

# Women Of Color: in perspective

A critical ethnography study examining the empowering opportunities for entrepreneurial women of color in the digital sphere.



Douglas A. Ready & Carol Cohen, 'Closing the Gender Gap Is Good for Business', Sloan Management Review, 2019

Aysha Irgens Saleh and Fatema Hassan  
The Master's programme in Techno-Anthropology  
Aalborg University CPH

June 4th, 2020

**Thesis written by**



---

Aysha Irgens Saleh



---

Fatema Hassan

## **Women Of Color: in perspective**

A critical ethnography study examining the empowering opportunities for entrepreneurial women of color in the digital sphere.

Supervisor	Tom Børsen
Number of pages	25 (+30 from the Podcast)
Characters	59.766
Written by	Aysha Irgens Saleh, 20186481 Fatema Hassan, 20153194

TAN 10: Master Thesis  
Master in Techno-Anthropology  
June 4th, 2020  
Aalborg University CPH

***The project is not confidential!***

# List of content

Acknowledgements	5
Summary	6
Introduction	7
Problem area	7
Vision	8
Problem statement	9
Research Design	10
Limitations and restrictions	10
An elaboration of the structure of the thesis	12
The framework of our theoretical methodological standpoint	14
Intersectionality According to Crenshaw	14
The introductory presentation of empowerment	16
A comprehensive understanding of Sen and Kabeer	19
The use of critical-ethnography based on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed	20
Freire's methodology in the context of Women of Color	22
Using narratology to interpret our empirical evidence	22
Interview Strategy	24
A short presentation of our informants	25
Introduction to the discourse within the utilized social technologies	28
Discussion	30
Algorithm bias	30
Performative activism	31
Conclusion	34
Reference list	36

# **List of appendix**

Appendix 1: Transcriptions, 2020

Appendix 2: WOC: in perspective - Episode 1, 2020 (Script)

Appendix 3: WOC: in perspective - Episode 2, 2020 (Script)

# **Acknowledgements**

We want to give a special thanks to our informants, who arbitrarily participated through the lock-down - we are so grateful for trusting us in telling your story, and handling your narratives with care and respect.

THANK YOU to Carriene Rendbo, Abi Olusanya, Naima Yasin, Ingrid Baraka, Stephanie Asi Brix, Manna Tarah, and Hilal Özgen.

Thank you to our supervisor Tom Børsen!

And we also want to thank each other for good partnership, even through rough times - and for fighting so hard in the end!

## Summary

I en tid, hvor social retfærdighed og vågenhed er mere relevant end nogensinde, havde vi til formål at bidrage til den forskning, der blev udført på dette felt. Især med hensyn til sociale teknologier og kvinder af farve. Vi søgte at besvare spørgsmålet om, hvad forholdet er mellem kvinder af farve og den digitale sfære, og hvordan de bruger sociale teknologier til at engagere sig, bidrage til og etablere samfund?

For at gøre dette har vi interviewet syv kvindelige iværksættere af farver, som er bosiddende i Danmark. Ved at bruge koncepter fra store feministiske og retfærdige lærde har vi trukket på forestillingerne om intersektionalitet som præsenteret af Kimberlé Crenshaw, Paulo Freires begreber om kritisk etnografi og empowerment processen, som den er beskrevet af Naila Kabeer. Disse har givet os de metodologiske værktøjer såvel som teoretiske rammer til behandling af vores data.

Afslutningsvis fandt vi et mønster af empowerment hos kvinderne, da det så ud til at være en fremgang, som disse kvinder måtte gennemgå for at mobilisere; dette går gennem internalisering - disempowerment - mobilisering - empowerment.

# Introduction

Do women of color even use Facebook? How can one be a “good immigrant”? Are safe spaces bogus? And what does it even mean to be “woke”?

In this thesis we aim to answer those questions along with uncovering aspects of the digital presence of women of color in the digital sphere. From community building to self-love to finding friends and even to obtaining new languages. We knew there was a lot to cover and we felt that it was relevant enough to be shared. This is why as part of our thesis, we have created an accompanying podcast stretching over two episodes. The aim of the podcast is to create an instrument for people who find themselves struggling to advocate and explain their experiences in a holistic manner. By shedding light on theoretical tools that unearth the experiences of systemic injustice and empowerment. Over the course of two episodes, we lay out a narrative tale that takes the listener through concepts that are exemplified with a real life case in order to promote understanding.

## Problem area

Several theorists argue that the digital age has made it easier for women to be liberated from social norms and structures, where it also creates opportunities and hopes for women. We have come to believe that most people, on a global level, understand the importance of empowerment - to gain control over one's own life, and to have control over the crucial and critical factors that hold on to oppression or power, and where social structures and underlying norms are allowed to dominate.

What problems are associated with being a woman in Denmark, and not least, being a woman of color in Denmark - but also what role social technologies have in the process from oppression to emancipation and what opportunities they create. These are the questions we would like to answer. We are unaware of how this inequality can be maintained, but at the same time are curious about the developments that are happening, especially as a result of the sustainable development goals formulated by the UN.



Through our study as well as finished product, we want to participate in the debate, create a voice and explore our techno-anthropological experiences in a field we privately advocate. We touch upon concepts of liberation, equality, accessibility and empowerment, but still focus on social technologies such as Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp etc., - how they can be used and what effect they have on the development of these concepts.

### *Vision*

Based on women's emancipation and empowerment, we wish to research the connection between social technologies and women of color in the digital era, while exploring what possibilities this relation creates. We aim to understand how women of color in Denmark establish communities through the use of social technologies, and concurrently unearth whether or not this process strengthens their respective communities they endeavor and if this also changes their role in society.

Our normative perspective gives the opportunities for purpose and action, while including women related to the subject. We aspire to affect women of color in Denmark, and create a case based on general tendencies in regards to women of color's status, roles, hassles etc., much as we want to focus on the importance of this problem globally through the perspective of the UN, theorists, informants, while also including our own experiences being women of color in Denmark.

