

‘Safe’ spaces? Challenges for women makers of colour online

Dr Karen Patel, Birmingham City University

@KarenPatel

This paper is based on some work for a chapter in an upcoming book, *Craft Entrepreneurship*, which is due out next year, edited by myself and Annette Naudin. Today I will talk about craft and the online context, particularly Instagram, which has been the site of many discussions about racism in knitting, and that's mainly what I will be focusing on. I'm going to look at the initial controversy which sparked these discussions and the activities of a group of knitters of colour who used Instagram to call out racism in the craft community, and the consequences and harms of the response. The situation highlights just one of the reasons why craft remains dominated by white makers, and how social media platforms help to reproduce these inequalities. At the same time, this activity also highlights how social media platforms could be a site for mobilisation and resistance. In this sense, they have the potential to be ‘safe’ spaces, but what does that entail? I'll be exploring that at the end.

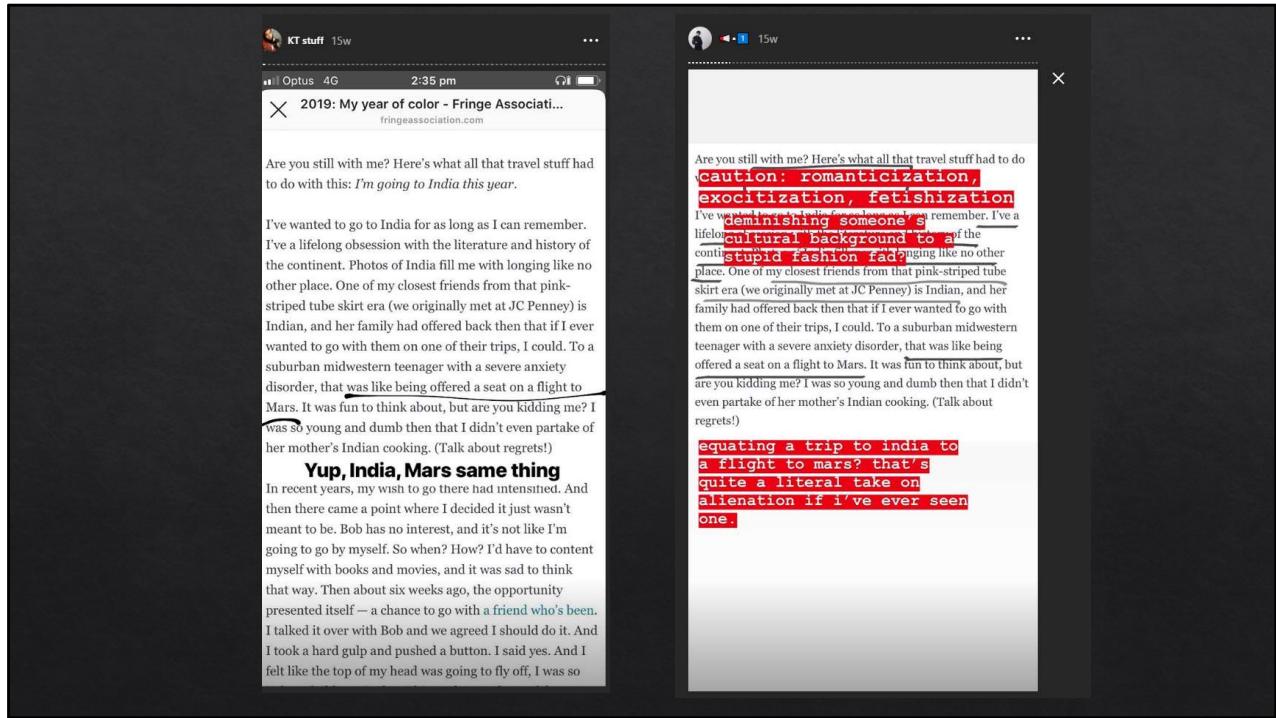
What's most striking to me however is just how "big" this discussion has been in that community.

