

Race, Ethnicity, and Technology-facilitated Violence: The Experience of Activists in Chocó, Colombia

Abstract

Racism extends into the digital realm, manifesting in various forms of technology-facilitated violence (TFV). Although much research centers on the Global North, it is essential to investigate this issue in other settings, such as Colombia, where activists are particularly vulnerable to TFV. This study enriches the debate with a qualitative approach, conducting 18 interviews with activists from Chocó and Bogotá. The literature on race and TFV reveals that technology can exacerbate racism through social media, like anonymity, and introduce new forms of racist violence, including deepfakes and algorithmic bias. However, these forms were not prevalent in our interviews. For activists, structural racism, especially limited internet, and electricity access emerged as a primary factor in their experiences with racist TFV. Overt TFV escalates to offline threats, silencing dissenting voices. This research emphasizes the need to understand TFV within non-Western regions, advocating for nuanced approaches to addressing digital racism in diverse contexts.

Keywords: activism, Colombia, race, ethnicity, racism, racist technology-facilitated violence

1. Introduction

In the studies of social movements in the digital era, there are different approaches to understanding how activists create, behave, and interact with Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Ortiz and Tripathi, 2017; Sola-Morales and Sabariego, 2020). ICTs enable the expression of political ideas, the organization of actions, the dissemination of information, and the presentation of social grievances (Rodríguez-Guerrero and Barrera-Algarín, 2023; Sola-Morales and Sabariego, 2020; Suárez Estrada, 2023). In addition to these advantages, activists are increasingly confronted with risks associated with using ICTs for

their cause, including technology-facilitated violence (TFV)¹ such as surveillance, harassment, doxing (revealing personally identifying information), and censorship (Kurasawa et al., 2021; Michaelsen, 2017). Many scholars have argued that TFV is an extension of violence occurring in the physical world, producing novel forms of harm such as doxing (Mitchell et al., 2022). In contrast to the traditional dichotomy between offline and online spaces, a continuity exists between the two (Morales, 2023; Suárez Estrada, 2023), and “violence on digital platforms is a multifaceted, fluid, overlapping, and interconnected phenomenon” (Morales, 2023: 1).

Empirical studies show that TFV varies based on identity and context, with race and ethnicity strongly shaping its targeting and impact (Rajani, 2022). When TFV targets ethnic and racialized people, it “not only reflects existing structures of gender- and race-based domination and hate but contributes to reconstituting how these structures intersect with online forms of racism and white supremacy” (Kurasawa et al., 2021: 2177). Since TFV often exists on a continuum of physical violence, activists challenging the status quo are commonly targeted. Colombia exemplifies this trend, given its long history of violence, including high rates against activists (Global Witness, 2022; Morales, 2023). This pattern extends to politicians, who frequently face online threats. Currently (2025), Colombia's vice-president, Francia Márquez, serves as a prominent exemplar. As an Afro-Colombian female human rights and environmental activist, she has been subjected to racist online attacks on account of both her identity and her political role (Linterna Verde, 2023).

Aligning with the Colombian scholar Viveros Vigoya (2023) and Latin-Americanist Wade (2000), we argue that race and ethnicity should not be understood as additional and essentializing variables to comprehend identities. Instead, they are embedded in a specific context. Race is a social construction based on the moral hierarchies that respond to changing biological traits and “has been used to classify people into groups by overlooking their different cultural practices and then placing these groups in a racial hierarchy with Whiteness on top” (Chávez-Moreno, 2024: 503). Moreover, it is being treated as a universal referent of the otherness of the West. Thus, the concept of race derives from racism (Viveros Vigoya, 2020).

¹ We understand TFV, as defined by Mitchell et al. (2022: 15) as “acts of harm that are brought about when technical artefacts, through making a harmful end easier or possible to achieve, invite actors holding this end to actualise it using the artefact”.

Ethnicity is a language of place, and both categories “contain a discourse on the origins and the transmission of essences through generations” (Wade, 2000: 29). Throughout history, race and ethnicity have structured unequal regional dynamics, as evidenced in Latin America, and have played a role in shaping the development of “Western” societies, technology, and science (Menéndez, 2018). Contemporaneously, Black and Indigenous individuals are, amongst others, subjected to racial profiling through the internet and algorithmic bias (Murrillo, 2022).

Notwithstanding the substantial body of literature on the role of race in TFV, there has been a disproportionate focus on the Western context (see e.g., Matamoros-Fernández, 2020; Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). Given the heightened risks activists face in Colombia (Human Rights Watch, 2022), where high levels of violence intersect with Black and Indigenous populations – especially in the department of Chocó, one of the country’s most violent regions with over 90% of its population identifying as belonging to an ethnic group² (DANE, 2022) – this study focuses on this area. Through 18 in-depth interviews, the research aims to understand how race and ethnicity shape experiences of TFV among activists³ in Chocó.

2. Theoretical Embedding

In this analysis, Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023), Latinx Critical Race Theory (LatCrit) (Valdes, 2005), Afro-Latin studies (de la Fuente and Andrews, 2018; Wade, 2006), Ethnic and Racial Studies from Colombia (Urrea et al., 2014; Viveros Vigoya, 2020; Viveros Vigoya and Lesmes Espinel, 2014), and postcolonial theory (Kumar, 2014) offer valuable frameworks for understanding the factors contributing to the increased vulnerability of certain groups, including Black, Indigenous, and Latinx populations, to TFV. These theoretical perspectives prioritize the experiences of historically marginalized individuals within research, recognizing and valuing the complex identities of those who navigate multiple, intersecting forms of oppression. These frameworks contend that racism is a structural and systemic issue rather than an isolated or individual problem. Additionally, they facilitate a critical analysis of how technology, data, and digital spaces – often presumed to be neutral

² This category includes both Afro-Colombians and Indigenous People.

