

Digital or tech colonialism is when one country establishes its dominance over another by using digital technology. This allows that country to exploit and influence the other politically, economically, and socially, leaving them technologically dependent (Kwet, M. 2021). Despite its growth and development, South Africa is a country in the Global South and has thus been impacted by digital colonialism. In this essay, I will outline the concept of digital colonialism with reference to Sareeta Amrute's article, "Tech Colonialism Today." I will also discuss the impacts of digital colonialism on software development in South Africa and across the globe. Finally, the essay will end with a reflection of my positionality and contribution towards decoloniality.

In her article, Sareeta Amrute defines colonialism as the practice of "acquiring full or partial control over another country, and exploiting it economically" (Amrute, S. 2019). She further states that colonialism is a "hierarchical, extractive and exploitative" relationship that causes "uneven consequences and malevolent paternalism" (Amrute, S. 2019). This means that in a colonial relationship, some people are placed above others. The people at the top take resources and labour from those at the bottom, and once their job is done, they are left with little to nothing. This causes them to depend on their exploiters to make decisions for them and that limits their freedom. This is what digital colonialism does. Technology makes communication easier, gives people access to information and helps them be more productive. Therefore, the countries with the most money and advanced technologies serve as colonial masters over those without.

In an article from the Institute for Internet and the Just Society, Giorgos Verdi discusses digital colonialism with regards to China and the USA. He talks about how China and the USA's centralized control and ownership of technology is slowly being used to exercise a form of world domination (Verdi, G. 2020). These two countries own the world's biggest tech corporations such as Alibaba, Huawei, and Tik Tok (China) as well as Apple, Google, and Facebook (USA). This is hierarchical because it creates the belief that only Americans or Chinese people can create digital technologies while the rest of the world is just meant to consume. On the other hand, both these countries are involved in extractive and exploitative behaviour. Apple,

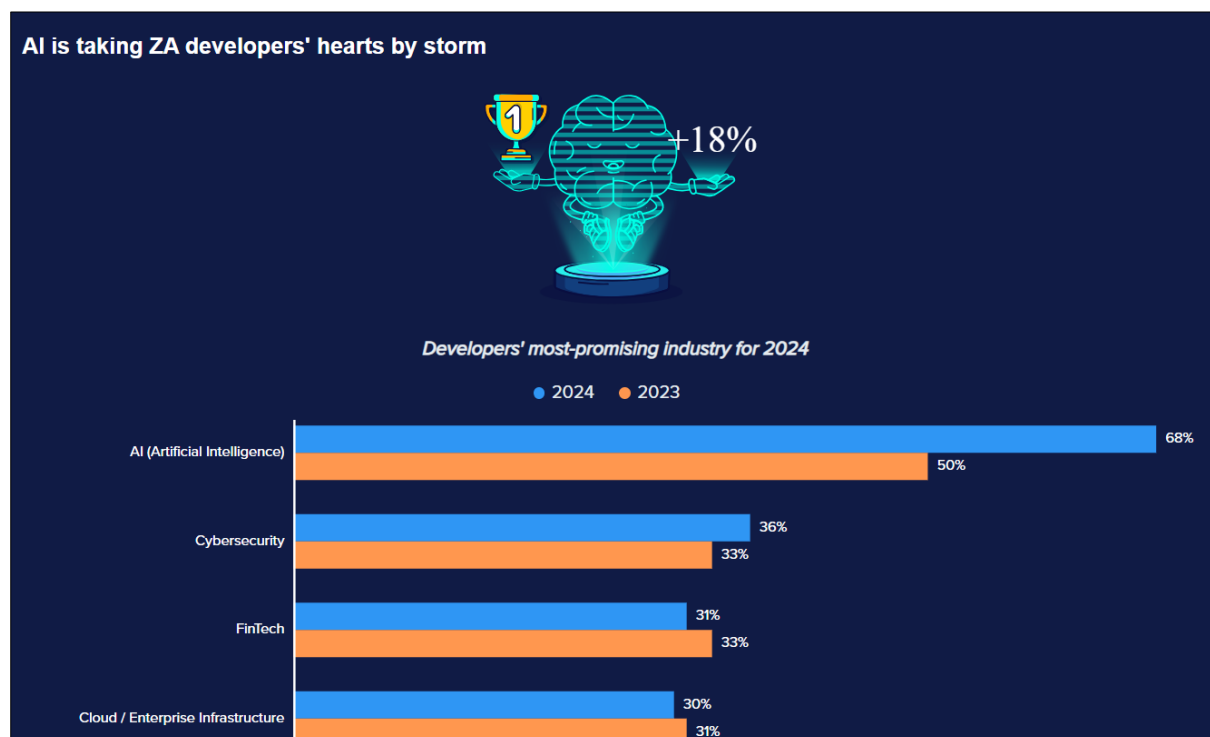
Huawei, and few other mobile companies are using child labour to mine cobalt from Congo, as well as other resources from various third-world countries (ABC News, 2024). This creates uneven consequences and malevolent paternalism because China and the USA keep getting richer while Congo is falling apart and the rest of world is just complicit, eagerly waiting for the release of the next smartphone.