Because it tells me that it has probably been a very white-centered space for a v

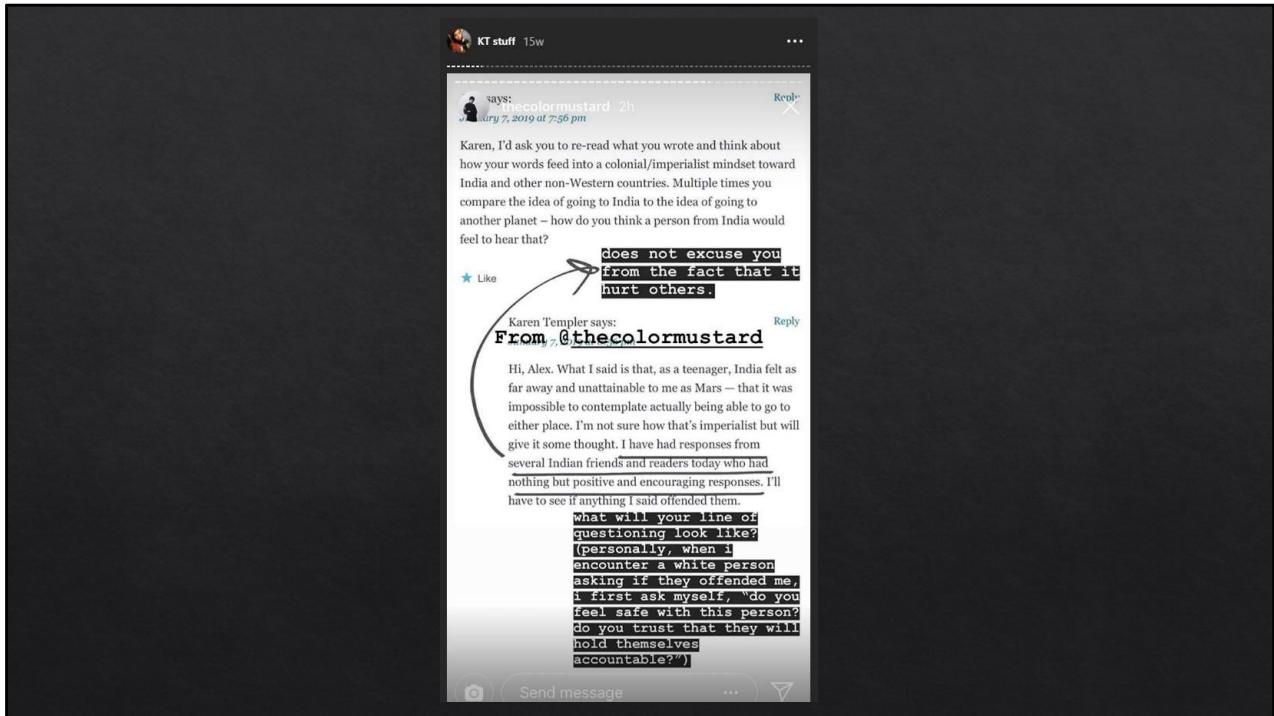
long time.

Spot on.

This is an extract from an Instagram story about the discussion around racism in the knitting community, which really gathered traction when a prominent knitter and blogger, called Karen Templer, posted on her blog about going to India. This Instagram story references how this space – the space being the knitting community – as white catered. I argue that you could say the same about the online space too, given how these discussions have progressed, and I'll demonstrate this throughout.



In Karen Templer's blog post, which she published in January this year, she talked about the things she wanted to do in 2019. One of which was going to India, and she says when she was younger, she was fascinated with Indian culture. For her, the thought of being offered a flight to India was like being "offered a seat on a flight to mars." That line in particular is what offended knitters of colour. Some used Instagram Stories to highlight this and how the language used is problematic - for example this user highlights the language used as fetishizing India.



At first, Karen didn't think she did anything particularly wrong, despite people commenting on her post asking her to reconsider her words. It was only when the post gained traction and attracted more criticism did she issue an apology. This only happened because of the work put in by a relatively small group of knitters of colour who highlighted the problems with the post, opening up a discussion about racism and micro aggressions in the knitting community.

