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49

DIGITAL WHITE RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

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Abstract

The Internet has become a ubiquitous central element in the lives of adolescents. In this conceptual paper, we focus on digital white racial socialization (D-WRS), arguing: 1) for an expanded conceptualization of WRS as *doings*, and 2) that social media may be changing processes of WRS through an extension of traditional settings and through the creation of unique social contexts. We highlight the uniqueness of social media contexts due to the designed *normalization of whiteness, weak-tie racism, social media affordances, and racialized pedagogical zones (RPZs)* allowing adolescents to practice *doing* race. We introduce a conceptual framework for Digital-WRS and end with an expressed need for conceptually-guided research on the multidimensional relationship between social media and WRS processes.

Keywords: white racial socialization, whiteness, racial-ethnic socialization, social media, developmental psychology

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Digital White Racial Socialization: Social Media and the Case of Whiteness

Introduction

In the United States, social media have become a ubiquitous central element in the lives of adolescents (Anderson, & Jiang, 2018; The Associated Press and NORC, 2017; Lenhart et al., 2015). Upwards of 96% of youth (8-17 years old) report using social media such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, at least once a day (Ballard, 2019), and indicate doing so for an average of more than four hours (Common Sense Media, 2019). While current models of white racial socialization (WRS) emphasize the importance of *social context*, the internet—particularly social media—have not yet been seriously considered as settings where WRS processes may occur (Byrd & Anh, 2020; Loyd & Gaither, 2018).

Similar to offline environments, the internet and social media are racialized social contexts that may shape how adolescents experience, interpret, and internalize understandings of race and whiteness. Furthermore, the internet, like other mainstream media, obfuscates whiteness by positioning *being white* as normative, universal, and default (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Brock Jr., 2020; Dyer, 1997). As such, this (under)current of whiteness may contribute to socializing generations of young people as participants in defending and reproducing the current racialized structures and ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). To date, the research on racial socialization among white children and families (e.g., Hagerman, 2014, 2017; Loyd, & Gaither, 2018; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018) suggests that WRS differs qualitatively from socialization processes among children and families of Color (Loyd & Gaither, 2018), because of the historical construction and maintenance of whiteness and white categorization as *normal*. However, we argue that framing race and whiteness as *doings* may allow for an expansive inquiry into the racial contexts of white racial socialization and into how white adolescents practice whiteness in their everyday actions and behaviors, including and beyond identity

development. Better understanding how future generations of white adolescents are normatively socialized into whiteness and being white on and through social media may be critical for disruptions to and divestments in these processes.

We begin this conceptual paper with a brief overview of the WRS literature, highlighting the dearth of research on social media as settings where WRS processes may operate. Next, we argue for an expansive discussion of WRS as doings, by engaging race as not just a demographic characteristic and identity, but also as processes and practices of securing and maintaining white domination. We then turn to the developmental stage of adolescence as a critical and significant time for studying racial socialization, including analyses of how social media contexts and affordances may complicate this development. Following this, to consider social media's role in WRS, we engage the literature on race and the internet, expressing the need to consider the color- and power-evasive origins of the internet, online racism, racialized pedagogical zones (RPZs), and the concept of *digital* white habitus. Finally, we introduce a conceptual framework for understanding WRS processes in digital social contexts, focusing on setting-level conditions and mechanisms (Figure 1). We apply this conceptual framework to an opinion piece published in *The New York Times* titled, "Racists Are Recruiting. Watch Your White Sons" (Schroeder, 2019). We end with an expressed need for conceptually-guided empirical work to study the influence of social media on WRS processes with a focus on white adolescents and expansive framings of whiteness.

White Racial Socialization

Developmental psychology considers the multidimensional transmission of information about race and ethnicity to be a form of racial-ethnic socialization¹ (RES; Hughes, et al., 2006;

¹ Because of the still ambiguous and overlapping nature of racial and ethnic socialization, we use the combined term 'racial-ethnic socialization' and the abbreviation RES.

Priest et al., 2014). The foundations of RES scholarship sought to elucidate how families of historically and contemporarily marginalized groups (e.g., Black/African Americans, Latinx) experience and navigate racial-ethnic discrimination and maintain cultural heritage, with a large focus on the verbal and behavioral (in)direct messages parents provide their children (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Boykin & Toms, 1985; Hughes et al., 2006; Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020), as well as the impacts of RES on psychosocial development and various outcomes (e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Banerjee, Boyd, & Rowley, 2018; Evans et al., 2012; Hughes et al., 2009; Neblett et al., 2008; Reynolds & Gonzales-Backen, 2017; Wang et al., 2020). As scholarship in this area has grown, researchers have explored different agents of RES (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) and the content of RES messaging (e.g., preparation for bias; Hughes et al., 2006; Hughes et al., 2016; Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020), through varying verbal and behavioral modes (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Priest et al., 2014; Yasui, 2015) within different social contexts (e.g., family, school, neighborhood, see Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Butler-Barnes et al., 2019; Caughy et al., 2002; Stevenson et al., 2005).

An emerging body of research has focused on RES processes among white children and families (e.g., Hagerman, 2014, 2017; Hamm, 2001; Loyd, & Gaither, 2018; Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson, 2018), or white racial socialization (WRS). Literature on WRS has understandably followed in the important footsteps of the RES literature that came before it—extending similar lines of inquiry to white youth and focusing on the content of (in)direct messages and behaviors parents pass down to their white children (e.g., reproducing, ignoring, as well as challenging racism and white supremacy), with variations based on time, context, and stage of development (Loyd & Gaither, 2018; Perry et al., 2021). However, WRS processes may differ from RES among Black families, for example, because whiteness and white categorization are socially constructed as *normal* or unremarkable. Whereas research shows that Black parents

may proactively utilize RES to help their children prepare for and prevent the deleterious effects of racism (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019), it appears that white parents are largely reluctant to explicitly discuss race and racism with their children (Vittrup, 2018; Zucker & Patterson 2018), relying on a passive approach (Abaied & Perry, 2021; Perry et al., 2021).

