Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World

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"Respectability politics" describes a self-presentation strategy historically adopted by African-American women to reject White stereotypes by promoting morality while de-emphasizing sexuality. While civil rights activists and feminists criticize respectability politics as reactionary, subordinated groups frequently use these tactics to gain upward mobility. This paper analyzes how upwardly mobile young people of low socio-economic status in New York City manage impressions online by adhering to normative notions of respectability. Our participants described how they present themselves on social media by self-censoring, curating a neutral image, segmenting content by platform, and avoiding content and contacts coded as lower class. Peers who post sexual images, primarily women, were considered unrespectable and subject to sexual shaming. These strategies reinforce racist and sexist notions of appropriate behavior, simultaneously enabling and limiting participants' ability to succeed. We extend the impression management literature to examine how digital media mediates the intersection of class, gender, and race.

Keywords: Respectability Politics, Impression Management, Socio-Economic Status, Self-Presentation, Race.

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Introduction

Jorge[1] is a 25-year old Puerto Rican New Yorker who lives in the NYCHA public housing projects. Smart and motivated, he has a sophisticated understanding of how other people judge him online:

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> They [privileged people] kind of dictate what's good to say because we're trying to appeal to them. Because they're the ones who have the jobs, and they're the ones who have the money to give us jobs, so we don't want to say anything that would … make us seem lesser in their eyes. I mean in a lot of ways we don't really care, but we have to pretend that we do. And that's kind of what I think Facebook is, it's the performance of, "No look, I'm viable for this, I'm viable for that. I'm vanilla enough so everyone enjoys me."

To Jorge, social status and class limit his ability to express himself online. To seem acceptable to the economically privileged, he and his friends must perform staid, conservative selves online: what he calls "vanilla." Otherwise, their educational and economic opportunities may be limited.

On social media, people edit themselves to fit what Bernie Hogan (2010) calls the "lowest-common denominator." This practice is typically analyzed through the frame of "impression management," which argues that people alter self-presentation, or code-switch, based on the audience, attempting to regulate how others feel about them (Goffman, 1959; Schlenker, 1980). Yet, social media complicates the ability to code-switch, because historically separate audiences are collapsed into flattened digital contexts (Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). Furthermore, impression management literature fails to account for structural differences that affect the options available to different individuals and the risks of performing incorrectly for a perceived audience.

We use the concept of respectability politics to analyze the self-editing that individuals engage in online through a lens that incorporates race, class, and gender. Respectability politics are rooted in resistance to racist imagery of Black people, particularly Black women, who adopted self-presentation strategies that downplayed sexuality and emphasized morality and dignity to reject White America's stereotypes of them (Harris, 2014; White, 2001). In this context, respectability is a tactic used by low-status individuals in the hope of obtaining social mobility (Shaw, 1996). However, behaviors are judged respectable by comparing them to racist, sexist, and classist norms that idealize upper–middle class versions of White womanhood (Muhammad, 2011). Moreover, respectability politics' emphasis on individual uplift ignores structural inequalities, which are not changed by ascending class status (Harris, 2014). Digital technologies like social media are sites through which hegemonic norms are made visible, and are tools for regulating and resisting norms. They also disrupt strategies that allowed individuals to maintain respectability in face-to-face situations, such as through code-switching (DeBose, 1992). Digital respectability politics loom large for young people like Jorge who believe they must adopt the norms of the "vanilla" upper-class online in order to succeed.

This paper draws from interviews with upwardly-mobile New York City young people from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds to understand how race, class, and gender affect impression management in the face of context collapse, examining how participants draw from discourses of respectability politics. We highlight how the strategies and tactics that our participants take to achieve respectability in digital environments—and judge others—regulate norms and status, thereby helping maintain social divisions rooted in structural oppression.

Literature review

Respectability politics

Respectability politics are a continuum of behaviors and attitudes that reproduce dominant norms, and strategies for producing a counter-narrative to negative stereotypes placed upon subordinated groups (Harris, 2003). Coined by Evelyn Higginbotham (1993), the "politics of respectability" describe how early 20th century Black women presented themselves as polite, sexually pure, and thrifty to reject stereotypes of them as immoral, childlike, and unworthy of respect and protection (Harris, 2003;

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McGuire, 2004). Paisley Harris (2003, p. 213) summarizes that respectability had two audiences: "African Americans, who were encouraged to be respectable, and White people, who needed to be shown that African Americans could be respectable." Respectability also encompasses messages of class status and privilege, denoted through dress, organizational affiliation, and behavior. Thus, respectability refers to a set of rules embodied by the White middle class that appealed to Black American reformers, and subsequently other marginalized groups, as a tactic for social uplift (Wolcott, 2013). Critiques of respectability politics have since emerged in Latinx, LGBTQ, and Asian-American scholarly work (Chong, 2008; Vargas & Ramírez, 2015; Ward, 2008).

