



Racial Capitalism Online: Navigating Race Among Creative Professionals of Color

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Racial capitalism, which describes how people in power extract value from the racial identity of others, has been a constant driver in the creative industries. As social media becomes the widespread avenue for sharing creative works and building professional reputation, the effects of racial capitalism become further amplified online. In fact, many creative professionals of color find that the biases they face offline are only replicated, and sometimes magnified, on digital platforms. In this study, we interview creative professionals of color who heavily rely on digital platforms to promote their work in order to understand how racial capitalism shapes their experience and performance of race online. Creative professionals describe seeing their work appropriated and shared for little to no recognition, while at the same time, feeling pressured to present themselves in a palatable way in order to meet the expectations of a dominant consumer audience. Creatives also worked within these capitalistic expectations by building communities with similar others in order to exchange advice, serve as role models, and share resources. Our data uncover how expectations on social media, fueled by racial biases, burden creative professionals of color, thus informing alternative futures that could compensate their work more equitably and build more inclusive spaces for creative professional growth.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Social media, race, entrepreneurship, employment, creative

ACM Reference Format:

Jaleesa Rosario Turner and Julie Hui. 2023. Racial Capitalism Online: Navigating Race Among Creative Professionals of Color. *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 7, CSCW1, Article 85 (April 2023), 23 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3579518>

1 INTRODUCTION

In the United States, creative professionals of color have long been shortchanged for the cultural value they produce [61]. Black songwriters are not credited for music they write [49, 56], and minority produced TV series are cancelled despite garnering widespread prime time audiences [28]. With the rise of social media and creative content platforms, creative people of color who achieve viral status have their art reproduced and copied with little to no recognition or compensation [70]. While social media platforms have marketed themselves as ways to democratize creative entrepreneurship, many people of color find the biases they face offline are only replicated, and sometimes even magnified, by the technologies that drive their livelihood. While HCI researchers have started to interrogate the role of race through the lenses of intersectionality [94, 95, 104, 123] and critical race theory [63, 87], few have applied the concept of racial capitalism to understand how creative professionals of color navigate issues of race on digital platforms. In order to inform how today's online spaces can more equitably center the goals and values of creative people of

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2573-0142/2023/4-ART85

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3579518>

color, we must first identify how creatives leverage online communities to navigate entrenched biases when performing their work.

The challenges creative professionals of color face online are not ahistorical, but a symptom of long-held policies in the creative industries combined with biases found in the design of digital platforms [49, 50, 56, 76]. Prior CSCW literature highlights the myriad ways people of color must work together to access similar professional opportunities, such as pooling together funds to launch a new product that more affluent entrepreneurs could afford to do on their own [8, 58]. Technologies meant to democratize pathways to socio-economic mobility often place unforeseen barriers among minority communities [31, 58, 121]. These are just some examples symptomatic of larger trends in technology that disadvantage racial minorities, such as through facial recognition [18], algorithmic biases [86], and the ignoring of complex intersectionalities of users [94, 95, 104, 123].

HCI researchers have been pushing the field to deeply examine how race and racism shape the design and impact of socio-technical systems [87, 95, 109]. In response to this call, we examine the online experiences of creative professionals of color based in the United States through the lens of racial capitalism—the process of deriving value from the racial identity of others [15, 69, 78, 100]. Racial capitalism emphasizes the embedded nature of racism within capitalism, that capital “can only accumulate by producing and and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups” [78]. Cedric Robinson, who is credited for developing the term racial capitalism, called the “oppositions” within society—most often manifested in racial divisions—to be the “triumph of capitalism” [100, pg.42]. More recently, Tressie McMillan Cottom expressed the importance of using racial capitalism to analyze the political economy of race and racism in today’s digital society [76]. While racial capitalism has been studied in other areas like sociology [15], ethnic studies [77, 78], and law [69], few have applied this framework to understand the work of creative professionals of color on digital platforms. McMillan Cottom argues that the Internet and digital platforms provide a unique and analytically distinct area to apply racial capitalism compared to prior research areas [76]. While social relations and exchanges occur offline, digital platforms allow these interactions to happen at a much larger scale and more quickly, thus amplifying its subsequent effects [76, 114]. Digital platforms flatten hierarchical structures [115, 116] through increased community visibility, and allow for new spaces of cultural production [16, 91, 96, 117]. But, they also allow a small number of companies to maintain control in online labor markets [10, 35], making it harder for new competition and magnifying hidden biases in the design of technology [86]. Building on this literature, we ask, *How does racial capitalism influence the experiences and performance of race among creatives of color on digital platforms?*

We address this question by performing interviews with creative professionals of color and using racial capitalism as our analytical framework. Interviews allowed us to illuminate lived experiences and counter-narratives as endorsed by critical race theorists with regards to the value of storytelling—“Well told stories describing the reality of black and brown lives can help readers bridge the gap between their worlds and those of others” [29, p. 49]. We define creative professionals broadly as artists, designers, influencers, and entrepreneurs who post creative content on social media (i.e., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) in part for the purposes of earning income, building a brand, or anything that could help support their livelihood or professional development [38, 42].

We found that creative professionals of color navigated instances of racial capitalism online by 1) building communities of similar others for professionalization and social support, 2) performing additional labor to meet dominant expectations of authenticity, and 3) questioning the commodification of minority identity by sharing alternative ideas for compensation and acknowledgement. Through in-depth interviews informed by the lens of racial capitalism, we contribute an empirically grounded understanding of how creative professionals of color experience racial capitalism on digital platforms and envision changes to platform design to more equitably center their goals and

values. We conclude with implications for how platforms could better delegate creative ownership and improve opportunities for social support. While our study is focused on creatives of color in the United States, who have been shown to drive significant social media engagement and platform revenue, we hope this study serves as a starting point to compare and contrast the experiences of minority creatives in other geographic and cultural contexts.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 Racial Capitalism

Cedric Robinson is credited for developing racial capitalism¹ as a framework for how capitalism has historically thrived through the existence of racism. In his seminal work, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Robinson argues that racially driven extraction, exploitation, and violence form the core of capitalism [100]. By focusing on capitalism in Western Europe, he states that Marx and Engels missed the key role race plays in the performance of capitalism around the world, such as through colonialism and slavery [99]. A blatant example of racial capitalism in early U.S. history can be seen in Thomas Affleck's popular antebellum book, *Cotton Plantation Record and Account of 1847*, which categorized every part of a slave's body, their health, and production, into various quantitative line items, equipped with standard formulas that plantation owners could use to calculate a slave's value and even predict the profit potential of their 'property.' The effects and conditions in which slavery operated under (and turned profit), are still at the root of modern US-based industries. For instance, Wall Street, home to today's two largest stock exchanges, first functioned as New York City's official slave market for Africans and Native Americans [113]. Racial capitalism is now being used to understand how capitalism feeds modern-day racial violence and extraction through contexts like mass incarceration and migrant exploitation [78, 100]. More recently, it has been applied in the HCI context to interrogate how racial exploitation shapes engagement on and durability of digital platforms [76].