Inequalities in craft

- ❖ Crafts Council UK *Who Makes* report (Spilsbury, 2018) highlight that the majority of people working in craft occupations full-time are white, male and older than the average across all occupations in the UK.
- ❖ *Supporting Diversity in Craft* report for Crafts Council UK (Patel, 2019) challenges for women makers of colour:
 - ❖ Perception of craft and creative practice as not being a viable career choice
 - ❖ Lack of confidence with using social media and online spaces, either through lack of knowledge of the platform or not wanting to open themselves up to criticism

The online debates about racism in the knitting community are part of the wider issue of inequalities in craft and the wider creative industries. Much has been written about inequalities in creative work in general, but there has been relatively little focus on the specificities of the craft sector. In the UK, figures from the Crafts Council highlight that the majority of people working in craft occupations full-time are white, male and older than the average across all occupations in the UK. In previous work I have highlighted the experiences of women makers of colour in this country, identifying some of the challenges they can face when trying to establish themselves as craft entrepreneurs, with a focus on social media use. Based on interviews with 17 makers, these challenges included:

The perception of craft and creative practice as not being a viable career choice, particularly from friends and family

Lack of confidence with using social media and online spaces, either through lack of knowledge of the platform or not wanting to open themselves up to criticism

Many of those interviewed were still trying to establish themselves, negotiating a predominantly white and middle class sector alongside the challenges and pressures of social media. Indeed, the role of social media in craft practice remains underexplored.

Challenges of social media

- ◊ Amnesty International (2018) report on abuse on Twitter
 - ◊ Black women are 84% more likely to be subject to abusive Tweets than white women
 - ◊ Women of colour (including Asian, Latinx and mixed-race women) were 34% more likely to receive abuse on Twitter
- ◊ Litchfield et al (2018) study on online abuse of Serena Williams
 - ◊ ‘Everyday racism’ more pronounced in online environments
 - ◊ Essed (1991) describes everyday racism as “involving systematic, recurring practices and behaviours which become socialized.”

Existing work on social media and racism/oppression highlights the extent to which online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram can be hostile for women of colour, regardless of their job or status. In 2018 Amnesty International reported the scale of abuse, or ‘trolling’ that women face on Twitter. The report highlights that black women are disproportionately targeted for online abuse, being 84% more likely than white women to be subject to abusive tweets. Women of colour (including Asian, Latinx and mixed-race women) were 34% more likely than white women to receive abuse on the platform. Litchfield et al carried out a study of social media abuse aimed at black sportswomen, finding that tennis player Serena Williams was subjected to the most abuse. They highlight the ‘everyday racism’ which pervades white-dominated spaces, such as sports, is exacerbated online. ‘Everyday racism’ is described by ESSed as involving systematic, recurring practices and behaviours which become socialized. Litchfield et al note that “Online environments, such as Twitter, can provide a complete abandonment of social restrictions that might otherwise be present in face-to-face interaction, providing a fertile space for abuse to occur.” As I will show, there are examples of ‘everyday racism’ within the knitting community, and the stories shared demonstrate its pervasiveness in both offline and online spaces.