Respectability politics has three main facets. First, it reinforces within-group stratification to juxtapose a respectable us against a shameful other, such as unrespectable Black people or promiscuous gay men (Ward, 2008; Wolcott, 2013). While Higginbotham (1993) describes it as a way to counter racist stereotypes and structures, respectability requires condemning behaviors deemed unworthy of respect within one's in-group. For example, advising women to dress modestly positions the speaker as more respectable than those who dress immodestly, reinforcing sexism (Hasinoff, 2015). Second, respectability endorses values that contradict stereotypes, such as presenting Black women as modest, thereby enforcing a dominant narrative that women should exercise sexual restraint. Third, practicing respectability involves impression management to align with White, middle-class indicators of class status and privilege, such as using standard English rather than African-American vernacular English in racially-mixed audiences (Warner, 2015). Thus, strategies to enact respectability reflect and reinforce the norms of the status quo (Wolcott, 2013). Underlying these tactics is the belief that respectable behavior allows marginalized individuals to obtain upward mobility (Shaw, 1996). As politics of respectability reflect the broader culture in which they are situated, such tactics both facilitate social mobility and limit the ability to challenge oppressive systems.

Respectability excludes African-Americans who do not live up to bourgeois standards (Harris, 2003). In the early 20th century, necessary behaviors for survival amongst the working class (e.g., women engaging in paid labor) were disparaged by the middle-class, who saw them as detrimental to efforts to uplift the race (Wolcott, 2013). As a result, many activists and scholars view respectability politics as delegitimizing justifiable Black rage, and have turned to social media to voice opposition (Smith, 2013). After the death of Trayvon Martin, pundits claimed that Martin's hoodie, not race, marked him as "gangsta" and threatening (Wemple, 2013). In response, individuals posted pictures of themselves wearing hoodies on social media platforms to protest racial profiling (Graeff, Stempeck, & Zuckerman, 2014). Similarly, in response to problematic media depictions of victims of police brutality, activist C. J. Lawrence's tweet with the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown spawned a movement in which people of color posted pictures of themselves captioned "#iftheygunnedmedown which picture would they use" (Korn, 2015). One portrait typically showed the user in graduation cap and gown or professional dress, while the other included trendy clothes or hip-hop iconography. The images critiqued the media's tendency to choose less "respectable" photos to represent victims of police brutality, as White suspects are often portrayed more positively than Black victims in media (Jackson, 2016). This campaign called attention to the phenomenon of media using positive images for White perpetrators and less "respectable" images for victims of color. Thus, available "unrespectable" images may be a danger for victims of color, as they are often used to justify negative media portrayals and the less respectable images yield less empathy among viewers and harsher public opinions (NPR Staff, 2014). Furthermore, photos marked respectable versus less respectable revealed viewers' notions of what is considered appropriate and valuable. As Jenny Korn (2015) notes, adhering to respectability requires that people of color perform as defined by structures of Whiteness before they are deemed worthy of exclusion from racialized violence (Croeser, 2015).

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Despite critique, respectability politics maintain cultural currency. Black elites continue to criticize lower- and working-class Black culture, such as Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter's address to Black churchgoers, in which he blamed an outbreak of violent flash mobs on poor Black people's parenting, out of wedlock birthrate, clothing styles, and vocabulary (Harris, 2014). His statements reinforced class tensions and placed the blame for structural inequality on subordinated groups, ignoring racist and classist institutions and histories (Harris, 2014; Higginbotham, 1993).

Critique of respectability politics also occurs in Asian and Latinx communities (Carbado, 2002; Chong, 2008; Sharpless, 2016). Devon Carbado incorporates Latinos in his analysis of public critiques of racial profiling, which often involve the police mistaking "respectable" Blacks and Latinos (doctors, lawyers, professors) for "unrespectable" people, thus reinforcing the idea that unrespectable people deserve police suspicion (Carbado, 2002). Similarly, Rebecca Sharpless (2016) criticizes immigration reform that relies on distinguishing decent immigrants from those convicted of a criminal offense as reproducing and reinforcing inequality. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong analyzes the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shooting, perpetrated by a Korean-American student. She criticizes the "model minority" stereotype of Asian-Americans and the inclination of Asian-American communities to distance themselves from problematic members (Chong, 2008). Thus, gradations of respectability exist not only within communities, but also between and across racial categories.