Dr Michael Kwet, who specialises in Digital Colonialism research says, “in digital colonialism, the dominant powers use their ownership of digital infrastructure, knowledge, and their control of the means of computation to keep the South in a situation of permanent dependency” (Kwet, M. 2021). This means that when a country’s media products and industries have global success, other countries will not be able to compete and will thus depend on that country to provide those goods and services for them. This is evident in the hindered growth of South Africa's television/entertainment industries. For example, Netflix, the American streaming platform, is taking customers away from local television services. People would rather pay R99 per month for Netflix rather than R469 for DSTV. Although Netflix is a better financial decision, a part of South Africa’s economy will be affected by the loss DSTV customers. This shows that South Africa is dependent on America for cheaper and more convenient television, and it strengthens America’s control over the type of content that we consume.

In addition, digital Colonialism has had a negative impact in the labour situation in global software development. This is evident in the CNBC article regarding Google’s decision to lay off hundreds of its employees. The company says that their decision was intended to “maintain [their] current global footprint while also expanding in high-growth global workforce locations” (Husain in Elias, J. 2024). This is why they are letting people go and moving some positions to Brazil, India, and Mexico. The employees were told via email that, “announcements of this sort may leave many of you feeling uncertain or frustrated, [but] these changes are in service of our broader goals as a company” (Husain in Elias, J. 2024). This is how digital colonialism functions. Google employees built the company and all its different facets to where it is today but when they can no longer “afford” to pay them, they outsource cheap labour from low-income countries. This shows that they have no regard for their employees’

lives or wellbeing and are only interested in making money.

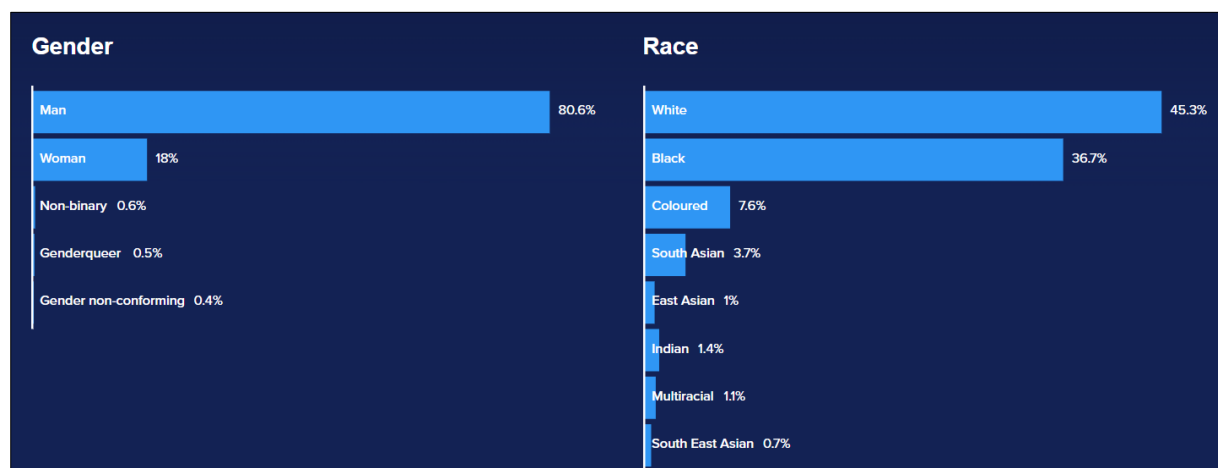
Similarly, digital colonialism has had a negative impact in AI-powered software development. “AI has the potential to drive global productivity upwards by automating routine tasks, enhancing jobs that survive and disrupting entire industries” (Verdi, G. 2020). Therefore, many countries will want to have the latest AI technologies to make their development process easier. However, like all the previously mentioned examples, advanced AI technologies are owned by the USA and many other countries in the Global North. These countries will “supply AI to [the South] in exchange for political influence and streams of data” (Verdi, G. 2020). As seen in the image below, AI is South Africa’s most promising industry for 2024. Therefore, if South Africa is supplied with AI by the USA, the USA would have access to the citizens’ information and be able to make political decisions that directly affect the country. Essentially, their control and ownership of the technology would give them power over the country.