Method

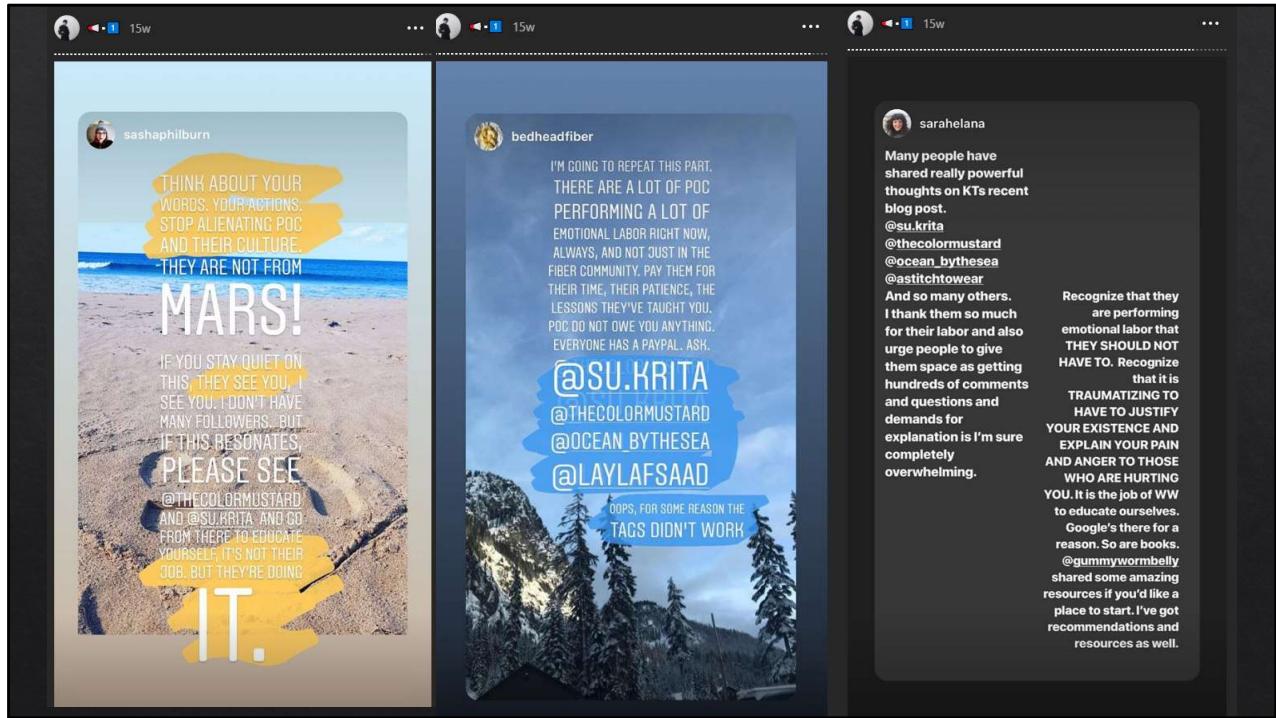
- ❖ Screenshots of Instagram posts and stories by five prominent knitters of colour involved in debates: ‘su.krita’, ‘thecolormustard’, ‘Tina.say.knits’, ‘astitchtowear’, and ‘oceanbythesea’.
- ❖ 231 posts collected spanning January-April 2019
- ❖ Thematic analysis

To analyse this I took screenshots of Instagram Stories which were created by five women who referred directly to either Karen Templer’s blog post or the subject of racism in knitting. The five Instagram users were ‘su.krita’, ‘thecolormustard’, ‘Tina.say.knits’, ‘astitchtowear’, and ‘oceanbythesea’. These five makers were the most prominent voices in the online debates, and are based around the world. A total of 231 posts were collected from Instagram Stories and posts by the users. I decided not to anonymise the five makers featured because I felt they should receive credit for the work they have done to raise awareness of racism in the knitting community. The screenshots consisted of a mixture of photos, ‘selfies’ with captions, annotated extracts from Karen Templer’s blog post and plain text. The content of the Instagram Stories and posts were thematically analysed. One of the key themes which emerged centred on the diversity work and emotional labour these women carry out to call out racism in the knitting community, and that’s the focus of discussion for the rest of this paper.

The emotional labour of calling out racism

- ❖ Sara Ahmed – emotional labour of dealing with racism and its response
- ❖ Emotional labour –
 - ❖ The work of makers of colour calling out racism on Instagram
 - ❖ Work that is productive and exploitable for platform owners (Cote and Pybus, 2007)
- ❖ Affordances of social media platforms can intensify the emotional labour of dealing with forms of racism and its response

I draw on Sara Ahmed's work when I discuss emotional labour. Ahmed talks about emotional labour in relation to the work she has done in academic institutions, but I feel it can apply to most situations. She says: "Talking about racism means dealing with the racism articulated in response to what you are talking about. Which also means: you end up doing more emotional labour the more you talk about doing emotional labour." I use the term emotional labour to describe the work of the makers of colour in this research because it was referred to frequently in discussions on Instagram, and also because the emotional labour that they invest in platforms such as Instagram is exploitable and productive for platform owners. I argue that for the makers involved in these debates, the affordances of social media platforms can intensify the emotional labour of dealing with racism and dealing with the response to racism online.



