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Brown Skin Girl: Mapping Negotiations of Colorism, Digital Resistance, and Black Girlhood

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the intricate relationship between the symbolic representation of skin color in virtual avatars and its profound impact on people's self-value within American society. Over time, white skin has been bestowed with societal significance, often associated with power and privilege. This research addresses the profound implications of these avatar choices on individuals' self-identity and the reinforcement of prevailing cultural norms. It highlights the subtle yet impactful ways in which modern technology intertwines with and reinforces societal attitudes toward race and appearance. By shedding light on this phenomenon, this paper aims to encourage further discussions on the potential consequences of associating skin color with value and self-worth in virtual spaces.

Keywords: Black girlhood, colorism, digital resistance, virtual spaces, virtual avatars, cultural norms



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Introduction

The internet is a place where identity can be constructed (Anderson, 2022). This includes racial and ethnic identity and the extension of cybercultures that include the networked cultures and electronic environments that are tethered to the digital spaces we move in and throughout. This negotiated digital space of socialization across the last three decades of the 20th century has created a rich transdisciplinary space for inquiry into identity construction and racial and ethnic socialization. In the realm of the internet, there continues to be a liaison between real and performed identities that are often expressed through the creation of avatars (Nishi et. al., 2015; Peck et al., 2022). By definition, avatars are supposed to represent self in digital media environments (Nishi et. al., 2015; Ratan & Sah, 2015) through a mixture of a person's true self and a person's alternative self. The creation of avatars is usually based on the intentions of use or what context the avatar will be operating in (Nishi et. al., 2015).

People use avatars to represent themselves and use tools like customization in order to identify with the avatar. The concept of avatars can be traced back to the 1970s primarily in the field of video games. One of the earliest instances of avatar-like representations was in the game "MUDs" (Multi-User Dungeons) where players used textual descriptions to represent themselves in virtual spaces (Ito, 2013; Sheldon, 2022). In 1980, Garriott released the game "Ultima," which allowed players to control a character called the "Avatar" who could interact with a virtual world (Contato, 2021). In the 1990s, with the rise of the internet avatars became more visually represented. Online platforms like AOL (America Online) allowed users to create and display graphical avatars to represent themselves in chat rooms and forums. In 1995, Will Harvey created the online community "The Palace," which allowed users to interact with each other using customizable avatars in a virtual world (Kushner, 2004). This played a significant role in popularizing the use of graphical avatars in social interactions. Second Life, launched in 2003 by Philip Rosedale's company Linden Lab, became a major milestone in the evolution of avatars (Rymaszewski, 2007). Second Life allowed users to create highly customizable 3D avatars and interact with others in a vast virtual environment. With the rise of gaming consoles like Xbox and PlayStation, avatar creation became a standard feature for gamers in 2008. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and others integrated avatar creation tools to allow users to personalize their profiles and express themselves visually. Facebook was launched in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. In 2008, Facebook introduced the "Profile Picture" feature, allowing users to upload a small image to represent themselves on the platform. In 2019, Facebook launched "Facebook Avatars," a more comprehensive avatar creation tool that enables users to design cartoon-like avatars with various facial features, hairstyles, clothing, and accessories (Wu et. al., 2015). Snapchat, launched in 2011, allowed users to create personalized "Bitmoji" avatars. Bitmoji allows users to design customizable avatars that can be integrated into Snapchat's messaging and Stories features, enabling a more personalized and expressive communication experience (Erinn, 2019). Instagram, launched in 2010, started as a photo-sharing app with minimal avatar representation. In 2019, Instagram introduced "Create Your Own" augmented reality (AR) filters, allowing users to design and share custom filters, including avatar-based filters (de Brito Silva et. al., 2022). Users customize their avatar characters to attract certain social interactions, and the imagined audience, and may even customize avatars that embody aspects contrary to themselves (Williams, 2019). This causes avatar formation to be a form of autoethnography where the creator of the avatar explores relations of power and culture (Kafai et. al., 2010).



Colorism in the United States emerged during chattel slavery, which established the preferential treatment of Africans with lighter skin complexions. (Reece, 2018). The impacts of colorism are deeply entrenched within broader historical contexts, reflecting its pervasive influence across the diaspora and its entwining within our socialization practices. This has shaped socialization practices that prioritize certain skin tones over others. This historical backdrop informs the challenges faced by Black women in leveraging technology, as the biases embedded in digital platforms reflect and perpetuate longstanding discriminatory attitudes. Colorism existing in digital platforms allows us to criticize Black women's leveraging with technology, reimagining digital constraints through the unique lens of Black girls (Steele, 2021).

