A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model
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Abstract
In recent decades, anti-immigrant, racist and nationalist attitudes have become increasingly mainstream, transforming public debates on immigration and immigrants in Europe and beyond. These attitudes and sentiments have been widely disseminated and amplified through digital communication, including commercial social media platforms. To better understand the relationship between racism and digital communication, it is necessary to move beyond media-centric explanations and simplified discussions of online hate speech and platform regulation. Therefore, this paper proposes a multi-theoretical approach to digital racism, i.e., racist content produced and circulated online. The paper presents an understanding of digital racism in relation to four perspectives: networked affect, nationalism, masculinity and conspiracy thinking. It takes a relational approach to these theoretical perspectives and discusses how they could be utilized to understand and analytically approach digital racism at the macro, meso and micro levels.

Contents
Introduction
Networked affect
Nationalism
Masculinity
Conspiracy thinking and theories
Concluding discussion

Introduction
In recent decades, anti-immigrant, racist, and nationalist attitudes have moved from the fringe to the mainstream of public debate and policy-making. Even if racism has never been an exclusively “illiberal phenomenon,” the current process of mainstreaming calls for a better understanding of racist ideas and attitudes within liberal societies (Mondon and Winter, 2020), including those with long-standing self-perceived cultures of tolerance and openness.

Racist and xenophobic attitudes and sentiments have been widely disseminated and amplified through digital communication, including commercial social media platforms (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017). Moreover, political actors with racist, xenophobic, nativist and chauvinist views have benefited greatly from the dominance of global online platforms for everyday information seeking and communication
A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model (Titley, 2019). In order to better understand the relationship between racism and digital communication, this article moves beyond media-centric explanations and simplified notions of online hate speech. It proposes instead a multi-theoretical approach to “digital racism” (Siapera, 2019), i.e., racist content produced and circulated online.

The aim of the paper is to present a model of digital racism in relation to four perspectives: networked affect, nationalism, masculinity, and conspiracy thinking (Figure 1). In particular, it discusses these as factors that underpin the articulation, circulation and amplification of digital racism. These perspectives offer separate entry points into the understanding of digital racism. Networked affect provides explanations of how the affective dimensions of digital technology have enabled and reinforced the construction of race, culture, religion, etc., and thus propelled wide-spread notions of inclusion/exclusion, practices of othering and discrimination. In particular, the perspective highlights how the socio-technical features of networked communication impact racism in multiple ways. Theoretical contributions on nationalism and masculinity on the other hand, offer insights to the broader socio-political practices and ideologies that have shaped racism, both historically and presently, and how digital communication relates to and reinforces offline socio-political practices and identities. Scholarly work on conspiracy thinking provides ways of thinking about race, power and conspiracy, and moreover how online communication has amplified and transformed historical offline conspiracy imaginaries relating to race and power.

**Figure 1:** Digital racism.
The four theoretical perspectives are distinct as they provide different rationales and ways of understanding digital racism, however, as the subsequent sections demonstrate, they are also profoundly relational. The paper argues that the proposed modular approach to digital racism, through its various levels of abstractions, enables flexible entry points to different forms and expressions of digital racism. Simultaneously, it stresses that digital racism needs to be approached from a relational perspective, assessing the intersections between networked affect, nationalism, masculinity and conspiracy thinking.

This paper further discusses how these theoretical perspectives could be used to understand and analytically approach digital racism at the macro, meso and micro levels. The focus is theoretical, but it engages with empirical research on digital racism and xenophobia from various national and political contexts. It draws mainly on research from European and other Western contexts, therefore, this limitation will be addressed at the end. The wider purpose of this article is to contribute to an ongoing discussion on racism in the digital age and to critically engage with sociological, political and socio-technical factors that reinforce racism.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, it examines the role of digital platforms in the circulation of digital racism. Drawing on the concept of networked affect (Hillis, et al., 2015), this section examines both organized and “ambient” forms of racism online (Siapera, 2019). Secondly, it assesses how various articulations of nationalism contribute to the construction of race, ethnicity and other signifiers of inclusion/exclusion online. Thirdly, it discusses digital racism in relation to masculinity and the (re)turn to historicized imaginaries of masculine gender in contemporary digital cultures. In particular, it identifies ideals of a “natural” hegemonic masculinity (Kaiser, 2022) and their relationship to race, ethnicity and nation. Fourthly, it discusses the role of conspiracy thinking and theories, and how they relate to ideas of race, politics and power in the digital age. This paper then presents a model that enables an analytical assessment of these four perspectives at the macro, meso and micro levels of digital racism.

Networked affect

Two decades ago, Back [1] recognized that new technologies “allow new horizons for the expression of whiteness” and race politics. The emergence of interactive digital communication has affected the ways in which racism and xenophobia are articulated, shaped and distributed in the public sphere (Titley, 2019). While the racial politics of the far-right were shaped by digital communication practices as early as the late 1980s, the expansion of global social media platforms over the past two decades has changed the way racism enters the public sphere and has similarly affected the way that immigrants and minorities are discursively constructed. In particular, the community-building aspects of digital platforms, including their reach, scale and socio-technical infrastructure, make them vastly different from pre-digital media systems. In order to theoretically capture the complex relationships between digital communication technologies and racial politics and discourse, the following section discusses digital racism in terms of networked affect (e.g. Hillis, et al., 2015).