The features of racial capitalism are tied to neighboring frameworks, like critical race theory (CRT), which points out the capitalistic motivations of how people in power will only work against racism if it aligns with their interests and motivations, known as "interest convergence" [29, 87]. CRT states that racism is ordinary and pervasive, in that it exists at all levels of society and interaction [29]. This can occur in blatant forms of discrimination, such as subconsciously or consciously choosing to hire [13] or respond to an email [79] for someone with a Caucasian-sounding name. But, CRT emphasizes that it is also necessary to uncover instances of racism that are rarely acknowledged but have compounded long-term effects on minority populations. We continue this line of inquiry by examining the experiences of creative professionals of color to uncover both the blatant and hidden forms of racism that they experience in performing their work, specifically through a case study of creatives in the U.S. context.

2.1.1 Racial Capitalism in the Digital Age. As HCI researchers start to engage more critically with race [53, 87], we must further study how it shapes the structures that govern how people use digital technologies. Recently, racial capitalism has been applied to analyze the impact of race on platform capitalism [76]—how large-scale platforms, like Facebook, Uber, and Airbnb, come to control the market and influence the larger economy [110]. McMillan Cottom argues that racial capitalism manifests in the platform economy through the dimensions of "predatory inclusion" and "obfuscation" [76]. Predatory inclusion describes the approach of developing policies that target the inclusion of marginalized users, but in many ways still limit upward mobility and wellbeing. While this approach has primarily been studied in economic development spaces, such as with

¹The term "racial capitalism" was first coined by Martin Legassick and David Hemson to express that apartheid South Africa could not be dismantled without the subsequent fall of capitalism [68].

housing redlining [111], researchers have started to explore what this looks like in digital spaces. For instance, there are instances of predatory inclusion in the design of gig platforms where workers have low-barrier to entry in employment, but face significant challenges paying off debt, earning a profit, or controlling their time [6, 105]. Oftentimes, the most marginalized who enter into gig work end up losing money due to predatory loans and managing unexpected expenses, like car repairs and insurance [101]. On the other hand, obfuscation describes how platforms hide their algorithms and decisions as a way to increase the value of the platform through the extraction of personal data [126]. For creative professionals, this makes it significantly harder to track how one's content is being used and disseminated online. Thus, the application of racial capitalism to platform capitalism draws attention to how the functioning of digital platforms impacts experiences of racial identity, content ownership, and exploited labor.

A recent example of these systems at work was when Black creators boycotted creating TikTok dances to artist Megan Thee Stallion's song 'Thot Sh*t' in the summer of 2021 [73]. Boycott participants felt that when viral trends were created by people of color, the platform's algorithm boosted the virality of their content while simultaneously suppressing the discoverability of the original POC accounts [75, 89]. They expressed that when elements of POC content go viral, they are often quickly adopted and 'watered down' by non-POC creators. By not tagging the original Black creator, digital environments help to aid in the complete and total Black erasure through algorithmic suppression. This phenomena can be analyzed as a social media fueled grassroots protest as a result of how obfuscation and predatory inclusion emerge within digital creator spaces.

Research at the intersection of critical race theory and entertainment law lends more support to the ways in which racial capital evolved within creative industries. In particular, law scholars like Kevin J. Green, expand on racial capital obfuscation and predatory inclusion practices by examining Black innovation throughout slavery and the Jim Crow era [49]. Record labels utilized predatory inclusion practices to get Black artists locked into highly exploitative contracts that disenfranchised Black communities and divested their economic earnings throughout the label. Green elaborates on how the lack of owning capital resources (studios, record labels, legal connections, etc.), was used to justify the extreme bleeding of the earnings of Black artists [49]. Exploitation of artists' contracts is still a core practice in today's digital music scene. For instance, for each dollar of revenue generated on Spotify, the majority goes to Spotify and the record label with only 6 cents going to the artist [4]. Artists express this division of pay is not nearly enough to make a living, with many choosing to leave these streaming platforms altogether.

2.2 Aspirational Labor and the Emergence of the Creative Professional

The term "Creative Class" was first coined by Richard Florida as people "whose economic function is to create new ideas, new technology, and new creative content" and who include a wide range of professions such as scientists, engineers, actors, artists, and designers [42]. Many see the benefits of this new class as being able to define their own jobs with more freedom and flexibility and where and there can be "a more horizontal division of labor" in employment hierarchies [12].

Yet, few have interrogated how this class of workers has manifested in the digital age and the role social media and opaque algorithms govern day-to-day work. In this study, we focus on a specific subgroup that has emerged, specifically creative professionals who use digital platforms to publicize and perform their work. Researchers studying this population find that creative professionals who rely on digital platforms require a significant amount of performative work in order to maintain visibility. Greater visibility as governed by "the algorithm" leads to more connections, increased profits, and potentially fame. Through the concept of aspirational labor, Brooke Erin Duffy explains how content creators perform "aspirational labor," similar to "visibility labor" [2, 24, 39], to build up the reputation needed to become professional influencers. This work is often performed for little to

no compensation and in hopes of becoming “professional” [38]. This places those who experience greater bias to begin with at a larger disadvantage. Where access to brand deals and partnerships is governed by number of “likes” and “followers,” creative professionals of color face the additional labor of regularly combating discrimination that govern the creative industries [49, 50] for the chance of achieving the same success and visibility.

Prior literature on aspirational labor questions how the work of creative professionals is highly gendered in that it is often unpaid and is driven by the commodification of women’s bodies [37]. Influencers might make purchases they can’t afford in order to “buy” their way into a certain status group or perform unpaid work in the form of company advertising by sharing products or blogging, all for the chance at becoming a “professional” [20, 37]. Yet, the power dynamics within creative industries rarely award this activity. While creatives of color face similar obstacles to those of other marginalized creative groups, the addition of race leads to compounded forms of exclusion [23, 94]. Duffy’s work examines how the gendered aspects of aspirational labor shape digital engagement, while this study uses a racial capitalism lens to examine how pressures to commodify race shape how creative professionals behave online.