Respectability also depends on acceptably performing gender and sexuality. Gender theorists argue that respectable femininity is contingent upon whether behavior threatens hegemonic masculinity (Schippers, 2007). To maintain social and economic capital, women manage their identities and sexual reputations to avoid association with "pariah femininities" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Even feminist role models have reflected politics of respectability, in that the women chosen reflected the altruistic feminine tradition (Firestone, 1970). In terms of sexuality, Amy Hasinoff (2015) argues that women who craft an image of innocence may obtain sympathy and avoid culpability in, for instance, criminal sexting cases. The ability to adhere to an image of respectability can be crucial in determining who is punished for violating a social or legal norm. Jane Ward's (2008) work on LGBT activist organizations also demonstrates how neoliberal claims to participation often require communities to discard members who do not fit market needs. She writes, "lesbian and gay activists embrace racial, gender, socioeconomic, and sexual differences when they see them as predictable, profitable, rational, or respectable, and yet suppress these very same differences when they are unpredictable, unprofessional, messy, or defiant" (Ward, 2008, p. 4).

Respectability politics reflect neoliberal, White, bourgeois normativity, and provide a frame for understanding subordinated group behavior from a gendered, classed, and racialized perspective. Respectability politics reinforce designations of appropriate or inappropriate behavior rooted in structural inequality. Moreover, the process of deeming an act respectable is reflexive. Those enacting respectability respond to their perception of the dominant narrative of respectability, and this response informs ideas of what is respectable. In other words, by privileging racist, sexist, and classist values, respectability politics lead members of subordinate groups to internalize them. Analyzing how young adults attempt to manage impressions through the frame of respectability politics allows for a critique of how appeasement to dominant norms acts to simultaneously enable and limit participants' ability to succeed, and how digital media mediates the intersection of class, gender, and race.

Impression management and respectability

The concept of impression management originates in social psychology, describing people's attempts to control how others perceive them (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 2003). It is closely related to the concept of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Erving Goffman's sociological approach to in-person interaction in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* used a theatrical metaphor to analyze choices when interacting with others. He argued that people present themselves strategically to

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influence how others see them, primarily to avoid embarrassment or reduction in status (Goffman, 1955). While some self-governance is deeply self-conscious, such as making a good impression during a job interview, Goffman notes that even in relaxed social situations, people habitually monitor their behavior. In this dialectic process, individuals respond to feedback from their audience, revealing and concealing information accordingly (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Since then, considerable research has been done in psychology and interpersonal communication on the specifics of self-presentation and impression management (Baumeister, 1986; Brown, 1997; Schlenker, 1980). Such scholarship notes that people change aspects of their self-presentation based on the nature of who they are speaking with, including gender, race, social status, and strength of social ties (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Tice, Butler, Muraven, & Stillwell, 1995). In other words, self-presentation depends on context (or environment) and audience (who they interact with). This is particularly challenging for subordinated groups. W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" describes the challenge of integrating sense of self while managing the need to curate presentation based on normative Whiteness (Du Bois, 1903/2000). Lisa Nakamura's work on "cybertypes" further shows how racist stereotypes shape how people of color are viewed online, requiring constant navigation of presumptions of Whiteness (Nakamura, 2002).

Drawing on Erving Goffman's work, internet studies' scholars have used impression management to understand why, how, and what people share online (Kendall, 1998; Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Murthy, 2012; Robinson, 2007; Walther, 1996). In early, text-based online communities, people "typed themselves into being" to participate (Sundén, 2003), embodying themselves in textual descriptions that could be fantastic or mundane. In sites like MySpace (Manago et al., 2008) and online dating sites (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), people constructed idealized images of themselves to appeal to peers or prospective partners, picking pictures, language, and graphics to attempt to manage the impressions of others.

However, modern social media presents new challenges for self-presentation and impression management. Because platforms like Facebook encourage users to "friend" people from many aspects of their lives, audiences that might typically have been kept physically distinct (such as high school friends and coworkers) collapse into one. This is not entirely new to social media. Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) describes how Black Power advocate Stokely Carmichael adopted different rhetorical styles for Black and White audiences, tampering down his fiery rhetoric for pro-integration White people. On television, he was forced to choose between these two modalities, and chose his Black style. This "filled his secondary audience with hatred and fear and brought on the wrath of the White power structure" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 43). This "context collapse" makes it difficult for people to vary self-presentation based on audience and context (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). While in Carmichael's day, only politicians, celebrities, and the like had access to forms of mass media that presented these challenges, sites like Twitter or YouTube, in which the scale of possible audiences has expanded far beyond bounded interpersonal groups, make it difficult to tell who is actually reading one's content (Litt, 2012). People have adopted a variety of strategies as a result. For instance, Bernie Hogan (2010) argued that this phenomenon often leads to a "lowest common denominator" approach, where people share only what is likely to be inoffensive, or safe for their parents or bosses. Eden Litt (2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016) writes that the "imagined audience"—the mental construct people form of their audience given the lack of knowledge about who is actually reading their content online—is influenced by social norms, social context (including both material affordances and community norms of a particular app or site), and the people who are visibly active on the site. Even so, people can be wildly inaccurate in their assessment of who is speaking, which can create serious issues when content spreads beyond its intended audience (boyd, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011, 2014).