³ The interviewees referred their work in collective processes and organizations as social leaders, activists or human rights defenders and had a similar understanding between each category. In consequence, we use those categories without any distinction.

or color-blind – perpetuate racial hierarchies and reinforce whiteness (Henne et al., 2021: 1). Since CRT is sometimes criticized for being constructed within the “Black-White paradigm”, the Latin American community – frequently identifying as non-white Latino/a/x – has expanded on CRT by examining the unique and multifaceted identities within its own population. LatCrit, which originated in the mid-to-late 1990s and was primarily developed in the US, addresses how overlapping forms of discrimination, including racism, sexism, and classism, converge to impact the lived experiences of Latin Americans (in the US). Moreover, LatCrit criticizes the “evolving ideologies and practices of Euroheteropatriarchy marked by capitalism, colonialism, homophobia, nativism, patriarchy and white supremacy that had been left mostly unchallenged by the initial Critical Legal Studies scholars” (Gonzalez et al., 2021: 1320; Trucios-Haynes, 2000) ⁴. Within the digital landscape, these theoretical frameworks have assisted scholars in comprehending racism in the digital age (see e.g., Mills & Godley, 2017).

2.1 Related Work: Racism in the Digital Age

As previously discussed, numerous scholars have focused their research on how racism can be reproduced within online spaces or enabled through technology. In general, the rapid development of ICTs has broadened the avenues of communication, including channels that sustain and spread racist narratives. Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) point out that social media, with its affordances, policies, and corporate decisions, significantly shapes racist dynamics. Online spaces, characterized by anonymity and the rapid spread of (dis)information, have become fertile ground for both overt and subtle forms of racism. Hate speech and racist cyberbullying are often more visible manifestations of racism, yet the lack of accountability in these environments allows them to flourish unchecked. Carvalho et al. (2023a) distinguish between overt and covert hate speech. Overt hate speech involves the explicit

⁴ When using LatCrit as a theoretical framework, it is imperative to critically reflect on its genesis and the ongoing critiques and debates within this domain. One salient critique concerns the apparent oversight of AfroLatinx individuals in contemporary LatCrit scholarship (Díaz, 2024). Furthermore, instead of being developed within Latin America, it was initiated by Latinx legal scholars in the US who sought to “produce critical socio-legal knowledge”, centering on the multiply diverse experiences and conditions of Latinx in the country. We believe it is important to acknowledge its contribution and think that combined with a critical assessment of postcolonial theory and CRT, it offers a valuable lens through which to comprehend how race, ethnicity, class, and other intersecting identities shape individuals’ experiences in relation to systematic discrimination – also outside of the US (Gonzalez et al., 2021: 1318; Matambanadzo et al., 2016).

spreading, incitement, promotion, or justification of hatred, discrimination, and violence against a targeted minority ethnic group through defamatory and derogatory language.

In contrast, covert hate speech is characterized by using irony, sarcasm, humor, and other rhetorical strategies to subtly manipulate audience opinions and shape perceptions around this group (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Baider, 2022). The proliferation of racist hate speech is closely linked to the practice of racist “othering” of minority ethnic individuals, which involves emphasizing and contrasting behaviors and practices perceived as different, non-normative, and even threatening to the dominant group’s identity (De Rosa and Manarini, 2020). This practice reinforces the identity and dominance of a particular group over an arbitrarily targeted minority based on ethnic identity (Brons, 2015; Hawkins, 2023; Kerrigan, 2019; Schwalbe et al., 2000). Social media platforms have exacerbated this dynamic by facilitating the desire to anchor community members' sense of belonging, while simultaneously promoting “othering” behaviors (Kerrigan, 2019; Lumsden and Harmer, 2019). Additionally, passive exposure to mass media and other forms of public discourse has significantly contributed to the construction of racist beliefs, often misused to manipulate public opinion (Hernández, 2010; Van Dijk, 2005). In this context, *Online Aggressive Racism* encompasses particularly aggressive forms of racism that dehumanize and denigrate the constructed racialized *other*, often relying on alleged biological arguments to justify supposed racial hierarchies (Bonhomme and Alfaro, 2022).

Contrasting with the overt manifestations of racism examined above, the more subtle, everyday racism – deeply ingrained in collective ideologies and societal understandings of “race” – is seamlessly translated into online interactions, reinforcing, and spreading discriminatory attitudes in less obvious but equally harmful ways (Ortiz, 2021). As Eschmann et al. (2020) elaborated, racial microaggressions – subtle, often unconscious racial slights – have found new avenues for expression in the digital age. These microaggressions, which can be deeply hurtful and offensive, are manifested through behaviors and/or speech that reinforce stereotypes, positioning Black and Indigenous people as inferior or second-class citizens. Specifically, microaggressions can be categorized into three types: (1) Microinsults, which are insensitive, negative, or demeaning remarks related to an individual’s race or ethnicity, often perpetuating stereotypes, sexual or physical objectification; (2) Microinvalidations, which

involve messages that minimize or deny the lived experiences of ethnic minorities and the reality of racism (frequently referred to as *Color-blind Racism*, see Bonilla-Silva (2022)). (3) Microassaults, which are explicit racial slurs or actions that convey overt prejudice and discrimination. More broadly, as noted by Roshani (2016) and Enein (2023), patterns of online racist hate speech often intersect with longstanding histories of oppression, discrimination, and exclusion experienced by Black and Indigenous populations worldwide, as well as with enduring colonial legacies.

The proliferation of ICTs has not only expanded the reach of such harmful behaviors, given the increased availability and anonymity of online platforms, but has also complicated efforts to counteract them, as these factors make accountability more difficult (Ortiz, 2021). According to Marks and Stanfill (2023), users who share racist content online have developed strategies to bypass content moderators and disguise overtly racist messages under moderated hashtags. Concepts like *Ambient Digital Racism*, proposed by Agudelo and Olbrych (2022), and *Platformed Racism*⁵, introduced by Matamoros-Fernandez (2020), aim to define the more nuanced and sophisticated manifestations of racism on social media platforms. This racism creates and circulates memes that stereotype ethnic groups. The absence of explicitly racist language makes racism particularly challenging to address, as it often goes unnoticed or is tolerated by users, contributing to its rapid proliferation on social media, often without awareness of the victimizing and offensive ramifications (Matamoros-Fernández, 2020). Regarding the above, Keels, Durkee, Hope (2017) and Nadal et al. (2014) have identified a variety of longstanding harms to the well-being of those affected by racial microaggressions, ranging from prolonged episodes of anxiety and depression to post-traumatic stress symptoms, and other health issues. These harmful experiences can also significantly impact self-esteem and hinder the development of a positive racial identity, further exacerbating the psychological and emotional challenges faced by individuals subjected to such forms of discrimination.