When they do discuss race, white parents are more likely to rely on a color- and power-evasive² approach (e.g., race is not important or not seeing race) than a color-conscious one (e.g., condemning racial inequity and expressing the importance of racial diversity; Abaied & Perry, 2020; Hagerman, 2016; Vittrup, 2018). In the rare cases when parents do proactively engage in **processes of WRS with** their children, they may be more likely to encourage intergroup contact (e.g., cross-racial friendships and racially diverse classrooms), rather than interrogating structural privilege or specifically about being white (Hagerman, 2017), a form of power-evasion (Neville et al., 2013). Even though focusing on intergroup contact may provide more opportunities to talk about race, research has not found an association between school diversity and parental racial socialization practices (Zucker & Patterson, 2018). As Perry and colleagues suggest (2021), children are taught norms and values that center and favor whiteness and white people as ideals for which to strive—reifying and maintaining systems of racism and whiteness.

Yet, white children form beliefs about race and racism regardless of whether their parents choose to discuss these issues (Loyd & Gaither, 2018). Moreover, because youth are not merely passive containers where information and worldviews are deposited, adolescents will interpret, adapt, adopt, and sometimes reject frames about race received from their parents (Hagerman, 2016). Much of this interpretation and adaptation by white adolescents may depend on the racial

² While we understand the term ‘colorblind’ is widely used to describe this type of approach, we chose to use “color- and power-evasive” instead because *evasion* is a more accurate description than *blindness*, as well as the ableist implications. See Neville and colleagues (2013) for an explanation of color-evasion and power-evasion.

contexts they are in (e.g., often represented through exposure to diversity and People of Color) and the racialized identities they are cultivating (e.g., whether they are committed to color-evasive and/or power-evasive ideologies, which may greatly influence how they identify).

Although white adolescents actively interpret and adapt messages about race and racism, research has shown that throughout the developmental process of becoming young adults, they may be more likely to seek out information that confirms and solidifies their views about race and racism, rather than challenge or change their ideas (Hagerman, 2020). While there are a growing number of studies on WRS, understandings of racial socialization for white adolescents remain limited (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2020), including little to no research on settings of WRS processes for white adolescents.

Settings of White Racial Socialization

To date, most research on WRS focuses on individual-level processes and outcomes. Fewer studies have considered the mechanisms and conditions beyond individuals that may facilitate WRS processes (Hughes et al., 2016; Loyd & Gaither, 2018), such as homes (Caughy et al., 2002), schools (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Hamm, 2001; Towles-Schwen & Fazio, 2001), and neighborhoods (Caughy et al., 2006; Stevenson et al., 2005; Thornton et al., 1990). Hughes, Watford, and Del Toro (2016) describe social contexts—or *settings*—as not just “distinctive, physically and temporally bounded environment(s),” but also as situations and networks in which youth are embedded (p. 17).

Hughes and colleagues (2016) describe four highly salient social contexts for studying RES processes during adolescence: families, peer groups, schools, and neighborhoods (see top layer of Figure 1). They argue for a more expansive analysis of settings—environments, networks, situations—in which adolescents develop ethnic-racial identities, and experience RES and discrimination. Expanding beyond individual features and interpersonal interactions to

settings as the unit of analysis enables researchers to empirically study components, such as role relationships, interpersonal structures, physical and structural features, which all function as affordances for behavioral and social processes (Hughes et al., 2016). This conceptualization includes the racialized social and behavioral norms and expectations of specific social contexts and the ways in which settings may encourage and/or hinder positive youth development more broadly (Hughes et al., 2016).

Hagerman (2018) offers one of the few ethnographic studies of white children's racial socialization, focusing on the racial contexts within which they live. Although her conceptualizations of whiteness are still relatively similar to those of developmental psychologists, Hagerman's work is invaluable for considering the ways that children's racial contexts are decided on and maintained. She argues that racial contexts are often determined through *bundled decisions* by parents (e.g., what schools their children should go to and where they should live). These bundled decisions inform how white children make sense of race (Hagerman, 2016). Although Hagerman (2018) does briefly cover the influence of media exposure on understandings of race for white adolescents, engaging social media as a racial context seemed to be beyond the scope of her current work.

To our knowledge, a recent study by Byrd and Ahn (2020) is the first to consider the internet as a potential context in processes of racial socialization among 1,084 U.S. adolescents (ages 13-17) from four racial-ethnic groups (Asian American, Black/African American, Latinx, and White). The authors explored how various environments—families, schools, neighborhoods, and the internet—influenced academic outcomes, critical consciousness, and psychological well-being in adolescents, with a focus on socialization messages and experiences with/exposures to racial discrimination (e.g., personal experiences of peer and institutional discrimination, vicarious exposure, and online-mediated exposure). Using a person-centered, profile approach,

they uncovered three groups in their diverse sample of adolescents: *average*, who reported low levels of racial socialization from family and school with average levels of racial discrimination in person and online; *positive school*, who reported positive school intergroup interaction, high levels of positive school socialization, and low levels of discrimination in and outside of school (also contained highest percentage of white students); and *high discrimination*, who reported high levels of experiences with and exposures to discrimination from multiple contexts (school, neighborhood, and online). Although this study broke ground as being the first to consider the internet's involvement in racial socialization of white adolescents, the researchers situate the internet as a unilateral source of information and racial discrimination—something to which children are exposed. Without a broader inquiry into the internet as multidimensional racial contexts in which adolescents do and practice whiteness and race, future research that considers the internet as just another form of media exposure may underestimate its role in WRS.

Whiteness as Doings

Many studies of WRS acknowledge the constructed and structural nature of racism and whiteness, while conceptualizing and operationalizing race as an essential demographic characteristic of individuals—something people *have* and *are*. However, research has demonstrated that racism and race are historical and ongoing outputs and byproducts of material inequality, dehumanization, and systemic violence (e.g., systems of enslavement, genocide, and settler colonialism; for a *portrait of white supremacy*, see Leonardo, 2004, p. 146). Given these dynamic systems and processes that comprise racism and race, we argue that to develop a conceptual framework for white socialization online, we first need to reframe whiteness as *doings*.

While speaking about race more broadly, Markus and Moya (2010) argue that race is not a *thing* people *have* or *are*; they are *actions* that people *do*—race exists as *processes* (p. 4).