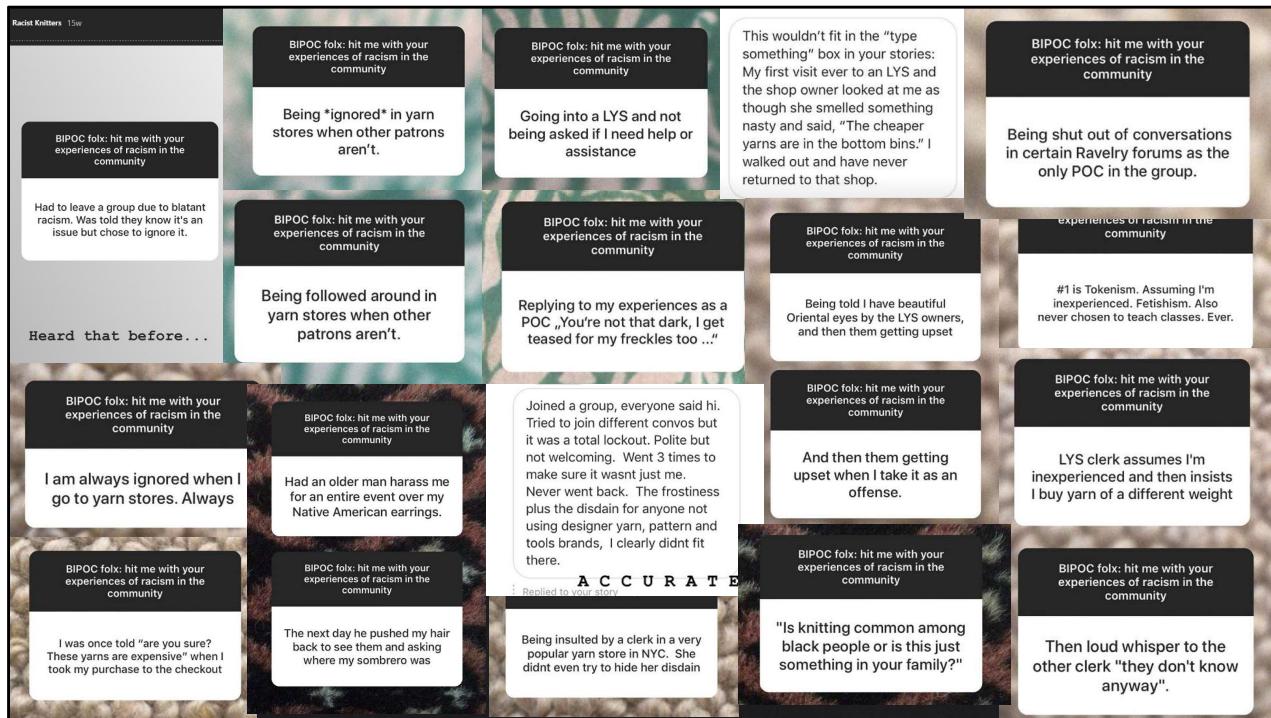
Several posts collected in the sample referenced the emotional labour of the makers engaging with these debates and attempting to educate others. Some white makers actively acknowledged those efforts, for example saying “It’s not their job but they are doing it”; “There are a lot of people of colour performing emotional labour right now”; and this one on the end: Recognize that they are performing emotional labour that THEY SHOULD NOT HAVE TO. Recognize that it is TRAUMATIZING TO HAVE TO JUSTIFY YOUR EXISTENCE AND EXPLAIN YOUR PAIN AND ANGER TO THOSE WHO ARE HURTING YOU.” Pain and anger are important here because not acknowledging, dismissing or denigrating the pain and anger of people of colour is a form of racism which is particularly prominent in online spaces. Indeed ‘pain’ and ‘harm’ was frequently referenced in the posts when people recalled their experiences of racism in the knitting community.

Some users described how dealing with discrimination or poor treatment in the community, offline and online, is “exhausting”. The exhaustion, pain, hurt and anger described in the posts are seemingly an attempt to educate non-white knitters about the felt consequences of their actions. Naming emotions online can also serve to create “communities of feelings” which other knitters can rally around, hence why some users felt the need to share and acknowledge the emotional labour of su.krita and the others.

Diversity work

- ❖ Diversity work: “the work we do when we are attempting to transform an institution; and second, diversity work is the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution” (Ahmed, 2012).
- ❖ Ahmed – institutions take shape “As a result of what has become automatic” (2012:25)
- ❖ Considering issues of racism and inequality is not automatic within the knitting community. “Willing” (Ahmed, 2017) and persistence is required by those carrying out the diversity work.

