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How the Damage of Racism in Social Media Generates Social Activism

Social media can be a positive place where people around the world can share their stories and experiences. However, it is also a cesspool of negativity. One way this negativity has manifested itself is in the form of racism. Videos of police brutality against people of color are heavily prevalent on social media. "Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people, and five times more likely to be unarmed when killed. The reasons for these killings are many, including the notion that race is a factor in these encounters." (Campbell, et al.) The killings are highly publicized, especially in recent years, and this publication has changed audience's opinions about the police. Although incidents of police violence are shared through numerous platforms, such as newspapers and television news, social media has been the most recent and vital medium of sharing these incidents. For example, bodycam footage of Kim Potter mistaking her gun for a taser and killing Daunte Wright, a Black man, circulated social media and resulted in increased calls for police reform. The sharing of incidents of police violence against people of color is arguably a powerful tool of anti-racism.

Following the murder of George Floyd, a Black man who was killed by police in May 2020, a video of his killing was posted on social media. Although disturbing and horrific, it was evidence that allowed the police officers involved to be held accountable. After this, social media users continued the pattern of spreading awareness of racism by posting videos and textual

stories. They have also utilized social media platforms for creating accounts and threads where victims of racism can relate to one another.

Although social media content can be a great weapon against the success of racist institutions, it has negative emotional impacts on the viewers of color. Further, sharing videos of police violence on social media does not always lead to justice for the victims involved. For example, although Potter's bodycam video sparked protests for police reform and racial justice, there was inadequate action taken and the actual justice received was inadequate. Potter was only sentenced to two years in prison for the manslaughter of Wright.

Racism in social media has negative effects on society because witnessing police brutality negatively impacts students of color, movements in support of oppressed races are met with counter-protestors, social media makes it easier for racists to target people around the world, and users can anonymously send racist messages without repercussions. However, racism in social media can also bring about positive effects on society because it makes having discussions about sensitive topics like racism easier, provides a space for victims to share their experiences, and is a catalyst for social change.

Viral videos depicting racism on social media have negative effects on society because they harm students of color. A study by the *Journal of Black Studies* used critical race theory to explore how the exposure of police violence to racially marginalized college students in the U.S affected them emotionally. Critical Race Theory is an academic concept that explains that racism is a systemic issue that exists in policies and legal systems, rather than a result of an individual's ignorance. (Sawchuk) The theory argues that people make choices every day, whether intentional or unintentional, that maintain the oppression of non-white people. It suggests that today's laws and policies uphold white supremacy and white privilege while perpetuating the oppression and

racism against people of color. CRT is widely controversial, as many conservatives argue that it assumes all white people are racist and supports discriminating against white people to achieve racial equity. Many scholars study CRT in education by analyzing how policies contribute to the persistence of racial inequalities in education. The study focused on 134 undergraduate students of color aged 18 to 24, where subjects reported their experiences seeing police brutality videos on social media through a 32-item survey. (Campbell, et al.) The three main findings of this study were that the students primarily use social media as a medium for learning about police violence, the participants displayed anger, sadness, and fear, which are symptoms of post-traumatic-stress disorder, and the student's race had an impact on their perspective of police violence on social media.

The survey asked participants how they typically found out about police violence, how often they watched videos of police violence in the media, and what their initial reactions were to seeing these videos. (Campbell, et al.) 85% of college students said they found out about police violence on social media and 8% said they found out about these incidents on television. 77% of participants reported feeling anger and frustration from watching these videos, 68% reported feelings of sadness and grief, 43% reported fear, and 81% said the videos were hard to watch. 78% of participants said that although publicity of police brutality is necessary, the presence of the issue on social media does more harm than good. A few students reported that they became too angry to continue watching the videos, paranoid about being the next person to experience police brutality, and shocked that these events happen. The study shows that witnessing police killings of unarmed Black men of all ages causes trauma for the Black men watching it and instills fear of police encounters.

Viral videos of racist violence on social media have negative effects on society because of counter-protests against movements for oppressed groups. In 2013, George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenager. This began the Black Lives Matter movement on Facebook and it spread throughout American culture. Michael Brown was an unarmed Black man killed by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. The hashtag #alllivesmatter was found to be prevalent in the discourse surrounding Michael Brown and BLM protest tactics. The saying "All Lives Matter" was established in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and is a form of criticism against it. Supporters of All Lives Matter believe that instead of paying more attention to one specific race's issues, we must equally pay attention to the worth of all races, even if one race is struggling more than the others now.