Through the release of a podcast, we intent to create a forum focusing on communities and togetherness, where we advocate the importance of this issue globally, and in part ensure availability and accessibility to a broader demographic, while telling the stories of different women related to the subject; thus creating a voice for women of color, which could also lead to opportunities for other women.

### *Problem statement*

On the basis of all our considerations, questions and concerns we formed a question, which can manifest the strength of social technology in relation to women empowerment:

*How do social technologies enable empowering opportunities for women of color in the digital era - and what barriers do these women meet in this process?*

### **Research questions**

In order to answer our problem statement, we have created three elaborate research questions; an explanatory, an analytical and a debating.

- What are the relations between women of color and the digital sphere?
  - How do women of color utilize social technologies in order to engage in, contribute to and establish communities?
- How do social technologies enable empowering opportunities for women of color in the digital era - and what barriers do these women meet in this process?
- What parameters are necessary in order to enable empowering opportunities?
  - To what degree does community building enable emancipation of entrepreneurial women of color in Denmark?

To answer these questions we have conducted seven interviews with different female entrepreneurs residing in Denmark. By making use of ethnographic methods - in the form of semi-structured interviews - we managed to acquire our empirical data. To further process our collected data we will borrow concepts from theorists who cover topics of injustice, community, empowerment and intersectionality.

# Research Design

In order to outline the vision for the study at hand, this chapter is divided into two parties. Firstly, elucidating the limitations and restrictions can help to understand the foundation of the study; and secondly, vi elaborate on the structure of the thesis, as we have chosen an alternative way of creating our analysis.

## Limitations and restrictions

### Proximity/distance

Throughout the study, balancing the proximity and distance in regards to our own engagement in the subject were very important. We are both femistically active, and may tend to involve ourselves too much in our private discussions about different aspects of the subject. But due to the format of our analysis we manage to balance both proximity and distance.

### The loss of empirical data and the “deselection” of empiricism

One interview we conducted with Manna Tarah was lost, which resulted in recovering the central concepts of the interview. This is why her interview is not a part of the appendix of transcriptions, thus still presented as one of our informants.

Although she is not represented in our analysis, we conducted an interview with Hilal Özgen. Throughout the other interviews we clearly experienced a story being told, where the strength and motivation underpins a change. Hilal's interview focused more solely on her business, answering the questions briefly and far from in-depth. This does not mean that the points she emphasized are not of good quality, it just does not align with the set-up we ended up using, in regards to following complications.

## **The consequences of the corona-lockdown, in regards to our research**

Due to the lockdown caused by the corona-crisis, we have faced several challenges in our research process as well as in the writing process, but also in connection with our final product.

1) The majority of our collaboration is based on being able to discuss, analyze and consider in our conversations about the topic and the empiricism we have gathered - here we usually utilize the facilities of campus: rooms, boards to form an overview, mark important points, create models, etc. a significant part of our collaboration has to a large extent been lost because we have not had the opportunity to meet, but have had to cooperate and spar via Skype.

2) We have based our study on critical ethnography, which requires qualitative studies that allow us to both observe, participate and interview. The intention was to interview the informants in their own space, where we could follow how they used the different platforms to form a whole between their narratives and their use of social technologies. Instead, we conducted semi-structured interviews because this could be done via Skype, which meant that the frameworks were less flexible according to observation and the quality lower due to sound, internet connection and flow. In the context of flow, we noticed a limitation in the flowing conversation, which lead us to base our analysis on the in-depth narratives.

Although it is possible to screen share on Skype, a feature we could have used to observe their interaction on the various platforms, we decided after the second interview that it would be disruptive both in terms of time but also the already deteriorating quality of the empiricism.

Therefore, we chose instead to focus on their narratives, in which they also comment on the social technologies in regards to their business. Since we do not have to visualize their interaction with the platforms, we could instead create a narrative where interaction can be explained with concepts and examples.

3) The Corona crisis has also had consequences for our handling of the informant group. We had agreed to an interview with Lyndsay Jensen, editor and founder of the online magazine 'The International Denmark', but never heard back from her after the

lock-down. In addition, most of our interviews were postponed, which meant that we could only begin our final analysis at a late stage.

In general, the lock-down has resulted in a difficult period, both because our cooperation has been affected by the circumstances, but also because the crisis has affected our mental minds. This is probably caused by uncertainty, which has throughout the period created a turmoil that we have had difficulty letting go of. It has also meant that we have been pressured alternately, which has also delayed some processes. We are saddened by the fact that we have to complete our final academic work under these conditions, but we are nevertheless proud to have come out "on the other side" and still deliver a product we can be proud of.

## **An elaboration of the structure of the thesis**

### **- Problem area**

In the following chapter, we focus on the actual issues regarding this subject, and what the vision for the project is. Hereafter, we stress our explanatory, analytical and debating research questions alongside our final statement.

### **- The framework of our theoretical methodological standpoint**

This chapter lays the foundation for our research. Determinately, we chose to merge both our theoretical standpoints and the methodological practice, as we realized that we use the concepts both theoretically and methodologically, when analyzing the narratives of our informants. We came to the conclusion that merging the two would 1) greatly mirror our techno-anthropological process within this project; 2) while also reflecting how we tackled the conducted empiricism; 3) and lastly, we aim to create a foundation based on the interrelated concepts within both our theoretical standpoints and the methodological practice.

### **- The analytical dissemination of the study: "WOC: in perspective"**

After determining the topic, we quickly decided that if we were to do such a study, we needed a method that would help us spread the message in a clear way. Podcasts are

a medium we both use and are easily accessible to listeners. There are a wide range of topics on a global scale, but in the Danish market there are not many podcasts that create understanding through the analysis of women's stories according to science and the outside world in relation to the empowerment of women of color.

Our intention is to be able to create a forum where it is possible to raise awareness of two essential aspects: As the study progresses, we have become aware of the importance of being able to articulate the problem or situation one may face. But to be able to speak to another human being, it also requires the other person to understand - or at least try to put themselves into the situation.