Careful impression management is central to respectability politics, where actors negotiate impressions not just in relationship to each other, but to broader social norms. For instance, in her study of

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low-income teenagers of color in Texas, Jacqueline Vickery (2015) notes that her informants disassociated themselves from peers they considered "ghetto." Vickery's participants knew their Facebook connections were visible to peers, requiring those who wished to maintain distance from people they considered unrespectable to carefully manage publicly articulated networks.

However, digital impression management literature rarely accounts for structural inequities among audiences and the subject positions of non-dominant individuals attempting to negotiate with members of a dominant culture. The imagined audience, for instance, resembles the concept of the White audience inherent to respectability politics; namely, that one must be able to successfully perform a White-defined bourgeois self to achieve upward mobility. The complexities faced when trying to manage impressions with an invisible audience through social media are magnified when there are clear differentials between dominant, acceptable social norms, and class, gender, racial, or ethnic norms viewed as less respectable through the eyes of the dominant gaze (Russell, 1991). Social media makes such differentials widely visible.

Little is known about the ways that digital media disrupts or transforms tactics of maintaining respectability through impression management. This paper draws from interviews with a group of young adults to understand how race, class, and gender complicate impression management, using respectability as an analytical lens. The strategies and tactics that these young people use to achieve respectability in digital environments, and judge others as unrespectable, reproduce social divisions.

Methods

This paper draws from a qualitative study of young people of low-socioeconomic status and their privacy experiences and practices (Marwick, Fontaine, & boyd, 2017). Participants included 28 young adults, aged 21 to 27, who lived in New York City (Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Long Island). Participants were required to have a smartphone or handheld device with similar capabilities and to regularly use at least one social media platform. The first group of participants (11) was recruited through emails to NYC-area high school and city college educators. To solicit individuals from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, recruitment flyers specified people who were immigrants, first-generation American or college students, from single-parent households, public housing residents, and/or Section 8 housing voucher recipients. Prospective participants were screened over the phone to determine study eligibility. All names are psudonyms and identifying information of participants has been removed.

Principal investigators (PIs) conducted 30- to 90-minute, individual, semi-structured interviews with 11 participants, for which we paid participants $25. The interview protocol included general questions about participants' interests and questions about social media use. PIs wrote field notes and memos about the participant and conversation after each interview, consistent with best practices of ethnographic research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Field notes and memos included information about interview content, interactional dynamics (e.g., body language and gestures), and how participants appeared to tailor their self-presentation to meet the researcher's expectations.

Inspired by collaborative and participatory methodologies (Torre, Cahill, & Fox, 2015), we recruited a subset of eight interview subjects as participant researchers (PRs) to enhance the validity of interpretation. Each PR interviewed two to six of their contacts, and five participated in a 90-minute focus group. Based on the PRs' initial interview, we suggested themes to investigate and encouraged them to rephrase questions, react to emerging topics, and introduce additional subjects as desired. PRs were paid $25 for completing training on basic interviewing techniques. They emailed completed interviews to the researchers or uploaded them to a shared file system. Participants received $50 for the first set of 2–3 interviews and $50 more for an optional, second set of 3 interviews. An outside transcription service transcribed the interviews.

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Table 1 Participants

Name	Age	Self-Identified Race/Ethnicity	Interviewer
Camila	17	Puerto Rican	PI
Vikrama	24	Asian Indian	PI
Mike	20	African American	PI
Angelique	27	Haitian/Irish	PI
Beth	21	African American (self-identifies as Black)	PI
Carlos	20	Hispanic	PI
Jun	22	Chinese	PI
Arvin	21	Filipino	PI
Diego	21	Dominican	PI
Malik	17	African American	PI
Jorge	25	Hispanic/Puerto Rican	PI, Angelique
Javier	24	Belizean (immigrant) Hispanic/Latino	Vikrama
Ebo	23	Ghanaian (immigrant)	Vikrama
Batuk	18	Asian Indian	Vikrama
Anthony	26	African American ("mixed")	Angelique
Aviva	23	White, Jewish	Angelique
Bryan	22	Puerto Rican/Latino	Beth
Fatima	21	Hispanic/Latina	Beth
Stacy	22	Latina/multiracial	Jun
Andrea	22	Multiracial (Latina & Caucasian)	Jun
Shaka	23	African (immigrant)	Jun
Jake	24	Asian-American	Diego
Gregory	22	Asian-American	Diego
Ravi	25	no race/ethnicity given	Diego
Isabella	21	Hispanic/Latina	Angelique
Natalie	25	White	Angelique
Matthew	23	Jewish/White	Angelique
Ryan	26	Multiethnic/triracial	Angelique

Participants included 18 male-identifying individuals, nine female-identifying individuals, and one biological female with a non-binary gender identification. Most are people of color (see Table 1; we use participants' racial and ethnic self-identification throughout). Many are immigrants. Apart from one who identified as middle class and one as upper–middle class, participants self-identified as low socioeconomic status. Based on their self-descriptions and our interviews, we consider many of our participants, and almost all of the participant researchers, to be upwardly mobile and focused on self-improvement through employment, education, or other pursuits.

