkk loking fukin hor

   EmotionRising

4) @EmotionRising lol even if she isn’t black, you still live in your Grandma’s basement you Ethiopian battle cricket

   CoolDJBen

The two forms of racism which occur here are both assumptions of the first commenters’ race and both commenters are prolific in the discussion, using racial slurs and stereotypes to attack their opponents. The fourth comment, however, avoids an outright racial slur for a stereotype of Ethiopian culture. This discussion continues in a similar vein until other users join in against CoolDJBen and CounterOffensive, some of which are illustrated by the above examples of hostility to racist language.

Racial slurs are most often used to insult other users directly, as in CounterOffensive’s ‘no class nigger’ comment. However, they are more than just another insult; they are frequently used to attack the real or perceived racial characteristics of a debate opponent. Comments involving racial slurs appear to use the ‘presence’ of another commenter’s race as evidence of their inferiority. The following example comes from a video of a boxing press conference:

1) Around 3:36-3:38, You can heard David Haye saying "I'm going to lose my life because of you"...Chisora really is a fucking cunt.

   ForeverMe
In this case, what starts as an incidence of flaming quickly takes on a racial tone as one commenter turns the other’s presumed race into an insult. Race becomes a part of the escalation of insults as the discussion progresses. This racial flaming uses the race (real or perceived) of the target as a demeaning modifier.

Racial flaming is the most common form of overt racism. Following is another example of how race enters discussions as a negative signifier. In this case, the topic of discussion is Whitney Houston’s funeral, in a more racially charged environment than the previous example. The genesis of this discussion is a comment which claims that Kevin Costner is the only white person there, from which followed a discussion over whether only blacks cared about Whitney Houston.

1) @WiseOne112 Whitney only liked rich white people they were probably the only ones dumb enough to lend that crackhead any money.

 LatinLover993

2) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@LatinLover993 Let's HOPE so!

JacksonVideos

3) @JacksonVideos Well Mel Gibson would of been there but I heard he hates Negros.

LatinLover993

4) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@LatinLover993 Here's a lesson in English grammar white. It's "would have" not "would of".
LOL
Thick cunt.

JacksonVideos

5) @JacksonVideos I had no idea we were getting graded on our youtube comments. And calling me a cunt is practically a complement, thank you btw. You seemed upset about my Negro quote, sorry nigger.

LatinLover993

6) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@LatinLover993 LOL
Dumb [Laughter]b freak. Fuck off the video you stupid lunatic white. You're stinking it up with your existence.

JacksonVideos

7) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@JacksonVideos yes nigger....whatever you say you sorry ass nigger.

LatinLover993

8) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@LatinLover993 Yes paedophile white shit. Now go fuck yourself.
LOL

JacksonVideos

9) @JacksonVideos Lmfao, Learn to spell you nappy headed ignorant tar baby, and yes being a White skinned Latino ain't a bad thing, Don't be jealous.

LatinLover993

10) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
@LatinLover993 I’m sure everybody in the congregation missed the pink dick. LOL
I hate negroes too - they’ve more in common with white pigs.

JacksonVideos

Here, LatinLover and JacksonVideos dominate the discussion with a racially charged exchange which relies on racial stereotypes and racial slurs to demean the other commenter. The pointed use of racial terms is again part of the escalation of hostility in an argument.

One further thing to note is that JacksonVideos’s comments are mostly marked as spam while only one of LatinLover’s comments is marked. These comments would be invisible to users who do not intentionally uncover them. Spam flagging allows users to single out posts which they believe do not contribute to the ongoing discussion. Since these comments are flagged by other readers (potentially even LatinLover), this shows a pattern of silencing one side of the argument while leaving the other largely untouched.

JacksonVideos posts frequently in racial discussions of this video, with hostility primarily directed toward whites, but certainly is not the only person posting racial slurs and hostile comments. The same trend holds true across all discussions in which commenters made anti-white statements. This video was the one where such content was consistently flagged; it is also the only long discussion with posts which demean whites. Interestingly, the flagging pattern leaves the words “Negro,” “nigger,” and “nappy headed ignorant tar baby” visible. This indicates that either users or a moderator did not find these comments as offensive. Since the role of moderators in reviewing these comments is outside the scope of this study, it is unclear how this pattern developed.