2.2.1 Racial Capitalism in the Creative Class. Race plays a significant, albeit understudied, role in the daily work of creative professionals. While digital technology is changing how creative work is being shared, we return to the same patterns of capitalism thriving on the extraction from racial minority work—Greene states, “History teaches us that the social structure of our racially stratified society, along with structural elements of the copyright system—such as the requirement of tangible (written) form, and minimal standard of originality—combined to deny Black artists both compensation and recognition for their cultural contributions” [49, p.342]. Prior to the age of social media, law researchers have explored the complexities of how race impacts intellectual property in various other creative industries, such as music, writing, and choreography [50, 120]. For instance, there is a long history documenting the extent that Black jazz artists have influenced White rock and roll music with little to no compensation or recognition [49, 56]. The existing research around racial capitalism [69], critical race Intellectual Property (IP) [120], and race and content ownership [49, 50] are all interlinked in that they each explore the structural inequalities that legal rules instigate against creative professionals of color. The process of transforming creative labor online to content ownership or recognition more equitably is still in progress [50, 120].

Further, making the financial and time commitments to become a professional and make a profit takes significant resources and privilege, a process that often disadvantages racial minorities [8, 41, 58, 98]. With embedded biases on who gets more support online, people of color are often asked to perform more labor to get the same, or often less, visibility and recognition. In crowdfunding, Black project creators are less likely to get funded [98]; Black visitors on Airbnb are less likely to get approved by hosts [41]; products held by darker skinned hands sell for 20% less than products held by light-skinned hands on Ebay [9]. Prompted by social justice movements, brands publicly ‘pledge’ to inclusion and diversity in an act of virtue signaling, but then fail to follow through with actions in terms of equal pay or making changes to their workplace culture [19, 32].

The pressure to be seen has led content creators to adopt various strategies to boost their visibility. In order to “game” the social media system, some Instagram influencers have started to participate in “engagement pods” where influencers mutually agree to like, comment on, and share each other’s work to boost one’s position in the algorithm [88]. These efforts point to the guessing and time invested in trying to play the system when there is no way to confirm how the algorithm truly works [52]. Others have formed private social media groups to help other creative entrepreneurs overcome similar experiences of discrimination or biases online [59]. These groups not only help with sharing of work-related tips, but also offer a safe space to air grievances experienced from

the job. These online activities mirror offline efforts by Black creative collectives who have started acquiring properties to turn them into safe full creative production spaces intended to perfect their craft, expand business, and go viral [108].

The profiting off of minority creativity has reignited questions in the digital age around creative ownership. Today, creative professionals of color whose work goes viral rarely benefit from the fame and influence it produces [61]. Various creatives of color on social media, like Jalaiah Harmon, creator of the original viral “Renegade” dance, have had trouble gaining recognition for their work [70]². Creative professionals of color point out how lighter-skinned influencers are able to easily profit without giving credit back to the original POC creator [71, 90]. Others have cited the way Tik Tok is designed makes it almost impossible to find the original poster, which makes crediting creatives online even harder. Yet, even when there is a clear original creator, artists still fail to earn credit. For instance, rapper Terrence “2 Milly” Ferguson and others unsuccessfully sued the gaming company Epic Games for using their dance move in Fortnite, a video game that makes an estimated \$2.5 billion in profit each year [25]. These examples demonstrate that the emergence and construction of the creative professional class has always been built on racial disparities. As the Internet becomes a fertile space for the sharing of creative works, further research must be done to understand the experiences of being a creative professional of color and how social media amplifies long-held biases and inequalities in creative industries.

3 METHODS

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

We interviewed 16 creative professionals who used social media to promote their work. Participants were aged between 20 and 40 and represented a range of non-mutually exclusive creative identities, including artist, creative professional, and entrepreneur. Participants identified with various racial backgrounds, including Black, African American, Xicanx³, Latinx, Brown, and Mixed (see Table 1). The demographic information reflects participants’ self-identification and preferred terms, rather than standardized categories. In terms of social media platforms, people used a combination of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit, and Snapchat. All participants were provided pseudonyms for anonymity.

We recruited participants by posting calls-for-participation to Facebook groups and listservs that engaged creative professionals, creative entrepreneurs, and artists, with a focus on groups that had a large population of people of color. Recruitment materials specifically called for engagement of “creatives of color.” Participants were also recruited through snowball sampling from initial participants. The calls-for-participation directed interested participants to a short survey where they answered questions asking about demographic information and interest to participate in the interview study. From this list, we interviewed participants who identified as a person of color and some form of creative professional residing in the United States. All interviews were conducted over the phone, and participants were offered \$25 compensation for a 1-hour interview. However, we allowed interviews to extend beyond 1-hour if the participants wanted to share more. Therefore, interviews on average lasted 1-2 hours. All were recorded and transcribed.

The initial semi-structured interview protocol included questions on how they decided to navigate social media as creative professionals, how race influenced their creative work experience online if at all, and what they would want to change about the industry. In this way, we used interviews as

²Only after a significant outcry from the Black community did people start giving credit to Jalaiah Harmon, the original Renegade dance creator. Fortnite recently featured her dance as an “emote” in their game store and tweeted her as the dance creator, but it is unclear whether she receives any royalty from the profits.

³Xicanx is a gender neutral adaptation of the word Chicano and or Xicano, a term which represented indigenous Mexicans with an emphasize on identifying outside the colonization gender binary.

Table 1. Participant self-identification and platform usage

ID	Race/Ethnicity	Pronouns	Creative Identities	Platforms Used
Abeo	Nigerian-American	He/Him	Artist, Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Dominique	Black	She/Her	Creative Professional	Instagram
Destiny	Black	She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Raven	African American	She/Her	Artist	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Nia	Biracial (Black, White)	She/Her	Artist	Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr
Kesha	Black	She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest
Angel	Mixed Xicanx	She/Her/They/Them	Artist, Creative Professional	Instagram
Jayden	African American/ Black	He/Him	Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat
Jada	Black	He/Him	Creative Professional	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Damien	Black	He/Him	Artist, Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Ciara	Black	She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram
Xavier	African American/ Black	She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional	Instagram, Facebook
Zara	Brown/Mixed (Southeast Asian, White)	They/Them/She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
Kendrick	Black	Did not disclose	Artist	Instagram, Facebook
Luna	Nicaraguan-American	She/Her	Artist, Creative Professional, Entrepreneur	Instagram
Cruz	Latinx	He/Him	Other	Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn

a way to encourage sharing of stories and counter-narratives—a central part of applying critical race theory to our work [29]. We conducted an initial round of interviews with 5 people, through which we identified patterns around building community, authenticity, and ownership. We then focused the remaining interviews on these emergent themes. We also note that we do not intend to use the term “people of color” as a generalization, but as a way to unearth the unique experiences of those whose perceived race significantly shapes their experience online—both positively and

negatively. As we recognize in the limitations, we welcome follow-up research to examine distinct racial experiences online. The study was reviewed and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Data was saved in a secure and encrypted digital folder. To preserve participant anonymity, we assigned each participant an anonymous code that was used to label their interview and demographic data files.