⁵ According to Matamoros-Fernández (2017: 391), *Platformed Racism* has a dual meaning: “it (1) evokes platforms as tools for amplifying and manufacturing racist discourse both by means of users’ appropriations of their affordances and through their design and algorithmic shaping of sociability and (2) suggests a mode of governance that might be harmful for some communities, embodied in platforms’ vague policies, their moderation of content and their often arbitrary enforcement of rules”.

Numerous scholars have explored the empirical implications of online racism, engaging with many of the concepts discussed above. The empirical findings of Ortiz's (2021) study, which explores the subjective experiences of racism among sixty US undergraduate students, align with Essed's (2013) concept of *Entitlement Racism*. Understanding this mechanism of validating racism is crucial for grasping how most respondents navigate and interpret overt racism on online platforms. The misuse of the principle of freedom of expression has not only distorted the recognition of subtle racist practices as racism online but has also led many participants to conclude that addressing overt racism online is a challenging, if not vain, endeavor.

2.2 Research Space⁶

Based on a literature analysis, Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021: 209) have demonstrated that studies on racism and social media remain “limited to a few contexts and platforms” and that Indigenous perspectives are missing. The results demonstrate that while most studies on race and TFV concentrate on the United States (44.23%) and Europe (25.96%), only 0.96% of the studies address the Latin American context. This illustrates a discrepancy between research conducted in the Global North and South. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how TFV targeting racialized activists manifests in non-Western or Global South contexts, where the socio-political environment may significantly influence how racial/ethnic groups experience and respond to online aggression, harassment, and lack of or barriers to technology infrastructure, revealing the structural and everyday racism that activists experience. Moreover, Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021) found that only 6.73% of studies have utilized interview methodologies, highlighting an area where our research seeks to contribute by providing in-depth insights through interviews. Their analysis also revealed that existing research predominantly focuses on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, often overlooking apps such as WhatsApp due to limited data access and the absence of a research API (Application Programming Interface).

⁶ Expression suggested by the Mexican scholar Raúl Pacheco.

3. Methodology

The research design employs a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews with activists and representatives of civil society organizations based and working with ethnic, digital, and human rights in Chocó, other regions of Colombia's Pacific coast, and Bogotá.

3.1 Background Information

As Morales (2024) noted, there has been a paucity of research on TFV in conflict-affected countries, including Colombia. Our study, which focuses on one of Colombia's most violent departments, Chocó, aims to provide insights into a conflict-affected context that has often been overlooked in academic research on TFV. Chocó has had multiple armed actors, including guerrillas, dissidences⁷, criminal gangs, and paramilitaries (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2024; Home and Grillo, 2022). Chocó is located on Colombia's Pacific coast and is one of the regions with the highest concentrations of ethnic and racialized populations. According to data from DANE (2022) and *Departamento Nacional de Planeación* (2024), over 70% of the population self-identify as Afro-Colombian, and over 20% are Indigenous. Concurrently, Chocó has the third-lowest percentage of internet access and is among Colombia's most economically disadvantaged departments in multidimensional poverty (DANE, 2024). Subsequently, the racial and ethnic conditions, along with the dearth of technological infrastructure, constituted the primary criteria for selecting Chocó as a case study.

3.2 Data Collection and Positioning

Given the study's sensitivity, we obtained IRB approval before its initiation. Throughout the research process, careful consideration was given to research ethics to ensure the protection and confidentiality of all participants (Fujii, 2012). Participants were contacted through relationships of trust established in previous research projects and one of the authors' local experiences of working with social leaders in Chocó in the last four years, using snowball sampling methods to reach all the participants needed (Gierczyk et al., 2024). The interviews were conducted between March and September 2024, 14 via the secure digital platform *Jitsi Meet* and four face-to-face with participants in Bogotá. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before commencing the interviews. The semi-structured questionnaire em-

⁷ Individuals who did not demobilize from the guerrilla group following the 2016 peace agreement.

ployed, included questions about the respondents' personal ICT use, their experiences of digital violence, and their perceptions of the intersection between race and digital violence. The interviews averaged 60 minutes, and no financial compensation was provided to the respondents.

Eighteen people participated in the study: seven individuals identified as women, one as non-binary, and ten as men. Of these participants, thirteen were Black or Afro-Colombian⁸, one was Indigenous, and four were Mestizo. The interviewees represent diverse organizations, including community councils (autonomous organizations of Afro-Colombian communities in Colombia), indigenous reserves, civic or peasant platforms, trade unions that advocate or protest for land, labor, environmental or ethnic rights, racial or gender justice. Five organizations advocated regionally and nationally for recognition of human rights violations against Black and Indigenous communities, including forced displacement and homicides, and promoted peacebuilding amid the ongoing armed conflict in ethnic territories. One organization focused on LGBTQIA+ rights specific to Black communities, while another promoted freedom of expression, and a third advocated for digital rights. An additional interview was conducted with a representative from one of the few technology-oriented companies in Chocó that supports human rights organizations.

As a Colombian white-mestiza scholar engaged in collaborative research with ethnic organizations, the author conducting the interviews is conscious of the potential for non-reproducing racist bias and the extraction of information from participants. The co-author brings a perspective shaped by her white European female scholar background, which influences how she interprets data and engages with the region. The study aimed to build horizontal relationships and share the research findings with interviewees. Digital security training workshops will be offered to them, focusing on digital and ethnic rights.