Findings

We identified two themes of participant practices: tactics for enacting respectability online in order to obtain social mobility, and judging female sexuality as unrespectable. Our participants knew their online activity could be viewed by people with different ideas of respectability. To maintain

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respectability, they developed strategies to create an image that would be consistently acceptable across collapsed contexts. They self-censored in a manner they described as presenting a "neutral" or "vanilla" face, catering to the respectability norms of the most powerful potential viewers—often potential employers or high-status community members—rather than peers.

Consistent with previous research on respectability, the female body was the primary site of regulation and norm maintenance for our participants, who valued sexual propriety and desexualized self-presentation (Shaw, 1996; Wolcott, 2013). These notions of female respectability were reinforced through a cycle of sexual shaming directed at women who failed to embody these characteristics. Participants regulated their peers' behavior through discourse around acceptable sexuality, while norm ascription for upward mobility was determined by the perceived expectations of groups in power.

Part one: Navigating respectability across context

If we don't take responsibility for our image online, who will?—Vikrama

Participants developed tactics to navigate a space in which being visible led to vulnerability to judgment and online harassment. Digital media disrupted local boundaries where, while notions of respectable behavior might vary, people could tailor self-presentation depending on context and audience. Instead, online, participants responded to divergent audiences and values. Complicating matters further, the scale at which people could engage in public shaming put vulnerable individuals even more at risk than in previous media landscapes, upping the stakes of non-respectability. Our participants often responded by varying tactics of self-censorship and avoidance of gaze to limit risk.

Avoiding the gaze

Participants were aware that the boundaryless nature of online participation challenged traditional tactics of carefully managing impressions to maintain respectability. However, they acknowledged the necessity to maintain some sort of online presence to engage with the world around them. Aviva said, "you need to use the Internet. That's just the way society works unless you want to go off the grid, which I am not willing to do." For some, the only agentic solution to context collapse was to avoid producing or sharing specific types of messages and images (often related to sexuality) in any context, while others attempted to curate their shared content depending on how they imagined their audience on different social media platforms.

Many participants curated a respectable online presence by avoiding sexual innuendo and censoring opinions on controversial topics. Aviva was "very wary about the things [she] puts online." Using rhetoric typical of campaigns urging woman to defend themselves against sexual assault, she compared online risks to the risks she faces walking down the street alone late at night, saying you must "be smart" and "take proactive steps to protect yourself." She described her online self as a different "form." She chose to present a fragment of herself, because certain facets of her being would be unacceptable to her imagined audience.

> When you're doing these things, you're kind of presenting a form of yourself that isn't 100% genuine because you want to present yourself in a very specific way.

Like Aviva, Jorge limited online participation to what he considered neutral. Using the term PC (politically correct), Jorge described avoiding confrontation as much as possible both online and offline.

> I carefully consider everything I say, put out there, and do, that's going to translate to the Internet. If it's going on Twitter, if it's going on Facebook, if it's going on Instagram, I either try to make it as neutral as humanly possible, or as PC as possible.

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Some participants altered self-presentation based on the social media platform and their assessment of who used it, rather than presenting a consistent vanilla self across platforms. Stacy used Tumblr more freely than Facebook, because Facebook activity could be viewed by friends and family who might judge her negatively.

> Stacy: I think I post certain things on my Facebook because I have friends and family. And even, sometimes, I do kind of cross a—like sometimes I'll put … not necessarily like sexually inappropriate things, I don't do that. But I will put, you know, just the occasional something that's adult humor, or …
>
> Jun: Not tasteful?
>
> Stacy: Yeah. Some people that are just like, "Oh, you shouldn't put that, you're a lady," whatever. Whereas on Tumblr, I have no family, virtually no friends who use Facebook—sorry, Tumblr—because they … at one point they used it, but they don't anymore. So, I pretty much have free rein more on Tumblr than I do on Facebook.

Like Stacy, Arvin varied strategies for impression management, depending on the audience he imagined would view his content. He used Facebook to connect with friends and relatives, Twitter to connect with professionals, and Instagram to express creativity. Arvin described himself as "a little obsessed with upward mobility." Because he was pursuing a career in marketing, Arvin felt his Twitter persona should be informative and market himself to professionals. He avoided posting content that would cast him in an unsavory light. Assessing who might view one's behavior in order to determine what is appropriate within that context is, in essence, an attempt to code-switch in the digital world.