That is, we both aim for the podcast to act as a tool to create a vocabulary, so that situations and issues become easier to articulate; but we will also act as a platform where, by means of concepts and interview quotes, we exemplify the problems in the systematic political and societal circumstances. In addition, we can be allowed to represent a still marginalized group that hopefully can lead to inspiration, action and critical awareness.

The podcast currently consists of two episodes, and aligning our informants' narratives with the concepts and terms from our theoretical methodological standpoint create understanding based on the realities lived by other people. The episodes are designed so that they can be heard independently but still form a continuous narrative throughout the episodes.

#### **- Discussion**

To round off our study, we take this chapter as a starting point for our discussion of research questions, but so that we still relate to the analysis and the concepts that go through it. In addition, we also discuss the technological bias in the utilized social technologies..

#### **- The conclusion of our problem statement**

Lastly, we conclude our problem statement in relation to all three research questions.

# **The framework of our theoretical methodological standpoint**

In order to answer our problem statement it is important for us to outline both our theoretical standpoint but in alignment with our choice of method. Although these are academically separated, we aim to give a reason for combining the two, thus using them both theoretically and methodologically. We aim to obtain a common understanding of how we use the interrelated concepts, thus explaining the foundation of the analysis.

By means of feminist theory and critical ethnography, we believe that it is possible to shed light on the stories of our informants, and concurrently disseminate these in a in-depth narrative.

## **Intersectionality According to Crenshaw**

*"Intersectionality was a lived reality before it became a term."* (Crenshaw, 2015)

This is how law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw begins her essay *"Why Intersectionality Can't Wait"* for the Washington Post. With that opening statement Crenshaw specifies the inherent nature of the term intersectionality, which although it is a term that is brought up a lot in recent years it is a concept that has been around for longer than – as Crenshaw puts it "nearly three decades after I first put a name to the concept". The following account of the term and Crenshaw's work is drawn from the Washington Post essay (Crenshaw, 2015) unless stated otherwise.

It was especially with the 1976 monumental court case, which involved five African American women holding a lawsuit over General Motors. Emma DeGraffenreid and other black women had made an observation regarding General Motors' organizational practices. The company seemed to be dividing its workforce by race and gender and assigned a particular set of jobs for black people, while white people

were assigned another. However, the observation did not end here, the women noticed that along with the racial segregation also came a separation in work tasks. The black jobs would be occupied by black males, who would work the floor of the factory – black female applicants would not be considered for such a position. Similarly, white females might get hired as secretaries in the offices, but no chance for black women to occupy that same position. It seemed that the women had fallen into a grey area where both their race and their gender gave them a disadvantage because neither the black jobs nor the women's jobs were appropriate for black women, since they were neither male nor white. Wasn't this clearly discrimination, even if some blacks and some women were hired?

To the dismay of women of color across the United States, the court dismissed their claims. The argument against the women's claims was that they should not be allowed to combine the claims of both gender and race into one, "because they could not prove that what happened to them was just like what happened to white women or black men, the discrimination that happened to these black women fell through the cracks." (Crenshaw, 2015)

Although intersectionality as a term was coined on behalf of black women, intersectional erasure is not exclusive to black women. The term elucidated the invisibility of many people whose identities fall into several minority groups, especially since those individual groups may not protect those who intersect across several groups.

"People of color within LGBTQ movements; girls of color in the fight against the school-to-prison pipeline; women within immigration movements; trans women within feminist movements; and people with disabilities fighting police abuse — all face vulnerabilities that reflect the intersections of racism, sexism, class oppression, transphobia, able-ism and more." (Crenshaw, 2015)

Intersectionality is arguably a thread of feminism which lends more of its combativeness towards seeking to give the underrepresented and invisible the vocabulary to speak about the oppression and injustices they may experience. In the case of black women against General Motors, we can draw out the notion of



discrimination against an intersected identity of black + woman, while black men and white women respectively would not face discrimination to the same degree (Crenshaw, 2015). This case is a prime example of the crossroad metaphor which Crenshaw uses in her work to explain the ways in which marginalized groups - especially black women - become misrepresented by political initiatives (Lykke, 2010: 71). These initiatives are according to Crenshaw often built without intersectional consideration as they usually deal with only one power differential at a time (Lykke, 2010: 71).

*“The image of roads crossing is intended to show how both identity politics and anti-discrimination policies that take either gender/sexism or race/racism into account, but not both simultaneously, miss the point in relation to women of color.”* (Lykke, 2010: 71).

In light of the exemplary nature of the DaGraffenreid VS General Motors case and the emergence of intersectional theory, we therefore aim to utilize the tools of feminist analysis of intersections as they are described by Crenshaw. However, we wish to use the tools provided (e.g., analyze the structures and power differentials that our informants have faced or continue to face in order to accomplish their goals) in the sense of the social benefits and setbacks they have experienced, since they themselves also set structures due to their owning a business. Thereby pointing our focus towards how these women of color maneuver - in their respective entrepreneurial spaces - in a predominantly white country such as Denmark. Furthermore with the methodological instruments of Freire, Sen and Kabeer shed light on the ways they combat the obstacles they may meet and what benefits their solutions and tactics have.

## **The introductory presentation of empowerment**

To investigate whether social technologies can liberate women of color in Denmark from the social structures, and thereby create opportunities for empowerment, we must create a common understanding of what it means to be empowered.

Empowerment is not a new term, and is used mainly by social development and marginalized groups. In agreement with the United Nations, we associate empowerment with the process whereby an individual gains greater control over their own lives. But what does it mean to have control over one's own life?