3.3 Data Analysis

After completing the interviews, they were transcribed offline using *Open AI Whisper*, followed by manual correction and formal pseudonymization. The encrypted data is securely stored on a university server, accessible only to the researchers to ensure confidentiality and

⁸ The activists interviewed recognized themselves as Afro-Colombian, Afrodescendant or Black individuals, which are descriptors of race and ethnicity we use interchangeably.

data protection. The coding process was performed by both researchers using *MAXQDA*, employing an abductive approach that generated 32 core categories from both the interview data and the theoretical framework introduced in Section 2. Nine core categories were then extracted and used based on the coding system (see Appendix I). To explore the activists' own understandings and experiences and to contextualize TFV, we applied reflexive thematic analysis to the dataset, which involved defining and naming central organizing concepts, identifying patterns, and using our subjectivity as researchers (Braun et al., 2019). This subjectivity implied being flexible about dataset size and composition and constantly reflecting on coding and writing (Braun and Clarke, 2022).

4. Empirical Findings

This section highlights key findings on racism in the digital domain, focusing on race and ethnicity in the context of TFV. Using CRT, postcolonial theory, and LatCrit as frameworks, it examines structural racism, colonial legacies, technology's non-neutrality, and the intersection of oppressions. It emphasizes the experiences of Black and Indigenous activists in Colombia, who, while advocating for social justice, challenge normative ideologies and face multifaceted discrimination.

4.1 Structural Racism and Technological Infrastructure

Although activists face connectivity challenges, they use ICTs – mainly Facebook and WhatsApp – to share their agendas, present perspectives on identity and territory, build solidarity, gain knowledge, address violence, accelerate decision-making, and disseminate information (I1/3-7/9-14/17). However, connectivity issues, electricity shortages, and insufficient devices exacerbate structural inequalities that disproportionately affect racialized/ethnic groups, hindering communication in regions affected by armed conflict (I5/7/10-11/13-18). Thus, a systemic perspective of racist TFV includes absence, destruction, and limitation of infrastructure.

Racism and armed conflict have resulted in increased impoverishment and hindered livelihoods and work conditions (I14/17) in territories where forced displacement, massacres, confinements, and the explosion of communication antennas have occurred. These occurrences are a consequence of illegal armed actors' actions, the non-installation of infrastructure by

public authorities and private technology companies, and the absence of social investment in ethnic territories like Chocó. As I17 observed:

One of the manifestations of TFV on the Colombian Pacific Coast is the disruption of communication channels. (...) The population is prevented from leaving their territory and communicating with others. The telecommunications infrastructure has been destroyed, and there was no warning of the approach of other armed groups. This has resulted in isolation and exclusion.

4.2 Continuum of Everyday Racism

The historical and structural power dynamics that perpetuate racism are evident in the daily experiences of Black and Indigenous individuals, with violent language and stereotypes used to marginalize them. This strategy has endured for centuries, and the digital domain represents an additional platform to articulate pervasive racist discourse, targeting individuals with high visibility (I2/4/13-14). Several interviewees shared that they perceive online racism not just as an individual experience, but as a collective issue affecting their community (I18). As a result, racist TFV is often seen as a form of collective harm directed at racialized groups. In this context, nine interviewees highlighted the racist language, and online harassment directed at current vice-president, Francia Márquez. They discussed how such attacks impact the public aspirations of Black activists. Other examples were the attacks against Black public officials in Medellín (I4), Black activists with a national activity, or running for local politicians (I13). Thus, there was a perception of unsafety for racialized activists expressing themselves in the digital sphere, being public figures, and working for transformations (I4/6/10-14/17-18).

The interviewees perceive a continuum of violence across traditional mass and digital media. This is because these media have engaged in the misrepresentation, exclusion of, and tensions with ethnic communities. Most of them are controlled by companies that reproduce dominant white-mestizo ideologies and representations as colonial legacies. This results in violence through covert and overt racism, which highlights the non-neutrality of these media. For instance, this continuum has displayed itself in Black and Indigenous communities and leaders -as a whole- being portrayed as less important, emphasizing their problems rather than their solutions (I13). Racist TFV could also lead to these groups being completely excluded and unrepresented because the focus is on urban areas with more connectivity instead of rural territories (I18). The tensions and exclusions might increase with members of WhatsApp

groups with other social and political movements, community organizations or individuals seeking for a job, who commonly have diverse backgrounds, including non-Black or non-Indigenous people. This creates more friction and no trust (I18), and those activists who reveal their identities are immediately removed from the WhatsApp group (I10-11). In other cases, the exclusion has manifested itself in overtly racist behavior and comments on Facebook and X, where Black and Indigenous activists are referred to as “animals”, “lazy people”, “parasites”, or a “plague”, among other disqualifying and racist adjectives (I8/10-12/15/18). Additionally, one interviewee reported being labeled “damn Black” and “the one who comes to create the problem” (I2).

Despite the regular exclusion, Black and Indigenous activists are not exempt of harassment and intimidation as it happens with their mestizo peers. More acts of violence targeting highly visible individuals comprise relentless extortion through calls and messages on WhatsApp and Facebook, and theft or misuse of personal information (I2-6/15/16). Other tactics include exposing activists' views publicly on social media without consent (I2), orchestrating thefts of organizational devices such as computers and cellphones (I17), cyberattacks (I10-11), and spreading racist disinformation that increases risks for their communities (I1/15/18). Furthermore, algorithmic bias on Facebook and TikTok perpetuates harmful stereotypes by portraying Black and Indigenous identities as “bad” or “brute,” suggesting that “only blond hair and green eyes are worthy” (I15). Indigenous representation is mainly absent (I15), reinforcing discrimination and exclusion. A pervasive form of algorithmic racial bias is the representation of white mestizo individuals as the *norm* in digital spaces. This representation often perpetuates the stereotype that white-mestizo individuals are inherently more intelligent and beautiful than those of Indigenous or Black descent (I15). In terms of stereotypes and stigmatization, one of the Black interviewees observed that they were treated on social media as groups and initiatives that were devoid of value and excluded by actors with more power, such as journalists, “who have used social media to delegitimize, disqualify an organizational action” and have not valued the impact of the collective process of the Black and Indigenous activists positively (I18).