In charting the negotiations of visual markers in Black girls' body politics, we also capture a need to further extend scholarship on the gatekeeping implications that impact how Black people, especially those at intersections of identity, experience these digital phenomena over time. Historically and presently, Black girls have had to exist within specific limits due to racial norms in society and learn to adapt themselves and their appearance (Williams, 2019). Colorist representations of Black girls contribute to hypervisibility and assault on Black girls' bodies. With unprecedented access to images that circulate of Black girls, the nuances of digital experience and anti-Black digital racism call for prioritization of Black girlhood and critical digital and media studies. As a mechanism where racism is affirmed and enforced, colorism ascribes privileged status to people whose phenotypic features are in closer proximity to whiteness (Rosario et al., 2021). According to Anderson et. al. (2017), Black girls tend to customize avatars that are more aesthetically driven. They choose skin tones based on aesthetics and make avatars that represent themselves (Freeman & Maloney, 2021; Spangenberg et. al., 2019). This preference for aesthetics extends to selecting the skin tone for their avatars. In this context, avatar customization becomes a means of self-expression and personal identity representation in the digital space. By tailoring avatars to their unique aesthetics, Black girls strive to forge virtual identities that mirror their individuality, style, and self-perception. The avatar serves as an extension of their personality, providing a creative outlet for self-expression. However, the limited availability of diverse and inclusive avatar creation tools presents challenges, hindering their ability to find representations that align with their preferences and self-image. This scarcity highlights a broader issue within the tech industry – the underrepresentation and marginalization of diverse groups in design and development processes. It emphasizes the crucial need for inclusive design and equitable representation to ensure that technology, particularly avatar creation tools, addresses the preferences and needs of all users, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, or background. Additionally, this sheds light on the potential impact on the self-esteem and self-identity of Black girls when faced with a lack of avatars that resonate with their aesthetic preferences. The absence of diverse representations may unintentionally reinforce harmful stereotypes and perpetuate the notion that certain aesthetic features are more socially acceptable or desirable than others.

As we journey through the evolution of avatars and representation, new media technologies have found patterns in a perpetuated colorist reality that has limited skin tone options for darker-complected individuals to accurately represent themselves online. Williams (2019) conducted a study that captured the difficulty of a Black femme gamer to capture their in real life (IRL) hairstyles in digital spaces because of system designers' limited conceptions of Black hair. This lack of choice in digital representation leads to users embodying certain traits in



virtual spaces causing the erasure of the nuances of Blackness in virtual spaces, inevitably causing a digital divide. Black people are excluded from progress forward and find themselves playing catch-up to virtual life. Their presence in virtual spaces remains managed by an industry that does not envision Black people as the primary users of technology (Williams, 2019). There are about three brown skin tone options that look like they were badly colored compared to default white characters when trying to decide how to accurately represent ourselves as Black girls online (Williams, 2019). In this instance, 'badly colored' means the quality and accuracy of the available brown skin tone options for avatars in digital spaces are not well-executed. The representation of brown skin tones in these avatars lacks realism, depth, and proper shading. The colors chosen for these skin tones do not adequately capture the diversity and complexity of real-world skin tones for individuals with darker complexions. Black girls are experts at learning to comply with white standards in order to survive in society. This includes how they choose to wear their hair in virtual spaces. This lack of choice and exclusion leads to the erasure of nuances of Blackness in virtual spaces, with projections of whiteness that reinforce the US racial structure in the digital space by alluding to the creation of white personae via avatars and subjects the perspectives of Black folk to be misrepresented (Nishi et. al., 2015).