3.2 Positionality

The primary researcher identifies as a Queer Icelandic-born Black, Afro-Caribbean American Artist and ethnographer who grew up between Iceland, Japan, and various parts of the United States. Even though she is fluent in English, her first languages were both English and Icelandic in addition to picking up Spanish from family and then French later in her education. She has been conducting artist and creative based research within marginalized communities within the United States for more than ten years. Her affinity for arts research is rooted in her mixed media artist background. She is part of a large creative community spanning various states, countries, identities, and communities. When speaking with participants, she discloses her personal background and creative professional journey. The second author identifies as Asian American and has five years of experience researching and working closely with marginalized entrepreneurial communities in order to understand how technology influences their experience and socio-economic mobility. She also has 10 years of experience researching professional creative communities online and in person. Their combined background shaped the research focus, which was informed by prior research [58, 59] and personal experience.

3.3 Analysis

Racial capitalism has recently been introduced as an analytical framework to understand how race influences behavior in a digital society [76] and has previously been used to analyze access to creative ownership and professional growth in creative industries [49, 50]. To reiterate, racial capitalism refers to the process of deriving value from the racial identity of others [15, 69, 78]. In order to answer our research question, *How does racial capitalism influence the experiences and performance of race among creatives of color on digital platforms?*, we use racial capitalism as “a way of understanding the role of racism in enabling key moments of capitalist development.” Therefore, we seek to understand how creative professionals navigate race in their work and how it influences the way they engage with their online audience.

We analyzed the data through the lens of racial capitalism to identify instances of when public perception and consumption shaped creative professionals' actions and thoughts around the impact of race. Customer demand drives capital exchanges, like acquiring followers, making a profit, and selling products. We performed a thematic analysis [103, p. 175] by identifying instances where participants spoke about these capitalist pressures alongside topics of race. For instance, this included instances of feeling that perceptions of their race influenced expectations for posting, or impressions that people of different racial backgrounds were unequally promoted by the platform. Instances also included examples of creatives encouraging each other by serving as role models or exchanging advice around navigating the minority experience as creatives online. Through this coding process, we determine three primary themes: 1) how creative professionals of color built communities of peers and followers to succeed within capitalist expectations online, 2) the challenges they faced maintaining authenticity in light of complicated histories and current events, and 3) how they navigated tensions between the commodification of their minority identity and managing creative ownership. First, the theme around building communities highlights how creative professionals of color leveraged social media to connect with similar others in order to exchange social support and resources needed to succeed professionally online. This often included discussing

how their race and other intersectional identities helped build connections with others who are harder to meet offline. The second theme on authenticity describes a converse perspective around sharing one's racial identity in a professional space, in which participants expressed how being authentic to their racial identity, and corresponding political and activist beliefs, often felt at odds with mainstream expectations of how a creative professional should act. Finally, The theme around creative ownership describes how participants felt that social media policies prohibit pathways to creative ownership, disproportionately suppressing the socio-economic mobility of creative professionals of color. Coding was performed in partnership between the two authors in a shared platform with regular conversations to establish agreement and convergence.

4 FINDINGS

Through interviews, we find that creative professionals of color had to navigate racial capitalism in order to succeed on digital platforms. They did so by connecting with similar others to exchange resources and spread awareness of challenges. Despite building these communities of support, participants still described feeling pressured to perform race and authenticity in "palatable" ways, all while struggling to access the benefits of their creative work. However, they felt that engaging online was necessary as barriers to professional success and recognition in more mainstream routes pushed them to forge these alternative paths online.

4.1 Building Communities for Social Support and Professionalization

Creatives described building communities to pool together resources and counteract the biases they faced in their work online and offline. This involved sharing advice, building networks with similar others, and promoting each others' work through tags, likes, and comments. Some described using hashtags to "find their community," which was useful for both accessing social support and connecting with a larger audience important for their professionalization. For instance, one participant described using social media to more easily connect with others of similar backgrounds and interests.

I really do feel like a lot of my people are on Instagram, like queer and trans people of color... A few of my current friends I've met entirely on Instagram, and I'm so glad that our paths crossed online, because I don't know when they would have in real life, like outside of the Internet. So that's also another goal, is to just make community and get in touch with people, and learn about people's work who I might not otherwise know about. -Zara

In this case, race and other intersectional identities were leveraged for collective solidarity. Zara emphasized that Instagram allowed them to build a community with similar others in a way that is not so easily done offline. They used hashtags and recommendations to find people with whom they felt comfortable connecting. Ultimately, these new connections ended up becoming both friends and evangelists of their work. Another participant described how online spaces provided her greater freedom in terms of what she gets to work on and who she can collaborate with. By forging her own path, she positions herself as a role model for how creative people of color can use digital spaces to have greater agency in their work.

Everything is really up to me and those who I choose to work with. I can create my own spaces and my own environments and money and help other people do the same, however they want to. -Dominique

For many, the narrative of "making it" and serving as a leader or role model was a key part of their day-to-day role as a creative professional of color. By making herself and her work visible online, she wants other people of color to know that there is opportunity to break away from the

racial biases that govern much of hiring and employment [13, 79]—as she expressed, “I just want to create my own way. I don’t want to rely on the white man for money.” With her own business, she can control how things run “from start to finish,” including the management structure to human resources.

Despite the biases hidden and apparent on the Internet, social media platforms have still produced an unprecedented opportunity for the ingenuity of creatives of color to connect and rise to the forefront. Creatives cited social media as a way to break out of mainstream pathways to success, such as through record deals, television spots, or working up through a traditional corporation, which they saw as even more challenging for people of color. In addition to serving as role models online, participants described looking to their network to exchange resources useful for their work.