A study was done on Twitter hashtags that co-occurred with #BlackLivesMatter from the beginning of 2014 to the end of 2014 to analyze the reactions to the non-indictment of Wilson in Brown's killing. (Ince, et al.) In the first phase of data collection, hashtags were gathered from the beginning of 2014 to August 2014, which was the period before and until the date that Brown was shot. In the second phase, hashtags were examined from August 10 of that year to November 24 at 9:25 pm, which was the period after the shooting and until the jury decided not to indict Wilson. The third phase of data collection involved assessing hashtags from that point until November 30, which was after the jury made their decision.

The study used five elements of the BLM framing and put them into categories: Ferguson, police violence, tactics, counter protest, and solidarity/expressiveness. (Ince, et al.) The category "Counter protest" was defined as "Text relating to blocking the goals, tactics and ideology of BLM or presenting an alternative." Tweets in this category were #alllivesmatter, #opkkk, #kkk, #whitelivesmatter, and #obamathugs. 4 of the top 5 hashtags most likely to occur

with #BlackLivesMatter in all of 2014 were Ferguson-related. However, #alllivesmatter was #4 and appeared 1.3% of the time, in 3,139 tweets. After Michael Brown's shooting, #alllivesmatter was ranked at #16 with 226 tweets. After Darren Wilson's non-indictment, #alllivesmatter was the third-ranked hashtag with 3,040 tweets. Users who tweeted these hashtags criticized the heavy focus on Black issues and wanted to revert the conversation back to all races equally, despite a significant issue happening with one race in particular. Although these counter-protest tweets were heavily outweighed by tweets that were supportive of the BLM movement, it is still evident that, in a racially divided society, social media is often used to reject social movements.

Social media has made it easier for racists to target oppressed races around the world, which negatively affects our society in the COVID-19 pandemic. American social media targets Asian-American people during the pandemic through hate speech. Social media is a communication tool that easily lets users send hateful and racist messages surrounding COVID-19. (Reima, 663) A study by Bing He and other scholars was conducted on the counter speech ecosystem on Twitter to analyze the change in attitude toward Asians as the pandemic happened. A keyword approach collected COVID-19 tweets using the dataset "COVID-HATE." (He, et al., 2) Over 206 million tweets were studied that were made between January 15, 2020, and March 26, 2021. A collection was used of keywords and hashtags belonging to three sets: COVID-19 keywords that collected tweets relating to the pandemic, hate keywords that indicate anti-Asian hate during COVID-19, and counter speech keywords that were used to counter hate speech and defend Asians. 1,227,116 hate and 1,154,289 counter speech tweets were found.

The study found that anti-Asian hate tweets appeared more frequently than counter speech tweets in 2020. (He, et al., 4) The spike in hate speech happened between March 16, 2020, and March 19, 2020, the period when the United States started experiencing COVID

lockdowns and restrictions. After the killing of six Asian women in the 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, hateful tweets rose by 17.9%. (5) This study shows that social media is an easy outlet for many people to target Asians and blame them for the pandemic through a short message and a quick press of a button. It is easier for people to hide behind a screen and send racist messages to Asians because they believe that there will be no repercussions in comparison to them sending that same message face to face.

Due to the rise of police brutality and anti-Asian racism in recent years, it may be easy to assume that racism only exists heavily in the United States, and the use of American social media can further perpetuate this racism. However, non-American social media has made it easier for racists to target oppressed races in other countries, which negatively affects our society through xenophobia. The interracial marriage between Chinese people and Africans in Guangzhou was researched. It was found that the Chinese social media platform Weibo has an account named "Black Issues in China" (BIC) that warns people of "dangerous" Africans in China. (Liu, Deng, 104) BIC locates and condemns Chinese women who dated or married African men. BIC warns its followers that China will have an STD epidemic due to Chinese-African marriages. Digital pamphlets warn Chinese people about Africans, saying, "They've made our blood ties black." (105-106) The authors conclude that, although the Internet enables marginalized communities to connect with each other, "…the major social media platforms have also become spaces in which racism, sexism, and homophobia intersect. These online discourses and associated offline practices are examples of the devaluing of African migrants, perpetuating harmful misconceptions of people of color as fundamentally inferior to the Chinese." (106)

Hate speech on social media increased during the pandemic because of the negative attitudes that Arab students and instructors had about China. According to the *Technium Social*