As new media technologies are inundated with digital discourses that inform, socialize, and have implications on identity construction, the digital nativity of Black girls in negotiation with their online experiences is scarcely foregrounded in vital contemporary research across the interdisciplinary fields of Black girlhood. This becomes a further priority as colorism has been sustained in media agendas that position darker-toned skin as inferior to lighter tones (Abrams et al., 2020), directly altering the lived experiences of Black girls. Acknowledging Black girls' digital potentiality measured within these types of anti-Black agendas calls for a foregrounding of contemporary scholarship aiming to disrupt the hierarchy of personhood based on color. More directly, this paper aims to contribute to that scholarship by centering digital resistance that aims to counter digital anti-Black racism that positions Black girls' bodies as sites of assault in online spaces. Through a digital collaborative ethnography, this manuscript works towards conceptualizing digital movements of resistance to colorist messages and digital anti-Blackness on Black girls explicitly. As digital tools continue to be integrated within everyday life, the relationality of digital Black girlhood to personhood in the digital realm must expose the controlling images of anti-Black digital messages that inform how Black girls are treated, and most importantly, how Black girls treat and see themselves. Through our review, we aim to center the mass consumability of digital media movements toward disrupting colorist messaging in digital Black Girlhoods and to capture the implications of those realities across our collective digital ethnographic reflections in charting new media technology as members across different generations. Recognizing the impacts of digital colorism uncovers the deniability of the stripped humanity of digitally native Black girls that measure likeability, intelligence, and beauty against proximity to whiteness in online spaces. This paper also brings awareness and visibility to how digital movements of resistance are forming as a critical counter to disengage and disrupt this subtle, yet powerful form of digital anti-Black racism.

Stereotype Threat, Colorism, and Body Politic in Black Girl Cyberspace

The digital participation and representation of Black women and girls globally illustrate that Black women and girls face unique challenges in digital spaces. These digital challenges influence the social identities that Black women and girls embody, conditioning their



negotiation of digital spaces. The negotiation of stereotypes in digital spaces can be linked to Steele's (1997) research on stereotype threat, defined as the socio-psychological or mental picture of oneself from the oppressors' perspective. Essentially, the stereotype threat in conversation with digital Black feminism details the participation of Black women and girls in digital spaces, especially social media platforms where Black women and girls face the most dehumanizing stereotypes. Racial stereotypes against Black women are powerful ideological tools that constitute marginalization against minority groups overall (Bessenoff, 2006; Collins, 2009; Poran, 2006). Stereotype threat reiterates the psychological characteristics of digital participation by Black women and girls, infiltrating their alternative digital lens.

Black women's and girls' bodies have historically been sites of political and social harm, influencing their lived experiences and digital identities. Eurocentric beauty standards and body images dominate media and popular culture, causing Black women's bodies to be habitually objectified and devalued. For Black girls developing under oppressive politics Black women and girls agency through digital platforms demonstrates that although Black women may not identify with white depictions of beauty, they actively disengaged with these stereotypical images to protect themselves from stereotype threat (Poran, 2006).

Digital stereotype threat can manifest through situational cues (Stelle, 1997) grounded in proximity to whiteness permeating online spaces. For Black women specifically, stereotype threat can present online as anti-Black rhetoric coupled with white definitions of femininity utilized to suppress Black women and girls in digital spaces. Although many scholars have argued that stereotype threat is visible across race and gender classifications (Kafai et. al., 2010; Nishi et. al., 2015), the critical component is that Black women as a group face a particular set of stereotypes that devalue them as a racial and gendered group (Collins, 2010). To resist stereotype threat, many Black women and girls devise an alternative online identity, typically measured in proximity to white ways of being (Jacobs, 2016). This measuring can show up in digital spaces physically-colorism, texturism, beauty filters-and ideologically-hypersexualization, virtual code-switching, appearance- influencing how digital perceptions of our character and personalities.

Colorism, as a manifestation of anti-Blackness, functions as a mechanism to uphold the subordination of Black women and girls in terms of beauty and desirability. Within the digital age, the identification of oneself as a Black woman exposes individuals to simultaneous evaluation against colorist ideals of femininity and beauty. Digital colorism is an extensively prevalent social phenomenon, observable across various social media platforms, online advertising, and image editing, wherein a preference for lighter skin tones is perpetuated (Childs, 2022). This colorist paradigm permeates the participation of Black women and girls in digital spaces, reinforcing the entrenched nature of anti-Blackness within the digital landscape. Moreover, the proximity to whiteness achieved through lighter skin tones intensifies the potential for cultural and social capital, while simultaneously marginalizing those with darker complexions online (Childs, 2022; Collins, 2010; Steele, 2022). The proliferation of colorist imagery not only impacts the digital engagement of Black women but also inflicts harm upon their self-esteem and mental well-being, causing Black women to present themselves with lighter skin tones via image alternating or avatar creation digital tools.