Participants acknowledged that the intersection of race and class largely impacted their need to present a respectable image online. In the focus group, Beth described her performance of her "Facebook self" as the "digital equivalent to wearing a suit, so Granny doesn't clutch her purse in the elevator." Her statement emphasizes the need to appear non-threatening to avoid rejection from higher-status individuals. During our focus group, in response to the question "So who chooses and says, 'Screw it, I'm not playing by these rules?,'" Vikrama lamented that economic capital frees the "so-called privileged class" from having to self-censor:

> So, let's say a person who's already among […] the so-called privileged class. Let's say the kid who is heir to a billion-dollar fortune, I think that person has the luxury to say, "Screw it" and just do whatever he or she wants.

Vikrama acknowledged the limits of challenging norms of respectability for subordinated groups, echoing the sentiment that repercussions for defying norms vary based on privilege.

Imagined and future audiences

Upwardly mobile young people must develop effective ways of navigating unfamiliar audiences in new social spaces. Online, users navigate an abstracted audience and future, leading participants to make presumptions about their audiences and the long-term impact of their behaviors online.

Many participants assumed that their audience was judgmental and could threaten their ability to obtain success. Considering the status of our participants as upwardly mobile, this may stem from experiences navigating potentially hostile environments to obtain their current standing. Ravi explained:

> You know, like you have this bright child who's a genius, who's in a bad neighborhood, the schools are bad, but still he or she is still a genius and trying to get out. But the people from

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> the hood is always going to try to take them back, and if they are not successful in converting the person, then the next step is probably death. They don't want to see this person succeed because they never could.

Although focused on his future, Ravi was extremely critical of poor communities because he believes "the people from the hood is always going to try to take them back." In other words, he thought their jealousy undermined his ability to succeed. Shaka echoed that online, "Nobody wanna see you taking care of yourself. That's why people talk bullshit about you," exemplifying the notion that the abstracted audience is waiting for you to fail.

Since online content is persistent, participants worried about the future impact of their current online behavior, amplified by their tenuous social positions. Without the social or economic capital needed to rebound from a reputational assault, a negative impression could undo efforts to climb the social ladder. Batuk believed that people should be careful online and keep opinions to themselves. He was wary about his online presence and does not take a stand on anything that might jeopardize his job prospects, saying that he does not take "political stances" in his posts and does his best to ensure that his posts "don't offend any particular demographic."

Batuk tried to portray himself as respectful and hardworking everywhere, but anxiety about future employment led him to portray a sterile version of his life online.

Ryan seemed very much removed from social media activity. His online presence was strategic, as he claimed to use Facebook only to avoid giving his phone number to easily offended family members. Ryan was judgmental of his peers who participated actively on social media and felt that if people post evidence of their "ratchetry" online, employers can and should take this as an indicator of their lack of professionalism.

> Some people have something called professionalism, where they can be absolute jackanapes when they're out with their friends, but they can conduct themselves in a very mature manner when they're at work. Though there are some people who just, you need to see ratchetry coming from a mile away. If you have way, way too many pictures of you or videos of you twerking anywhere on social media and getting drunk on a weekday, I'm pretty sure I don't wanna hire you for my nine to five. There's a huge chance you'll come in hammered.

Ryan distinguished himself from "jackanapes" who engage in "ratchetry" and "twerking," coded language for lower-class African-Americans. This condemnation is similar to the youth Vickery (2015) interviewed, who tried to disassociate themselves from "ghetto" peers. Because social media makes social connections visible, curating contacts to remove people is a form of impression management. On social media, professional norms were acceptable, but activities associated with the lower class were not, and indicated unsuitability for participation in the working world.

Part two: Regulating the digital (female) body

The main site of respectability has historically been the female body, where norms are negotiated and women are turned into a marker of social values of sexual restraint and maintenance of traditional gender roles rather than agented actors. Due to the intersection of race and gender, women of color are further subject to critique and objectification, prompting a long history of highly gendered and racialized respectability politics that center on what women wear, how they engage sexually, and how they behave in public (Ford, 2015). Our interviewees modernized these dynamics for the digital ecosystem. Participants ascribed to the fundamentally sexist notion that women should not flaunt their sexuality for public audiences, lest they be perceived as lacking self-respect. Behaving otherwise left women at risk of attack by their peers, and reduced opportunities for upward social movement. As a

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result, male and female participants felt that girls should behave in ways that decreased their likelihood of being targeted, primarily by reducing their visibility.

Sexuality as unrespectable

Few participants admitted to engaging in online practices that fell outside of acceptable norms. Instead, they provided detailed descriptions of what others did, adopting a judgmental gaze. The judging process reflected sexist social norms, while shaping and defining what was considered respectable in others. This allowed participants to distance themselves from people who engaged in behavior they considered unrespectable, and maintain their own respectable self-image. Such "othering" also reinforced the message that the behavior fell outside of the boundaries of acceptability by implying that such practices were exclusive to people other than themselves. Jun interviewed Shaka, who criticized his female peers for allowing their body to be subject to spectacle. Discussing nudes, Shaka explained that sharing sexually explicit material indicated a lack of self-respect, with the consequence that others would feel entitled to behave harmfully towards you.