The two videos on Whitney Houston’s funeral also contained the most prominent examples of coded racial language. Coded racial language refers to language which is deployed to discuss racial topics in a “race-neutral” manner (Bonilla-Silva 2003) which protects the
speaker against being accused of racism. In the observed discussions, however, rather than masking racial attitudes, the two prominent coded phrases occurred either alongside overt racism or a few posts before the commenter returned with overtly racist language. The two potentially coded phrases used were “crackhead” and “crack whore.” While Houston’s real-life cocaine use may have encouraged these terms, especially the first, the second is an image suggesting that Houston, a wealthy music star, prostituted herself for crack cocaine. This is consistent with common stereotypes of Black women (Collins 2008). The following example illustrates the use of coded language and controlling images in one discussion:

1) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
   I wonder how much Costner paid to have that speech written for him. Not worth a crack whore’s death for sure.

   GunFavor

2) @GunFavor flag this idiot, maybe some mod will delete his account!

   MyValentine

3) This has been flagged as spam hide • Not Spam
   Pethetic. Whitney was a crack whore who flushed her life down the drain at the expense of her daughter who is left behind to clean up the ess. Whitney was selfish, pathetic, and a waist of space.

   GunFavor

4) @GunFavor first of all you should learn your mother tongue; it’s “pathetic”. secondly, who fixed her up with those drugs and drink? What do you know about music, great singers and such? As Kevin Costner said, she thought she wasn’t good enough. In any case, we’ve lost a beautiful woman, a very good voice and an incredible performer!

   johnandrews

5) @GunFavor learn how to spell. Waste is w a s t e not waist. Moron.

   mywebsitedotcom
This discussion illustrates both hostility and stereotyping. As with most hostile reactions (see above), the respondents in this discussion attack the intelligence of the target poster. The attacks are directed at the messenger, not the message. GunFavor’s use of the bad mother and crack whore stereotypes is consistent with controlling images of black women, which construct black women as culturally and socially inept (Collins 2008). However, GunFavor’s comments are also devoid of any overt racial signifiers.

The personal attacks are consistent with examples which contain overt racism, where comments attack the personality of the poster rather than the content of their message. However, unlike the other messages, none of the replies claim the original comment is a racist. Only two discussions use some variation of the ‘crack whore’ coded language, and both were about Whitney Houston, a pop star with a known history of cocaine use. Neither discussion contains claims that the poster using coded language or controlling images of black women is a racist. This is a very tentative description, however, as there were not enough examples of coded language or different subjects of discussion to determine if this is a pattern.

DISCUSSION

The typology of racial discussions created with the data is both consistent and inconsistent with theories of colorblind racism. It is consistent because the hostility in almost every racial discussion reflects a general discomfort with racial subjects. It is inconsistent because the frequent use of racial slurs and overt stereotypes contradict expectations generated by face-to-face interviews (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2007). Similarly, this typology may reflect a complication of the idea that private spaces protect racial minorities from discrimination (Feagin 1991) by blurring the lines between public and private spaces. While users may surf YouTube in the privacy of their own homes, its discussion spaces act as a pseudo-global public space where
anyone can post. This is an extension of the public sphere into one of the most private, the home, which extends the possibility for racial harassment from anonymous sources. Alternatively, it is also an extension of the private sphere into the public, giving users the ability to access and participate in media without the need to appease gatekeepers. This leaves the space open for volatile confrontations as well as displays of hegemony and resistance.

The interpersonal hostility evident in all but two racial discussions points to a general trend of discomfort with racial themes. Whether the original post claims a video is racist, claims a comment is racist, or makes overtly racist statements, the most frequent response was hostility against the account which started the discussion. The most telling pattern in the hostile discussions was the difference between responses to racist comments and responses to claims of racism. Racist comments were met with insults to the intelligence of the commenter while claims of racism were met with attacks against the commenter’s intelligence and arguments against the content of the claim. The former represents a general understanding of racism as an individual problem, consistent with neoliberal racial ideology (Omi and Winant 1994). The latter represents an individualistic understanding of racial perception as well as a denial of the possibility of racism.