However, the presentation of an alternative self can be disadvantageous to resisting anti-Black racism within digital platforms. For example, there is a lack of representation when it comes to Black folks hair choices for emojis, bitmojis, memojis, and avatars. The choices are often



comical including and often limited to “spherical afros, straight-back cornrows, [and] cylinder ponytailed locs” (Williams, 2019). Hair styling is significant to Black cultural identity and Black girlhood. Black girls have used hair to express cultural pride and a sense of community. Black girls would like to be able to choose a hairstyle for their avatar that they actually wears on their head and not a style created by an algorithm or an application designer with a limited concept of Black hair. This lack of hair diversity in the digital space is simultaneous to IRL policies in schools and in work spaces where Black girls and Black women are told to not wear braids, not wear locs, or straighten their hair in order to be allowed in certain spaces (Williams, 2019). The hairstyles in many virtual spaces today meant for brown skin tone characters represent 70’s styles or hairstyles designed with lighter hue characters in mind. Moreover, many social media algorithms reinforce negative stereotypes, making it difficult for individuals to challenge them (Bassenoff, 2006). Furthermore, because Black women and girls carry stereotype threat into digital spaces, typically this group may pack a light “digital bag” (in the words of Erika Badu), one that strategically avoids negative depictions of Black women through suppressing Black women and girls' digital identities. Nevertheless, the “lightness” of our digital bag as Black women infringes upon our psyche in physical and virtual spaces concurrently.

Avatars, emojis, bitmojis, and memojis have a lack of representation (Anderson et. al., 2017). There are a prescribed set of choices. As a result, people adapt and use the features that are available to them (Williams, 2019). Sometimes to obtain more options, one must either pay or endure a waiting period. Increasing more options comes at a cost to the company, which allows less access for people in a certain population. When customizing an avatar, users may want to adjust the nose shape or lip size to accurately represent themselves. Unfortunately, this causes the avatar to look less aesthetically pleasing. The avatar ends up resembling a Blackface caricature instead of having a natural human appearance (Nishi et. al., 2015; Williams, 2019). Avatar users should have the ability to customize their avatars to have natural appearances, to look like in real life (IRL) Black girls, and not look artificial or even alienated (Spangenberg et. al., 2019). Limited choices in how a person gets to create their virtual self affect a person's representation of who they are or desire to be when participating in the online community (Kafai et. al., 2010). This lack of representation causes Black girls to feel excluded from the creation of avatars that represent them accurately.

The absence of minorities on the Internet was coined as the “digital divide” (Kafai et. al., 2010). Those with access to computers and the Internet and those without access are also referred to as a “participation gap.” This is defined as those who know how to produce and contribute to online content and those who just browse the internet (Kafai et. al., 2010). Black people continue to be excluded from progress and end up playing catch-up in expected virtual life because the people who manage these spaces do not envision Black people as primary users of technology, especially Black women, and those who identify as such (Williams, 2019). Research has revealed that these technology spaces do not promote inclusivity but instead target their virtual representation toward men and boys (Anderson et. al., 2017). As a result, digital spaces are derived from a white (male) user experience and when Blackness is introduced, it results in inauthentic cultural forms (Williams, 2019). Black girls have the option of choosing between yellow face or Black face, inaccurate skin tones.



Digital Black Feminism, Online Collaborative Ethnography, and Black Girlhood

Digital Black feminism is an extension of Black feminist thought in negotiation with digital spaces and Black women and girls' experiences. Through the consideration of racialized and gendered digital discourses and culture, digital Black feminism extends inquiry space in the past, present, and future of technology (Steele, 2021). As research and scholarship continue to respond to this much-needed space of inquiry, more opportunities are created to acknowledge the continued evolution of Black cyberculture and digital Black feminism to critically document Black women and girls' impact on the histories of this cultural infrastructure. In this way, emerging scholarship creates avenues as sites of Black digital expression and the extension of Black feminist technoculture. These sites of resistance are further contextualized through what Steele (2021), terms principles of digital Black feminisms, as possibilities in digital spaces are linked to principles of agency, the right to self-identify, gender nonbinary spaces of discourse, complicated allegiances, and the dialectic of self and community interests.