Sciences Journal, 125 Arab students and 105 Arab instructors were used for a study. (Reima, 662) Twitter pages were sampled that counteracted hate and racism connected to Covid-19. The subjects were asked if they thought the COVID-19 pandemic was a punishment from God and which countries they believed were punished. The content of the Twitter accounts was analyzed to understand how racism, hate speech, and prejudice relating to Covid-19 are handled. 51% of the participants believed that Covid-19 was a punishment from God. 40% of the subjects believed China is being punished by the pandemic, and this was based on morals, ideological points of view, and social myths they believed such as, "The Chinese eat insects and bats." (Reima, 663) The results revealed that participants had a lack of exposure to other cultures and misinformation, as seen in the comment, "China tortures Miammar's Muslims." (Reima, 663) The study concludes by explaining that hate speech during the Covid-19 pandemic can be analyzed using the attenuation risk framework. "The secondary consequences of a risk event (hate speech) serve as amplifiers of the original risk (Covid-19) and activate representations of similar events (negative sentiments) within the receivers (students and instructors). Newspapers, television, and social media are powerful communication tools that enable their users to send (hate and racist) messages and convey information about Covid-19 to millions of people simultaneously." (Reima, 663) The study shows that people around the world perpetuate racism, not just by white people, and social media is a tool they can easily use to do so.

Social media has made it easier for anonymous users to send racist messages to professional athletes, which can spread through society and influence others to target them too. *The Journal of High Technology Law* cites instances of racial abuse against athletes. In 2014, African-American hockey player P.K. Subban scored a goal for the Montreal Canadiens to win against the Boston Bruins, and found racist tweets from Bruins' fans calling him the n-word,

saying he doesn't belong in hockey, and using the hashtag #whitesonly. (Ayers) Professional tennis player Sachia Vickery said that since she joined social media, people have called her racist names such as the n-word, "monkey," and "slave." Professional soccer players Paul Pogba and Marcus Rashford missed penalty kicks and lost their games. They experienced anti-Black racial abuse on social media. Racism is still a problem today because of "its ability to adapt to the changes within society." These instances exemplify how racial abuse of athletes on social media is a major problem in the sports industry.

Despite the detrimental effects that racism in social media has on our society, addressing racism through memes makes it easier to talk about the sensitive topic of racism and thus has positive effects on our society. After George Floyd was murdered in May 2020, protests happened in over 70 countries in the US. There were more than 7,750 demonstrations. 93% of the protests involved non-violent protestors. 28% of people killed by police since 2013 are Black, but Black people only make up 13% of the national population. (Moody-Ramirez, et al.) A study was done of memes shared a month after George Floyd's death using Critical Race Theory. In the study, 38 memes were found of the conflict theme (systemic racism/stereotypes), 15 memes of the human-interest theme (last straw in police brutality), 31 memes of the responsibility theme (discussing who is responsible for American freedom), 57 memes of the morality theme (denial of protests), 35 memes of news coverage, and 21 memes with no theme.

Of the 197 total memes, 59 had a positive overarching tone, 108 had a negative tone, and 30 were neutral. (Moody-Ramirez, et al.) The themes found in the negative memes were that systemic racism is justified, black people fit the stereotypes in mass media, and Floyd's death was a tipping point in the BLM movement. Memes in the positive category highlighted the importance of BLM and how Floyd's death means that Americans should be concerned about

police brutality. Social media outlets allow the public to post messages that can reach and influence large audiences. Critical race humor allows people to have uneasy conversations about racial truths and trends. Humor can address the bigger issue of systemic racism that has existed in American history. The study notes Limor Shifman's "Memes in Digital Culture," which explains that memes are visual, culture information that passes amongst people and can represent a shared cultural phenomenon as well as change public opinion.

Addressing racism in social media has positive effects on society by letting people who experienced racism share their stories. The Black Lives Matter movement was revived when the murder of George Floyd raised awareness online about police brutality. An analysis of an Instagram account called @bipoc_untold found narratives of student experiences of racism. Students of color at a single-sex school in Canada anonymously posted about experiencing racial discrimination. The account creator explained that the purpose of the account was to uplift voices of color in predominantly white schools to raise awareness about behaviors that can potentially harm BIPOC classmates. (Li, 285) The account practices counter-storytelling to debunk the discriminatory assumptions in dominant narratives, challenge the predominantly white population's perception of BIPOC experiences, and give insight into the experiences of BIPOC students at all-girls' schools. There is a larger anti-racist social media movement called "Blackat" which consists of Instagram accounts that share BIPOC experiences of racism in private schools. Many of the accounts have the handle "Blackat" followed by the school name. The purpose of the movement is to reject the assumption that BIPOC can escape racism by attending private schools. (287)