Amartya Sen (1933) is an Indian economist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1998 for her contribution to both the welfare economy and her interest in the poorest members of society and their problems. Sen developed *The Capability Approach*, which focuses on improving people's lives and freedoms (Sen, 1998). This approach presents an alternative and evaluative combination of things that a person is capable of *being* or *doing*. According to Sen, the most basic is political freedom and civil liberties, where the ability to choose (capabilities) and the actual realization of these choices (functionings) are part of the life of individuals. (Sen, 1999: 16)

But to be able to help herself, Sen talks about the agency aspect of the individual, which is:

*“Someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives (...) This work is particularly concerned with the agency role of the individual as a member of the public and as a participant in economic, social and political actions.”*(Sen, 1999: 19).

Therefore, we understand that the individual must thus be able to maintain her own values and goals, but is still part of a society that creates some circumstances in which the individual must navigate. These circumstances are not necessarily mastered by oneself. Therefore, the approach also allows us to examine underlying factors in human relationships such as differences in social conditions and differences in relational perspectives (Sen, 1999: 70-71).

Where Sen's capabilities refer to the potential that man has for living the life they want, Kabeer uses the concepts of *resources* and *agency*.

Naila Kabeer (1950) is a Professor of Gender and Development, and her research includes gender, poverty, social exclusion, labor markets and the foundations of life, social protection and citizenship.

However, Kabeer emphasizes that there is a deficiency in achieving the being and doings, for example, laziness, incompetence or individual priorities or preferences. Thus, the failure to meet goals reflects some profound limitations on the ability to choose - can be labeled 'disempowerment' (Kabeer, 1999: 438).

According to Kabeer, empowerment requires a process of change - a change that involves a shift from 'disempowerment'; meaning that a person has been denied the ability to make strategic choices in life (Kabeer, 1999: 437).

This is to be understood as power being the ability to make choices, but not all kinds of choices are signs of power or empowerment. Sometimes man makes choices that are not necessarily in her favor, and here Kabeer suggests that it could indicate that man has internalized their social status - persons of lesser value, thus undermining their own well-being. Power is therefore not reflected in the exercise of choices, but in the type of choices (Kabeer, 1999: 437).

Here she uses Bourdieu's idea of *doxa*, in order to conceptualize these norms and traditions that have been taken for granted. Doxa describes traditions and beliefs in societies that exist beyond discourse, and in order to move these norms to a discursive level, a critical consciousness is needed. This is done only by questioning the current doxa of competing ways of doing things, so arbitrariness of what was common sense is revealed. It can allow people to imagine other choices, by bringing alternatives to the discursive level (Kabeer, 1999: 441). In fact, we have to question, be critical and wonder about, norms, traditions and beliefs - or the invisible social contracts in society - to be able to make free choices.

According to Kabeer, having the ability or capacity to make strategic choices in life depends on three interrelated dimensions: resources (conditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes) whose interactions determine the possibilities for change in the life of the 'disempowered' (Kabeer, 1999: 437).

Resources refer to material, social, and human resources, and Kabeer's understanding of agency can be largely compared to Sen's interpretation of the concept, but to a greater extent clarify the power associated with the goals one sets for herself. In

addition, Kabeers also makes use of a final dimension, namely achievements. These relate to the concrete outcomes of the choices one has made - the level that is made up of both resources and agency. Here she believes that the focus should be on the potential inequalities in people's ability to make choices, and not on the differences in the choices being made (Kabeer, 1999: 439).

### *A comprehensive understanding of Sen and Kabeer*

Only the person herself can achieve the goals they set, and this requires some form of change process. Both Sen and Kabeer make use of the concept of agency, which focuses on man's ability to create change - that is, they must emerge as a significant player in the process of change. Consistent with Kabeer's understanding of agency, we also believe that, combined with resources and achievements, helps determine a person's ability to make changes in her own life. It is also understood here that the ability to make and exercise choices is central to the concept of power in an empowerment process.

However, we still believe that the doxa, that is, the societal norms and structures that exist in Denmark, can negatively affect the opportunities that women of color have compared to the convention, so that these women thus 'disempower' themselves - on an institutional, social and private level. Sen's *Capability Approach* includes the basic concepts for analyzing women of color's perspectives in our society - examining their capabilities; what they are capable of doing according to what they value doing and being. Kabeer discusses these concepts in relation to how people can acquire the ability and thus change their state from disempowerment.

We thus believe that a person must be a significant player in this change process, that they should be able to acquire the ability to make some strategic choices in life, based on the values that may be essential to her. It allows you to question and let the critical consciousness result in achievements. In this way, a change in our norms and the existing doxa can be made possible, and further necessary change can occur in our society.

On that note, we are ready to elaborate on the critical ethnography we will use to access the study. It is important here to understand that we are constantly dealing with disempowerment and empowerment, both on an individual, social and

institutional level, but also in relation to women of color, social technologies and the relation in between.

## **The use of critical-ethnography based on Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed**

To analyze our empirical evidence, we use the 'pedagogy of the oppressed', developed by the former Brazilian Professor of Pedagogy, Paulo Freire (1921-1997). He was concerned with how it was possible for the oppressed, those in a position of powerlessness, to change their situation so that one or more can participate as active citizens in the society of which they are a part of. According to Freire himself, his pedagogy deals with "an awareness of the societal power relations that oppress the poor (Freire, 2012: 255), and in addition he also formulates his pedagogy as: " ... a pedagogy which must be forged with, not for, the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity. This pedagogy makes oppression and its causes objects of reflection by the oppressed, and from that reflection will come their necessary commitment in the struggle for their liberation." (Freire, 2005: 48)

Freire hereby argues that freedom should be the goal of an educational process; pedagogy must be created with, and not for, the oppressed in order to be able to fight for their own liberation - but this also requires that they recognize the reality of oppression as a situation that can be changed, and thus not as a closed world. This insight must, of course, be combined with a motivating and empowering force in the liberating action (Freire, 2012: 256). Freire points out that only when the oppressed can see the real oppressor, and when they actively participate in the struggle for emancipation, do they begin to believe in themselves. Thus, like Sen and Kabeer, Freire emphasizes that action must clearly occur, such that the discovery of the oppressor is not merely an insight (Freire, 2012: 257).