Contemporary racism and xenophobia are caused and shaped by a variety of factors. These include socio-economic conditions, lack of social cohesion, social unrest, failed integration policies and historical social/racial relations and regimes, as well as specific individual factors, all which has been thoroughly researched. Digital communication adds to these diverse aspects in new and complex ways. In particular, research shows that digital communication not only makes racist attitudes and sentiments more accessible to the public, but also amplifies them between citizens and within society, gradually pushing the boundaries of what counts as publicly acceptable discourse about immigrants and minorities (Nikunen, et al., 2021; Farkas, et al., 2018; Åkerlund, 2022; Ekman, 2019). Consequently, this article does not suggest that digital racism should be understood as something “outside” offline racist attitudes and behaviors in society — but as integrated with these. Digital communication is embedded in everyday-life practices, and shapes the way we perceive and construct material conditions and social relations, on both a collective and individual level.
In this sense digital racism is a part of the “mediated construction of reality” (Couldry and Hepp, 2017).

Dean [2] argues that online social networks “produce and circulate affect as a binding technique.” Similarly, Papacharissi [3] states that “networked public formations ... are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment.” Social media is characterized by the circulation of information and provides various forms of enjoyment and connectivity (with friends, family, colleagues, etc.). However, a vital factor that underpins user gratification is emotive, and the communication between users involves affective attachments. Networked affect can be understood as the various forms of emotive work that go into producing, sharing, circulating, commenting, liking, reacting, etc. in user networks (Hillis, et al., 2015). Affect emerges in the relationship between subjects and bodies (Clough, 2008), and online it is shaped by interactions that provide meaning, attention and recognition among users within networks.

Vital emotions that reinforce user engagement and interaction on online platforms, such as happiness and joy, are related to positive gratification and create a sense of recognition and belonging. These emotions produce feelings of community, or what Dean [4] calls “friendship without friendship.”

However, digital communication can also include sentiments of exclusion. Within anti-immigration networks online, affect emerges through the circulation of negative emotions such as hostility, fear, distrust and hatred of others, but also through sentiments of in-group belonging and solidarity among users. Ahmed [5] argues that “the passion of these negative attachments to others is redefined simultaneously as a positive attachment to the imagined subjects brought together through the repetition of the signifier, ‘white’. It is the love of white, or those recognizable as white, that supposedly explains this shared ‘communal’ visceral response of hate.” The “repetition of [this] signifier” [6] also suggests that its referents and meanings fluctuate. The inclusion and exclusion of racialized subjects changes depending on contexts and political situations. It can include meanings attached to ethnicity, culture, religion, etc., indicating that the process of inclusion/exclusion is constructed through “floating signifiers” (Hall, 2021).

As Sauer (2020) notes, emotions are also drivers of the global upsurge of right-wing populist politics, which exploits resentment among the citizenry for political purposes. The strategic use of online platforms by political actors exploits and amplifies this resentment, and anti-immigration actors use it to target not only immigration policies, but also immigrants as subjects (Ekman, 2020). The socio-technical features of social media, including algorithmic personalization, and their technical design, which enables, directs and constrains user behavior, have also benefited right-wing/far-right actors (Ernst, et al., 2019; Doroshenko and Tu, 2023).

The ability to create or occupy online communities, where information flows can be strategically selected and (re)directed can contribute to the formation of echo chambers (Boulianne, et al., 2020), thus sustaining the affective responses of resentment among users. Similarly, Farkas and colleagues [7] argue that “the enactment of ethno-cultural stereotypes as a means of constructing platformed antagonism ... encapsulates the novel ways in which the socio-technical structure of social media platforms shapes new modalities of antagonism.”

Thus, users on social media platforms circulate emotive reactions to both imagined and real events and societal conditions and can therefore be exploited for political purposes. For example, the recurrent circulation of content depicting Muslims as terrorists (Kundnani, 2015) or deviant (Andreasen, 2020), or depicting immigrants as rapists (Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016), builds on the possibility to construct them as objects of fear and hate. It also implies that the meaning attached to these objects can be endlessly appropriated and reframed depending on the context. Åkerlund (2022) explores how a derogatory (neo-Nazi) term for immigrants is mainstreamed over time and across Web sites. The circulation between various online spaces shows that they function as “gateways between mainstream and far-right ideas” (Åkerlund, 2022), suggesting that digital networks facilitate a gradual normalization of racialized articulations over time and across space.

Online cultures of anti-immigration and far-right networks also rely on the circulation of certain digital
A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model

artifacts of (racial) signification, such as memes (Askanius, 2021). As Titley and colleagues [8] note, online cultures of satire and irony, mash-ups and trolling have reinvigorated older racist imaginaries by locating them within a “remix culture” saturated with irony, play and “humorous disavowal,” thus reaching audiences and public acceptance far beyond the cadres of the far right. This echoes Fekete’s (2014) critique of the narrow focus of extremism research on the reciprocal relationship between the far ends of the political spectrum. She uses the term “cumulative racism” to highlight how racist ideas and attitudes “are constantly travelling from the fringe to the mainstream and back again” [9]. On social media platforms, this is also a relational process between users in which the boundaries of acceptable discourse are pushed forward, with the risk of normalizing racialized imaginaries of immigrants and minorities (Ekman, 2019).

The production and circulation of digital content pertaining to the imaginaries of race, culture, religion, etc. are also part of online users’ mundane communication. Sharma (2018) proposed the term “ambient racism” to conceptualize the construction of race at the micro level of online communication. Ambient racism refers to the implicit use of racialized and discriminatory language and ideas in everyday digital communication. It is not necessarily intentional or part of specific political strategies, but rather is a more subtle and polished discourse (Agudelo and Olbrych, 2022; Siapera, 2019). Ambient racism includes banal forms of racialized expressions that emerge in everyday social relations (Essed, 1991), and it is often accompanied by denials that it is racist (Siapera, 2019) based on the right to free speech (Titley, 2020). For example, in a very large Swedish Facebook group formed around an “immigration-critical” discourse, “the denial and (re)definition of racism was evident,” and “users emphasized the ‘debatability of racism’ by arguing that their status as truth-tellers, victims and realists precluded their consideration as racists” [10].