> Shaka: Be careful what you put on social media, and respect yourself, 'cause if people seeing that you don't respect yourself, they not gonna respect you. And they will talk shit about you, and they will fucking be creepy on you.
>
> Jun: They begin to feel like they have the right to destroy you.
>
> Shaka: Exactly, because you destroying yourself, so they will help you to destroy you, of course. Nobody wanna see you taking care of yourself. That's why people talk bullshit about you.

To our participants, there was no acceptable context in which to produce or distribute nude photos. Thus, responsibility for an image being shared without consent was on the producer of the image for having taken the picture in the first place. Camila (17, Puerto Rican) was very active in her community and her church and was careful that her Instagram posts emphasized achievements and academic honors rather than her body. Her understanding of suitable online behavior was complicated by her belief in the right to privacy. She believed it was disrespectful to dig for information about people online, or for young people to pass around sexual images. However, she maintained that if people find inappropriate information posted by you online, it's your fault. She explained:

> If you're posting a picture where I can see 95% of your skin, and someone shows that around, if you posted that yourself, apparently, that's something you want people to see. And I feel like it is wrong if someone goes and shows that to 50,000 other people, but then if it's like if you didn't want or expect something like that to happen, knowing that teenagers do it a lot, then you shouldn't have posted it on there.

Camila was an active and engaged participant on Instagram and was proud of having a large Instagram following, but was careful to make sure her own accounts were suitable for anyone, including her pastor, to see. While she accepted that it is wrong to share sexual imagery non-consensually, her emphasis on individual responsibility furthered victim-blaming.

Diego (21, Latino/Dominican) introduced the idea that class determines the level to which girls can protect themselves and the judgment cast upon those who defy norms of respectability. He told the story of a friend whose nudes were posted without her permission, noting that if she had money her family would have been able to get a lawyer, but because she didn't, the response was "if she didn't want them out there, she shouldn't have sent them in the first place." Although Diego's friend did not have economic capital, Diego used his technical skills to have the photos removed:

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> Cause it's like if you have money, if you have the means and you have power, if you see something you don't like on the Internet, you can change it. You could change it. I, I'm a minority from the hood who has a little bit of know how. My friend had nudes posted up on a website and she was 15. I wasn't okay with that. I was upset. I was blowing up her phone and I was calling her. And she just kind of gave up. It took me three days to get into that website and shut it down.

Diego hacked revenge porn sites on behalf of his friend because he felt she had no other means of redress for violations of privacy and personal property. Such a radical approach underscores the degree to which young people feel powerless over structural systems that undermine their ability to control sexual images.

Sexual shaming as a revenge tactic

Girls' behaviors are regularly shaped by threat. Girls are told not to walk alone late at night, not to travel alone, and to dress modestly to avoid being violated. Women of color, who have historically been at heightened risk of sexual assault, used virtues of sexual propriety to protect against sexual advances of dominant group members (Wolcott, 2013). Such discourse was replicated online. When girls failed to operate within the boundaries of respectability, the reaction was sexual shaming. One's nude photos could be exposed as punishment for discussing controversial topics, or after a romantic relationship dissolved. Angelique was active in online gaming spaces and Tumblr, and well aware of potential negative consequences. Angelique's top fear was being doxed (having information about her location and family exposed), which she saw as the most damaging risk online, second only to having sexual images distributed.

> It's a nightmare, and I value my sense of safety, and I'm very aware of Deep Net stuff, and one of my top fears is getting doxed and people coming after me, because there's not much to me. I don't have nudes out somewhere on the Internet. I don't have a reputation or anything like that, but the thought of my normal life being disrupted by crazy people is just not appealing to me.

Angelique worried that one of her close friends would be targeted for sexual shaming because she frequently engaged in arguments online. Although Angelique was protective, she blamed her friend's actions for any negative ramifications:

> And I'm always afraid that she's going to say the wrong [thing], she's going to be stupid and get into a fight with somebody that's going to want to get back at her for something and that they'll go after her somehow. Because she is a person that has pictures of herself online and she is a person where, in special situations, but there have been naked things exchanged. And I hope to God she never gets into that kind of a fight with someone with which that's happened but I would say out of everyone, she's the one person I'd be the most afraid for.

Angelique believed her friend was dually at fault for arguing with others online, and for taking nude photos that others could use for revenge. To Angelique, the best solutions were silence and avoiding immodest photos, rather than blaming those who might seek to do harm. Echoing the notion that women should not take sexual images, Fatima said she was "not stupid enough to send anyone lewd pictures, because those don't end up where you want them to be." Throughout our interviews, both male and female participants felt that defying the prescription to maintain invisibility would lead to negative ramifications.