4.3 Escalation and Intersections of Overt TFV

In Colombia, threats of death and forced displacement are common for activists, particularly through text, WhatsApp, and Facebook messages, video, and phone calls (I2/4-5/7/15-17). However, Black and Indigenous activists encounter compounded forms of violence, characterized by intersecting racism, sexism, and classism (I2/9/13/15). Some respondents highlighted that TFV intensifies when multiple identities intersect, often spilling over into physical threats. Racialized activists, particularly, face heightened risks and more severe violence compared to their mestizo peers (I4-6), who mentioned primarily misinformation and hacking, rather than exclusion (IP1/7/12).

Death threats, extortion involving demands for explicit content, and online harassment frequently target the families of Indigenous, Black, and mestiza women activists, often extending to the surveillance and monitoring of their daughters both online and offline (I16). For example, a Black woman activist faced misogynistic and racist attacks questioning her caregiving responsibilities and signaling that she was unwelcome due to her race (I2). In another instance, a Black male activist received threats from an individual claiming association with an armed group, who warned that he and his wife would be harmed if a girl living with them did not enter into a relationship with him (I4). Such threats have the potential to escalate into physical violence; for example, an Indigenous activist who received a digital threat later survived an attempted homicide (I15). Another instance where gender and race intersect and intensify violence involved a Black, non-binary activist who received offensive, racist comments and death threats on social media related to their intersecting identity. Additionally, videos and photos depicting a violent assault against them and an LGBTQIA+ friend - during which they were physically attacked - were circulated on social media, aiming to humiliate them based on their gender identity. They also became targets of doxing, as anonymous individuals downloaded private photos from their Facebook profile to create a fake account and distribute a meme intended to further discredit them (I9).

4.4 Interviewees' Understanding of Racist TFV

The experiences of the interviewees revealed that racist TFV is directed towards racialized/ethnic groups, their cultural beliefs, practices, bodies, and their local activism (I1/9/14/17-18) and, when perpetrated against activists in conflict and repressive settings,

necessitates a comprehensive and multifaceted approach that considers both systemic and individual factors, including technological infrastructure and online racism (I1/17). As I13 stated:

We're talking about macro access, so we're fighting in the 21st century, in 2024.
(...) Structural racism has created a significant disadvantage, leading to the necessity of addressing issues that should have been resolved long ago.

This demonstrates that the local interpretation of racist TFV is intricately linked to structural racism and broader racial and ethnic conflicts within historical and cultural context. For 14 interviewees, the individual perspective encompassed stereotypes, stigmatization, death threats, hacking, extortion, and algorithm bias that collectively constitute everyday racism (see Section 4.2) through social media and instant messaging applications.

4.5 Historical Legacies and Embodied Impacts

The roots of racist TFV are deeply embedded in institutional and structural factors, particularly the legacy of “the status quo of coloniality” (I10-11/17), with actors seeking to dominate and assert power over others (I10-11). Historical stereotypes and societal prejudices persist in Colombia, where Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQIA+ individuals remain marginalized, while white-mestizo individuals often seen as superior (I4/9/17). Moreover, the ongoing armed conflict has exacerbated racist TFV, with armed actors using digital platforms to suppress activism, control narratives, and issue threats (I3-4/10-11/15-18). In most incidents, perpetrators remain unknown (I3/5/13), creating a sense of impunity and racial injustice as these acts are either ignored or accepted by broader society. The digital sphere thus becomes a channel for violent actors to “disseminate through digital media, their messages, insults, and threats” (I14).

The psychological consequences of racist TFV are significant, manifesting as fear, emotional distress, self-censorship, low self-esteem, demotivation, and mental health challenges (I1-4/8-9/12/15-18). Additionally, distrust and apprehension towards social media platforms arise due to the cultural harm inflicted on both individual and collective identities, customs, and worldviews, such as *buen vivir* (living well). For instance, activists may feel pressure to abandon traditional dances, rituals, and other cultural practices in favor of trends popularized on platforms like TikTok, Facebook, or YouTube to feel socially accepted (I1-2/4-5/13/15). As individuals and communities living in remote areas where illegal armed actors control

their territories, state protection measures are ineffective, leaving them with only individual and community measures to protect themselves (I15/17): "In areas under constant threat, such as Chocó, there is a heightened sense of anxiety and vulnerability among ethnic communities. Because they cannot guarantee their physical integrity" (IP15). For example, following a public communication and complaint by the Indigenous organization via WhatsApp, the armed actor killed one of the social leaders in retaliation (I15). In cases of digital threats, racialized activists and their families may face forced displacement by the perpetrators, depending on whether the threat was directed at the activist or a family member, and if the threat specified a deadline for leaving the area (I2/4/16/17). Additionally, racist TFV compounds the ongoing armed conflict (I17) and could contribute to suicides among young individuals (I4/8/9).

In terms of organizational effects, Black and Indigenous activists have strengthened both digital and physical networks (creating closed or private spaces) (I5/8/13/15/17), their collective self-governance, including collective guards, communications, and mobilization through training and alliances, and developed skills such as strategic silence and digital security behavior (I2-4/10-11/15/17/18), common political struggles (like racial reparation of TFV) that will allow them to obtain transformations (I4/13/15/17). Despite the violence, they are challenging the dominant ideologies and promoting their activism. If they feel that they do not belong to this network and are exposed to violence, the psychological impact will be stronger (I17). In some other cases, because of the level of violence, interviewees, especially women, have decided to withdraw from the collective process, the digital platform, to reduce the rhythm of their activism or to be less public (I2-4/9/16).