The large volume of racist expressions visible on platforms indicates that the governance models used by social media companies do not prevent racism. Instead they “draw upon ... understandings of illegal hate speech, but ... also allow certain contents to circulate under rules governing freedom of expression and public debate. In this manner, we obtain a dichotomy of what effectively constitutes ‘acceptable racism’ and what is deemed unacceptable or even illegal” [11]. So, ambient forms of racism escape regulatory practices and evade the moderation practices employed by social media companies. In her study of Facebook, Siapera [12] noted that “other forms of ‘ambient’ racism are not considered problematic because they are seen as open to debate, because they are seen as a matter of private discussion between users and because both the circulation of contents-data and issues of ‘freedom of expression’ require that such contents remain.”

Since online platforms thrive on the accumulation of circulated data and the interactions between users, racialized comments and reactions are facilitated by affective attachments. Content that generates emotional responses is therefore part of the algorithmic bolstering and steering on platforms and search engines (Noble, 2018); that is, it enables the circulation of discriminatory content. Racist and other discriminatory content is often widely circulated because it generates user activity and thus fits the commercial models of platforms (Hokka, 2021). Consequently, the socio-technical features of digital platforms benefit anti-immigration actors, enabling platformed racism and antagonism (Matamoros-Fernández, 2017; Farkas, et al., 2018).

Nationalism

Nationalism is one of those big concepts that require extensive and detailed scrutiny to do them justice (see Özkırimli, 2017, for an introduction). This section will discuss how racism and nationalism can be understood as parallel ideologies that have had a “mutual influence” on each other (Balibar, 1991). It will also consider how articulations of nationalism and imaginaries of the nation intersect with, and reinforce, notions of race, ethnos, culture and other markers of difference within online networks. Contemporary digital racism is produced in relation to both the imaginaries of “the nation” and the material existence of nation-states, i.e., the borders that confine individual mobility.
Nationalism and racism are not reducible to each other, but historically they have been interdependent (Miles and Brown, 2003). Balibar [13] claims that racism is “not an expression of nationalism…but a supplement internal to nationalism.” Since both racism and nationalism are ideologies and practices of inclusion and exclusion, race and/or ethnicity have been the main social factors in the construction of in-groups and out-groups in many nationalist projects. The ideologies of “nationalism and racism are not independent and autonomous forces but are generated and reproduced within a complex interplay of historically constituted economic and political relations” [14]. In contemporary digital racism, the construction of inclusion and exclusion draws on both historical narratives and more contemporary ideas of nation and belonging. Digital communication has in various ways reinvigorated nationalist discourses, often conflating them with racial or ethnocratic imaginaries in various national settings, supporting both anti-immigrant policies and racist discourses (Mihelj and Jiménez-Martínez, 2021).

In more overtly racist and fascist online networks, the concepts of nation and belonging are often linked to idealized and/or mythologized notions of the past. These networks include discourses of palingenetic nationalism, which build on the idea that contemporary society is in decline, and that a rebirth of society is necessary to restore the nation to the stature of its idealized past (Griffin, 2018). In networks of a fascist character, the idea of a restored “Volksgemeinschaft” (racial community), as opposed to contemporary multiculturalism, is an example of palingenesis. Narratives of idealized histories may include elements of Norse mythology, the Hellenic Empire, or British colonialism, depending on the context. These nationalist narratives can be understood as neo-tribal, meaning that they deny “any variation and diversity within the nation which is conceived as homogenous and amorphous” [15]. Common to these forms of nationalism is the idea that an idealized past resides in mythical history. Within the far right, nationalism is rooted in historical myths that serve to legitimize more ethnically homogeneous nations (Elgenius and Rydgren, 2017), while imaginary narratives serve as legitimizers of a society restored to its former glory.

Among the novel and less politically constraining historical myths, we find, for example, in Sweden the reinvented version of the “People’s Home” (Folkhemmet) promoted by the second largest party in Sweden, the far-right Sweden Democrats. In their reconstruction of contemporary history, they “offer an apocalyptic rhetoric inspired by the (reactionary) conservatism of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s and offer a rebranded version of the concept People’s Home along ethnic lines. A Swedish Golden Age, dated to the 1950s, is pitted against the decline of the past 50 years. The alleged decline is caused by the internationalization promoted by the Social Democrats and the Liberals” [16]. The idea of the People’s Home does not carry negative connotations as a signifier of a greater and more glorious past (such as Empire), and thus it can easily be invigorated with ideas of ethnic homogeneity and harmony, fulfilling the same palingenetic role as any other idealized past.

Consequently, the process of inclusion and exclusion of groups along racial, ethnic or cultural lines is flexible, and ethnocratic visions of what constitutes an ideal nation can fluctuate over time and space, as well as strategically in relation to public opinion and political situations. A common feature of the conflation of nationalism and racism is the idea that contemporary society is facing a historical momentum of decay or destruction, due to immigration. National rebirth and a return to a historical ideal are constructed as the only option. This can be seen in softer versions, such as the slogan of Trump’s successful 2016 presidential campaign, “Make America Great Again,” which flooded social media, and the slogan of the far-right party AfD (Alternative for Germany) in the 2021 EU election, “Germany. But Normal.” The word “normal” is obviously an empty signifier that could be appropriated for any conceivable meaning making. In AfD’s vision of Germany, it clearly signified a “nation without Islam” (another slogan used by the party), without immigration, and in the end, an ethnically homogeneous nation.