As a methodological and theoretical tool, digital Black feminism gives language both through theory and method for the experiences of Black girls to be centered and explored and for Black feminism theoretically to provide a lens for highlighting the spaces wherein Black girls find safety, platform, and resistance. A resistance that disrupts the centrality of whiteness that the digital space creates capacity for. Utilizing digital collaborative methodology, this work centers reflective collaborations within the research process to center, precondition, and shape the research design. As an online research method, digital collaborative ethnography adapts ethnographic methodology to give language for studying community and cultural dynamics across new media technology. This research approach creates space for consideration of computer-mediated interactions both internally and externally for individuals who are charting these virtual spaces. Ethnographies of online cultures and communities extend ethnographic study to settings where interactions are technologically mediated. Our digital collaborative ethnography captures both our individual and collective memory work (Dillard, 2008) in our digital negotiations with new media technologies and the communities and spaces in which we negotiate, work, study, and exist in engagement with others within real, everyday lives. This paper aims to capture experiences across both the physical and digital space. It builds the capacity for individual and collaborative relationships that center our ethnographic social experiences both separately and in conversation with one another.

Findings: Our Stories, Our Avatars

Kenesma D. John

Reflecting on the curation of my memoji (See Appendix A, *Figure 1.1*), bitmoji (*Figure 1.2*), and avatar (*Figure 1.3*), I realize there are different options for creating digital avatars of myself, but none of them really capture who I am. Each of the characters is "supposed" to look like me, but I don't feel like any of them accurately represent me. While I think the glasses in all three representations, and my hair in the Memoji (*Figure 1.1*) and Bitmoji (*Figure 1.2*), are on point, the rest of the features just don't match up.

When the yellow skin tone emojis first came out, I didn't fully understand that they were rooted in white supremacy until other options became available. I realized that the creators didn't choose the yellow tone because nobody's skin tone is actually yellow, but because it was seen as closer to whiteness. As soon as the option became available, I switched all my keyboards to



represent the second-to-last option, a brown-skinned tone that was right in the middle of the other brown tones. When Bitmojis became popular in 2014, I initially thought they were fun and enjoyed the idea of creating a character that looked like me. However, I could never quite figure out how to make my Bitmoji (*Figure 1.2*) look exactly like me. My hope was that one day there would be an option to upload a photo and have the Bitmoji created for me. I was never quite satisfied with the final result of my own creations of digital representations.

When I switched from Android to Apple in 2022, I was excited to try the Memoji feature and create a character that looked like me. While it was nostalgic to revisit the process, my character still doesn't look quite like me. The avatar options on Facebook and Instagram also intrigued me, and I thought that Meta would definitely know how to create an avatar that looks like me. Unfortunately, out of all three representations, my avatar (*Figure 1.3*) is the one that looks the least like me. At this point, I don't even use it. I find it frustrating that none of these options for creating digital avatars accurately represent me. It's a reminder that we still have a long way to go in terms of representation and inclusivity in our digital media.

Taryn T.C. Brown

In terms of generational experiences, my initiation into the digital realm aligns with the transformative evolution of cyberculture and digital expression over the last three decades. Facebook emerged during my college years, representing a simpler version compared to the sophisticated technologies available today. At that time, my focus wasn't deeply rooted in understanding how these virtual self-representations authentically mirrored the internal struggles and dialogues I grappled with regarding elements of my body politic, such as hair, skin tone, and body type. What captivated me more was the opportunity to establish connections in virtual spaces with individuals from diverse backgrounds. During these early years, digital expression was characterized less by the creation of personalized avatars and more by a diverse array of virtual imagery, language, and visuals that vividly brought forth different facets of one's identity. This trend was particularly pronounced on platforms like MySpace and BlackPlanet, and it did not permeate digital identity and representation to the extent that I observe in the present day.

As I reflect on my experiences with digital self-representations, I recognize a history of internal struggles shaped by societal comments like "You're so pretty for a dark-skinned girl." These remarks fueled my challenges in navigating perceptions of self and the complexion of my skin. Additionally, my identity as a Zimbabwean often marked me as culturally different, leading to feelings of being an outsider among my peers. The advent of the digital era provided a platform for confronting these aspects of myself, allowing me the agency to deliberate on how I wanted to portray and present the reflection staring back at me in the mirror.

As I've matured, these facets of my identity have become even more intricate. While gaining confidence in the richness of my complexion, I've grappled with other dimensions of the body politic prompted by avatars, bitmojis, and memojis. Although technological advancements have broadened opportunities, I question the implications of internalizing the reality that essential aspects of oneself are often relegated to the 3rd, 4th, or 5th options in digital spaces. Recognizing this tension prompts a critical examination of the progress in Black cyberculture. While we pioneer advancements, we must also acknowledge the complex



interplay that shapes digital identity development and virtual spaces. Deliberating on these intentional questions represents a crucial step forward in navigating the complexities of digital negotiations, with far-reaching implications for racial identity development and socialization.