5. Discussion

The experiences of racialized activists with racist TFV from (conflict-affected regions in) the Global South are vastly underrepresented in the academic literature (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021). This highlights the necessity for comprehensive research that incorporates CRT, LatCrit, Afro-Latin studies, Ethnic and Racial studies, and postcolonial theories and applies concepts such as colonial legacies, structural racism, the non-neutrality of technology, the voices of marginalized individuals, the struggle for social justice, more frequently

to the digital realm (see Appendix II). Those concepts also provide a framework for understanding the systemic racism embedded in digital platforms, technologies, and online interactions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Kumar, 2014; Wade, 2006). Through LatCrit, Ethnic and Racial studies with a specific focus on Colombia, and Afro-Latin studies, the specificities between Black/Afro-Colombian and Indigenous activists from Chocó as racial/ethnic identities are translated into shared experiences and inter-group patterns of systems of subordination (de la Fuente and Andrews, 2018; Valdes, 2005; Wade, 2006), which are used by racist TFV to justify its existence (Kumar, 2014). This reflects broader “structural or systemic social problems”, where inequality is reinforced through technology (Valdes, 2005: 152). Unlike the often-studied countries of the Global North, racist TFV in the Global South is not only present in online spaces but is also expressed by a lack of essential resources, such as devices, connectivity, electricity, and infrastructure, all of which are necessary for the digital sphere to function. Colombia, as a Latin-American country with a long history of colonialism and racism, makes observable the pervasive association between the lack, obstruction, and destruction of technology infrastructure – produced by ineffective institutions, private technology companies, and the continuous armed conflict and ethnic territories. In this context, TFV seems not only to be present in Chocó but also in other ethnically diverse regions of Colombia, which face low levels of connectivity and have high concentrations of Black and Indigenous populations. The findings can also, to some extent, be applied to other conflict-prone contexts that have endured colonialism and histories of racial violence. However, it is crucial to consider and reflect on local norms and specific factors unique to each context.

The literature presented in Section 2 emphasizes that technology plays a significant role in both amplifying and enabling new forms of racist TFV. While it can escalate existing forms of harm, such as hate speech or harassment, it also creates novel ways, including memes and GIFs, for perpetrators to inflict harm, some of which are uniquely facilitated by technology. (Matamoros-Fernández, 2020), and digital surveillance. In our case study, most interviewees have not encountered certain TFV types frequently discussed in academic literature. Examples of these include algorithmic bias (Murillo, 2022), the use of memes (Matamoros-Fernández, 2020), and digital surveillance (Michaelsen, 2017). Instead, the interviewees primarily emphasized issues such as structural racism, digital threats, including death threats or

cyberattacks, and both overt and covert forms of racism. Several factors may contribute to this focus, including limited access to technology, partial awareness of specific digital platforms, and a general sense of distrust toward some ICTs. As a result, the themes commonly explored in the literature but less prominent in this study might be more relevant to activists in urban areas, those engaged in individual rather than collective activism, or individuals affiliated with political parties (I15/18; Rodrigues (2024)). These aspects could serve as important directions for future research on racist TFV.

Some other aspects presented in Section 2.1, such as microinsults that perpetuate sexual or physical objectification (Eschmann et al., 2020), were not mentioned explicitly by the interviewees. Instead, the interviewees articulated a heightened awareness of concerns pertaining to racial “othering” (Kerrigan, 2019), overt and covert forms of hate speech and harassment, including microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults (Assimakopoulos et al., 2017; Eschmann, 2021). This entailed the utili-

zation of dehumanizing terminology, encompassing epithets and adjectives that evoked associations with animals or diseases (I8/10-12/15/18). This had the effect of reducing Black and Indigenous people to something less than human, reinforcing stereotypes and longstanding white ideologies (Carvalho et al., 2023), and perpetuating power imbalances.

In addition, thirteen respondents reported experiencing direct threats to their safety. While TFV is generally high in Colombia (against activists) (Stuardo et al., 2024; Verifico, 2024), the content of such threats seems to differ when the victim is Black or Indigenous (Carvalho et al., 2023; Mills and Godley, 2017). When making visible and perceptible what has been hidden or uneasy to identify (Agudelo, 2022; Viveros and Lesmes, 2014), threats against mestizo white activists appear to not address explicitly their racial identity, and instead address gender or their activism (I1/7/12), whereas those threats directed at Black and Indigenous activists are predominantly race-related (I2-6/8-11/13-15/17). This finding aligns with the national trend of Black and Indigenous activists encountering heightened forms of violence that are both more entrenched in “historical and contemporary conditions of racial precarity” (Amparo Alves, 2021: 161). It also shows the racialization and the reproduction of

the “*mestizaje* ideology that has long made race-related inequalities invisible in Latin America” (Viveros Vigoya and Lesmes Espinel, 2014: 26) in the digital realm. Instances were reported in which activists were banned from online platforms, such as WhatsApp groups, solely due to their race (I10-11). This issue seems to be intensified by the broader Colombian context, where challenges to sharing critical perspectives and engaging in activism are significant due to the current armed conflict, which mutated and continued after the signing of the 2016 peace agreement. Racist TFV against Black and Indigenous individuals does not emerge to occur in isolation, but is deeply influenced by broader systems of domination, representing a continuation of historical power dynamics grounded in racial and ethnic oppression, expressed through discrimination, colonization, and exclusion (Enein, 2023; Roshani, 2016).

Based on the empirical findings of 15 interviews, we identified structural racism (1) and historical legacies and colonialism (2) as the most critical factors to consider when analyzing and understanding racist TFV in the Colombian context –particularly in Chocó. Structural racism in digital spaces seems to manifest in several ways, including poor infrastructure, connectivity and electricity, and is embedded within the design and functioning of digital platforms. The Colombian state at both the local and national levels have historically neglected to improve the life conditions of the people in Chocó and their access to technological infrastructure, and armed actors have hindered and worsen Chocó people's livelihoods, interfering the limited infrastructure it has been in place (see I5/7/10-11/14-17 in Section 4.1). Moreover, historical legacies and colonialism (2) continue to shape present-day incidents of racist TFV. This form of violence often taps into enduring legacies of colonialism, racialized hierarchies, and repression due to the armed conflict, creating unique vulnerabilities and targeting racialized groups in specific ways. For example, online hate speech and harassment may draw on colonial stereotypes or reinforce discriminatory narratives that have historically been used to marginalize certain racial groups.