In racial online discourses, the construction of in-groups and out-groups is flexible and context dependent. For example, anti-Semitic notions of exclusion are mainly limited to fascist actors, whereas anti-Muslim exclusion is easier to market within the political mainstream. In European contexts, the latter is often associated with “nativism,” an ideology that “opposes migration on the grounds it threatens the nation’s integrity and ethnocultural character” (Walsh, 2023; Betz, 2019). Nativist attitudes and discourses are not
A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model

necessarily tied to more elaborate historical conceptions of the nation, as in nationalism. Instead, they are embedded in ethnocentric visions of monoculturalism and ethnic homogeneity. Nativist attitudes are often visible among right-wing populist political actors who use culturalist argumentation when opposing immigration. Nativism is also expressed in ideas that portray demographic change as an existential threat, specifically that immigrants will outnumber native populations and impose their foreign cultures on Western societies (Ekman, 2022).

A fringe, but interesting phenomenon is “femonationalism” (Farris, 2017; Sager and Mulinari, 2018). In contrast to the patriarchal chauvinism prevalent in both racism and nationalism, femonationalism refers to the appropriation of feminist arguments in anti-immigration and racist discourse. It is linked to nationalist imaginaries that see the female body as a symbol of the nation’s borders (Sager and Mulinari, 2018) and immigrants as posing a physical threat to native women (Horsti, 2017). The bodies of native women “are seen as worthy of protection, while the racialized (male) Others’ bodies are seen as threatening the safety of the women of the nation” (Sager and Mulinari, 2018). So, feminist arguments can be used to promote anti-immigration policies and discriminatory attitudes toward immigrants on the basis that the immigrants’ patriarchal cultures are incompatible with Western societies. In the next section, the specific relationship between race, nationalism is examined through the role of masculinity in digital racism.

Masculinity

To understand what underpins digital racism, we need to look more closely at the masculine discourses, identity formations and communities that flourish online. A reinvigorated discourse of masculinity that proposes a “natural” (biological) hegemonic masculinity has been politicized through the rise and success of far-right political actors and parties (Kaiser, 2022). Some researchers even suggest that the rise of right-wing populism must be understood as a “male phenomenon” [17]. Although the relationship between racism and gender has been thoroughly examined (Essed, 1991; Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 2005; Bhattacharyya, 2008), I argue that contemporary research on digital racism has much to gain from assessing recent conceptualizations of political masculinity (Kaiser, 2022; Kimmel, 2017; Norocel, et al., 2020; Sengul, 2022). Moreover, a historical approach that more closely examines the racial imaginaries and practices of masculinity in the twentieth century could shed (new) light on how masculine communities and communication practices shape anti-immigration/immigrant sentiments and discourses online, and thus impact digital racism in very specific ways.

Racial political movements have always been dominated by men, and they have also been supported by masculine ideals and practices. The most striking modern project that relates imaginaries of race to masculinity can be found in twentieth-century fascism. In particular, masculinity was produced within fascism through a combination of collective discipline (based on social hierarchies) and a naturalized culture of violence. To uphold the patriarchal character of the white nation, where social hierarchies were constructed as a natural order, discipline was a necessity, including the securitization of reproductivity. Violence is essential to maintaining these social orders of class and gender, but it is also considered to be justified for its own sake (Ekman, 2014).

Fascism’s “hardness of men” resides in historicized ideals of male companionship and the aesthetics surrounding male communities prior to, and within, fascist societies (Theweleit, 1987). For example, ideals of heroic realism idealized certain forms of masculinity that naturalized male violence and the white male body as a bulwark against the degeneracy (i.e., non-Aryan elements) that “threatened” the German (Nazi) nation (Kaiser, 2022). Italian fascism’s “mystique of action and violence was tied in closely with the regime’s mystique of youth” [18], and these myths also shaped the prevailing masculine aesthetics and ideals within fascism. The mythic aspects of racial masculinity are particularly important here. In historical fascism, narratives of white male sacrifice became testaments to heroism, and were a central part of the ideology disseminated and taught to the youth. In fact, the “unselfish heroism” of men was designated as
A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model

the “creed of the Fascist” [19], creating gendered expectations among the fascist portion of the citizenry.

Fascist masculinity also saw the emancipation of women as a threat to the racial nation, and thus it subordinated women to the will of men (Theweleit, 1987). Fascist masculinity accordingly implies control over biological reproduction and female sexuality. The ethnocratic imagination of fascist masculinity demanded “protection” of the white woman’s body and sexuality in order to ensure the reproduction of a “white” nation. As will be discussed shortly, key elements of this particular patriarchal construction have been recontextualized and reinvigorated in contemporary digital racism.

Contemporary “natural” masculinity does not simply reflect the ideals in historical fascism; however, there are some similarities between the two that are worth highlighting here. A fruitful starting point is to examine the supposed crisis of masculinity emanating from a sense of loss of power among men in more gender-egalitarian societies. This so-called crisis has created sentiments of entitlement among men, which are related to notions of biology (male), race (white), and sexuality (hetero), grounding these feelings of entitlement in a “natural” realm of social relations. Kimmel [20] calls this attitude “aggrieved entitlement,” which refers to sentiments that build on the notion of a natural right to power (felt by white men) that has been appropriated by “unseen forces larger and more powerful.”