Situating whiteness as doing focuses attention on the *how* of whiteness: becoming racialized through social processes and orientations, through unnamed and unmarked cultural practices (Frankenburg, 1993), and doing whiteness through “small, innocuous, and constantly repeated rituals” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 147). Framing whiteness and by extension, white socialization, as doings allows for the examination of “processes that secure domination and the privileges associated with it” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 137). In other words, the current ways that whiteness is conceptualized in the literature on WRS may be less useful for understanding how systems of whiteness are reproduced and maintained through everyday processes of action. Framing WRS as doings may allow us to ask comprehensive and expansive questions of how people categorized as white develop and construct identities, while actively problematizing *white(ness)*—not just as a taught identity—but as normalized and harmful orientations and processes (Ahmed, 2007).

Power-evasive framings of white socialization that do not include expansive inquiry into the normativity and invisibility of whiteness act as barriers to understanding the ways in which white socialization reinforces white domination. These framings only allow for reductive inquiries at the extremes: innocence or monstrosity. When white people are framed as *innocent* (often used as a self-descriptor), they are situated as not knowing or not understanding (Wekker, 2016)—individual examples of white ignorance (Mills, 2007, 2014). However, as innocuous as innocence may seem, “innocence is not as innocent as it appears to be” (Wekker, 2016, p. 18). White innocence is connected to deeply disavowed privilege, entitlement, and violence (Wekker, 2016). It is also predicated on the notion that racism and whiteness naturally exist in the world without their production and maintenance through people.

When white people are implicated as *monsters*, they are framed as extreme examples of *bad white people* (Dyer, 1997), actively and willfully participating in white domination (e.g.,

white nationalists). White people often point to these monstrous examples as a means of distancing, to maintain their innocence and separation from racism (also, see *white intellectual alibis*, Leonardo & Zembyas, 2013). Normative whiteness depends on these two extremes (innocence and monstrosity) to disappear the everyday doings—processes and mechanisms—of white socialization securing white domination. Framing white socialization as everyday mundane doings allows for an inquiry into the possibility that systems of white domination may require neither monstrosity, nor innocence. Perhaps white domination just requires white people to go about their everyday lives.

Adolescent Development

During adolescence, young people work to figure out who they are and who they want to become—key components of identity work, a core developmental task for this age period (Erikson, 1968). As such, adolescence is a critical time for further understanding racialized group membership and the ways young people may be labeled and categorized by others, within various social contexts and throughout society. Although processes of socialization around race and whiteness begin in early childhood, WRS takes on special significance in adolescence (Lloyd & Gaither, 2018) and we therefore chose to focus our conceptual framework and paper on adolescence as a unique developmental stage for a few reasons.

First, driven by both brain maturation and cognitive advances in understanding abstraction and nuance (Kuhn, 2009), adolescents can better ponder complicated and abstract social issues such as race and racism and better understand structural forces and hierarchies (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Second, during this developmental period, youth are provided more freedom to explore the world outside of their immediate family (Brown, 2004; Eccles et al., 1997; Hughes et al., 2016; Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). Encounters within these new contexts may expose them to new ideas, may challenge some of their existing

assumptions, and may displace existing understandings of race (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019).

A third and related factor that makes learning about race especially significant during adolescence is the increased importance of peers (Brown, 1990; Brown & Larson, 2009; Ward, 2004). Youth turn to their peers for signals about what is expected when it comes to unpacking and modeling racialized behaviors, while also regulating each other to maintain conformity to particular social norms and hierarchies (Rivas-Drake & Umaña-Taylor, 2019). A fourth relevant factor of this developmental period is puberty, which creates adultlike bodies and appearances and brings on sexual maturation (Susman & Dorn, 2013). Pubertal changes may prompt individuals to be more focused on their physical appearance, more susceptible to images and media standards of white beauty, and may raise concerns regarding body image (Cotter, Kelly, Mitchell, & Mazzeo, 2013; Grabe & Hyde, 2006). Finally, adolescence is a time when young people start to more frequently participate and engage on social media (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Wood, Bukowski, & Lis, 2016)—contexts and autonomy they may have never experienced before.

Adolescents on Social Media

Social media are broadly defined as mobile and internet-based interactive platforms with various users, content, and functions, allowing people to play, (co)create, exchange, discuss, and modify user-generated content (e.g., text, images, video; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011; Ouridi et al., 2014). Increasing access to and rapid adoption of social media during adolescence (Anderson, & Jiang, 2018; The Associated Press and NORC, 2017; Ballard, 2019; Common Sense Media, 2019; Lenhart et al., 2015) suggests that they may play significant roles in youths' cultivating understandings of the world around them and consolidating their identities (Loyd & Gaither, 2018). More generally, research has suggested that social media use can be

both helpful (e.g., security, social connection, relationships) and harmful (e.g., discrimination, social media addiction, cyberbullying) to adolescent well-being (Best et al., 2014) and varies widely from adolescent to adolescent (Beyens et al., 2020).

Diverse perspectives have also emerged concerning social media's role in teaching adolescents about race. Some scholars frame social media as positive forces in racial socialization, suggesting that they may provide an outlet for developing complex understandings of race, offer access to helpful information about racism's socio-historical roots, and lead to healthy intra- and interracial experiences (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014)—even offering adolescents of Color opportunities to confront and contest racist dominant narratives (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016; Carney, 2016; Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2017). For example, Eschmann (2020) studied online experiences of racial microaggressions among college Students of Color. In response to witnessing brutal language and racism online, he found that these students engaged in two main forms of resistance: *racial checking* and the creation of *online counterpublics*. Racial checking refers to the practice of critically responding to racial microaggressions online through public displays of admonishment for racist actions that may go unchallenged and unpunished in other social contexts. Further, Eschmann argues that people are more available and willing to talk about race in online counterpublics—“Whites are not *silent*, and people of Color are not *silenced*” (p. 12).

On the other hand, some scholars contend that race-related experiences on social media may have negative implications for adolescent health and development (Valkenburg, & Peter, 2011; Wolniewicz, et al., 2018) and psychological functioning (English et al., 2020; Tynes et al., 2008; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015). These implications extend to school settings, as well, where adolescents who report increases in online racial discrimination also report decreases in academic motivation (Tynes et al., 2015). Additionally, adolescents online may experience racial

miseducation (Tynes, et al., 2018), racial microaggressions (Tynes et al., 2018; Williams, et al., 2016), racial harassment (Duggan, 2017), vicarious trauma (Tynes & Markoe, 2010; Tynes et al., 2018), racial discrimination (Tynes et al., 2008, Tynes et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2016), and hate crimes (Citron, 2014; Tynes, et al., 2018).