Ebonie S. Bennett

Upon reflection on the construction of my digital identity in physical and ideological forms, such as emojis, bitmojis, memojis, and avatars; it is evident that the images presented above do not necessarily reflect my true self. Rather, they depict how I would like to be perceived in an oppressive society that devalues Blackness and Black women specifically. As a Black woman navigating digital platforms through a raced and gendered lens, the presented images are heavily influenced by societal stereotypes and biases that have not only influenced my digital participation but also my internal sense of self.

My digital ethnographic research was conducted through a comparative analysis of my digital identities across various emoticon platforms. Through this analysis, the emoji shift from yellow skin to diverse skin tones emerged as a reflection of the attempt made by technology to cater to the diverse identities of its users. However, it should be noted that upon the initial release of diverse skin tone options by Apple in 2015, the color shades offered for darker skin tones were extremely limited. As a researcher and a user, I vividly recall that the darkest available skin tone was at least three to four shades lighter than my actual skin tone. While additional darker skin tones were released in the following months or years, I remain uncertain as to whether my chosen skin tone for my emoji accurately represents my skin color as I would perceive it.

Additionally, the bitmoji and memoji created in 2019 and 2018, respectively, were compared with the most recent Facebook (2021) avatar. The analysis revealed that the current avatar, unlike the previous ones, does not have an overtly friendly smile. This is significant because it aligns with stereotypical depictions of Black women as angry and unapproachable. It is also important to note that the 2021 avatar was available post-Covid, a time after much symbolic activism in mainstream and digital media spaces occurred. An extensive choice of skin color, body type, and physical features are available on the Facebook Avatar (2021) platform compared to the bitmoji (2019) and memoji (2018) platforms.

Moreover, the analysis highlighted the impact of physical stereotypes on the creation of digital emojis. Specifically, the most recent avatar features a darker skin complexion and a braided hairstyle, which contrasts with the straight hair depicted in the previous avatars. The physique of my avatar can also be compared with previous emoticons, demonstrating fuller hips, larger lips, and larger stature. Such findings demonstrate how digital stereotype threat contributes to the perceived digital self, thereby perpetuating anti-Black digital racism and attacks on Black women's bodies.

However, my digital ethnography also underscored the potential for agency among Black women and girls in digital spaces. Through a conscious effort to create accurate representations of themselves, individuals can resist the impact of societal biases on their digital identities. The Facebook avatar (2021), although not exact, is an enhanced version of my digital self that I could recognize. Thus, the present study contributes to the growing body of literature on the



intersection of race, gender, and technology; emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing digital racism for Black women and girls.

Results

Using our own positionalities and the Five Principles of Digital Black Feminism (Steele, 2022) we found similarities in our experiences. The themes that emerged are self-perception, authentic representation, societal pressures, and self vs. community. These themes helped us to capture the negotiations of digital representation online.

Self-Perception: Prioritization of Agency

The theme of self-perception aligned with one of the Five Principles of Digital Black feminism, the prioritization of agency. This principle recognizes the agency Black girls and Black women have in shaping their own narratives and experiences in online spaces. This also includes giving Black girls and Black women the tools and resources needed to accurately exercise their agency and make meaningful contributions to digital culture. Not having the correct tools to accurately represent ourselves online was seen in ethnographic collective memory work. Ebonie stated, "I vividly recall that the darkest available skin tone was at least three to four shades lighter than my actual skin tone. While additional darker skin tones were released in the following months or years, I remain uncertain whether my emoji's chosen skin tone accurately represents my skin color as I would perceive it." Ebonie was not given the correct tools to accurately represent her hue of skin color online. There is a need for more hues and not just three options (*Figure 4.1*).

Kenesma also stated how she did not have the correct tools needed to be represented in digital spaces. She expressed, "Do I see myself? Not exactly. Out of all three representations, my avatar is the one that does not look like me the most. At this point, I don't even use it." The options that are available for bitmojis, memojis, and avatars are not enough for Black girls and Black women to accurately represent themselves online. The lack of options causes these digital representations to not look like us, to the point where we do not use these tools because they were not meant for us.