Aggrieved entitlement can result in a sense of collective victimhood and self-victimization, and as Kimmel (2017) notes, self-victimization can be used as a strategy to legitimize acts of violence. In the circulation of online masculine discourse, self-victimization can legitimize violence against women (Kaiser, 2022), but it also intersects with racial imaginaries in which white males are constructed as victims of immigrant men. For example, in online discourses on migration, positions of self-victimization construct the native population as subjected “to injustice and exploitation by migrants in combination with a government that condones or even encourages this perceived development” (Schröter, 2022).

More generally, racial politics of resentment tend to build on the connection between racial and masculine victimization (Sengul, 2022). As discussed above, the imaginaries that construct the external immigrant or the internal racial “other” within online networks produce notions of existential threat to the native population. These “symbolic threat” perceptions have also been shown to underpin discriminatory practices against immigrants and racial “others” (Obaidi, et al., 2022). The sense of an existential threat fuels racialized articulations online, and through the circulation of negative emotions, they become drivers of engagement. In the worst case they might also “help to justify violence as a necessary means to avert such threats” [21]. This has been visible in the self-appointed public policing by vigilante groups organized online (Ekman, 2018) and in the circulation of manifestos of extreme-right terrorist attacks targeting refugees and minorities (Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2019). Symbolic threats, as is discussed in the following section, are also deeply intertwined with conspiracy thinking and ideas.

In racial discourses, the masculinity of immigrants or racial minorities is contrasted with the dominant “feminized” masculinity of the Western man [22]. The masculinity of the immigrant/racial other is raw, animalistic, violent, etc. (hypermasculine), while the Western man is weak, emasculated and feminized (hypomasculine), which calls for a resurrection of the natural white masculinity. Consequently, online racial discourses are fundamentally anti-feminist, since feminism has deprived Western men of their natural position and identity, thereby causing the betrayal of feminized men in Western societies.

Feminism is viewed as a state-sponsored ideology deployed to undermine the “natural” order of gender (Ekman, 2014). Since violence is located in the actions and mindset of the “other,” one’s own violence is obscured. The violence of the “other” becomes intrinsically distinguishable, as it manifests itself as violence against women or against the defenseless and innocent natives. In this form, violence is framed as an “immigrant problem” [23] and the bodies of immigrants and minorities are constructed as imminent threats (Ahmed, 2004). Within digital racism, violence against women is a recurring theme circulating online. In posts, videos, memes and narratives, white Western women are depicted as victims of violence perpetrated by immigrants, minorities, non-whites, etc., producing affective responses that circulate within networks (Ekman, 2020). The violence of the other is a legitimizing strategy for one’s own violence.
Violence targeting the “other” is framed as a rational reaction, as existential self-defense [24]. Research also suggests that this form of online communication increases the risk of violent threats against immigrants and minorities (Wahlström and Törnberg, 2021; Obadi, et al., 2022).

Online networks provide spaces where racial sentiments create variations on the theme of male refugees as violent, sexist and rapists (Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016). During the 2015 refugee crisis, the term “rapefugee” linked refugees with sexual assault and rape (Lee and Nerghes, 2018). The circulation of content that collectivizes refugees as sexual and violent perpetrators connects contemporary online racism to historical and colonial imaginaries of white women being attacked or threatened by non-white bodies. In the aftermath of the refugee crisis, the upsurge of anti-immigration vigilante groups across Europe and elsewhere was largely supported by notions of self-defense, and content depicting refugees as a threat has been used to justify violence (Ekman, 2018). Historicized fantasies of a “threatening other” play a prominent role in far-right propaganda, but were also visible in more respectable right-wing discourses (see Ekman and Krzyżanowski, 2021, for an analysis of immigrants as threats in legacy media). In the latter, elements of ethnos and culture were used as explanatory factors for rape and violence against women in society.

The construction of the collective hypermasculinity of the “other” also includes imaginaries of weakness at the individual level. Immigrant men are constructed as cowards, deceitful and ultimately subordinated to a cultural group mentality; i.e., they are not equal to European men. In anti-immigration discourse, immigrant men are depicted as cowards, effeminate and weak; they arrive alone, having forsaken their families, and are therefore also emasculated on an individual level (e.g., Rettberg and Gajjala, 2016). This became visible in online racist discourses during the war in Ukraine. The (mostly) male refugees of 2015 were compared to the wave of refugees fleeing Ukraine in 2022, who were mostly women and children. The latter became evidence of “real” refugees as opposed to the majority of those who fled during the 2015 refugee crisis (cf., De Coninck, 2023).

Conspiracy thinking and theories

There has always been a close relationship between racial imaginaries and conspiracy thinking. In particular, the construction of races and religions as enemies, in which Jews have been particularly targeted, is a recurring element in conspiracy theories. Among the upper class in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews were often perceived as cosmopolitan communists (“the International Jew”), whose goal was to overthrow Western, Christian, capitalist societies. A classic example of such conspiracy theory can be found in Winston Churchill’s 1920 pamphlet “Zionism versus Bolshevism” [25]. Here Churchill distinguished between good and bad Jews, with the former being nationalists (Zionists) and the latter “scheming for a world-wide communist State under Jewish domination” [26]. In contemporary online communication, similar anti-Semitic versions of the “global” Jew can be found in far-right conspiracy theories about “globalists” and “cultural Marxism,” the latter referring to fantasies about the influence of the Frankfurt School (Busbridge, et al., 2020).