Research has shown that adolescents of Color frequently experience individual and vicarious racial discrimination online and are more vulnerable than white-identifying adolescents to being subjected to online ethnic-racial discrimination and the associated mental health consequences (Tynes et al., 2015). English and colleagues (2020) found that Black adolescents report over five experiences of online racial discrimination per day, and online experiences of discrimination were more common than offline ones. Although there are studies on the experiences of racism online for Black adolescents, less is known about the involvement of white adolescents and the social reality of (normatively white) digital contexts in online racial discrimination and racism.

One may ask: how do adolescents categorized as white experience, witness, and participant in online racism and racial discrimination? What features of online social contexts facilitate and maintain processes of racial discrimination and racism? How might these digital contextual features impact WRS processes for white adolescents online? Even though research shows that social media are significant social contexts during adolescence, especially regarding racialized learning and experiences related to online racism and discrimination, developmental psychology has yet to seriously consider social media as relevant social contexts for WRS processes. We begin our efforts to integrate these notions by reviewing the specific features of social media platforms that may inform the nature of their use and potential impact.

Social Media Affordances

One aspect that distinguishes online socialization from offline socialization contexts are the affordances offered by social media (see the middle and bottom layers of Figure 1).

Affordances refer to the functional and relational aspects of artifacts that can be recognized by users and frame the possibilities for action in relation to, with, and through the artifact (Gibson, 1979; Hutchby, 2001; Zhao et al., 2013). In other words, affordances are properties of social media that may allow users to do things on and through digital interfaces. For example, many social media platforms offer mechanisms to group content, such as hashtags (#), affording users the ability to connect their content to events, communities, movements, trends, and other similar information, as well as search content with relative ease. More specifically, affordances are actions users *perceive* to be possible, beyond what may be intended by creators and designers of the artifact (Brock Jr., 2020; Hutchby, 2001; Norman, 1988; for example, see *hashtag activism*, Jackson, Bailey, & Welles, 2020).

Social media offer various functions and tools for adolescents, such as relationship building, identity development, expanded learning, and practice of social skills (Moreno & Uhls, 2019). Although early scholarship largely treated social media peer interactions as a mirror image of offline experiences (Nesi et al., 2018), other scholars situate social media as fundamentally different from offline experiences, offering distinct affordances and unique contexts that transform adolescent peer relationships (boyd, 2010; Nesi et al., 2018).

Acknowledging the uniqueness of the social media context, Nesi and colleagues (2018) argue that social media transform peer relationships through several affordances: asynchronicity, permanence, publicness, availability, cue absence, quantifiability, and visualness. *Asynchronicity* refers to the time lapse between different aspects of a conversation or interaction, which may allow adolescents time to consider their responses, carefully curate their online self-presentation, and engage in multiple interactions simultaneously. *Permanence* reflects how accessible content

or messages remain following the original interaction or post (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015; Nesi et al., 2018), and may be considered a driving force for other social media affordances, such as searching (boyd, 2010), retrieving (Peter & Valkenburg, 2013), and replicating content (boyd, 2010). *Publicness* refers to adolescents having the ability to use social media to communicate with a variety of audiences—peers, adults, and strangers—differing in sizes and to a degree not possible offline (Nesi et al., 2018). Utilizing prior work on accessibility (McFarland & Ployhart 2015; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), Nesi and colleagues (2018) consider *availability* as encompassing an ease of receiving and initiating contact with others and joining networks—consisting of a removal of barriers to communication.

Whereas offline face-to-face communication may include interpersonal cues such as vocal tone, physical touch, gestures, and facial expressions, *cue absence* on social media can influence social interactions and can vary depending on the specific tool—from seeing another person on video chat to total anonymity in an online forum (Nesi et al., 2018). The final two affordances are not represented in prior frameworks but are believed to have significant implications for adolescent development (Nesi et al., 2018). One is, *quantifiability*, and includes features such as likes, followers, retweets, views, and other public numerical metrics. The final affordance is the extent to which an interface or platform emphasizes *visualness*, or photographs and videos as a central component.

When considering WRS processes, future research must expansively examine the racialized **construction** of social media affordances and their relationship to normative practices of whiteness. For example, what role do publicness and permanence play in white adolescents practicing race online? Does the visualness of Instagram influence whether white adolescents maintain or disrupt white standards of beauty? How does cue absence influence WRS processes knowing that white parents often practice indirect and color- and power-evasive forms of

socialization? More research is needed to explore these questions and others, and to help uncover other potential social media affordances implicated in digital-WRS processes. It is also important to mention that many research approaches to studying social media (e.g., as a social network or microblog) may miss *cultural* affordances of these sites (Brock Jr., 2020). Future research should consider the cultural affordances of social media and their involvement in maintaining as well as countering whiteness and white domination. In the section outlining our conceptual framework for digital-WRS, we give examples of how social media affordances may transform WRS processes.

Whiteness and the Internet

Affordances are not the only ways that social media may transform WRS processes. When considering WRS in digital contexts, the infrastructure and interface of the internet become critically important to accurately situate the practices, behaviors, and interactions occurring on and through social media (Brock, 2018). The internet is frequently conceptualized as neutral and democratizing—as “the great equalizer” (Nakamura, 2013a). An often-cited example of the internet’s origins in color- and power-evasive ideology is a cartoon published in *The New Yorker* on July 5, 1993, of a dog on a computer with the caption: “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” The argument was that the signifying markers of *race* would no longer be present, and therefore racism would not exist online.

To this day, many researchers continue to theorize and conceptualize the internet as racially neutral and separate from racism (Brock Jr., 2020; Daniels, 2013, 2015; McPherson, 2013). However, as many scholars have convincingly argued and empirically supported, the racial neutrality of the internet has always been a myth (e.g., Chun, 2009; Daniels, 2013; 2015; Nakamura, 2006, 2009, 2013b; Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013; Noble, 2018; Tynes et al., 2018). Instead, in many ways, the internet follows in the footsteps of traditional mass media

representations of race (Baker-Bell et al., 2017; Noble, 2018; Tukachinsky et al., 2015), tending to reflect white supremacist and anti-Black dominant narratives (Adams-Bass et al., 2014; Daniels, 2009, 2013; Jakubowicz, 2017; Klein, 2017; Nakamura, 2014).