Freire explains that the oppressed must be included in the empowerment process, to be part of it, by distinguishing between systematic teaching and teaching projects; systematic teaching can only be "changed through political power", where teaching projects are carried out with the oppressed (Freire, 2012: 257).

By basing his approach on the quest to replace the teacher-student model - "knowledge (is) a gift bestowed by those who regard themselves as knowing, to those who are considered ignorant" (Freire, 2012: 259), which he criticized for being of a monologue form - with dialogue, cooperation on common acknowledgments can be made possible. In the teacher-student model, he assumes that a knowledge/ignorance relationship may exist, thus maintaining the existing power dynamic between the educated and the uneducated.

He therefore sees knowledge as a dialectical movement - a process of moving from action to reflection to reaction, where he also proclaims that people, regardless of their background and basic skills, have some form of knowledge that can be absorbed through personal experience. Therefore, he sought to develop a theoretical framework that was applicable to the concrete situation of man (Freire, 1973: 45). By this, he believes that context can not only exist objectively outside people, but on the other hand, exist within people, through relationships both in and with their world, where objectivity and subjectivity are constantly in a dialectical relationship with each other (Freire, 1973: 87).

Freire argues that the acquisition of skills is not the goal in itself, but the means of production for a larger goal, why critical awareness and communication skills could transform unfair circumstances. He acknowledges that he has a Marxist influence, which is clearly seen in his desire to improve Brazil's political and economic structure, back in the 1960s. However, we do not necessarily want to change the political and economic structures in Denmark, but we must critically relate to these structures in order to relate them to the women's empowerment process.

Through observations and Freire's own teacher experience, he described the term "mutism" - groups of underprivileged people remained in oppression for generations. He believes that the reason for this happening may be a result of our system, that is, there is a one-way communication from the dominant culture to the less powerful; they talk, we hear - they make the rules, we follow them. This kind of monologue, Freire thinks, is also central to the oppression; He further explains that people who live under such oppressive circumstances live in a "culture of silence". In this context, he

also mentions his criticism of “assistencialism”, which dehumanizes people, by focusing and attacking the "social illness" in which the causes are neglected, and robs people of the chance to take responsibility for getting out of difficult situations. And it is precisely this political system that Freire describes as a dominant culture. (Freire, 1965: 24-25).

## **Freire’s methodology in the context of Women of Color**

Freire formed a method by which people must intervene in their own life situations; he thus tried to help people understand their repressive factors in order to work up a critical attitude. The application of his method allows us to examine: 1) the oppressive factors of women according to the circumstances (political and economic structures - and in general societal structures and unspoken contracts), and 2) how communities both emerge and how they can have a liberating effect. But it also gives us the opportunity to explore how the oppressed become a subject of transformation, rather than an object (in political terms), in regards to the women’s businesses - and only in this shift can the “culture of silence” be part of the problem-solving process and development. Individuals can emerge in a new consciousness, but concurrently become aware of their historical context and become a conscious maker of their own culture - simply they must intervene in their own lives to gain a critical understanding of their role in society.

### *Using narratology to interpret our empirical evidence*

In the shaping of this master thesis our intention was to conduct ethnographic semi-structured interviews while physically present with our informants. This was in part both to hear their stories, but also to provide an explorative and narrative dimension to our fieldwork. That way we could observe their body-language and the ways in which they interact with their platforms, and in a way allow the field to open itself up to us. The purpose of that was to gain an in-depth understanding of how the various informants use their respective social technology platforms for their businesses and why. However due to the sudden circumstances enforced to decrease the spread of Covid-19, we were obligated to conduct interviews through the video

communication platform Skype. This still allowed us to interview our informants. Some we interviewed by utilizing the video conference function, but connectivity issues arose along the way which lessened the quality of both video and audio.

Despite the fact that it is possible to screen-share on Skype, it seemed as if it would be too “complicated” both for our informants and ourselves, as it would require technical know-how on our end as well as our informants. We ultimately decided that we would make due with merely interviewing our informants, and ask more technical questions related to their use of the platforms.

This is why we have chosen to use narratology which - as the term implies - deals with narratives and how they influence perception. Narratology provided us the methodological toolset to analyze the conversations we have had with our informants. By utilizing narratology in accordance to our interviews, we could provide insightful knowledge about our informant's perceptions of society, along with oppression, self-perception and values. We could engulf ourselves in their narratives by analyzing them, thematizing and, in a way, deconstructing them, then retelling them (Czarniawska, 2010: 239-242).

A narrative can be a powerful form of communication between people, as it can support people's ability to negotiate and renegotiate meaning, but also to attribute meaning to new events (Dupont, 2007: 102). The narrative can help shift the perspective from reality if you focus on how the past is portrayed, but can also be used to put words into reality. Bruner stresses that it is important to note that stories are based on the expectations of others and from the culture they belong to - this may include a showdown with an expected state, which may bring new insights and acknowledgments. (Bruner, 2004: 78-79)

Therefore, it can also be central to identify who this new insight and perspective belongs to and whose purpose it seeks to fulfill. Especially according to using the collected empirical evidence to design two podcast episodes centered around women of colors perspective in Denmark in relation to their role, profession and respective communities.



## Interview Strategy

When shaping our interviews, we did not want for the interviews to feel cold and distanced from the interviewee. We wanted to create an atmosphere of solid conversations where we laid an ear to the stories that our informants wished to lay upon us. However we still had some theoretical considerations in mind when forming our questions, since the Covid-19 pandemic has limited us to our interviews becoming our main source of empirical evidence and thereby not being able to do observations on the women's physical use of their respective socio-technical platforms.

We were however able to utilize the video conference feature on Skype with some of our informants meaning that we could see their faces and they could see ours, which made it easier for us to identify nuances (sarcasm, irony, humor, sadness, happiness, etc.) in their speech, but also easier for them because they could also see when we were listening or wanted to ask an elaborative question to their statements.