An instance in social media of a Black person who shared her experience of racism is the Tik Tok creator, Janice Mofus, who is a singer and goes by the stage name, Baby Storme. She

was visibly upset as she recounted her experience at CitiBank. Mofus tried to cash in a $30,000 check that her father gave her to pay rent and was told by staff that they could not verify the check and therefore would not deposit it. (Mofus) When she asked them if they had ever refused to deposit anyone's check before, one of the staff members said no. When she asked the woman why, in that case, she refused to deposit hers, Mofus got no answer. Despite telling staff that they could call her father and verify that he gave her the check, they refused. Staff then locked down the bank and prohibited Mofus from leaving until the police got there and investigated the check. Subsequent videos that she posted in the bank showed the place being locked down and the staff having no rebuttal to her telling them, "You don't want to cash the check because it's a $30,000 check and I'm Black." She then turned the camera around to the non-Black staff and said, "Don't be surprised when you see yourself on the Internet." Further, the staff said she was not allowed to record in the bank and would not let her leave until the police confiscated her phone.

This video is frustrating to watch because while the camera was only on them for a second and viewers could only rely on what they heard, the bank staff's words did not imply any remorse for what they said or proactiveness in convincing her that they did not have any racially biased intentions. They made foolish claims, like saying the back of the check was "missing something." (Mofus) Although they should know that, in a society where Black people have been increasingly killed by police, it is unacceptable to lock a Black person in an establishment just because of the presumption that she has a fake check, the staff did it anyway without a second thought. It appeared that the staff were confident enough that there would be no repercussions for their actions and that they could treat Black people however they wanted, because most people in society have gotten away with it. The way the staff handled her accusations was dismissive and dangerous.

Despite Mofus's horrifying experience, her choice to share her experience and the evidence on social media drew support from hundreds of thousands of Tik Tok users. On her original video, many people commented that she should get a lawyer, expose the location of her bank, and sue them. (Mofus) A popular creator, Chris Klemens, said, "It turns out my day is wide open tomorrow – will happily stop by to give them a word. What was the lady's name?" Another popular creator, Jazmyn W, wrote, "It's the way they tried to call the police with absolutely no rationale." Others tagged Citibank's TikTok page, hoping that the bank would see the video and address the situation.

In Mofus's video where she was in the bank, users continued showing support and holding the bank staff accountable. The user @cynthiaknowbest commented about the check, "They aren't allowed to keep it for further 'investigation.' They can cash it or decline to cash. No bank policy will back up this behavior." (Mofus) Another user, @roberto_artiste, commented, "And the bank cannot lock you inside, that's false imprisonment." The implications of these comments are that many establishments will violate their own policies because of racial bias and the false presumption that people of color are criminals.

Although what Mofus went through was traumatizing and highlights the experiences of many people of color, social media allowed her to share her story and find support from people around the world. Seeing her videos on social media also opened up opportunities from people of color to comment on the videos and share their stories. Both sides can benefit from addressing racism in social media: The people who post and the people who view. Although posting on social media about racist incidents can increase support for racial justice, this racial justice might not always come. For example, the Citibank employees eventually let Mofus out of the building with no explanation or apology, and she was left with anxiety and fear afterwards. (Edwards)

Citibank released a statement about the incident, saying they are working with her to resolve the issue and launching an investigation. However, this seems like an incomplete statement as there does not appear to be significant action being taken to prevent this issue in the future at Citibank, and there was no mention of their efforts to prevent racial profiling.

Studies show that sharing stories of racism in social media can educate us on the impact of racial discrimination on people of color. When 139 stories from the Instagram account @bipoc_untold were studied, the authors analyzed the frequency of each specific type of racism (microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, evaded racism, and "antiracist" racism), the frequency of each way BIPOC were affected by racism, the frequency of subcategories of racism (racial stereotyping, double standards, tokenization, etc.) perpetuated by staff and faculty, and the frequency of the ways students were affected by the racism of staff and faculty. (Li, 288-289) Microassaults were defined as outwardly racist comments and intentional ridicule of BIPOC culture. Microinsults were defined as ignorant ridicule of BIPOC culture, exclusion, racial stereotyping, and double standards. Microinvalidations were defined as denying the existence of racism, justifying racism, cultural appropriation, and racial slurs. Evaded racism was defined as avoiding the difficult conversation about racism, ignoring racism, avoiding the consequences for racism, and lack of antiracist education. "Antiracist" racism was defined as performative activism, white saviorism, and tokenization.