In *Distributed Blackness*, Brock Jr. (2020) writes of the internet as “an enactment of whiteness,” as white people communicating online becomes normative and universalized—white communication and interests are assumed to be *everyone’s* communication and interests (e.g., representation on Instagram being overwhelmingly white). The normalization and universalization of whiteness seek to obfuscate processes through which white supremacy is secured: systems of domination and inequity (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Brock Jr., 2020; Dyer, 1997). In co-occurrence with the normalization of whiteness and white people, is the otherization and marginalization of any practices and people who do not fit within and among whiteness and white people (Hall, 1997)—even online (Gray, 2017, 2018).

In other words, the racialization of the internet systemically marginalizes, otherizes, and devalues specific groups of users and practices (e.g., users of Color through digital racism), and prioritizes and normalizes users who are seen as “normal” and thus superior (e.g., white users through ideologies of whiteness). Whiteness and racism work in tandem to support racial domination and inequity even and especially through digital social contexts (see top of Figure 1). For example, Black content creators and activists may have their posts removed for calling attention to whiteness and racism despite breaking no social media terms of use (e.g., Gassam Asare, 2020; Parham, 2020).

Indeed, white cultural domination and racism can even be built into the infrastructure and interface of online spaces. It can be assumed that social media designers, creators, and coders design interfaces, create content, and structure networks in their own image (Brock Jr., 2020). Thus, considering the demographic composition of the tech industry, with a vast majority of

leadership (63-73%) being white in 2014 (Molla & Lightner, 2014) and data suggesting that little representative change has happened since (Houser, 2020), this image is likely to be white. This dynamic suggests that whiteness and racism on the internet may not rely on any specific perpetrators, but may also be enacted through the design, interface, and “digital networks of social interaction” —likes, shares, posts, and retweets—or what Brock Jr. defines as *weak-tie racism* (p. 156; see middle and bottom layers of Figure 1).

As an example, Brock Jr. (2020) uses the dissemination of Trump’s racist misinformation and xenophobia through Facebook and Twitter using likes and retweets, (including the involvement of automated algorithms), “promoting an atmosphere of social death to be experienced thirdhand by Black internet users” (p. 158). Thus, participation in online, weak-tie racism and whiteness may only require that white people use social media as it was developed to be used—even just witnessing, liking, and sharing content that already exists, rather than generating any new content themselves. Therefore, online, weak-tie racism may be arguably *more* pervasive than offline racism through social media affordances and normalization of whiteness, including the potential for wider audience involvement, the utilization of a platform’s interactive features, and revictimization through a permanent digital record (Palfrey & Gasser, 2011).

Racialized Pedagogical Zones

In line with understanding whiteness as practices and enacted ideologies—as *doings* (Markus & Moya, 2010)—racialized pedagogical zones (RPZs) are an important inclusion in our conceptual framework, considering social media beyond merely novel sources of information and messaging (see left box of Figure 1). RPZs, or the unique settings that allow for the *doing* and *undoing* of race, have been positioned as *teaching* entrenched ideologies of race and racism and incentivizing these learnings through the pleasure principles of social media platform—likes,

views, followers, notifications, and the possibility for increased *exposure* and *impressions* (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Gray, 2018; Tynes et al., 2015). RPZs emerge from intersecting features—such as settings and dialogue—and surpass passive consumption of media while representing the practice of performing or “doing race” (Gray, 2018; Richard & Gray, 2018).

In other words, social media contexts create hypothetical racialized classrooms—where adolescents learn about normalized expectations of their racial group and can practice performing and contesting these expectations with others. The intersecting features of social contexts come together to create RPZs and may be covert, seemingly neutral, and—similarly to racism and whiteness—built into the digital infrastructure and interface. As outlined by Nakamura (2013), everyday online racism continues to be treated as a glitch in the signals of the internet, rather than built into the signal itself—as whiteness and racism are digitally normalized.

The following example shows the influence of racialized digital infrastructures and the potential creation of RPZs, socializing normative and hegemonic perspectives of race and whiteness. An artificial intelligence researcher (Faddoul, 2020) found that TikTok recommends new content and accounts based on people who look the same—on some presumed and chosen physiognomic characteristics of race in their filter bubble photographs. In other words, if a young person follows white people on TikTok, their recommendation algorithm will suggest other white people to follow. Similarly, if people follow perceivably Black content creators, their algorithm will recommend more perceivably Black profiles (Epps-Darling, 2020; Faddoul, 2020). Although young people still have the opportunity to practice their own agency and follow who they want, future research of white socialization processes online will have to contend with the infrastructural and algorithmic factors of social media environments securing and maintaining systems of domination (e.g., forms of segregation and inequitable resource

distribution) —systems that may be triggered by no human-involvement beyond the original and iterative coders and designers.

Thus, it seems that human-coded algorithms, as in this TikTok example, can further segregate white adolescents from their peers of Color (Epps-Darling, 2020), not just keeping them from experiencing similar content, but also from building digital relationships and solidifying a lack of awareness of racism and inequity (Lewis Jr, 2021). Although some may have hypothesized that access to social media would lead to even more exposure to other people who may not be encountered in offline, face-to-face interactions, especially because of the current segregation practices in the United States, there are many examples of recommendation algorithms relying on assumed and ingrained online practices of racialized homophily, which could reify offline segregation. As adolescents use social media to understand their own lives and the role of race and ethnicity therein, and to practice *doing* race and whiteness (Tynes et al., 2015), future research must consider how various infrastructural settings *(re)make race* and *(re)produce* racism and whiteness through intersecting features of RPZs, as well as how adolescents participate in and experience social media.

Digital White Habitus

An additional construct that may help to frame doings of whiteness online is the notion of *digital white habitus*. Bonilla-Silva (2017) defines white habitus as “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (p. 121). Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick (2006) document three phenomena related to white habitus which may also extend into digital spaces. First, they note that white people are likely to experience racial segregation and isolation in their neighborhoods and schools while growing up. Second, white people rarely interpret this segregation from Black people as racial (this omission may also be extended to other racialized

groups). Third, the authors suggest that white people are very unlikely to develop lasting, significant relationships with Black people. Considering the normalization and universalization of whiteness through designed digital interfaces, infrastructures, and automated processes, as well as social networks of interaction, we suggest that the internet creates a *digital white habitus*.

