Online racial discrimination: A growing problem for adolescents

Cyberbullying researchers are beginning to understand the race-related experiences of adolescents of color.

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Racial discrimination is a common stressor in the lives of adolescents of color in the U.S. Previous empirical research suggests that the majority of minority youth perceive themselves to be the victims of racial-ethnic discrimination (Benner & Kim, 2009; Harris-Britt, Valrie, Kurtz-Costes, & Rowley, 2007; Huyr& Fulgini, 2010; Martin et al., 2011; Medvedeva, 2010; Nebelbecker et al., 2009; Pachter, Szalacha, Bernstein, & Coll, 2010; Seaton, Caldwell, Sellars & Jackson, 2006). A growing body of research also suggests that the contexts in which discriminatory experiences occur matter and have differential impacts on child and adolescent adjustment outcomes (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Rina, Martin, Gardner, & Brooks-Gunn, 2013). Given the facts that 95 percent of youth have access to the internet (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013) and that adolescents of color spend 4½ more hours per day on average than their white counterparts using various forms of media, including mobile devices (Rideout, Laireclla, & Wartell, 2011), it is important to understand discriminatory experiences in electronic formats, including widely used social network sites.

Early writings on the topic of race online argued that the internet could reduce or eliminate racial discrimination that people of color typically experience in offline settings (Glaser & Kahn, 2005; Kang, 2000). Recent theorizing suggests that social media often requires users to reveal their identities and that doing so can make individuals more susceptible to experiencing racial discrimination (Kahn, Spencer, & Glaser, 2013). In addition, victims may have a potentially permanent record of their online interactions (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) that they carry around on their devices. While we have quite an extensive literature on general forms of online victimization, research on experiences with race is surprisingly limited.

This article describes preliminary findings from two recent studies using data from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (https://www.nichd.nih.gov/Pages/index.aspx)-funded Teen Life Online and in Schools Project (Brendesha Tynes, principal investigator), a longitudinal study of the risk and protective factors associated with online victimization. The mixed-method explanatory sequential design includes online surveys, interviews, samples of online experiences provided by participants and observations from a school-based sample of diverse youth. The sample was recruited from schools in the Midwest with varying demographic compositions including relatively equal numbers of African-Americans, whites and Latinos as well as schools that were over 80 percent either Latino of African-American.

In the first study, we (with Eleanor Seaton (https://thesanfordschool.asu.edu/asu­directory­person/eleanor­seaton ) examine reports of online racial discrimination and the prevalence of these experiences for adolescents of color from 2010-2013. We also outline age, race and gender differences along with the contexts in which online racial discrimination occurs. In the second study, we outline the nature of these messages using thematic and content analysis of students’ qualitative descriptions. We define online racial discrimination as denigrating or excluding individuals or groups on the basis of race through the use of symbols, voice, video, images, text and graphic representations. Like its offline counterpart, these experiences include racial epithets and unfair treatment by others due to a person’s racial or ethnic background, such as being excluded from an online space. These incidents may be directly experienced (also called individual experiences) by victims or may be vicariously experienced or witnessed (Tynes, Giang, Williams & Thompson, 2008). Online forms of racial discrimination also include what are commonly known as “cloaked sites” that are created to spread misinformation about the history and culture of certain racial/ethnic groups. One example is "martinlutherking.org" which was created to disparage Martin Luther King Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement all while appearing to be a legitimate site.

Prevalence of Online Discrimination

Using a sample of 340 African-American, Latino, Asian and biracial adolescents (drawn from a larger sample of 1028 sixth-12th grade students at year 1), online survey data from study one revealed that 42 percent of minority youth indicated that they had experienced at least one direct (individual) discriminatory incident in the first year, with 55 percent in the second year and 58 percent in the third year reporting such an incident in the third year (see Table 1). Sixty-four percent of minority youth indicated that they had experienced at least one vicarious discriminatory incident in the first year, with 69 percent the second year and 68 percent the third year. The most common direct discriminatory incident across the three years was “People have shown me a racist image online.” The most common vicarious discriminatory incident across the three waves was “I have witnessed people saying mean or rude things about another person’s ethnic group online.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discrimination Items</th>
<th>Time 1 (percent)</th>
<th>Time 2 (percent)</th>
<th>Time 3 (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People have said mean or rude things about me because of my race or ethnic group</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have shown me a racist image online</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have cracked jokes about people of my race or ethnic group online</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>People have said things that were untrue about people in my race or ethnic group</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have witnessed people saying mean or rude things about another person’s ethnic group online</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have excluded me from a site because of my race or ethnic group online</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People have threatened me online with violence because of my race or ethnic group</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Percentage Perceiving Discriminatory Incident via the Internet at Least Once in the Past Year (2010-2013)

Changes in Online Racial Discrimination Over Time and Differences across Age, Race and Gender

We also found that reports of direct racial discrimination increased across the three time periods. Minority youth perceived an average of less than one incident (M=.72) at the first time period, one incident (M=94) the second year, and slightly more than one incident (M=1.1) at the third. The results also suggested that vicarious racial discrimination increased across the three waves. Participants perceived approximately one and a half incidents of vicarious racial discrimination (M=1.43) at the first time period, and nearly two incidents of vicarious racial discrimination the second (M=1.69) and third (M=1.70) years.
Gender, race and age differences were examined in direct and vicarious discrimination over the three time points. The results indicated no gender differences in either direct or vicarious discrimination in any of the three years. This was also the case for race (note there are mean differences, but these analyses included counts only). There were, however, age differences such that middle to late adolescents perceived more direct online racial discrimination than youth in early adolescence in the first year. There were also age differences in vicarious racial discrimination; youth who were middle to late (M=1.73) perceived more vicarious discrimination than youth in early adolescence (M=1.06). There were no age differences in individual racial discrimination at time two. However, middle to late adolescents perceived more vicarious discrimination than their early adolescent (M=1.29) counterparts. There were no age differences in direct or vicarious discrimination at time three.