The study found that students were responsible for 53% of the incidents of racism, staff or faculty caused 33.3%, and the institutions caused 13.6%. (Li, 289) The narratives related to students were 18.5% microassaults, 54.2% microinsults, 20% microinvalidations, and 7.1% "anti-racist" racism narratives. The narratives related to teachers had no microassaults but were 54.5% microinsults, 13.6% microinvalidations, 22.7% evaded racism narratives, and 9.1% anti-

racist" racism narratives. The narratives related to institutions were 33.3% evaded racism and 66.6% "anti-racist" racism narratives. Racism against BIPOC students deprives them of community and social acceptance. Microinsults are the most common category of student racism. (294) The key takeaways from studies are not just learning the individual categories of racism, but how they interact with each other.

Racism in social media brings about positive effects on our society by invigorating protests for social justice. Social media serves as a forum where users can emphasize and interact with social movements. (Ince, et al.) The study from *Ethnic & Racial Studies* showed that, of the 66,159 total tweets with the hashtag #blacklivesmatter, 373 were posted before Michael Brown's shooting, 19,942 were posted after the shooting, and 45,844 were posted after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson. (Ince, et al.) Some of the ten most common hashtags appearing with #BlackLivesMatter in all of 2014 were #fergusonoctober, #justiceformikebrown, #shutitdown, and #blackoutblackfriday. The period from Michael Brown being killed to Darren Wilson's non-indictment made social media users erupt with calls to action. Although the BLM movement was evident in social media before this killing, the study shows how, as the injustice continued, more users began protesting for Black lives. Social media is a power that society has today because it allows people to come together when there is a social injustice such as racism, and their support for the BLM movement quickly spreads and influences other users around the world to voice their support. Without the instant messaging and posting that social media offers, perhaps the reinvigoration of the BLM movement would not have happened as quickly or have garnered support from as many people.

No matter how many protests for social justice there are, true justice is yet to come. Although many viral videos have evidence of racial violence and garner support from a huge portion of

society, there is often little justice that comes of them. Along with the situations of Potter and Mofus, a disturbing instance of injustice was in 1991 when four police officers were charged with assaulting Rodney King, a Black man, in Los Angeles with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force. (History.com Editors) They brutally beat him with their batons and kicked him repeatedly, even after he became incapable of resisting. A witness filmed the attack and released it to the press, causing national outrage. Despite the uproar in support of King, the officers were found not guilty on all counts. Even today, with the use of hashtags and videos in support of oppressed races, the lack of justice is almost the same as it was in 1991.

Although racism in social media has negative effects on society because it harms students of color, causes divides between protestors and counter-protestors, makes it easier for racists to target people around the world, and allows users to anonymously send racist messages, racism in social media also has positive effects on society because having discussions about sensitive topics like racism through memes erases uneasiness, victims of racial abuse have a space to share their experiences, and racism in social media is a catalyst for social change.

The systems in place that keep Black people at a disadvantage to white people are still in place today. The more horrifying aspect is that this racism is not obvious. Therefore, the government and other people in authority get away with racism simply because they can. Since slavery and other obvious forms of racism are illegal, white supremacists had to find other ways to uphold their ideology. As a result, more Black people are arrested for drugs, on death row, and killed by police.

The key to solving racial abuse on social media is not increasing government regulation or censorship. (Ayers) Although government regulation would create speech policies that censor racially offensive speech, it would also lead to over-censorship of content that supports racial

differences. Social media platforms are obligated to create their own speech policies that ban hate speech and racism because they have the expertise needed to address these issues. Americans value freedom of speech. Over-censorship is a threat and could prevent users from posting meaningful, educational information about racial issues. Social media platforms already have incentives to create speech policies. Social media platforms have the expertise and the desire to address racism.

It is easy to believe that racism is not as prevalent in society because we are not experiencing it personally. People of color face microaggressions that white people around them may not even notice. For example, if a Black person is called "well-spoken," a white person around them could think that that was a compliment. However, it is a microaggression that will affect the person emotionally because it implies that Black people always use slang and improper English. Although seeing and reading about racism in social media is harmful, upsetting, and scary, it has brought progress in our society that would not have happened without the existence of social media to emphasize these issues. Without social media, not as many people would have known about George Floyd or tried to get justice for him. Not as many people of color would be able to have their voices heard and supported by complete strangers all around the world, who can share that they have experienced the same thing. Social media shows us that racism *is* prevalent and we must be exposed to it, because that is the only way to learn about issues we don't see or experience first-hand.

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