White habitus would suggest that many white youth are likely experiencing racial segregation and isolation through traditional social contexts of offline WRS (see top layer of Figure 1). As these social contexts extend into digital spaces (see middle layer of Figure 1), the socialization process of white habitus may as well. White habitus may even inform blueprints for involvement in novel and unique digital social contexts (see bottom layer of Figure 1). However, Hagerman (2016) offers a helpful critique of white habitus, arguing that it is too prescriptive and does not account for the agency of white children to negotiate, reinterpret, and reinvent white ideologies and norms. White children presented with frames of colorblind **racial** ideology demonstrate that they may reproduce, rework, and at times, reject these frames altogether (Hagerman, 2016), depending on the social setting and conditions. Future research on digital processes of WRS should engage the possibility of a digital white habitus through a recreation of digital segregation and a lack of meaningful interracial relationships online, while also accounting for the active role children play in white socialization processes.

Conceptual Framework of Digital White Racial Socialization

We present a conceptual framework on Digital-WRS focusing on setting-level mechanisms and conditions through social media that may facilitate WRS processes (see Figure 1). Through a foundational grounding in whiteness as doings, we conceptualize social media as extending and expanding traditional settings of WRS and—due to transformational aspects of social media affordances, weak-tie racism, and RPZs—creating new and unique social contexts facilitating WRS processes. Whiteness and racism remain larger systems involved in processes

of securing and maintaining domination and racial stratification, while influencing processes of WRS on and offline (displayed as overarching at the top of the model). This framing allows us to consider both the individual processes, experiences, and identities of white adolescents, while also focusing on the ways these processes of white socialization fit into larger structures and patterns of whiteness and racism.

The top layer of the framework represents traditionally studied offline settings of WRS (families, peers, schools, and neighborhoods). These settings are not mutually exclusive, they are overlapping. WRS processes, comprised of a wide variety of messages, behaviors, and practices (e.g., white supremacist attitudes, colorblind racial ideology, and racial justice activism), may span multiple settings (represented by the dotted lines and circular arrows between each setting, illustrating the ability for WRS to go between and across settings). Environmental, networked, and situational features of WRS settings may shift and influence one another, requiring consideration of multiple settings and the relationships between them.

The middle, extension layer displays the potential for these traditional settings of socialization to extend into digital spaces. WRS processes in traditional settings from traditional sources may influence how white adolescents engage social media contexts and inform digital practices and behaviors. On the other hand, social media contexts may also influence WRS processes in traditional settings (represented by the multidirectional arrows between the top traditional layer and the middle, expansion layer). For example, offline forms of racialized violence are widely shared on social media, including ongoing structural and everyday violence against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color and displays of organized white nationalism such as the Capitol insurrection and Charlottesville, as are various resistance movements (e.g., Standing Rock resistance against the Dakota Access Pipeline and global Black Lives Matter movements). Despite the high visibility of these events and viral coverage across social media

platforms, white parents may still not talk to their children about them (e.g., Underhill, 2018). Even though most white parents practice racial color- and power-evasive approaches to RES (Abaied & Perry, 2020; Hagerman, 2016), social media may allow white adolescents to both witness and participate in resistances against systems and acts of racism not accessible through offline social contexts. Without parental input or guidance, white youth are likely left to process this disturbing **racialized** content on social media on their own.

Finally, the bottom layer represents the potential for social media to create unique social contexts not experienced in offline settings of adolescents' lives. While whiteness and racism are not new or unique to social media, the transformative capacity of *social media affordances*, the internet as an *enactment of whiteness*, and online *weak-tie racism* may lead to transformative intersecting features of *RPZs* and novel WRS processes not represented in traditional WRS dynamics. For example, the *quantifiability*, *permanence*, and *replicability* of social media allow for white youth to spectate and participate in many practices of networked whiteness and **anti-Black** dehumanization. These practices range from lip-syncing the "N" word in dance challenge videos on TikTok (even *games* to "Not Say the "N" word" by reciting songs by Black artists that use the word many times, see Crave, 2020); engaging in practices of digital blackface (Jackson, 2017; Parham, 2020); examples of white adolescents visually reenacting murders of Black people by police (e.g., #GeorgeFloydChallenge, see Collman, 2020), and holding mock "slave auctions" of Black students on Snapchat (Merritt, 2021). The quantifiability of impressions and engagements in social media contexts through digital platform design may even incentivize white adolescent participation in online racism and the *doing* of whiteness through replicating others.

When conceptualizing the relationship between each layer and the processes facilitating WRS in various contexts, we draw on *RPZs* (Everett & Watkins, 2008; Tynes et al., 2015; Tynes

et al., 2018) to consider the intersecting features of environments, networks, and situations as potential sites for inquiry. By analyzing and empirically mapping intersecting features, we may be able to better understand the setting-level characteristics of WRS processes online, offline, and all the layers in between. It is important to note that our conceptual framework does not represent a linear contextual progression from offline to online, but rather suggests a multidirectional relationship between online and offline social contexts involved in socializing adolescents into whiteness. To demonstrate further, we apply our model of digital WRS to an example of a tweet and a subsequent *New York Times* article by a concerned white mother of two white sons.

“Racists Are Recruiting. Watch Your White Sons”

In an October 2019 opinion piece published in *The New York Times* titled, *Racists Are Recruiting. Watch Your White Sons*, the author—Joanna Schroeder—a parent of two white adolescent sons urgently calls upon white parents to “prevent [their] sons from becoming indoctrinated by a growing racist movement that thrives online and causes real-life devastation” (Schroeder, 2019). Schroeder follows this by stating not only does she not want their sons to turn into white mass murderers, but also “to keep them from becoming supporters of the racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and gender- or sexuality-based hatred that is on the rise.” She positions white supremacy as “not just a person in a K.K.K. hood,” but also the “seemingly friendly voice in the videogame forum.”