Contexts of Online Discrimination

The contexts for online discrimination were examined. The most frequent contexts for these experiences were social networking sites like Facebook and text messaging. Forty-four percent of minority youth indicated that they had experienced online discrimination on a social network site at time one, 51 percent at time two and 48 percent at time three. Twenty-two percent of minority youth indicated that they had experienced online discrimination through text messages at time one, 18 percent at time two and 19 percent at time three.

Because researchers noted shifts in the popularity of online contexts among participants in interview data, specific sites (e.g., Tumblr, Twitter and YouTube) were assessed for the third time point. Twenty-one percent of minority youth indicated that they had experienced online discrimination on Twitter and YouTube.

Participant Descriptions of Experiences with Online Racial Discrimination

To complement survey findings, in the second study we (with Allana Zuckerman) asked African-American students in grades sixth–12th at year 1 about their worst online experiences. This question was included in the online survey about their online victimization experiences outlined in study one which 1028 students completed. The item was open-ended to allow students to provide details about this experience in their own words. African-Americans were chosen because follow-up interview data revealed they experience a particularly virulent form of online racial discrimination. Thematic and content analyses were conducted with open-ended responses across three waves of data. Narratives were coded and a word cloud with the most frequently used words was also generated using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Thematic analysis showed emergent themes primarily revolved around the nature and content of online racial discrimination as well as the contexts in which they occur. Participants reported six primary types of experiences:

1. Racial epithets.
2. Statements that were untrue, stereotyping and implicitly racist statements.
3. Racist jokes.
4. Symbols of hate, such as the Confederate flag.
5. Threats of physical harm or death.
6. Graphic representations/actual images of dead black bodies.

Examples include the following:

"The worst thing that has happened to me on the internet is that someone threatened to kill me because of my race."

"Almost everyday on Call of Duty: Black Ops (a video game) I see Confederate flags, swastikas and black people hanging from trees in emblems and they say racist things about me and my teammates."

"The worst internet experience that I received was online scrolling down my Facebook stream and seen a picture of an Obama doll hanging by a nuce [sic] at a gas station... I showed it to my mom and my co-workers but really nothing we could do about it."

"Me and my friends were playing Xbox and some kid joined the Xbox Live party we were in and made a lot of racist jokes I found offensive."

Interestingly, experiences across time appear to account for current events and technological trends. For example, a female student reported seeing the President Obama effigy hanging during his second campaign and election year. Experiences also occur on the most popular online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The word cloud below is from year three and reflects the most commonly used words in participant narratives, including the terms racist, black, online, page, people, picture, race, angry, game and Zimmerman (a reference to George Zimmerman, who killed 17 year-old unarmed teen Trayvon Martin in 2012 and was acquitted in 2013) (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Most Commonly Used Terms in African American Participants' Worst Experience Responses for Year 3

Implications of Findings for Adolescent Mental Health

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As expected, the majority of the sample reported being victims of online racial discrimination and these reports increased across the three time periods. This is consistent with a general increase in online hate activity associated with the campaign and election of the first African-American president in the U.S. Despite claims of a post-racial America, the Simon Wiesenthal Center (2009, 2012) reported the numbers of extremist and hate sites rose from 6,000 in 2006, to 10,000 by 2009 and to 15,000 by 2011. Not only does this fringe element of society contribute to the racial discrimination that adolescents are potentially exposed to, but average internet users may also be more likely to engage in discriminatory behaviors online (Kahn et al., 2013). Given the perception of privacy online, perpetrators can feel as though they are in a large crowd of others with a low likelihood of identification, which arguably leads to less self-monitoring when expressing beliefs (Kahn et al., 2013). Moreover, research has shown that adolescents may be more likely to engage in discriminatory behaviors when they perceive they are not being monitored (Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004). Scholars posit that although the internet represents exemplary societal progress, online contexts often resemble pre-Civil Rights Era race relations in which prejudice is overtly expressed (Glaser & Kahn, 2005) and discrimination practices are common.

Given the increasing amount of time that adolescents and young adults spend online, experiences of racial discrimination via the internet have implications for their mental health and other developmental outcomes (Tynes et al., 2008). Studies show that online racial discrimination is associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, lower academic motivation and increased problem behavior (Tynes et al., 2008; Tynes et al., 2014; Tynes, Hiss, Ryan, & Rose, 2015; Umana-Taylor et al., 2015). Most importantly, online racial discrimination contributes uniquely to adjustment outcomes over and above offline experiences. Given the current racial climate in the U.S., it has never been more important for researchers and practitioners to understand how race related experiences impact youth of color over time.

Equally important is the potential role these findings might play in informing the design of cyberbullying prevention and internet safety programs. They may also be used in the development of interventions that help youth to cope with and critique the information they are exposed to in online settings. These interventions should be comprehensive with an explicit focus on adaptive coping strategies and developing critical media and racial literacy.

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References


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