Black girls and Black women's agencies should be at the forefront of all digital strategies that are aimed at advancing Black feminist goals. This means that creators must focus on Black women's resilience, creativity, and resistance in the face of oppression inside and outside the digital realm. Taryrn shared some of her experiences outside the digital realm. She shared, "As someone who grew up with comments like, "Oh you are so pretty to be a dark-skinned girl," I definitely have struggled with perceptions of self and the hue of skin." This experience is one that is all too familiar to Black girls who are of a darker complexion. Comments like these are heard inside and outside digital spaces. Giving Black girls and Black women the correct tools, like more skin tone options, can empower us to take control of our digital lives and challenge the dominant narrative and power structures that have historically silenced and marginalized us.

Authentic Representation: The Reclamation of the Right to Self-identify

The theme of authentic representation aligned with another one of the Five Principles of Digital Black feminism, the reclamation of the right to self-identify. This principle acknowledges the need for marginalized individuals to reclaim and assert their agency by defining their own



identities. This is accomplished through actively reclaiming their right to self-identify by sharing their experiences on their own terms. When referring to her Bitmoji, Memoji, and Avatar, Ebonie expressed, "...it is evident that the images presented above do not necessarily reflect my true self. Rather, they depict how I would like to be perceived." We have a right to define and represent ourselves authentically online in any capacity that we perceive as fit. The process of self-identification is complex, and multifaceted, and should not be dictated or constrained by societal norms, stereotypes, or oppressive structures.

Kenesma expressed the immediate change she made when there were more emoji options available. She said, "I immediately changed all my keyboards to represent the 2nd from the last option, brown-skinned, not too light and not too dark but right in the middle." Kenesma was excited to have more options to express her identity in the digital world. She felt as if she could reclaim the power dynamics that have historically controlled and limited our identities. She felt as if she had autonomy in shaping her identity.

Even with forward movement in the digital space, there is so much more that needs to be done. Taryrn reminded us, "... [that] although in the movement forward in digital space for what we can do as Black folx leading our own advancement in Black cyberculture, we must also still think about the true interplay that exists for how we think through digital identity development and virtual spaces." Yes, we are able to represent ourselves authentically, to a certain extent, without external interference or distortion, but we still need to understand digital identity development. With the ability to resist oppressive narratives and assert our own agency, how does this play a role in Black girls' digital identity development?

Societal Pressures: Creation of Complicated Allegiances

The theme of societal pressures aligned with another one of the Five Principles of Digital Black feminism, the creation of complicated allegiances. This principle focuses on the complexity of political and social affiliations due to the intersections of forms of oppression and privilege Black girls and Black women face. This requires the recognition of the diversity of Black girls and Black women's experiences and perspectives. Taryrn expressed how she sometimes had to state comments when taking a picture due to the color hue of her skin. She stated, "It makes me think of, prompting folx to make sure I have good lighting when we just snap a picture, or noticing if a space might naturally be just too dark to capture an image." This aligns with the need to engage in uncomfortable conversations in order to advance shared goals. People who do not share the same skin tone as Taryrn may not understand the importance of good lighting. Black girls and Black women's experiences are shaped by race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. This means we have different experiences in all aspects of our lives due to our intersecting identities. It is important to not only center our voices but listen also within digital cultures.

There was one question Taryrn wanted us to think through when it came to societal pressures and the creation of complicated allegiances. She expressed, "How can we see youth thinking through the decisions they make or not in the selection of who they are?" Teens are already pressured by society to meet certain expectations and norms imposed on them. There is now added pressure in digital spaces to create and present a certain digital identity through customizable digital representation. Societal pressure involves the expectation to create memojis, bitmojis, and avatars that align with social norms, trends, and/or idealized versions



of oneself. Encouraging digital literacy and promoting authentic self-expression in digital spaces can help mitigate the negative effects of societal pressure and foster a healthier online environment. We can work to create a more inclusive and effective digital space.

Self vs. Community

The theme self vs. community aligned with another one of the Five Principles of Digital Black feminism, the Insertion of a dialectic of self and community interests that are shaped by the affordances of the platform in which they emerge. This principle refers to the navigation of the interplay between individual self-interest and collective community interests within digital platforms. Each digital platform has distinct affordances, functionalities, and dynamics that shape the interactions of users. It also influences how individuals express themselves within online communities. Although individuals have their own interests, perspectives, and goals, they are also part of a broader community. As a result, Black girls and Black women navigate this by balancing their own personal objectives with the goals and needs of the larger community.