As aforementioned we have conducted semi-structured interviews, this was both to ensure that we had the structural integrity of the interview to gather information that allows us to utilize our chosen theories, but also in part to allow for our informants to bring up topics and themes they may find important or relevant to discuss with us.

Below you can see an excerpt of one of our interview guides.

Research questions	Interview questions
<b>Intro</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What is her business about?</li> <li>- What does it mean for her?</li> <li>- Challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To begin, I think it would be great if you could give us a short introduction about yourself and ILoveNaturalHair               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How did you come up with ILNH?</li> <li>- How did it all start?</li> </ul> </li> <li>- How has it been for you to start a business in Denmark?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Has there been any challenges along the way?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Empowerment</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- What motivation was behind starting the business?</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How do you use social media in your business endeavours?               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do you feel that your business is perceived any different, because you use Social Media as a platform?                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- And if so, do you feel it would be perceived any different if it had started in a conventional way?</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>- Do you feel a type of empowerment through your work? And if so, in what way?</li> </ul>

### *A short presentation of our informants*

We will now present our seven informants, all of whom are women who have created digital businesses or creative platforms through social technologies. They are presented by their own name, company and a brief introduction to who they each are and why they are where they are.

Furthermore, we have selected these women on the three simple parameters that 1) they are women of color, residing in Denmark, 2) they have started their own businesses, and 3) they use social technologies in regards to their business.

#### **Manna Tarah, 20.04.20**

BilanRK: An online clothing shop

Social technologies: Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Website

About: Manna Tarah is the main designer behind the Danish-Somali fashion brand Bilan RK. She uses sustainably sourced East African fabrics, and combines traditional garments and patterns with Scandinavian simplicity to create her own unique clothes. Manna's allegiance to the person of color community was evident during our interview with her, through her avid expression of the many POC groups and the mobilizatory activism she actively partakes in.

#### **Carriene Rendbo, 09.04.20**

Ilovenaturalhair.dk: A web based shop selling afro hair products, organization of workshops, gives advice and helps with the maintenance of the hair.

Social technologies: Facebook, Instagram, Website

About: Carriene moved from London to Copenhagen about 11 years ago, and was frustrated that there was no hair care and hairdressing for women with afro hair. Therefore, she became one of the pioneers who started a platform on

which to buy afro hair products, but at the same time get advice on care and handling of the hair.

**Abi Olusanya**, 09.04.20

The BlacBox: A self-care subscription box for black women  
Social technologies: Facebook, Instagram, Website, Twitter  
About: Abi moved to Copenhagen from London for approximately three years ago, and quickly started her business because she missed beauty products that fitted dark skinned women. In addition, she sought a black community, such as what she knew in London.

**Stephanie Asi Brix, Naima Yasin & Ingrid Baraka**, 07.05.20

A Seat At The Table: A discussion podcast focusing on the women's experiences and how it is to be a black woman in Denmark.

Social technologies: Podcast, Instagram, Facebook  
About:

**Hilal Özgen**, 14.05.20

LashedByLalskii: Er personlig plejer,  
Social technologies: Instagram, Facebook  
About: Hilal is a self-made lash technician who has recently started her lash extension business in her own home by creating a Facebook and Instagram profile to obtain a clientele. She uses her platforms to communicate with her followers along with sharing pictures of her work.

Series, Groups and Reflections on Individuality

Although we use terms such as women of color, minority and marginalized groups, "culture of silence" and the oppressed, we are still aware that the women we have interviewed are individuals before anything. Our feminist approach can set a precedent for us to use the stories of the seven women to define the repressive -

along with the empowering - factors that have played a role in shaping them, their businesses and their communities. We can thereby form an arguably homogeneous group based on these factors, where individuals still act and reflect differently from one another. In light of their shared experiences of being women of color in Denmark, it is important that we still consider our informants' differences.

In order to do this we have taken inspiration from social justice theorist and political philosopher Iris Marion Young (Lykke, 2010: 72). Young introduces a term similar to Crenshaw's structural intersectionality, called *seriality* (Young, 1997: 12-37). Young however borrows from Sartre in her defining of a *series* to be *a social collective that shares some structural conditions without necessarily forming a political identity around these* (Lykke, 2010: 72). To explain this concept Young describes a series similar to a line of people queueing for a bus (Young, 1997: 24). While these people are sharing the same structural condition and partaking in the same practice, that does not necessarily equate to them also having a shared political consciousness or a group identity. However the state of a group identity or shared political consciousness is not off the table in a series, as this state of mind could shift, in specific cases, such as the people on the bus feeling *cheated by the bus company and decide to collectively do something about it* (Lykke, 2010: 72).

Another term Young coins to differ from series, is a *group*. A group - according to Young - is a collective whose members actively partake and add to the achievement of a common goal. We are all in a sense connected to our own interwebbing of different intersectional networks of series (Lykke, 2010: 72). For example a line of women - with no regard to any other intersectional parameter - could be considered a series, while a line of only black women - with no regard to additional intersectional parameters - can be considered two intersecting series aligning. When these series are joined together and a collective is formed of people with similar intersecting series, this collective can be considered a group.

## **Introduction to the discourse within the utilized social technologies**

In order to understand references in regards to the social technologies utilized by the women, we aim to briefly introduce the different platforms, so that we can outline how these platforms can also be biased through their algorithms.

Within our group of informants, the utilized platforms are Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Websites. Four very different platforms, which are all within the category of social media.