In conspiracy thinking, race, ethnicity, religion and culture are flexible categories of inclusion and exclusion. A typical far-right conspiracy that involves Jews as conspirators is the notion of a “Zionist Occupation Government” (ZOG) (Bartlett and Miller, 2010). The ZOG conspiracy is a fringe political phenomenon that involves the idea that Jews secretly control governments and global institutions. At the heart of anti-Semitic conspiracy thinking is the idea of an existential threat to white populations. For example, the notion of “white genocide” (Wilson, 2022) builds on the idea that a Jewish elite promotes immigration to Western countries in order to “weaken and dominate the white population” (Allington and Joshi, 2020).

A comparable conspiracy theory, albeit of a different character, that is centered on immigration is the
A relational approach to digital racism: Toward a theoretical model

Eurabia theory (Bangstad, 2019). The idea of “Eurabia” emerged from the racist “counter-jihad” movement in the first decade of the twenty-first century and is based on the idea that a quiet and gradual takeover of Europe by Muslims is underway in Europe (Carr, 2006). Proponents of the Eurabia theory made successful use of online communication to spread the idea of a foreign colonization by Muslims in Europe, and the counter-jihad movement linked European anti-immigration actors, such as Pegida in Germany and the EDL in the U.K., with far-right political actors in North America (Ekman, 2015). Eurabia included classic elements of conspiracy thinking, such as secret agreements between European liberal/leftist governments and Muslim organizations and nations. Hence, Eurabia proposed a silent Muslim take-over orchestrated from within.

In today’s online anti-immigration discourse and networks, an increasingly normalized conspiracy theory has replaced the radical and implausible idea of “Eurabia.” This more flexible theory, called the “great replacement theory” (Ekman, 2022), is a continuation of the idea that demographic change is the driving force that poses an existential threat to native populations. It is based on the idea that European populations are being demographically “replaced” by people of non-European origin through immigration (Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2019). Unlike conspiracies about “ZOG,” “white genocide” or “Eurabia,” the idea of replacement is far from a peripheral phenomenon. On the contrary, various versions of it are propagated at the highest levels of society. For example, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Prime Minister Róbert Fico of Slovakia (Plenta, 2020) have both articulated the idea that European populations are being deliberately replaced through immigration.

Similar statements have been made in the United States by (previous) Fox News host Tucker Carlson, pointing also to the role of legacy media in legitimizing conspiracy theories within the hybrid media landscape. Additionally, a U.S. Republican senator has suggested that immigration is a strategy to ensure political support for Democratic Party candidates (Ekman, 2022). In fact, the idea that immigration is a way to increase the number of voters for liberal/left-wing political parties is a persistent element of online anti-immigration discourse, with immigrants being depicted as “voter hoards” (Ekman, 2020).

Among the online communication strategies used by anti-immigration actors, we find the dubious use of immigration statistics to verify an ongoing replacement, and of voter statistics from electoral districts with higher shares of immigrant populations to validate the idea of immigrants as voter hoards. Native populations are constructed by the conspiracy theory as victims of immigration policies set up by politicians who are framed as indifferent to, and unaffected by, the problems associated with immigration (Ekman, 2022). Immigrants are thus not the conspirators, but rather an out-group threat, a tool in a malevolent plot hatched by the political and economic elite. The Great Replacement intersects with nativist understandings of ethnic belonging and exclusion, but it is also related to a more general populist discourse. It constructs an elite as the conspirators and the people as the silenced victims, and in this sense conspiracy theories are populist in character and can be used strategically by political actors (Butter, 2020).

The idea that European populations are being replaced by immigrants is also connected to old tropes of anti-Semitism. A number of especially visible anti-Semitic elements online are related to the Hungarian and Jewish businessman George Soros (Langer, 2021). The founder of the international network Open Society Foundation, Soros is often portrayed as the architect behind the waves of immigrants to Europe. Several political leaders in Central European countries such as Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Poland have made use of anti-Soros statements in relation to immigration and policy-making (Plenta, 2020; Langer, 2021). In Hungary, Soros has been accused of masterminding the large wave of refugees during the 2015 refugee crisis, often referred to as the “Soros plan” by the Hungarian government. Through a combination of both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, Soros is depicted as an “International Jew” who uses refugees as a means to “de-Christianise and Islamise Europe by supporting mass migration” [27].

Consequently, conspiracy theories combine racial elements of historical anti-Semitism with contemporary Islamophobic views, providing an updated version of the imaginaries of global Jewish power. Online, terms such as “cosmopolitan elites,” or “Rothschild” have replaced racially charged referents such as “Jews” or “ZOG,” thus communicating with a less overtly racial language (e.g., Bjørgo and Ravndal, 2019).
Similarly, the online conspiracy theory network QAnon used the term “cabal” to describe “Satan-worshipping pedophiles who rule the world” [28]. “Cabal” refers to the mystical interpretation of Jewish scripture and is used as a dog-whistle term for a global elite of conspirators, or simply for Jewish control [29].

Conspiracy theories are flexible and can easily be combined, thus reinforcing ideas about secrecy and how everything is interconnected and happens for a reason. For example, conspiracy thinking involving the term “deep state” (famously articulated by former U.S. President Trump) can easily be linked to anti-Semitic ideas of Jewish power (Mattsson and Johansson, 2022) or, as in the QAnon conspiracy, to the secrecy of the “cabal” (Langer, 2022). As a result, conspiracy thinking intersects with racialized discourses in various ways, and conspiracy claims can be used strategically by actors seeking to pinpoint a certain group or actor at a given time and/or national and ethnic context.