These seemingly contradictory trends, hostility to racism and denial of racism, are nearly universal in the discussions observed and represent the flexibility of racial ideology. It illustrates the power of the hegemony of neoliberal discourses which oppose the far right discourse of white supremacy as well as the anti-racist mantra, “To oppose racism one must notice race” (Omi and Winant 1994:158). In treating any form of noticing race as a personal flaw worthy of ad hominem attacks, participants in racial discussions on YouTube deploy color-blind ideology to oppose all ways of noticing race. The contradictory hostility toward racist comments and
claims of racism illustrates how users’ justify their stances on racism by a neoliberal logic: race is not an issue and only deviant individuals believe otherwise. This reconciliation allows enough flexibility for the discourse to remain hostile to all racial subjects.

Despite the general trend in opposing any form of racial discussion, racial topics do arise in ways which are uncommon in face-to-face interactions. The presence of overt racism suggests three facets of racial ideology online. The first is that social spaces on the internet open up the possibility for a revival of “old-fashioned” racism. Second, social spaces online act as an anonymous public space where there is little insulation from racial harassment. Third, the use of racial slurs primarily as insults against other users shows how online social interactions are informed by the idea of racelessness, more accurately described as default whiteness, which dominates thinking about the internet.

The presence of ‘old fashioned’ racism contradicts expectations from recent theorizing about racialized social interactions. In Bonilla-Silva’s (2003:55) *Racism Without Racists*, for example, “Not a single [respondent] used the term ‘Nigger’ as a legitimate term.” In contrast, in the discussions observed by this study, “Nigger” occurred in 3 videos and was used 24 times in total, 21 times in discussions, and was used most frequently as a legitimate term. “Chink,” “jew,” and “cracker” are also used as racialized insults targeting discussion participants, albeit far less frequently. This suggests that the primary perceived division between users is a black-white dichotomy, which is also a facet of the dominant racial ideology (Omi and Winant 1994).

Surprisingly, few code words and colorblind phrases appeared in the discussions, which occurred frequently in interviews by Bonilla-Silva (2003). This may be a facet of the “public” nature of YouTube’s discussion spaces. Feagin (1991) proposes that overt racism becomes more frequent as a space becomes more public and anonymous. In the social spaces of YouTube, overt
racism is a frequent occurrence whenever race is a topic of discussion. In this public, pseudo-anonymous space where multiple racial projects collide, the two most dominant appear to be the “old-fashioned” racist rhetoric of white supremacy and the colorblind rhetoric of rejecting race as a concern. Both projects work to marginalize the racial minority users of the video, creating social spaces where whiteness, though unintelligible in most interactions, is a privileged status. However, it is important to note that YouTube also provides a space for racial minorities and anti-racists to talk back against such marginalization, opening channels unavailable in older forms of media.

The prevalence of racial slurs and the hostility toward any mention of race may also come from the lack of racial signifiers in the social spaces of YouTube. There is no space for gender or race on account pages. Unless a user posts their race and gender in the “about” section of their profile or includes an image, the information is unavailable. Despite this lack of signifiers, racial slurs are often used as a form of insult in arguments. In research on MUDs, games with no “race” options for character building generally led to assumptions of whiteness (Nakamura 2000; Kolko 2002). Similarly, YouTube’s lack of racial signifiers makes it guesswork for users to assign racial signifiers, though sometimes this is aided by a racial signifier in the username. This is important because the use of racial slurs as insults shows how users attribute racial qualities to others’ behavior. Even without racial signifiers on profiles, race is still present in many social attributions on YouTube.

The trend in racial attributions is to assign race to another discussion participant only as a negative signifier; racial attributions were never used as positive modifiers. When used as a modifier of others, the racial attributions differentiated others from normative whiteness. In the examples provided above, the attributions of black and Asian racial identities were used
alongside insults to the users’ intelligence or character. In cases where users ascribed a race to perceived racist commenters they used the term “white trash” or otherwise racially signified the offender as white. Notably, “white trash” as a category is a way of signifying some whites as defying the expectations of whiteness, a way of separating the “bad whites” (in this particular case, racists) from the “good whites” (Hartigan 1997). This acts as a way for users to signify that the whiteness of racists is different from the whiteness of non-racists, thus maintaining the supposedly race-neutral whiteness of the video.