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The tendency to blame the victim in interpersonal violence can be attributed to the desire to preserve faith in personal invulnerability, as well as a way of stressing one's own social status and of safeguarding against re-victimization (Vynckier, 2012). For our participants, blaming the victim served these functions. By distancing oneself through judgment, our participants could soothe anxiety about being potential victims while emphasizing their own relatively high status in comparison to "stupid" girls who sent sexy photos. By defining appropriate versus inappropriate behavior, participants developed guidelines for decreasing risk. Aviva described the curation of self as a safeguard against vulnerability, saying that you have to be very careful about "what you present" and who you communicate with online.

Our female participants faced the added pressure of being judged by peers, family, and respected community members. Participants did not argue that men needed to maintain content acceptability for such a broad range of personal and distant figures. Although some participants acknowledged the potential consequences of men behaving in an unrespectable manner online, discussion was largely focused on the negative ramifications of explicit female sexuality. Consistent with literature examining the gendered nature of respectability politics concerning sexual expression (Marwick, 2017), the risk of sexual shaming was exclusive to girls, while boys were not at risk. Shaka was aware of the gendered aspect of sexual shaming, specifically that there were more stringent requirements for girls. He expressed sympathy for girls who were unable to post specific kinds of content for fear of being shamed or targeted, saying that he felt "a little bad about females on social media" because "random creepy-ass guys" try to talk to them. However, he said that because others' behavior cannot be controlled, girls have to "just be careful what [they] do" online. Replicating offline respectability politics, both the burden of maintaining sexual propriety and the risk for not doing so fell disproportionately on women. "Creepy-ass guys," while regarded negatively, were considered a given in the social media ecosphere.

Discussion

Politics of respectability rely on a degree of control over oneself, and a sense of personal responsibility for how others perceive you. Grounded within and reliant on the White, middle-class norms of U.S. culture, respectability politics assume that careful impression management can relieve the burden of systemic racism and structural inequality. Digital media has upended traditional strategies for maintaining respectability, which took boundaries for granted. While it was historically possible to code-switch and maintain respectability, context collapse undoes certain assumptions of how respectability politics operate.

Digital media can provide new opportunities for mobility, but confers greater risk upon those with tenuous social positions. Our participants understood that online dynamics reflected the same systems of inequality, discrimination, and structures of power as offline. By participating respectably on social media, upwardly mobile individuals invite the dominant gaze in an effort to obtain success, but they also participate online to maintain connections with friends and families, producing tension between modes of being across contexts. Their ability to control the distinctions between these contexts was further limited by the way in which networks reveal identities through associations. The larger the gap between our participants' home lives and the hegemonic norms that determined respectability, the greater the potential that curated images could be shattered by networked digital media. In the United States, the American Dream maintains that upward mobility can be obtained through hard work, excluding the reality that social impressions and networks weigh heavily on one's likelihood to succeed (Burton & Welsh, 2015). The logic that job-specific skills and merit will lead to success is challenged

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in a context in which the personal (social media) can easily be accessed and used to judge the professional.

Practically speaking, our participants' avoidance of the gaze has the potential to damage their chances of professional success. Aligning with respectability has traditionally diverted negative judgment to those who are not behaving respectably. Our participants diverted the gaze through self-censorship and limiting of participation online. However, pursuit of upward mobility is largely about writing yourself into being online through the curation of profiles on sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter; by opting-out, participants may limit future professional possibilities. While male participants discussed managing their presentation to achieve professional goals, female participants had the additional need to avoid harassment and protect their virtuous sexual identity. Ascription to respectability politics may allow individuals to succeed, but doing so fails to address the systems of inequality and oppression that necessitate their use.

Our participants' all shared a self-identification as upwardly mobile New York City young adults. However, they differed across lines of queer identity, race, ethnicity, and gender. This raises questions of what digital respectability looks like at the intersection of gender and race, and how digital respectability differs dependent on these varying intersectional identities: all fertile grounds for future research. Although rooted in the struggle of Black American women, respectability politics shape broader cultural norms and are reinforced by these norms. For example, the misogyny intrinsic to respectability was represented by our male participants' offering of advice for women participating online. Intending to protect women, men offered prescriptions on the behavior of women that aligned with values of purity and conservatism that police female sexuality.

We are not arguing that digital media is changing our notions of respectability. In contrast, respectability—even operating in digital spaces—remains entrenched in values and assumptions of worth, determined by hegemonic norms. What has changed is the ability of upwardly mobile individuals to maintain the boundaries that enabled them to do the identity work necessary to move towards higher social standing.

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Note

1 All names are pseudonyms.

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