One goal of the community is to not give in to stereotypes. Ebonie explained how her digital representation reflected the stereotypical depiction that Black women are angry. She explained, "The analysis revealed that the current avatar, unlike the previous ones, does not have an overtly friendly smile. This is significant because it aligns with stereotypical depictions of Black women as angry and unapproachable." Black folx are aware of how they are depicted online. Having an avatar that represents a negative stereotype of Black women can have a negative effect on the community, continue oppressive narratives in digital spaces, and set back progress on the empowerment of Black women.

Even with community goals, there are personal goals that need to be highlighted too. Taryrn expressed, "I don't think at the time I was so invested in how these virtual representations of self truly did actualize some of the internal struggles and conversations I was negotiating with aspects of my body politic (hair, skin tone, body type)." Black girls and Black women can strategically use digital spaces to connect with like-minded individuals. They can use these platforms to foster dialogues, share resources, and promote well-being. They can also critically evaluate and challenge the limitations and potential harms of the platform. For example, these visual representations of self can promote negotiations with aspects of body politic that can perpetuate systemic biases and online harassment which can then require navigating online spaces with caution through self-protection and community support.

Limitations and Recommendation

Understanding the implications of evolving Black representation in digital spaces is crucial for comprehending the potential impact on Black girlhood and shaping more inclusive and equitable digital environments. Black women and girls engage in various forms of digital resistance. They actively challenge and disrupt the prevailing narratives by altering codes, modifying avatars, and creating their own digital content that celebrates and embraces diverse expressions of Blackness. Independent users play a crucial role in reshaping the digital landscape, pushing back against colorist messaging, and advocating for more inclusive representations. However, societal beauty standards, which prioritize lighter skin tones over darker ones, continue to influence the self-esteem and self-perception of Black women and



girls in both real-life and digital contexts. While we investigated the internal processing of how Black women view themselves and the tendency to create representations that deviate from their actual physical appearances; it may be beneficial to conduct a similar study highlighting the perspectives of Black girls.

This paper highlights the significance of critical digital and media studies in understanding and transforming the experiences of Black girls in the digital age. By examining the role of avatars, digital resistance strategies, and the impact of independent users and Black computer programmers, it emphasizes the need to disrupt colorist messaging and redefine representation. Additionally, it explores the complexities of Black girls' self-perception in digital spaces, interrogating the influence of digital nativity and societal beauty standards. Moreover, the paper considers the evolution of Black representation in AI and avatars, raising questions about the future trajectory of Black girlhood in digital contexts. Ultimately, it advocates for a more inclusive and empowering digital landscape that recognizes and celebrates the diversity and agency of Black girls.

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Appendix A

K. John Digital Representation



Figure 1.1 K. John Memoji



Figure 1.2 K. John Bitmoji



Figure 1.3 K. John Avatar

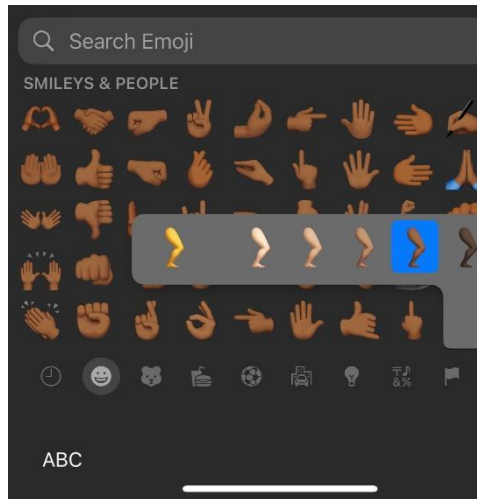


Figure 4.1 Emoji Skin Tone Options

Appendix B

T. Brown Digital Representation



Figure 2.1 T. Brown Avatar



Figure 2.2 T. Brown Bitmoji



Figure 2.3 T. Brown Memoji

Appendix C

E. Bennett Digital Representation



Figure 3.1 E. Bennett Bitmoji

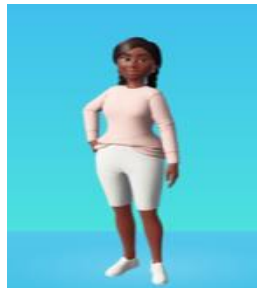


Figure 3.2 E. Bennett Avatar



Figure 3.3 E. Bennett Memoji