(OfferZen, 2024)

On a different note, digital colonialism has contributed to South Africa’s loss of culture and has widened the digital divide. The content we consume and programs we use

were created by tech-dominating countries, which happen to be, Japan, South Korea, and the USA (GeeksforGeeks, 2024). Therefore, South African software developers will disregard their own cultures and values to create from a Western point of view. This furthers the idea that our cultures, experiences, and ways of doing are not “valid” forms of knowledge. With the digital divide, English is the predominant language used in programming and software development. Therefore, South Africans who are not proficient in the language are unable to access and engage with these programs. In essence, “marginalised people are not developing the systems therefore they are being disadvantaged” (Geyser, H, 2021).



(OfferZen, 2024)

Similarly, the South African software development industry mirrors the West with the demographics of its employees. As seen in the image above 80.6% of South African software developers are men and 45.3% are white people. This is similar to the USA where 78% of developers are men and 48.5% are white people (Zippa, 2021). The USA’s percentages are justified because it is a white-majority country. South Africa, however, has a majority of black and coloured people so it alarming that they are not well-represented in the tech-industry (South African Government, 2024). This is the work of digital colonialism. It is furthering the idea that only white men can develop software, meaning that women and people of colour are disregarded. It also means that the programs that they create will mostly cater for white men therefore, any problems that arise would have gone unnoticed because the creators are not directly affected by them.

In general, digital colonialism is rooted in imperialism, classism, sexism and exploitation so, the only way to combat it is to practice decoloniality. The Mignolo and Walsh reading defines decoloniality as “transcending rather than dismantling Western ideas through building our own [schools] of thought” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2020, p.7). This means that our way of thinking, knowing, accessing, and building must be deconstructed in order to create new ways of doing. In other words, instead of disregarding what already exists we need to create new content so that, as time goes on, the new content becomes the standard or the norm. The Mignolo and Walsh reading further states that, “Each of us, endorsing and embracing decoloniality is responsible for our own decolonial liberation” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2020, p.11). Therefore, an important part of practicing decoloniality is being aware that you are doing it for yourself.

My role in decoloniality is informed by my positionality. Being a young black woman from the Soweto township, my lived experiences are the complete opposite from people in the Global North. I am also aware that everything in the world is part of a system of power and that I have some advantages. I am in a position of power because I receive an education that allows me to be part of the production of knowledge. Therefore, I plan to develop informative websites that centre people who look like me. I want to add onto the work that other women of colour have done before me and make my work accessible so that it can reach the widest audience. This will show that black women in the industry do exist and that the web is not just designed by white men from the Silicon Valley. That is how I plan to practice decoloniality in my work and in my daily life.

Word Count: 1705

References

- ABC News (2024). US court absolves top tech companies in Congo's child labor case. [online] ABC News. Available at: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/us-court-absolves-top-tech-companies-congos-child/story?id=107839639>. [Accessed 31 May 2024]
- Amrute, S. (2019) 'Tech Colonialism Today'. RHODE ISLAND, <https://medium.com/datasociety-points/tech-colonialism-today-9633a9cb00ad>. [Accessed 7 May 2024].
- Elias, J. (2024). Google lays off hundreds of 'Core' employees, moves some positions to India and Mexico. [online] CNBC. Available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/05/01/google-cuts-hundreds-of-core-workers-moves-jobs-to-india-mexico.html>. [Accessed 29 May 2024].
- GeeksforGeeks. (2024). Top 10 Most Technologically Advanced Countries 2024. [online] Available at: <https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/top-10-most-technologically-advanced-countries/>. [Accessed 2 June 2024]
- Geyser, H. (2021). 'Decolonising Technology', [Lecture], WSOA3028A: Interactive Media 3A, University of the Witwatersrand. [Accessed 6 May 2024].
- Kwet, M. (2019). Digital colonialism is threatening the Global South. [online] Al Jazeera. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/13/digital-colonialism-is-threatening-the-global-south>. [Accessed 2 June 2024]
- Kwet, M. (2021). Digital colonialism: The evolution of US empire. [online] Longreads. Available at: <https://longreads.tni.org/digital-colonialism-the-evolution-of-us-empire>. [Accessed 29 May 2024].

- Mignolo, W.D. and Walsh, C.E. (2020). On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis. 1(93), pp.1–12. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cal.11089>. Introduction. [Accessed 7 May 2024].
- OfferZen (2024). State of the Software Developer Nation 2024. [online] OfferZen. Available at: <https://www.offerzen.com/reports/software-developer-south-africa>. [Accessed 30 May 2024].
- South African Government (2024). South Africa's people. [online] Wwww.gov.za. Available at: <https://www.gov.za/about-sa/south-africas-people>. [Accessed 2 June 2024]
- Verdi, G. (2020). The Road to Technocolonialism. [online] Institute for Internet and the Just Society. Available at: <https://www.internetjustsociety.org/the-road-to-techno-colonialism>. [Accessed 5 May 2024].
- Zippa (2021). Software Engineer Demographics. [online] www.zippia.com. Available at: <https://www.zippia.com/software-engineer-jobs/demographics/>. [Accessed 2 Jun. 2024].