These women's attempts to educate others about their experiences of racism on Instagram is a form of diversity work. Diversity work is “the work we do when we are attempting to transform an institution; and second, diversity work is the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution”. This could be applied to the work these women are doing in calling out racism in the knitting community – which is the ‘institution’ in question. Sara Ahmed describes how institutions take shape “as an effect of what has become automatic.” Within knitting, we could say that whiteness is automatic. This is because knitters of colour still feel like outsiders. Ahmed describes how diversity work is difficult because it involves doing work within institutions “what would not otherwise be done by them” Those carrying out the diversity work are required to be persistent, because considering issues of racism and inequality is not automatic within the knitting community. “Willing” - to use a phrase from Ahmed's living a feminist life - and persistence is required by those carrying out the diversity work.



This is made clear by su.krita, who asked knitters of colour to submit their experiences of racism in the knitting community to her anonymously via Instagram, which she posted as a story. Here is just a fraction of what she received. These experiences include being treated with 'disdain', being followed around local yarn stores or not being acknowledged in stores, having their knowledge and expertise dismissed or questioned, comments on their skin colour, not feeling welcomed in craft groups. Many of these are 'offline' experiences. In most cases it seems many of these people felt they couldn't do anything at the time, they've gone away and thought about it or tried to forget about it, and then disclosed them online. Su.krita's work in collating and reposting these responses takes a great deal of time, effort and emotional labour.

Social media as potential ‘safe’ space?

- ❖ Platforms could provide catalyst for wider awareness of institutional racism in knitting (and wider creative industries?)
- ❖ Lead to mobilisation offline? Su.krita – ‘Sydney is Cancelled’ knitting group:
 - ❖ “Creating a space that is safe for marginalised makers. BIPOC [Black, Indigenous People of Color] have experienced ongoing and systemic alienation in mixed spaces within the fibre art community. We centre the voices & experiences of BIPOC here.”
- ❖ Sustainability of these movements?
- ❖ Diversity work as extra work for women makers of colour

In this, su.krita has managed to create a safe online space for disclosure. These women who engage in the diversity work and invest emotional labour into collecting and sharing experiences and engaging with others is important work which could yet prove to be a catalyst for a wider awareness of institutional racism in knitting. In comparison to local yarn stores or community knitting groups, social media platforms can be relatively safe spaces for people to speak up about racism and feel like they will be heard by at least an engaged group of fellow makers online.

Online activity can also enable groups to mobilise offline. For example, as a result of these discussions and the engagement she received, su.krita established a safe knitting space in Sydney for makers of colour, called ‘Sydney is cancelled’. According to the group’s Facebook page, Sydney is Cancelled is “creating a space that is safe for marginalised makers. BIPOC [Black, Indigenous People of Colour] have experienced ongoing and systemic alienation in mixed spaces within the fibre art community. We centre the voices & experiences of BIPOC here.”

This group is an example of how online communities can lead to the establishment of physical safe spaces. However, it seems to be spearheaded by one person, who has already invested a lot of time and energy into raising awareness of racism in her field. How sustainable is this for a maker who is simultaneously running a craft business? Being able to juggle many different tasks at once is a part of being an entrepreneur in

any field, none more so than in creative work. But as I have shown in the case of the knitting community, diversity work is additional work which, at the moment, is carried out predominantly by women makers of colour.

Conclusion

- ❖ Diversity work and emotional labour of women makers of colour to call out racism in knitting
- ❖ Social media could be a ‘safe’ space but it takes the investment from a person or small group of people to moderate and maintain these spaces. Should strive for *safer* spaces online (Clark-Parsons, 2017)
- ❖ Better regulation of online abuse required to reduce harms and allow communities and safer spaces to thrive

In conclusion, I've highlighted here the diversity work and emotional labour undertaken by a small number of women makers of colour who take the time and effort to call out racism in the knitting community. There are opportunities on social media to create positive change by raising awareness and educating others, but it relies on the labour of a dedicated few. Drawing on the work of Rosemary Clark-Parsons, the possibility of a ‘safe’ space, offline or online, should be considered as a relational task always in flux and requiring a wider collective effort. As she argues, we should strive for spaces to be *safer*. In the online context, the platform owners need to play their part in this respect. Regulation of online abuse and hate speech remains woeful, and needs addressing if these opportunities for positive change are to be realised.

Thank you

Karen.patel@bcu.ac.uk

@KarenPatel