Thirdly, twelve interviewees revealed that the intersectional and embodied impacts (3) of racist TFV are deeply felt within communities. Racist TFV affects individuals in ways that

intersect with other aspects of their identity, such as gender, leading to compounded forms of violence. The experiences of Indigenous, Black, and non-binary activists illustrate this pattern (I2/9), echoing the findings of the Colombian Truth Commission (2022) and extending its relevance to the realm of technology. Finally, we found through 14 interviews that racist TFV often causes cultural harm (4), targeting not only individuals but also their communities and cultural identities (see example of Francia Márquez) (I4/18). Digital disinformation campaigns, for example, can undermine cultural practices, put communities against each other, and exacerbate broader cultural damage, further perpetuating the violence and marginalization faced by these groups. These four identified aspects are essential for analyzing the role of race concerning TFV, as they are deeply interconnected and mutually influential. For example, historical legacies contribute significantly to the foundations of structural racism (see Figure 1).

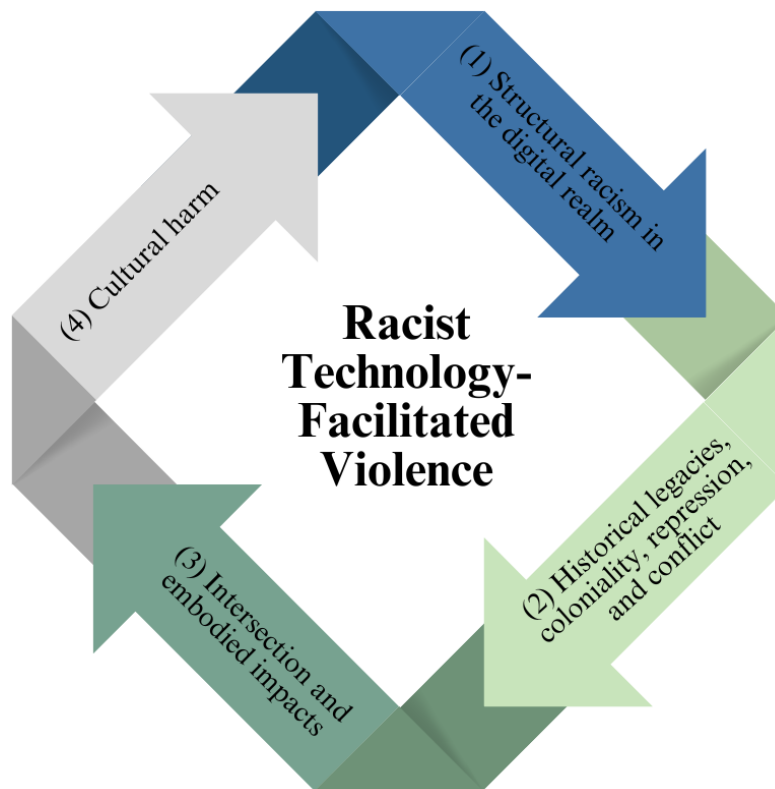


Figure 1: Aspects to consider when analyzing racist TFV in Colombia. Source: Own depiction.

On this basis, we propose adapting Mitchell et al.'s (2022) broad definition of TFV to address the interpretation of racist TFV. This entails incorporating aspects of structural racism and colonial legacies. In consideration of these aspects, we present the following interpretation of racist TFV in the context of Chocó: Racist TFV refers to acts of harm and exclusion enabled by technical artifacts that make it easier or possible for actors to perpetuate racism online and offline. This includes the amplification of existing racism, such as racist hate speech, the creation of new forms of racism, such as algorithmic bias, and the lack, obstruction, and destruction of infrastructure, like electricity shortages and the absence of antennas. Racist TFV is shaped by structural racism – such as the inequitable access to technology – and cannot be fully understood without considering colonial legacies, intersectional oppression, and cultural harm, which often impact entire communities rather than just individuals.

This definition employs two perspectives of CRT concurrently: material determinism and racial realism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023) and the multi-dimensional analysis of LatCrit, Afro-Latin studies (Valdes, 2005; Wade, 2006), and Ethnicity and Race Studies from Colombia (Urrea et al., 2014; Viveros Vigoya, 2020; Viveros Vigoya and Lesmes Espinel, 2014). However, it does so in the context of digital technologies and scholarships on TFV, primarily focused on attitude, discourses, data, content, and representation (see Section 2.1). In this regard, the racial realism perspective is a complementary and critical lens. In addition, our proposal allows us to observe the structural nature of racism in these spaces, as suggested by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021: 218). In sum, our empirical findings expand the concept of TFV by emphasizing race as a critical factor that often exacerbates the violence experienced in the digital realm and facilitated through technology. As a technique of power against Black and Indigenous activists living in situations of armed conflict/repression, such as in Chocó, it is not an isolated or neutral issue, but a structural continuation of historical racial oppression maintained by multinational corporations and state institutions embedded in a hybrid and world system of racial capitalism (Kumar, 2014; Henne et al., 2021). It can then hinder the capacity and potential of activists to have an active presence and intervention in the public debate through social media and digital platforms and has psychological, familial, community, and organizational effects.

As an enabler, technology mediates both racist and resistant behavior in cross-platform cases. The phenomenon of activists challenging dominant narratives through creating or advocating alternative media and spaces is not limited to social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. It also encompasses other digital and physical spaces, including instant messaging applications like WhatsApp and video-sharing platforms like YouTube and TikTok. Furthermore, the results show that the digital space not only reflects but also intensifies offline racial inequalities with intersected forms of racism, sexism, and classism (see Section 4.3), expressing both misogynistic and racist attacks, digital death threats that become physical and sharing sensitive content of violence against Black LGBTQAI+ activists, especially in conflict zones, functioning as a powerful medium where harmful ideologies are perpetuated and strengthened. Perpetrators exploit digital tools to uphold traditional forms of racial and ethnic discrimination while also developing new tactics to target activists – suppressing and controlling their voices and activities to obstruct the spread of their political goals and cultural identities. This dynamic is further exacerbated by the anonymity of perpetrators and the internet’s rapid, far-reaching influence (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas, 2021).