### **Instagram**

The platform is a social networking service based on sharing photos and videos, and is owned by Facebook, Inc. The users are enabled to update content, which they can edit, organize with tags and location. It was founded by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, and was launched in 2010. The users content can be shared publicly or privately, meaning only with pre-approved followers - which also allow the users to access trending content. After adding new features, the 'DM's' (a messaging feature, as we see it on Facebook), and the 'stories' (similar to the platform Snapchat, which allows you to record short videos in limited time), became popular features and are beneficial to anyone promoting their business, their brand or their product. Although Instagram rapidly gained popularity, and is also praised for its influence, the platform has been subject of criticism in regards to policy and interface changes, and allegations of censorship and along other accusations. (Wikipedia, 2020)

### **Facebook**

Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Chris Hughes, and Dustin Moskovitz, and offers online social networking. The platform instantaneously became "the largest social network in the world", with half of the users logging in everyday. The platform allows the user to create profiles, share

posts and send messages; the user can join pre existing groups, or are enabled to create new ones. Facebook allows you to interact with users through events, groups, pages or message-threads. Alongside, the users are able to “like” content from other users. (Hall, 2019)

## **Twitter**

The platform is also referred to as the most popular microblogging service, cofounded by Evan Williams, Christopher Isaad (“Biz”) Stone and Jack Dorsey, and received a “Webby Award for Breakout of the Year” in 2009, thus hereafter becoming a “mainstream means of communication”. Compared to a regular blog, usually with a long update every other day, Twitter allows the users to post dozens of updates with a limited number of marks. Incorporating traditional social networking features, enables the users to track specific topics, participate in dialogues, and more. The users participated in transforming what before was a hobby, to a platform that transcends political borders. (Hayes, 2010)

## **Website**

A website consists of a domain name, and presents related content, oftentimes dedicated to a certain topic or purpose. The World Wide Web is constituted by all publicly accessible websites, and are accessible for users on a range of devices.

Within the different types of social platforms, a certain discourse can be identified, as the users interact differently on each of the platforms. As we can see in the overall similarities in the social networking features, many of them serve the same, but might function differently. The microblogging phenomenon stands out compared to the other platforms, especially in regards to intersecting the political sphere. Although we connect Twitter to political debate, many platforms, if not all, are greatly dominated by algorithms - and these algorithms are to a large extent biased, which means that repeatable and systematic errors can create unfair and unjust outcomes.

The bias that the algorithms create, and how they affect maintaining minority groups, will be elaborated further, when analyzing and discussing our empirical data.

## **Discussion**

As is evident in our analysis, the digital sphere has an inherent nature when it comes to the organization of women of color communities. It has shown itself to be an instrument of connection and exposure for our informants' respective communities especially. Social technologies seem to enable women of color to accelerate the process of mobilization as they are no longer confined to having to be physically present in order to partake in conversations with their peers. This means that women of color who were otherwise geographically challenged in regards to finding a WOC community, now have the ability to do so from their own home. In a way, one can argue that this can progress into these women becoming strengthened in their identities as they can interact, learn, and teach each other how to express their experiences. Furthermore the mere ability to see one's peers represented - although digitally -, alone, can in itself be a fruitful part of an empowerment process.

During our conversations with our informants, only one informant gave us an explicit example of a barrier she had met throughout her career. This was the example presented in the podcast with Carrienne who was recommended by her white male website developer not to post her photo to her website.

One could however argue that despite our informants not bringing up barriers they have met with their use or recommended use of their digital platforms, there are still factors that work against persons of color on the social technology outlets.

### **Algorithm bias**

A platform that has been critiqued time and time again, is Facebook in relation to their ads targeting algorithm. It is said that with such types of machine learning algorithms, the problems often start with the training data. Training data are the data sets that the algorithms are fed in order to teach them patterns that can aid the machines to ultimately make decisions on its own(Hao, 2019). It is said that oftentimes the issues with algorithm bias are a product of the training data itself containing



prejudiced doxas, thereby accelerating the human-made problem of prejudice and turning into a systemic and constant way to enforce these worldviews. As an example of this, we can look to Muhammad Ali and Piotr Sapiezynski who led a research experiment on Facebook advertisement practices (Hao, 2019).

The study was set up in a way where the researchers *ran a series of otherwise identical ads with slight variations in available budget, headline, text, or image* (Hao, 2019). Results showed that especially ads for job listings and for real estate had notable disparities. The algorithm had for instance, shown job listings for secretaries and nurses to a higher amount of women than men, and similarly, it had shown postings for janitorial jobs and taxi drivers to a higher number of minorities (Hao, 2019). When putting this study in relation to our question of the barriers women of color meet when they are maneuvering around on social platforms, we can see that the advertising algorithms could work greatly against them. If these algorithms are biased towards gender and race, then what does this entail in regards to persons who face prejudice on both those parameters? Although our informants did not bring it up themselves, the discussion is still relevant to have, because if these types of algorithms go about uncritiqued and unquestioned they will continue to magnify the prejudices that can be hidden and underlying - such as the website developer example from Carrienne.

## **Performative activism**

As we discuss in our analysis, we see that many of our informants have a tendency to engage actively in their respective communities, especially person of color groups on social platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. A thing we specifically talk about is the notion of safe spaces. Safe spaces being spaces our informants characterize as places - both digital and physical - where they can be themselves and make themselves vulnerable even when that room is shared with other people. But when we discuss the notion of safe spaces on a digital platform, who's to say the person you're talking to is who they claim to be?

Tuesday the 2nd of June, 2020 Instagrammers across the world took to the platform and many people's feeds were filled to the brim with square images of pure black cosigned with a #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to accompany the post. This was the product of a solidarity initiative for people to pause their usual upload schedule and have a digital moment of silence in solidarity with the current protests in America that seek justice for the overwhelming amount of black minorities who are ruthlessly killed by law enforcement (Flanagan, 2020). It did not take long for the initiative to kick off, and it took even less time for activists and protesters to catch on to an issue. The hashtag is primarily used to share information, videos and photos relating to the movement or to the concurrent protests. But when the tag becomes flooded with black squares that do not offer any practical knowledge for those who are "on the ground" then we can begin to question the validity of the entire initiative.

*"Just as quickly, some wondered what participation would mean, and many questioned whether the effort, embraced so quickly by huge corporations, would end up being an empty gesture rather than a sincere effort to counteract a history of exploitation."* (Flanagan, 2020)

Andrew Flanagan writes for NPR. Many activists took to Twitter to express their dismay with the gesture, some even suggesting that those who have stayed quiet about the protests since the beginning and only now are partaking in the blackout are subjects of performative activism (Jennings, 2020).