A lot of my feed is people who use Instagram as a platform for education, and I realize that that’s a huge amount of work for them, and that they’re giving away a lot of free resources. So that’s something I notice a lot, and I really value when people take the time to say, ‘Cool, I have followers. Here’s some things I want to teach you. Here’s some ways you can learn from me. Here’s other people you can learn from.’ And to create this web of resources that is really readily available.” -Angel

We point out these examples to highlight how creative professionals of color work within capitalistic systems to create the social support, community, and resources needed to succeed. For example, this could include best practices on how to build a business, tips about their creative process, and how to navigate issues of discrimination. For various creatives, this also involved the additional labor of sharing vulnerable personal experiences and educating others about the unique struggles they face as a person of color in the creative industry and where they live.

With the people that do follow me, I try to spread awareness. I talk about the Black struggle, the struggle of being black and being a woman. I just try to spread awareness because I live in a pretty straight, white town, and conservative. So, I know a lot of people that do follow me grew up around that. -Nia

Similar to Zara, Nia described how she had little opportunity to connect with similar others in-person. Rather, Nia found much of her community online by sharing her experiences as a person of color in a predominantly white area and how that affected her work and livelihood. Posting about these experiences helped attract followers who have grown up in similar contexts and battled similar biases.

For many participants, racial identity is closely intertwined with their professional life. They describe this mix of professional and personal as their “different branches” and “entangling [themselves] in art and activism.” Building community by proudly sharing all facets of their identity and educating others on the struggle of being a minority in the industry is personally meaningful and a primary motivation for engaging online.

4.2 Pressures to Perform of Palatable Authenticity

However, being authentic on social media is not easy. Participants expressed the stress and emotional labor it took to be authentic, especially when that image is so closely tied to their professional success. We define *palatable authenticity* as the pressures creative professionals of color feel in order to appeal to the online audience’s aesthetic of what is acceptable, attractive, and worthy. This demonstrates another example of racial capitalism, in that creatives feel that they must present themselves in a way that is “palatable” to the White majority, and ultimately for their consumption. We find that performing palatable authenticity involves grappling with the internal struggle of deciding what self is best to present publicly. While sharing core aspects of their identity was important to them, participants expressed that doing this in a palatable way felt like additional

labor beyond the already time-consuming work of creative entrepreneurship online. They described the complexities of authenticity as toeing the line between presenting their personal identities and creative talent.

Do I want to limit myself? Because, personally, I like to talk a lot about civil rights and whatnot, and people get tired of it, and people think that I'm talking about it too much, or I'm just honing in on one issue. [They say], 'Well, I didn't come here to see you talk about civil rights, I came here to see your art.' But then Instagram wants you to incorporate more of who you are so that you can get more followers. But if I do that, then people will think that I'm being mean to White people." - Destiny

Authenticity, broadly defined as being one's "true self" involves being able to recognize and act on one's inner motives, feelings, goals, strengths, and weaknesses [51, 65, 97]. For many, balancing one's authentic self and the audience expectations is challenging, and even further complicated with one's racial identities. Participants express how it is relatively impossible to separate one's experiences as a person of color from their professional work. These narratives of authenticity are watered down to appease the social media aesthetic rather than reflect creatives' true experiences and inspirations for their work. For example Destiny, an independent painter expressed feeling conflicted having to always make the choice to police her creative truths rather than be judged professionally, even if these experiences are intersecting.

Creatives expressed internal battles of not knowing how much of themselves they should present and in which contexts. One person, who identifies as an artist, creative professional, and entrepreneur, described how he did not want to mask his Black identity in order to show others like him that one can be successful and stay true to one's background and culture.

I definitely don't hide the fact that I'm a Black male with regard to my social media presence...I don't code switch in a lot of my posts, so I have the African-American Vernacular English. That's another point of my identity...I like talking the way, like, Black. That's important to me. Again, being my authentic self within reason. I don't give up everything, but I do want to ensure that I keep it real." -Damien

Damien mentions the pressure to "code switch," referring to adjusting one's behavior to cater to the comfort of others usually in exchange for a desired outcome [5, 80]. In this case, Damien is referring to racially code-switching, where Black people adjust their self-presentation by mirroring the behaviors of the dominant group (i.e. White people) [26, 30, 74]. However, knowing how to be authentic "within reason" is not clearly delineated and has often pushed creatives of color to hide important aspects of their identity. The use of coded jargon has historically been a part of the minority experience. Angel, who identifies as a Mixed-race Xicanx tattoo artist, recognized her rise to success through Instagram and the balancing act of curated language.

There's a certain amount of coded communication that I think still fits to be able to be on social media faithfully. Like I might not say, burn the prisons at all costs explicitly on my social media, but I'll say, 'Here's some alternatives to policing for communities.' Or 'Here are some prison abolition resources to consider.' But to me, that's what it ultimately says. -Angel

As expressed by Angel as well as others, there is a sense of responsibility to show solidarity and speak out about injustices that are less apparent to the mainstream population. However, doing so often materializes in the form of self-curating personal and political news to avoid "secondhand traumatizing" their audience as they make sense of their own experiences. In this case, participants decide how their language appears to both White and non-White audiences when sharing triggering posts, like news about racial violence.

Kendrick, a LatinX creator, goes on to express that creative entrepreneurs want to be recognized as multidimensional, especially as they transition into more professional environments. However, he often felt that he was asked to hide the other facets of his identity to perform his race in a more palatable way.

I'm this three-dimensional human being that has these interests, that has these values, that has things that are important to them, and I'm not going to check it at the door simply because you're paying me to do this thing that's completely unrelated. -Cruz

Similarly, Ciara expressed, "I am presenting in the world because of the color of my skin. I can't really take off the fact that I'm a woman, or take off the fact that I'm black." Owning and sharing one's racial identity acted as a double edged sword. On one side, as described in the previous section, sharing one's experience helped build communities of support needed for growing a following and customer base. On the other hand, sharing too many personal experiences and opinions about race seemed to conflict with mainstream audience expectations of what a creative professional is supposed to post.

Further, the pressure to remain authentic also seems to impede one's ability to maintain digital boundaries. Almost all participants spoke about the feelings of overexposure and vulnerability that comes with having to perform online as a creative person of color, not because they want to but because they feel as though they have to. Dominique was told to market herself as the "coin black girl in this industry." In this case, she was asked to perform her race as a form of capital—a way to monetize that facet of her identity. Destiny describes how sometimes she would prefer to have posts without her face in it, but she noticed that posts with her face tended to get more likes and comments, something she attributes both to her audience's preferences as well as "the algorithm" prioritizing posts with faces on people's feeds.