Online communication has dramatically changed the way in which conspiracy theories and thinking seep into the public sphere. Butter [30] notes that conspiracy claims went from being “virtually absent” between 1965 and 2000 to being “practically omnipresent” in the digital age. However, online communication not only makes conspiracy thinking available to large and new audiences, but also facilitates it through the logics that underpin social media. Conspiracy claims tend to involve controversial and sensational statements. They rely on narratives of good and evil and of victims and perpetrators, and thus they produce in-group victimization and out-group hostility. Therefore, they are also highly affective in character, and enable user engagement online. Conspiracy actors exploit the vast quantity of data circulating online, strategically selecting and steering information to validate conspiracy claims. Consequently, online sourcing strategies, in which a mix of true, questionable and false information can be deliberately combined, allow for seemingly rational arguments and narratives that support a wider set of conspiracy claims.

Conspiracy networks also rely on the circulation of affective exaggerations, for example in the online circulation of immigrant statistics. They include affective practices that create inclusion and exclusion (e.g., Nikunen, et al., 2021). For example, the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement” thrives on the orchestrated circulation of negative emotions in online networks. These emotions reinforce the shared construction of culture, ethnos, race, nation and power — and their attendant notions of belonging and exclusion — among users.

Concluding discussion
The aim of this paper has been to bring together four distinct theoretical strands in order to provide a multi-theoretical approach to digital racism that combines sociological, political and socio-technical perspectives. The next section discusses how digital racism can be understood at the macro (contextual, ideological), meso (organizational, network, group) and micro (individual) levels, respectively (Table 1). Significant to the concluding discussion is the aforementioned relational dynamics between the four theoretical perspectives.

Central to the understanding of digital racism at the macro level is the role of affect as a political driver of engagement. Because online user engagement is underpinned by affective attachments, digital racism needs to be understood as a form of cultural politics of emotions (Ahmed, 2004). Negative emotions drive user engagement and serve as elements of a broader process of identity-building online. These processes create in-group solidarity and out-group hostility based on race, ethnicity, culture and religion. Online, this can be understood as a form of “politics of fear” (Ahmed, 2004) that creates bodies for inclusion and for exclusion. The process of inclusion/exclusion is always contingent on specific situations and contexts. It can focus on the internal exclusion of minorities, or the external threat of the approaching (or imaginary) immigrant. It is tied to nativist notions of ethnos, and to the borders of the nation-state. Hence, the ideologies of racism and nationalism/nativism reinforce each other through discourses of ethnic belonging — for example in the online circulation of “naturalized” versions of historical pasts — and through contemporary discourses of securitization, such as the protection of the nation-state from external threats. In the latter, immigrants are constructed differently according to ethnic signifiers derived from ideas of cultural proximity.

Race and nationalism/nativism are also linked to masculinity. Online, imaginaries of a “natural” masculinity are connected to ideas of race and nation. The politicization of white masculinity is enabled through notions that depict Western men as victims of an ostensible “crisis” of masculinity. Online, this crisis is understood as the result of state-sponsored feminism, including gender-equality policies. The struggle for a more egalitarian society has degraded the natural order of the patriarchy and resulted in

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**Table 1: Spatial levels of digital racism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spatial level</th>
<th>Affect</th>
<th>Nationalism</th>
<th>Masculinity</th>
<th>Conspiracy thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macro level</td>
<td>Affect as a political driver online; Cultural politics of negative emotions as drivers of engagement and identity building</td>
<td>Ideas and ideologies of exclusion/inclusion; Ethnocentrism; Paligeneis; Nationalism; Femonationalism</td>
<td>“Natural” masculinity as response to the “crisis” of masculinity; Violence; Anti-feminism; Masculine identity politics</td>
<td>Anti-Semitic conspiracies as the foundation; The Great Replacement; Islamization; Eurabia; Deep State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meso level</td>
<td>Communities with closure; Shared affective experiences; Affective networks; Collective victimization; Online circulation of emotions</td>
<td>Group cohesion on social platforms; Campaigns depicting out-groups as threats to national security; Nativist discourse by far-right political actors; Native women’s bodies as a “battleground” in the protection of the nation</td>
<td>Männerbund; Manosphere; Vigilante groups; Collective victimization; Perceived loss of “natural” order and authority</td>
<td>Conspiracy networks; C-Anon; Circulation of conspiracy content; Moralization of in/out-groups; Vigilante groups; Collective victimization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Micro level</td>
<td>Experiences of violence: Articulations and expressions of hate, animosity, fear, etc.; Individual victimization; Everyday digital racism; Ambient racism</td>
<td>Everyday banal and ambient forms of utterances/attitudes of inclusion/exclusion; Immigration as an existential threat to nation, culture; Expressions of paligeneis (personal expressions of idealized pasts)</td>
<td>Lone Wolf terrorists (incels); Articulations of anti-feminism; Individual victimization; Contemp towards the “hypermasculinity” of immigrant men and the “hymasculinity” of “feminized” Western men</td>
<td>Lone Wolf terrorists; Individual victimization; Articulations of conspiracy, including racial conspiracy content</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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debilitated men who are unable to respond to the threat of hypermasculine immigrant cultures. Consequently, online political masculinity calls for white/Western men to restore the “natural order” in which race, ethnos and culture play a formative role in the identity politics of masculinity. Finally, at the macro level of digital racism, conspiracy thinking connects immigration to ideas of political secrecy and betrayal. Fantasies of “white genocide,” “Islamization,” and ethnic “replacement” are intertwined with both nationalism/nativism and the call for a reinvigorated natural order of masculinity to serve as protection.