While preceded by examples of similar parental concerns (e.g., Anonymous, 2019; Kamenetz, 2018), Schroeder’s Twitter thread (See Appendix), shared close to 100,000 times, and subsequent NYT opinion piece sparked international news coverage and wide concern about white children’s digital innocence and vulnerability to the fringes of white nationalism and extremism (e.g., Gibson, 2019; Prasad, 2019; Sidner, 2019; Simon & Bowman, 2019). These

fears are not unfounded, as white supremacist groups were quick to adopt the internet for recruitment and spreading of propaganda (Daniels, 2009). However, white parents may be overlooking influential and pervasive processes of adolescents becoming “supporters of racism.” To further illustrate digital-WRS, we apply our conceptual framework to these recently expressed fears of white adolescent sons being recruited by white supremacists and nationalists online.

Applying Conceptual Framework to Opinion Piece

As discussed in our conceptual framework, we argue that there is a multidimensional relationship between processes of WRS and social media contexts influenced by systems of whiteness and online weak-tie racism, which are critical for situating experiences of white adolescents on social media (i.e., the overarching systems of the D-WRS framework). Although a traditional approach to studying WRS would align with Schroeder’s focus on messaging, there are limitations to narrowly framing digital-WRS as ill-intentioned individuals on the internet. Our framework starts, as this paper has, with a broad reframing of white socialization as not just messaging, but *doings*. The normative nature of whiteness and white socialization are like a current in a river—doing *nothing* takes white adolescents *downstream* where processes of hegemonic whiteness currently intend them to go—to color- and power-evasive ideologies and practices, and protecting *being white* as dominant, superior, and normal. In other words, normative digital-WRS for white adolescents may lead to similar practices of racism and supremacy, including racialized complacency, apathy, and complicities in whiteness, resecuring its position of power (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006)—beyond the intervention of ill-intended white nationalist recruiters. It is likely that the author’s sons have been and are continually being socialized into *doings*—practices and behaviors—of whiteness

through systems of normative and color- and power-evasive white socialization online and offline.

The **top layer** of our conceptual framework for digital-WRS considers the traditional settings in which white adolescents participate. In this situation, researchers studying WRS in various social contexts may ask about the racial segregation of these white sons' neighborhoods, the racial(ized) makeup of their schools and peer networks, and the various ways these contextual features (often framed as exposures) may relate to the messages they receive within their families (including the author herself). The **middle layer** of the conceptual framework would consider the ways that social media may be expanding and extending the offline social contexts in which white adolescents are participating. In the case of the *NYT* article, we may inquire into the multidirectional relationship between the traditional offline settings just mentioned and the environments, networks, and situations in which these white youth find themselves online.

For example, offline socialization processes within the home, school, neighborhood, and among peers may influence how **white adolescents** engage information and messaging on social media. As mentioned earlier, research has shown white youth may be more likely to seek out information that confirms and solidifies their views about race and racism, rather than challenge or change their ideas (Hagerman, 2020). As such, the author's white sons may be more likely to utilize social media and the internet more broadly to clarify and support their current racial ideologies and understandings. In other words, if her sons were to look for content or communities to clarify and solidify specific racist dominant narratives—such as “Black on Black crime” or “examples of reverse racism”—they would find it. A focus on the middle layer may involve considering how the author's sons are engaging social media, including the sites they use, the people with whom they communicate, the content they are exposed to, and the ways that

the mechanisms and features of these digital environments facilitate WRS processes and interrelate with the traditional offline spaces in which they find themselves (e.g., at home and in their own neighborhoods).

Given dynamics of whiteness, weak-tie racism, social media affordances, and the subsequent creation of digital opportunities to practice *doing race*, the **bottom layer** of the conceptual framework engages the new and unique social contexts in which the author's white sons may experience WRS processes. The bottom layer of our conceptual framework asks the questions: as they engage on social media, what social contexts are the author's white sons experiencing that are only available to them through these digital spaces? Are there situations and networks unique to these digital spaces that are facilitating their understandings of whiteness, racialization, and allowing them to practice race? Furthermore, how are the mechanisms and features of these novel contexts facilitating and encouraging the (un)doing of whiteness throughout their lives?

To **Schroeder's** credit, various social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, reddit, and 8chan) have been known to contain unique contexts where white nationalist ideologies and discourses flourish in ways potentially not present in her sons' offline lives (Daniels, 2009). However, to reduce digital-WRS processes to these spaces alone is a mistake. Processes of digital-WRS likely **also** exist in seemingly innocuous environments, networks, situations, and interfaces on the internet, where the projects of race and racism are not as overt. In this case, participation in whiteness and anti-Black racism on social media must be considered in expansive and nuanced ways, not limited to isolated individual acts and messaging. This analysis includes considering forms of weak-tie racism—networked racism—the author's sons may enact through consuming, liking, sharing, and repeating culturally dehumanizing content and interactions. Research has shown that white people are less likely than other racialized groups to post or perceive content

online as being race-related (Anderson & Hitlin, 2016), further normalizing and universalizing digital weak-tie racism. In the context of the NYT piece, the author and her white son's may not be aware (or perhaps, evading awareness) of race-related content and patterned racialized actions on their social media feeds and within their own posts, missing critical moments and hidden labors of white socialization. More empirical inquiry is needed to understand the impact and influence of participation in and spectatorship of weak-tie racism in digital-WRS processes.

Social media affordances such as publicness and availability may provide adolescents opportunities to interact with people outside of their parents' direct supervision and control. These interactions may not be inherently positive or negative and could range from chatting with neo-Nazis and sharing eugenics propaganda (Epps-Darling, 2020) to participating in online counterpublics (Eschmann, 2020). Online counterpublics are an important example of RPZs—the unique environments, networks, and situations in which adolescents find themselves that teach and allow for the *doing* of race, as well as the *undoing*. If the author's white sons are participating in online counterpublics where there are frequent, complex conversations about racism and whiteness, they may be more likely to ask questions, challenge, and take agency in traditional processes of WRS with their parents or guardians and in traditional offline WRS settings (e.g., the multidirectional arrows between the top and middle layers of the conceptual framework). However, as mentioned earlier, more work must be done to understand the potential pre-designed mechanisms within social media contexts that may work to prevent the development of online counterpublics and maintain traditional forms of power-evasive WRS. For example, it is likely that the author's white sons are subjected to automated recommendation algorithms and processes that reproduce similar forms of offline segregation in online spaces and lead to forms of digital white ignorance (Martín, 2021; Mills, 2007).