The typology established by these results shows how contradictory racial projects and normative expectations of social behavior produce novel results on YouTube. However, these novel results can be traced to established behaviors, with some modifications. Theorizing YouTube as a pseudo-anonymous public space, for example, can help scholars understand how overt racism and hostility dominate racial discussions despite strong norms against such behaviors in face-to-face contexts. The neoliberal, colorblind racial project theorized by Omi and Winant (1994) and Bonilla-Silva (2003) can explain the apparent contradictions in a social environment which negatively sanctions both racism and concerns about racism; in the colorblind, “raceless” space of YouTube it runs counter to the norm to bring up race in any context. The social norms against discussing race reflect the desire of users to avoid racial topics, similar to what Silver (2002) observed in the Blacksburg Electronic Village. This tendency to avoid race is also built into YouTube through the lack of racial signifiers, documented by Nakamura (2000) and Kolko (2002) as ways of creating normative whiteness on MUDs. Despite norms which oppose race as a topic of discussion, race remains a frequent subject of contention on YouTube.
This typology helps establish how the Veil of race (Du Bois 1999[1903]) shapes users’ views online. According to Alexa.com (2012), around 20% of YouTube’s users are in the United States, more than twice that of the second largest user base, Japan (8%). This may explain why English language discussions on YouTube tend to be dominated by racial tensions which are prevalent in the United States. The three categories of discussion established by this study illuminate how users see the social spaces of YouTube through the Veil. All three topics construct race as a “forbidden” topic, and overt racism and stereotyping further construct non-white races and “ethnic whites” (such as “white trash”) as undesirable. If race truly did not matter in online contexts, the hostility toward the topic as well as the racial tension would not exist. Instead, racial discussions occurred in nine of the 23 videos and racial comments occurred in thirteen.

The site of this study, YouTube, is important because it represents the most trafficked online space for pseudo-anonymous discussions. As such, understanding the racial elements of social interactions on YouTube opens a window to how users take race online in a very popular context with a multitude of users. There is no doubt that a vocal minority of “old fashioned racist” commenters can dominate a discussion, but the trends of reactions to racial subjects including (but not limited to) this kind of racism establishes a very real and very widely viewed social space online. Across the most popular videos on YouTube, users discussed race in ways which were patterned and consistent on a general level. For a website with such immense popularity, the hostility toward all racial subjects indicates the influence of colorblind racism in shaping online interactions. It appears users cannot simply lift the Veil when they enter the supposedly race-neutral social spaces of the internet. As such, the color line may still be a
primary problem of the 21st century, over one hundred years after Du Bois (1999[1903])
proclaimed it the problem of the previous century.

Conclusions

This study establishes a typology of the ways people discuss race on YouTube and
connects it to the hegemonic discourse of colorblind ideology. The hostility of the community
toward any racial subject indicates a general discomfort with the idea of race, and the lack of
peaceable racial discussions suggests that race remains a highly divisive issue for users of the
site. Normative whiteness takes the form of overt racism, stereotyping, and racial attributions
even when signifiers of race are not readily present. Hostility, overt racism, and stereotyping are
dominant forms of racial discussion, illuminating the potential of YouTube’s social spaces to
suppress, rather than celebrate, difference. Future research can strengthen this descriptive
typology by establishing patterns, examining evidence for the connection between racial
discourses online and offline, and testing the assertions made by this grounded theory. This study
suggests that YouTube’s most popular social spaces are not raceless. Despite the image
presented by colorblind norms, race remains a prominent facet of social interactions on
YouTube. The thing which gives meaning to the technological space of the internet: the users,
the ghosts in the machine, are viewing their digital lives through the nearly invisible fabric of the
Veil.

Future Research and Limitations

This study establishes a typology of racial discussions on YouTube and suggests a
framework for their existence based on previous research about racial ideology. The primary
goal was to see how users discussed race in the most popular online social space for pseudo-
amonymous interaction. As such, it did not seek out spaces where users were more likely to
discuss racial subjects, did not attempt to establish the spaces where race matters and where it doesn’t, and did not include active participation in the discussion process. As such, these results are not generalizable across all contexts on YouTube.