When it becomes "trendy" to perform activism, it can make the movement lose its momentum along with the movement becoming infiltrated by people who ultimately are just following a fad. So in a way these safe spaces become nests for persons who do not have a particular interest in the well being and protection of persons of color, because their goal is to tag along.

PhD candidate and activist Anthony James Williams comments on the matter for Vox: *"Often, these cutesy illustrations — or the girl who played Brittany on Glee [Heather Morris] who did a TikTok dance for #BlackLivesMatter — don't harm us. But right now, the biggest thing is not necessarily making a watercolor Black Lives Matter sign or doing an interpretive dance. That's not really helping out people on*

*the ground. If someone's doing that in addition to other actions, cool. But if that's all that you are contributing to the struggle right now, there's a lot more you can do, even if it's just literally making phone calls to your local police department to tell them to release people who've been protesting."* (Jennings, 2020).

Williams co-signs the notion that although participation is not harmful in the most severe definition of the word, it is simply redundant and a wasted effort when there are other more constructive ways to show one's solidarity with the BLM movement.

## Conclusion

Throughout the analysis, we have emphasized that the digital sphere certainly allows women of color to be empowered, because it opens up the opportunity for them to choose - between choices they may not have been exposed to in their local society. Although the digital sphere enables women to participate despite their surrounding conditions, a minority group of women is excluded, as the material resource plays a significant role, having access to the digital sphere. Considering poor women, who might not have access to neither the internet nor the devices, the digital sphere is not choosable opposed to them having access to the material resources needed.

Considering our empiricism, women of color seek social platforms in order to solve a problem, find a community or to promote your business. Importantly, they want to be exposed to women they can mirror themselves in, women who understand them. Stephanie from A Seat At The Table mentions the word “belongingness”; confidently, we believe that the foundation of communities are belongingness. Therefore it feels natural to them to interact with their customers, because they “know”. Because in these communities, they are safe from the surrounding conditions, doxas and systematic political injustice - and that is the reason for the communities to arise, to create more safe spaces for people in oppression.

Having this safe space, also allows you to get a voice - and not least, be heard.

We can not necessarily argue that the communities enable emancipation for entrepreneurial women of color, but we can argue that for them to be an entrepreneurial woman of color today is due to the fact that they found communities, who shared the same values - and *that* is what is emancipating.

We do not necessarily identify any barriers in the process of empowerment in regards to social technologies, but one could argue that the women experience the barriers in the local society or community, and therefore utilize the digital sphere as a getaway. Although we argued that “it is first and foremost about oneself. The individual must be able to intervene in their own life and create the necessary process.” - which is not less true now, than it was then - we just need to remember that some of the

conditions affecting the process are not controllable by the individual self. This is due to the systematic political power, the dominant culture. And we can stress as much that the dimensions of the individual, resources and achievements represent the empowering process, the political injustice will still be affecting the dimensions we thought we could control.

It is therefore crucial that communities are created, that social technologies allow the documentation of inhuman acts and that a critical consciousness is formed.

## Reference list

Bruner, Jerome (2004): At fortælle historier i juraen, i litteraturen og i livet, Læringsarenaer, akademiskforlag, 2004.

Crenshaw, K., (2015): Why Intersectionality Can'T Wait. [online] The Washington Post. Available at:  
<<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-theory/wp/2015/09/24/why-intersectionality-cant-wait/>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Czarniawska, Barbara (2010): Narratologi og feltstudier. I: Brinkmann, Svend og Tanggaard, Lene: Kvalitative metoder, en grundbog. 1. udgave, 2. oplag, Hans Reitzels Forlag, København 2010.

Dupont, Søren (2007): Jerome Bruner og socialkonstruktivisme. I: Ritchie, Rom: Teorier om læring - en læringspsykologisk antologi, 1. udgave, 1. oplag, Billesø & Baltzer, Værløse, 2007.

Flanagan, A., (2020): NPR Choice Page. [online] Npr.org. Available at:  
<<https://www.npr.org/2020/06/02/867371758/music-companies-promise-a-tuesday-blackout-for-black-lives?t=1591238017528>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Freire, Paulo (1965): Education for Critical Consciousness

Freire, Paulo (1973): De undertryktes pædagogik

Freire, Paulo (2005): Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 30th Anniversary Edition, Continuum New York, 2005.

Freire, Paulo (2012): De undertryktes pædagogik. I: Illeris, Knud: 49 tekster om læring, 1. udgave, Samfundslitteratur, 2012.

Hall, M., (2019): Facebook. Encyclopædia Britannica, [online] Available at:  
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Hayes, D., (2010): Jack Dorsey, Christopher Isaac ("Biz") Stone, And Evan Williams | Cofounders Of Twitter. [online] Encyclopedia Britannica. Available at:  
<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jack-Dorsey-Christopher-Isaac-Biz-Stone-and-Evan-Williams>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Hao, K., (2019): Facebook'S Ad-Serving Algorithm Discriminates By Gender And Race. [online] MIT Technology Review. Available at:

<<https://www.technologyreview.com/2019/04/05/1175/facebook-algorithm-discriminates-ai-bias/>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Wikipedia (2020): Instagram. [online] Available at:  
<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instagram>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Jennings, R., (2020): Who Are The Black Squares And Cutesy Illustrations Really For?. [online] Vox. Available at:  
<<https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2020/6/3/21279336/blackout-tuesday-black-lives-matter-instagram-performative-allyship>> [Accessed 4 June 2020].

Kabeer, Naila (1999): Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of 28 Women's Empowerment, Development and Change 30:435-464, 1999.

Lykke, N., (2010) Feminist Studies. 1st ed. Hoboken: Taylor & Francis.

Sen, Amartya (1998):The possibility of social choice, nobel lecture, December 8, 1998.

Sen, Amartya (1999): Development as freedom, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Young, Iris Marion. (1997): Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.