It's just making myself more vulnerable for the world to see...I feel like because of the way that Instagram works, like with the algorithm, if you post a flyer about something that you're doing, that flyer is not going to get a lot of sight if you don't also post a video talking about what you're doing today. -Destiny

A strong social media presence is necessary to get clients and jobs. However, this requires sharing products and content as well as one's lifestyle, personal story, and image. Doing so in an "authentic" way can be especially vulnerable when what one experiences day-to-day also involves regular racial bias, microaggressions, and obstacles. Balancing true authenticity and palatable authenticity is particularly challenging for creatives of color whose identity are tied to complicated histories and current events.

4.3 Questioning the Commodification of Minority Identity

Commodification of minority identity is the central driver of racial capitalism in that others benefit and profit off of another's race. Creatives saw this take effect in the way their race was used without fair recognition. Even when creative professionals have the space to express themselves authentically online, social media makes it particularly challenging for them to benefit from their work. Participants expressed understanding having to give up some ownership and freedom to participate online. However, as we see more examples of fame and publicity disproportionately represented in non-POC communities, many have started to question the policies and equity of digital platforms meant to democratize socio-economic mobility. Similar to histories of music and dance [49, 50], participants pointed out how minority creativity drives significant engagement on social media platforms, but rarely leads to public recognition.

It's always been that Black humor and Black culture has made everyone else's humor, but like I feel like it's just even faster now. And so you have these phrases that belong

to the POC's and really belong to the Black community, like the word 'woke' or like the word 'bae.' It's just crazy that that s*** became commodified so quickly. -Luna

While creatives expressed that they were grateful to have a platform to reach such a wide audience, they felt that their minority identity was often “fetishized” and “tokenized” by mainstream society. They cited examples that have since become publicized in popular press, such as how most popular memes are often of Black individuals [64], that much of the viral Tik Tok dances originate from choreographers of color [40], and that modern language takes significantly from communities of color [102]. As Nia expressed, “It’s so cool and so trendy to be oppressed basically. They’re like, ‘Oh, I want that for me.’” Yet, it becomes very apparent that while people readily consume, spread, and appropriate POC creativity, they are less eager to give credit to those who originated the ideas.

You know, they’re [Instagram] running ads, but it’s like, we are the ones making the content that makes those ads visible. And so I feel like if an artist is constantly getting an ad put by their space, that artist should get money or be at least consulted with.”
-Zara

When asked what needs to change, participants listed a variety of alternative futures, including being able to track the extent their content brings money to platforms. For instance, they suggest using algorithms to determine what percentage of platform engagement is driven by their profile or profiles of people of color. Participants also called for social media platforms to create new policies that make it easier for artists to control how their content is used for platform ad revenue and whether the monetary value is being distributed fairly. These conversations introduced questions around who owns social media “space” and therefore who benefits financially. On one hand, social media provides a platform for artists to be seen. But, participants pointed out that there is little discussion on the disproportionate return benefits where highly popular posts by creative professionals of color drive platform revenue and sustainability.

Participants also explain that non-POC creators experience compounding benefits due to generally greater resources and fewer biases. This involves having greater finances and time for managing their content and brand, which in turn leads to more industry deals and earnings. Zara, who identifies as Mixed-race Southeast Asian/White, reflected on how her lighter skin has given her an advantage over her peers in terms of garnering likes and attention.

“The whole outward, just skin, face identity has been a privilege online, and it’s been pretty easy for me to post a picture of my face and get a lot of positive feedback. But that’s something I’m also fairly critical of, and I don’t like that or approve of that. And so it’s something I’m trying to figure out. How I can actually work against that implicit bias in the algorithm and the people’s minds you know?” - Zara

She recognized that the bias occurs on two levels: first a societal preference for lighter skin led to greater online engagement, which led to a second level algorithmic benefit—as more people engaged with her online the better she fared in the algorithm. Realizing this made her question how she was performing race online, knowing that the benefits she received were at the cost of underlying systemic biases her darker skin peers faced more often. Creative professionals who face greater structural challenges, both as a result of their physical appearance as well as life circumstances, are then put at an unfair disadvantage. Dominique, for example, described the pressure of unpaid digital labor and the expectation to constantly engage online.

We should be getting paid for this...Make it easier for us to be seen, have visibility, because you’re making it harder for people who are not everyday posters, who are not hashtagging, who are not double-clicking in comments and then double-tapping... I’m

sorry, when I have time to browse, I will, but on days where I really don't have time to sit on my phone, I really don't. -Dominique

In this case, Dominique uses the term “browsing” as it relates to finding clients and or creative job opportunities. Leveraging social media for one’s creative profession requires putting in significant unpaid hours and sometimes “buying” one’s way into certain status groups [38]. Unfortunately, creative professionals of color are less likely to have the resources and privilege to “buy” influence and work unpaid.

Overall, creative professionals of color appreciate the new opportunities social media have provided in terms of being able to build a community and following online. However, they have noticed how long held patterns of racial biases and commodification are now being replicated online in new and less obvious ways. Participants suspect that platforms, whose revenue is driven by the ingenuity of its users, are disproportionately benefiting from the work of creatives of color. While creatives are able to drive their own sales through their personal posts, they suspect that much their potential revenue is going to the platform instead. Because platforms obfuscate this data, it is imperative to attend to the lived experiences of creatives of color who report a growing inequality in who is benefiting from their content.

5 DISCUSSION

Our study illustrates that even though digital platforms have improved professional opportunities for creatives of color in terms of building an audience and connecting with similar others, it is still plagued by entrenched biases that have long existed prior to the Internet. Participants spoke about how the expectations around authenticity and experience of racial capitalism shaped how they performed race online, constantly making decisions between being true to oneself vs. taking into consideration the broader perceptions of one’s consumer audience. On the surface, this labor involves trying to game the algorithm, entering into a competition for followers, and constantly posting to stay relevant. But, our data show an underlying layer of additional labor in terms of what news to endorse, language to use, and the balance between personal and professional posts. As prior work on aspirational labor points to its gendered nature [38], such as working for free, our work uncovers the additional racialized labor performed by people of color in hopes of achieving greater professional recognition. We discuss how these findings relate to historical patterns of how race influences creative ownership and self-presentation online.