The assessment of digital racism at the meso level considers the ways in which sociological, political and socio-technical intersections between different networks, political actors/organizations and social groups become perceptible online. The community-building aspect of online communication is key to this understanding. Engagement is enabled through the circulation of affective attachments between users. The racial/ethnic dimension of online nativist, masculine and conspiracist networks tends to engage users for different reasons, but through similar discursive constructions of collective victimization. Nativist/nationalist networks enable circulation of sentiments that produce inclusion and exclusion based on ideas of national or ethnic belonging. “Digital nativism” carries “affectively charged content” that generates engagement “at rates exceeding their offline support”, pointing to affect as a significant factor underpinning the impact and circulation of nativist content online (Walsh, 2023). Networks of political masculinity are connected through the circulation of sentiments about the loss of a “natural” order, being rendered superfluous, or being ostensibly disadvantaged on the basis of gender (Kimmel, 2017).

Political masculinity is further intertwined with nativist ideas through the notion of a historical decline of patriarchy, and through imaginaries of the masculinity of the threatening “other.” Here, the external/internal threat to white/Western women’s bodies is an important signifier for linking race, nation and masculinity in online community building. Thus, nativist and nationalist ideas are highly compatible with ideas of “natural” masculinity. In online networks they feed on similar sentiments of loss and disadvantage that produce collective victimization. Consequently, the combination of race, ethnos, culture and masculinity can produce group cohesion on social platforms. This has become visible, for example, in the rise and geographical spread of anti-immigrant vigilante groups mobilized online (Nikunen, et al., 2021).

Political actors with anti-immigration and/or racist agendas exploit online networks and groups by feeding off shared affective experiences among users. In particular, they tap into and steer online discussions about immigration, and thereby strategically produce specific out-groups by invoking elements of nativist discourse and right-wing populist strategies such as provocation, sensationalism and fear mongering. Another strategy is to create cloaked online spaces and falsely pretend, for example, to be Islamists, in order to provoke and incite racially charged emotional responses (Farkas, et al., 2018).

The content produced by far-right news sites also plays an important role in providing users of online platforms with reframed and recontextualized information about immigrants and immigration. Here, discussions revolve around illiberal and uncivil representations of immigrants/minorities that generate collective notions of threats to national security, or to the very existence of native ethnicity and culture. Similarly, conspiracy thinking is fomented in online networks where imaginaries of race and nation are linked to notions of political power and secrecy. In networks such as QAnon, the circulation of conspiracy content relates old anti-Semitic fantasies of Jewish power to contemporary immigration policies. More generally, the online circulation of conspiracy thinking reinforces digital racism and adds a quasi-rational framework of political and systemic critique.

At the micro level, digital racism is realized through individual articulations of negative emotions directed at immigrants and minorities. These overt forms of racial expression build on individual victimization, with immigrants being perceived as a violent and existential threat. Here, the interactive dimension of online networks can push the boundaries of what is perceived as acceptable language in relation to immigration, and can also reinforce the discriminatory character of language directed at immigrants and minorities. Individual articulations connect immigration and immigrants to perceptions of self-vulnerability, and the longing for a different, “safe” society is rooted in idealized notions of the past. These expressions build on imaginaries of past societies characterized by strong cohesion, monoculturalism and racial homogeneity.
The expression of idealized pasts also includes a desire for traditional forms of gender relations, with feminism being blamed for multiculturalism and for the decline of the nation, the culture, and the “natural” order of gender. At the individual level, notions of immigration/immigrants can be intertwined with conspiratorial thinking that provokes racial antagonism. Racially charged conspiracy claims often build on strong forms of individual victimization that increase the risk of violent action. Ultimately, conspiracy claims can support and enable racially motivated terrorism. As we have seen, the online “manifestos” of “lone wolf” terrorists such as the El Paso shooter, the Christchurch murderer, the Buffalo shooter and most notably Anders Behring Breivik — who murdered 77 people, most of them minors, in Norway in 2011 — all contained statements that legitimized terror on the basis of racial conspiracy thinking. In these manifestos, all the terrorists claimed to be defending their countries against “ethnic replacement,” “Islamization,” “white genocide” and so on. The online manifesto of the Christchurch Mosque terrorist in New Zealand in 2019, was even titled “The Great Replacement” (Ekman, 2022).

The everyday use of online platforms allows for more subtle forms of everyday racial expressions. These are not necessarily intentional or perceived as racist or discriminatory by the people making them — but are part of the specific features of Internet culture, such as humor, satire, irony, memeing, mash-ups and trolling (Titley, et al., 2021). They are embedded in users’ everyday jargon and content production, and build on racial, ethnic and cultural signifiers of inclusion/exclusion. These forms of “ambient” digital racism evade the governance models and moderation practices of platforms (Siapera, 2019) and permeate the everyday flow of information experienced by users. To conclude, digital racism at the individual level includes overtly racist expressions and content intentionally produced by racist actors for political purposes, as well as the mundane and unintentionally discriminatory expressions published online by “ordinary” users.

Finally, this article has some limitations. Further theoretical development should consider how specific geographic, social, cultural and political contexts impact digital racism in specific ways. Moreover, empirical research that considers the intersection of the perspectives presented could inform, revise and thereby strengthen the understanding of digital racism across various contexts. Additionally, research should focus on how various forms of platform features/affordances impact and (re)shape digital racism in relation to the proposed theoretical model.

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Notes

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6. Ibid.


11. Siapera, 2019, p. 3.


23. Miles and Brown, 2003, p. 52.


29. Langer, 2022, p. 25.


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