Future research on racist TFV, following critical frameworks such as postcolonial theories, may recognize the patterns and hybridity of subordination and subaltern positions and the specific strategies of resistance to this violence. This could translate into more collaborative and fair research with activists and local organizations, who should participate in the research design, collection, and data analysis. Further research might also address the role of institutions, governments, and national companies of technology in promoting racist TFV, as well as the role of memes, digital surveillance, and algorithmic bias against Black or Indigenous activists or politicians.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the empirical findings offer valuable insights into a Latin American country affected by conflict – a region that, as highlighted in the study by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021), has been insufficiently represented in discussions about racism on social media. In general, the interrelationship between race and TFV can be elucidated through diverse theoretical perspectives that must be critically examined to respond accurately to the complex

realities of technology and violence in the Global South, particularly in one of the most violent countries for activists globally. Methodologically, the interviews and the qualitative analysis are beneficial for gaining a detailed and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences, struggles, and proposals of marginalized voices with racist TFV. The objective is to undertake a comprehensive and multifaceted analysis encompassing infrastructure, context, and content to better understand the continuum of violence through ICTs.

As our discussion illustrates, racist TFV is shaped by systems of oppression that restrict and alter the scope of the racialized activists' agendas and actions in both the digital and physical spheres. It is beneficial to consider the lack, limitation, or destruction of connectivity and electricity as additional forms of racist TFV. The interconnection between the physical and digital spheres implies space, time, history, and intersectionality variables (Rajani, 2022). Future research should deepen the strategies of resistance that activists in the Global South have created to counter and transform racist TFV through time and space, expressions of racist TFV such as digital surveillance, memes and algorithmic bias against individuals such as politicians or activists digitally born and the role of national institutions and companies.

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Appendix I

Excerpt of Code Book

Core-category	Sub-category	Sub-sub-category
Personal information	• Self-identification	• Human rights defender • Social leader • Activist
	• Sexual identity	• Female • Male • Non-binary

	• Race/Ethnicity	• Black/ afrodescendants • Mestiza/o • Indigenous • Peasant
ICT used	• Twitter • Facebook • Telegram • Instagram • YouTube • E-Mail • Webpage	
	• WhatsApp	• Importance of WhatsApp groups • Most used
Benefits of ICT use	• Fast information spreading and sharing • Communication • Visualization • Solidarity • Sharing own perspective • Attention gathering • Awareness raising • Bonding relationship	
Forms of TFV	• Doxing • Online GBV • Hacking • Extortion • Algorithmic bias • Hate speech • Cyberattack • Digital death or forced displacement threat • Digital surveillance and profiling	
Forms of racist TFV	• Memes • Othering • Exoticization • Stereotypes • Online microaggressions • Racist disinformation • Lack or obstruction of infrastructure	

Consequences of TFV	• Self-censorship • Emotional distress • Reporting violent incidents • Community and organizational effects • Familial effects	
Context factors	• Patriarchal society • Racist society • Poor infrastructure • Poverty • Overall violence • Shrinking secure civic spaces	
Definition of racist TFV	• People targeted • Perpetrator • Own understanding	

Table I: Excerpt of code book. Source: Own depiction.

Appendix II

Excerpt of Theoretical Framework

Aspect	LatCrit (Gonzalez et al., 2021; Valdes, 2005b)	CRT (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023) & Afro Latin studies (de la Fuente and Andrews, 2018; Wade, 2006) & Ethnic and Racial Studies from Colombia (Urrea et al., 2014; Vigoya, 2020; Viveros Vigoya and Lesmes Espinel, 2014)	Application to racist TFV
Structural and systemic racism	Explore how colonial legacies and systemic oppression affect Latinx communities (initially solely in the US).	Focuses on how racism is deeply embedded in social, legal, and political systems, impacting people of color (PoC)	Digital platforms can perpetuate structural racism through algorithms, content moderation policies, and unequal access to technology because of the electricity shortages, lack of infrastructure such as antennas and devices limited internet access (all interviewees), reinforcing the racist status quo.

Intersectionality	Emphasize the intersection of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and other identities, particularly for marginalized Latinx communities.	Focuses on how race intersects with other aspects of identity, including gender, sexuality, and class.	Digital violence must be understood not just as racism, but as it intersects with other factors like gender, class, and sexuality, especially for marginalized communities like Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQAI+ individuals, escalating the level of violence into compound and physical violence (I2/9/15).
Voice of the often oppressed and marginalized	Centralize the voices and experiences of marginalized Latina/o communities, focusing on their lived realities.	Critiques the dominance of white voices in academia, law, and policy, advocating for the inclusion of marginalized perspectives.	The voices of Black, Indigenous, and other marginalized racial groups are often silenced or excluded in online and offline spaces (all interviewees).
Technology and colonial legacies	Critique how colonialism continues to shape the experiences of marginalized communities, including through technology.	Critiques the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism and its impact on racial justice.	Technology is often rooted in colonial structures. The digital divide and unequal access to technology disproportionately affect marginalized racial and ethnic communities, reinforcing existing inequalities (all interviewees)
Social justice and activism	Deeply concerned with social justice, focusing on activism and empowerment, especially for Latinx communities.	Advocates for the liberation, empowerment and solidarity between Black, Indigenous other racialized people, emphasizing resistance to injustice.	Digital platforms can be both sites of resistance (e.g., organizing, connecting and amplifying marginalized voices; I4,13,17,18) and oppression (e.g., targeted harassment; I8,10,12,15,18). Activists affected by digital violence seek for structural change in the access and use of ICT (all interviewees)
Challenge to normative ideologies	Question dominant narratives and hegemonic ideologies, especially those that erase or marginalize Latinx and other racial/ethnic communities.	Challenges color-blindness, meritocracy, and legal neutrality obscure the persistence of racism.	The prevalence of color-blindness or “neutral” policies on digital platforms can mask the reality of racialized violence (I2/4/12-13).

Table II: Insight into how CRT, Afro-Latin Studies, Ethnic and Racial Studies from Colombia, and LatCrit were used as a framework for our analysis. Source: Own depiction.