5.1 Authenticity and Race Online

A salient effect of racial capitalism online is surfaced in the presentation of “authenticity”—being able to recognize and act as one’s “true self” in terms of inner motives, feelings, goals, strengths, and weaknesses [51, 65, 97]. However, creative professionals are expected to present a veneer of “authenticity” in order to produce a sense of intimacy with one’s digital audience [7, 21, 38]. The demonstration of authenticity online has been shown to increase perceived quality [83] and purchase intentions [85], and be particularly critical for digitally-promoted content [36, 46, 47, 72]. Branding researchers emphasize that effective authentic content must seem intrinsically motivated, in that content must show the person truly enjoying doing the work and living their lives (e.g., [11, 14]). In order to meet this demand, creative professionals feel pressured to constantly post day-to-day updates about their creative motivations and identity.

But, the desire to be authentic while maintaining a “palatable” public image uncovers a double narrative for creative professionals of color—one where they see social media as a leverage for professional growth and another where they feel pressured to minimize their racial identity to placate the wider online audience [16]. We describe these experiences as examples of “profile

work”—the decisions and trade-off’s social media users make in maintaining and managing their profiles [107, 119]. Scholars who introduced profile work describe people’s profiles as “products,” referring to how one’s curated collection of posts represents the owner [119], in this case the creative professional. We contribute to this literature by discussing how race influences profile work decisions, particularly through pressures to code switch and conform to respectability politics. As described earlier, code-switching refers to adjusting one’s behavior to cater to the dominant group [5, 26, 30, 74, 80], while the related concept of respectability politics emphasizes how the dominant group (i.e. White people in the U.S. context) often governs what is considered respectable, such as types of dress and speech [55, 92], thus pressuring marginalized groups to conform to this image. This was particularly evident with certain creators’ intersectional identities [17, 23, 94, 95, 112]. For instance, Dominique was encouraged to market herself as the “coin black girl” in order to succeed in the fashion industry. In contrast, Damien, a Black man, describes the pressure to hide his Blackness, pointing out that he made a conscious decision to continue speaking in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). These stories uncover how different minority and intersectional identities draw out complex reactions and expectations from the public. For other participants, being authentic online meant expressing views about current events related to race, equity, and inclusion. Yet, in an effort to be truly authentic to their values, they struggled with balancing their more creative content with complex social justice views.

The pressure to minimize aspects of one’s racial identity could also be considered a form of “testimonial smothering,” which occurs when “a person waters down her ideas to make them more palatable” [23, p.134]. In the case of creative professionals of color, the decision to make oneself more “palatable” is driven by the capitalistic pressures to cater to the dominant audience in exchange for greater recognition online. While many participants rebelled against this urge and chose to present themselves according to their “true self,” doing so can take considerable stress and anxiety given the threat of being harassed [51]. For instance, Dosono and Semaan describe the considerable emotional labor in moderating public and personal perceptions of race and identity in online communities of Asian American and Pacific Islanders on Reddit [33, 34]. We observe a similar phenomenon occurring among creative professionals of color who describe the emotional labor of figuring out how much to share about their racial experience and bracing themselves for the backlash if they do not meet public expectations.

Creator pressures to cater to online audience expectations are made even more conflicted considering the recent use of AI to create “ideal” influencers of color [60]. Take for instance Shudu, a beautiful dark skinned African model with over 200k followers and who happens to be an AI object created by a White man. While Shudu’s creator expressed his motivation was to create beauty “not represented in media often enough,” people of color have been quick to point out that there are plenty of real influencers of color who deserve the same fame. Real Black models still struggle to land jobs, book shows and even find hair-and make up who can style them [44]. With AI models, many creatives believe that AI will take potential jobs away from real women of color [106], thus increasing the pressure to play into the public expectations of palatability considering followers can now easily find an AI-created person of color made explicitly for the White majority gaze.

We argue that truly supporting creative professionals of color inherently involves appreciating real lived experiences, which often requires facing uncomfortable truths about racial inequalities in society. However, HCI research has found that social expectations and platform policies are not always conducive to expressing the more complicated parts of personal authenticity due to a positivity bias in SNS communities [97, 119, 125]. In their study of performing authenticity on social network sites, Reinecke and Trepte found that people were pressured to post more positively in order to reap the benefits of social media, including greater social support and acceptance

[48]. However, always acting positive ultimately puts those with overall lower psychological well being, including those who experience more stress or hardship, at a systematic disadvantage. This positivity bias can be especially problematic when creative professionals want to speak about sensitive topics, such as discrimination.

In order to support authenticity, we suggest taking inspiration from models of online communities that are built by and for people of color. For example, the platform Somewhere Good promotes decentralized digital spaces intended to cultivate authentic and creative engagement between trusted members [1, 122]. The platform allows for layers of vetting by allowing members to communicate through increasingly rich mediums, such as from text to voice to video and eventually in-person. Such options for who to invite and how to engage are left up to members, who are primarily people of color, which allows for space to be authentic with those they trust, a theme that also emerged in related work on enhancing feelings of safety and privacy among marginalized entrepreneurs [59]. Within more “closed” communities, creatives of color express feeling more comfortable to openly communicate through shared language and values. For instance, researchers have compared the semi-closed community of Black Twitter to a modern day Green Book⁴ where Black people can connect with similar others to talk about shared experiences, exchange resources, and empower each other [16, 66]. Even though Black Twitter is technically public, scholars have pointed out that deep knowledge of Black culture is needed in order to understand and engage meaningfully. Such examples confirm prior work underlining the importance of private or closed/semi-closed channels with trusted networks for disclosing sensitive information for social support [93, 124]. From these examples, we highlight common implications around the importance of engaging more people of color in platform design and leadership, allowing for curated engagement, and providing greater freedom to users on how they want to engage with others.

5.2 Racial Capitalism and Implications for Creative Ownership

In addition to the pressures of being authentic online, creative professionals also highlighted the expectations to perform and commodify race, all for the chance at success in terms of recognition and profits. Today, we see racial capitalism in the control of minority creativity and ownership reflected in social media policies and copyright/IP law. McMillan Cottom describes how the combination of “predatory inclusion”—policies targeting marginalized consumer citizens under extractive terms [76]—and “obfuscation”—hiding algorithmic processes to block data ownership and awareness—put social media users of color at a disadvantage. Our findings confirm this assertion as we see these two features of platform capitalism affecting the livelihoods of creative professionals of color. In terms of predatory inclusion, creatives described the unprecedented benefit of social media in building a path towards professional creative independence, sometimes expressing that it is their only viable option. Participants described leveraging social media to connect with similar others to share resources and build an audience for their work. But they also lament the inability to fully benefit from the impact they have on social media engagement and shaping popular culture. Participants agree that the way social media is set up “obfuscates” content ownership [76], increasing the value of social media platforms through collected personal data, while inhibiting social media users’ ability to quantify their benefit to the platform.