Future research must be driven by expansive conceptualizations of social media beyond a source of racialized messages, to the ways adolescents practice *doing race* online through witnessing, interacting, spectating, and participating in many interlocking and overlapping social medias settings—networks, situations, and environments—and the intersecting features at the level of setting (RPZs). As mentioned earlier, research suggests that youth negotiate the messages they receive and select which ones to internalize (Hagerman, 2014; 2016; Hughes & Chen, 1999; Hughes, Watford, & Del Toro, 2016). Future research should consider the amount of customization social media offers adolescents and could highlight adolescent decision-making processes involved in digital-WRS (or lack thereof), including decisions around building and performing online white identities. If the article’s author had an expansive, settings-based understanding of digital-WRS informed by our conceptual framework, how might her inquiries into her sons’ social media use have differed, especially when seeking to prevent them “from becoming supporters of the racism?”

Conclusion

In this conceptual paper, we **put forth** two main arguments: 1) we argue for an expanded conceptualization of white racial socialization as doings, and 2) argue that social media may be changing processes of WRS for adolescents, through an extension of traditional settings (e.g., families, peer groups, schools, and neighborhoods) and creating unique online social contexts. These unique social media settings—consisting of environments, networks, and situations—must be considered as RPZs allowing adolescents to practice *doing race* and *whiteness*. Collectively, these digital social contexts for WRS lead to the ongoing design and production of a digital white habitus. While socialization around whiteness has specific implications for youth categorized as white, future research will likely have implications for all young people and racial-ethnic socialization broadly. We have attempted to make clear that deep, conceptually-guided work is

needed to empirically study and map the characteristics of settings on social media while observing their individual-level impact on WRS processes for adolescents. These new and expansive directions for developmental psychology, and WRS more specifically, have implications for better understanding the ways that whiteness seeps into everyday, mundane practices and life, including imagining and building ways of doing and being otherwise.

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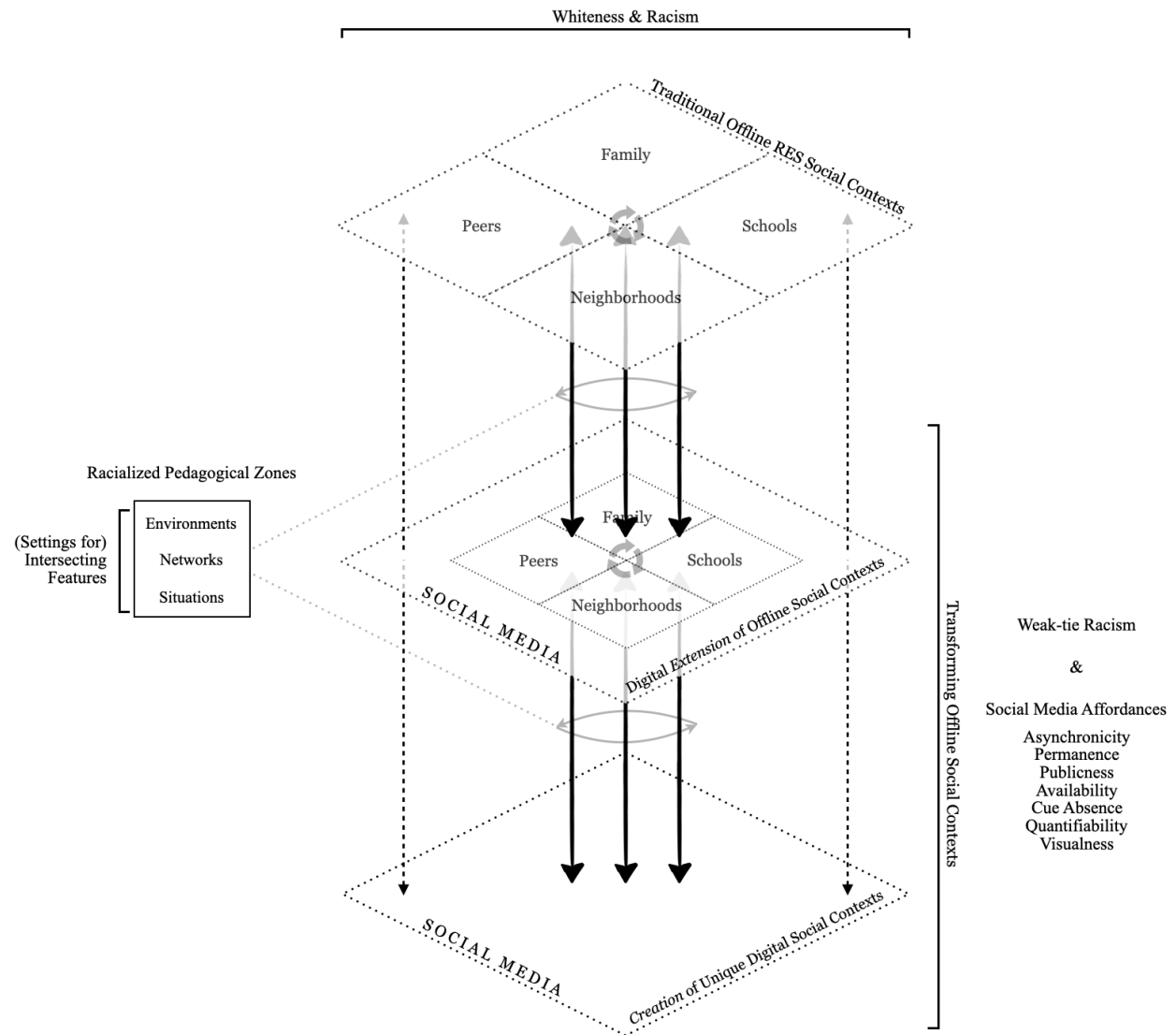
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Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework for Digital White Racial Socialization.



Appendix.

Beginning of Schroeder's twitter thread.



joanna schroeder ✓

@iproposethis



Do you have white teenage sons?

Listen up.

I've been watching my boys' online behavior & noticed that social media and vloggers are actively laying groundwork in white teens to turn them into alt-right/white supremacists.

Here's how:

12:20 AM · Aug 13, 2019 · Twitter for Android

76.1K Retweets **14.2K** Quote Tweets **172K** Likes

Digital White Racial Socialization: Social Media and the Case of Whiteness

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