Generalizability is a virtual impossibility on a site with as much user-generated content as YouTube. As a result, this study only attempts to describe patterns on the most frequented videos. However, there are many other contexts on YouTube (personal blogs, amateur news shows, home videos, etc.) which receive millions of pageviews over time and thousands of comments which would be missed by this study’s method of data collection. Future research should make use of these contexts as well to develop a more nuanced and detailed description of the racial discussions on YouTube.

Another issue of generalizability is time. The data was collected during three randomly determined periods in the month of February, 2012. While the random determinations of dates and which 200 comments to collect were done to avoid chronological biases in the data, it is still possible that unique events (Whitney Houston’s funeral and the Super Bowl, for example) had an effect on the data. Future research expanding on this typology should collect data over a larger period of time to balance out the potential effects of major cultural events.

The data collection process online is particularly difficult because of the pseudo-anonymous nature of most users. Unlike many interview and ethnographic studies, it is difficult (sometimes impossible) to directly observe the demographic characteristics of the sample. This is further compounded by the possibility of one person having more than one account on the site. All YouTube accounts have an attached “Profile” section where users can list information about themselves, and this may provide at least some information of the participants in discussions. There are ethical considerations in using this information, however, and the varying privacy
settings would likely make this an issue of obtaining consent from a targeted group. This study did not use this information because the focus was on the dialogue and ideologies, not the individuals making the comments. Future research, however, could potentially make use of user accounts to get a better idea of the characteristics of participants in racially themed discussions.

During the data collection phase of this study, YouTube’s comment sorting was in Beta stage. “Beta” is a stage of development before an official release in which the community can test the software for glitches and give suggestions to the developers. The sorting option “By thread” was still in development at the time of data collection. As a result, this study most likely missed comments as a result of the glitches inherent in the development process. In the data, this is sometimes evident when an “@” tag starts a conversation; this means the original comment that began the discussion is not included by the sorting algorithm and could not be found. This feature has since entered official release, and future research will be able to use it with fewer software errors. It would also make it much easier for researchers to track discussions back to their origin, something this study did for the most part but which was made difficult in a few instances due to the Beta testing.

The potential triggers of racial discussions were not a focus of this study, so it can not make causal claims about the discussions themselves. In general, racial discussions happened over videos which contained nonwhites. This was not a universal trend, but seeking out videos with non-white stars or subjects seems to be one avenue for finding many racial discussions. Another is seeking out videos which actively discuss race and racial subjects, which encourages discussion. This would allow for the expansion of this typology based on a larger number of discussions and a larger range of videos. As mentioned above, expanding the time of observation
or the number of videos documented during each observation would also allow for a more
definite idea of which video characteristics lead to racial discussions.

Participant observation or virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) could help expand upon these
results. The nature of YouTube allows researchers to observe discussions in chronological order
long after they actual interactions took place. However, this form of observation trades off the
ability to watch the observations unfold or to be a part of those discussions. Strangelove’s (2010)
ethnography of YouTube mostly paid attention to the gendered nature of discussions and the
ways users built communities around subjects and interests. Future ethnographies can build off
of that work as well as this typology to establish an in depth study of race on one of the internet’s
most popular social spaces.

An alternative way for future research to expand upon this research is to take a
longitudinal observation sample rather than a cross-section. While the data used by this study
allows for pattern recognition in discussions, there is no way to be sure “unanswered comments”
will remain unanswered; many may become discussions after the observation period. To
establish which kinds of racial comments draw reactions from other users, longitudinal data
which follows a body of comments farther than just one observation would be more sufficient.

Subsequent studies can also examine whether more “public” videos elicit more racially
hostile responses. If the hypothesis that YouTube’s more public, anonymous spaces facilitate
more racial hostility, then videos with larger audiences and more well known stars may contain
more discussions and more hostility of race than intimate videos created by bloggers. This would
further expand Feagin’s (1991) thesis that public, anonymous spaces are less protective against
racial discrimination, building a framework for how “public” and “private” apply to online social
spaces.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1080/08900520903320936.