The extraction of value from communities of color is deeply rooted in the historical control of the minority economy. The evolution of copyright protection has long reflected what is valued by dominant members of society in terms of what is considered to be “high” vs “low” art [45]. Copyright law places “higher-brow” art like ballet choreography or longer-form writing under

⁴The Negro Motorist Green Book was a guidebook published between 1936 to 1966 that provided Black travelers with information about where was safe to travel (e.g. routes, hotels, restaurants, etc.)

copyright protection, while failing to protect content like jazz, hip hop dance moves, and fashion design. It was not until gospel, ragtime and the blues rose to popularity within White communities in the segregated south were laws to protect published works passed [49]. The historic lack of value for creatives of color forces them into continuous “contract/work-for-hire” positions with little opportunity for professional advancement. Similarly, as expressed by creatives of color in this study, the need to continuously engage on social media for the hope of success while not being able to track and quantify one’s value to the platform makes it particularly difficult to grow their reputation and financial base. Recent docuseries like “Who Gets to be an Influencer?” have also brought to light how Black and Brown digital creatives are being shut out of the digital economy by societal and algorithmic discrimination. Without clear reasoning of what creative works are valuable enough to be protected and promoted, biases against products more often created by people of color will prohibit an equitable future for creatives. This becomes an issue of value, what should be valued, for whom, and by whom.

As more people pursue non-traditional careers that rely heavily on social media engagement, it is imperative to understand how race and racial biases influence platform experiences and performance. HCI scholars have called for an investigation into how technology “has” race and promotes racism [53, 87]. We call for CSCW and HCI researchers to further engage with creative professionals of color to understand what *they* envision to be qualities of equitable platforms. For instance, inspired by Harrington and Dillahunt’s work on speculative design [54], social media platforms could hold workshops to elicit ideas for alternative designs where creators have greater awareness of how their content is being used and shared (anti-obfuscation). Similarly, researchers could work with creatives to develop frameworks for how to accurately capture the value of their creative content as it is shared through social media. Having these conversations ahead of time would be particularly useful in a quickly changing digital landscape.

In response to recent strikes and complaints about how people of color are treated on social media [19, 71], Adam Mosseri, Head of Instagram, responded by outlining a four-step plan to 1) mitigate the additional harassment Black people face on their platform, 2) review the account verification criteria to make sure it is equally inclusive, 3) make sure that minority content is distributed fairly and reviewing concerns about “shadowbanning,” and 4) doing more to remove algorithmic bias from their systems [82]. While these would be welcome changes, we call for greater transparency or even an external audit of whether the algorithms equitably promote creatives of color. Algorithmic transparency is particularly important considering that the majority of the tech industry is White [57, 81] with many still believing that algorithms are race neutral [84]. Participants suspect that race influences whose content is distributed and shared more frequently. These suspicions are further supported by examples in popular press that show content initially created by people of color are often recreated and more widely publicized by White influencers [70]. In addition, various researchers have documented how platform algorithms simply reflect offline racial biases [3, 27, 62, 67, 84, 86, 118], such as with cyber racism, promoting stereotypes, and centering Whiteness. Thus, algorithms that may be defined as fair by current platform designers would just be reproducing the status quo [16, 43]. In order to combat systemic biases ingrained in the algorithm, further research could focus more on setting publicly agreed on standards for fairly distributing minority content rather than relying on inherently biased user behavior to drive algorithmic models.

In addition to greater transparency and equity of who is promoted online, we also suggest opportunities for platforms to recognize the value that creative professionals of color provide to the platform. For instance, computer scientists could develop ways to quantify how much influence a creator has on platform engagement. Creatives asked if there was a way to measure the influence individual artists have online through spread of content, not just through formal re-shares, but by

recognizing copied artwork, choreography, etc. In many cases, the organic spread of one's art was seen as a positive, but in other cases creatives saw their work being used for profit without consent [25]. Technological systems could offer an opportunity to track this content appropriation in a way that can (potentially) hold companies accountable for demographic based exploitation. Although tracking of creative work online is a complex endeavor, with some technologies gaining traction [22], its continued development is imperative to increase equity in online creative industries where minorities are often shortchanged. HCI researchers could partner with law scholars to develop opportunities for creators to more easily claim ownership of their posted work from the beginning. We also suggest opportunities for HCI researchers to develop new ways to measure and highlight the value creators of color produce for digital platforms.

6 LIMITATIONS

We acknowledge the limitations of studying the general experiences of creative of professionals of color rather than focusing experiences within a specific racial group. We do not intend to overgeneralize these experiences, but rather begin to start the conversation about how race shapes creative professional experiences online. Given the positionality of the first author, in terms of personal background and previous research, our literature and analysis focused more closely on Black and Brown creative professional experiences. This is not to say that other racial groups underrepresented in the study do not also experience biases worth of investigation. Rather, we hope this study serves as a starting point to more deeply examine experiences of distinct demographic groups in the future. We also hope to explore this space further with an eye towards intersectionality. While this was not a central part of our analysis, we believe a future study with intersectionality as a lens will illuminate compounded experiences of exclusion and bias.

7 CONCLUSION

Overall, we find that creative professionals of color experience the effects of racial capitalism online, particularly with respect to topics of creative ownership and authenticity. Through in-depth semi-structured interviews, we share stories from participants about their experiences navigating the digital space as professionals hoping to gain recognition and earn an income. They discuss working within capitalistic expectations by building connections with similar others online for social support and exchanging resources needed for professionalization. These motivations to succeed professionally online in turn shape their choices around self-presentation, including what facets of their racial identity to share or keep private. Despite pressures to seem more "palatable," creatives still point out glaring biases and inequalities in terms of how they are viewed and compensated. They call for digital platforms to make changes that allow for safe authentic sharing of their work and identities as well as equitable recognition of their labor and value.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would first like to thank the creative professionals who shared their experiences and perspectives to make this paper possible. Second the authors thank Tawanna Dillahunt and Patricia Garcia for providing valuable feedback on earlier versions of the paper. Finally, we thank the University of Michigan School of Information Research Experience for Master's Student (REMS) program for funding the first author's research time to perform this study.

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Received January 2022; revised July 2022; accepted November 2022