Can you help stop online racism?

Authors:
Noelle M. Hurd, Sophie Trawalter,
Alexander Jakubow and others
Associate Editor:
Sara Amos and Alexandra Appleton

Abstract

Imagine you read a comment on a school social media site that made a negative statement about your race. How would that make you feel? Angry? Frustrated? Now imagine that nobody stood up to the person that made the comment. Would that make you feel worse? You might think other people agree with them, or you may feel disconnected from the school. Unfortunately, this is how many Black students feel because of the online racism they face today.

We wanted to find out more about the impacts of online racism. We also wanted to discover what makes students more likely to stand up to online racism, and if this helps to reduce its negative impact. Our study showed that online racism negatively affects how Black students feel. But when they see White students standing up to the post, they feel better. We found that White students are more likely to stand up to online racism if they understand how it impacts Black students, and if they know what to say.

Introduction

Over the past 25 years, the number of Black students dropping out of college has increased. This is partly because of the online racism they face while studying. This can make students feel unwelcome and lose focus on their work.

Everybody can see racist comments posted on social media, but it is rare for someone to stand up to them. Other studies have looked at what Black students can do to protect themselves from these posts. We think that an equally important approach is to change online behaviour. People are less likely to express their racist views when others express disagreement. It also lets Black students know that these views are not held by most students.

In this study we wanted to answer three main questions:

1. How often are racist comments posted online?

2. Do racist posts negatively affect Black students? Is some of the harm reduced when White students stand up to the posts?

3. Can we encourage White students to challenge posts through an online intervention?

Impacts of online racism on Black students
Source: Inspired by Education Week.

Methods

Our study focused on a mid-sized public university in the Southeastern U.S. First, we used a computer program to collect all comments from the online student newspaper and school Facebook pages. We **filtered** and **categorized** the results into different types of racism.

We then designed **focus groups** to give Black and White students the chance to talk about their experiences with online racism. Afterwards, we **analyzed** their responses to look for trends within their experiences.

Finally, we designed an online intervention based on our results. We split White students into three groups:

→ **Partial intervention**
Students read an article about online racism. The article highlighted the positive **impacts** felt by Black students when White students challenged online racism.

→ **Full intervention**
Students read the same article. They were also given more instruction and examples of what to say when standing up to racist posts online.

→ **Control group**
Students were not given any reading material.

Afterwards, we asked everybody about their views on standing up to online racism. All students also had the chance to respond to an online racist comment.

Results

Approximately 4% of Facebook posts and 44% of posts to the online student newspaper were explicitly racist or prejudiced against marginalized groups. Participants across all of the focus groups said that they had seen racist comments online.

Black students felt frustrated, unwelcome, isolated, and overwhelmed when they saw online racism. They also reported feeling distracted and unable to focus on their studies. Black students across the focus groups said it was rare to see someone stand up to a racist post. However, they felt relieved and part of the community when it did happen.

Attitudes towards standing up to racist posts significantly improved after both interventions (Figure 1). White students were significantly more likely to stand up to a racist comment and submit a response after the full intervention.

- Partial intervention: 19% submitted a response
- Full intervention: 30% of students submitted a response
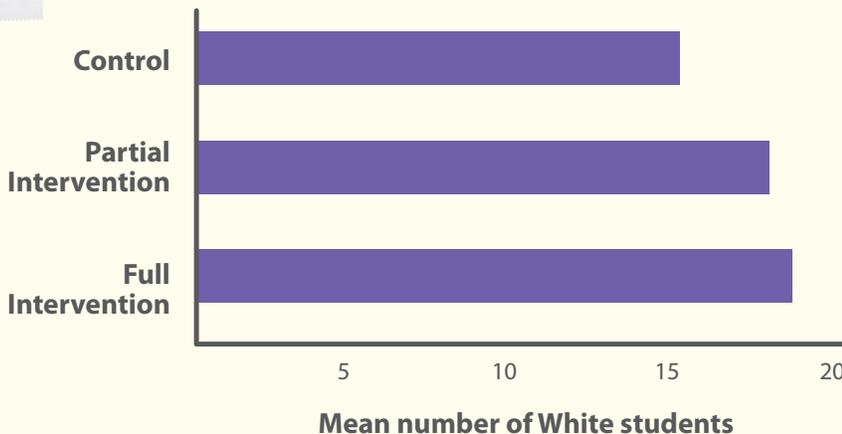- Control group: 13% submitted a response

Figure 1:
Understanding of the need to stand up to online racism.

What does the graph show us about the effectiveness of the intervention?

Mean number of White students

Discussion

The data from the focus groups suggested that Black students feel less isolated after seeing White people stand up to online racism. Most White students admitted that they do not stand up to online racist posts. This is often because they were unsure of what to say and worried about saying the wrong thing.

Through the online interventions, we were able to increase the likelihood of White students standing up to online racism. Understanding how online racism impacts Black students and knowing the right way to respond is vital. It increased the likelihood of students responding to racist comments online by 130%.

Conclusion

Helping to stop racism is a shared responsibility. People are more likely to express their racist views if they think others support them. You should always report online racism when you see it. If you feel comfortable, you can also use your voice to stand up against it. This helps stop racism spreading, but also shows Black students that these views are not supported by the majority. By making the brave decision to stand up to racism, you are helping to create an inclusive online environment where everyone can thrive.

Tips on How to Stand Up to Online Racism:
Research shows that briefly expressing disagreement and your own emotional reaction or personal values is enough. Don't personally attack the individual. Here are examples of effective responses:
"I think what you said could be harmful to other students. I want my school to be a place where everyone feels welcome."
"I'm disappointed that you would say something that is racially offensive."
"I am upset by what you said. I think it is important that all people are treated fairly."
"Your comments are racially insensitive. I completely disagree with you."

Glossary of Key Terms

Analyze – Examine in detail.

Categorize – Put things into groups with the same features.

Filter – Remove unwanted data.

Focus group – A group of people brought together to discuss a particular subject.

Impact – (Have) a strong effect on someone or something.

Online intervention – An online experiment that is designed to change the way people think about a subject.

Racism – A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on physical properties such as skin color and hair texture. This "system" unfairly disadvantages some individuals and groups, and it damages their health and mental health.

Check your understanding

1 What words did Black students use to describe how online racism made them feel?

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2 This article focuses on racism toward Black students. What other groups of people might be discriminated against online?

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3 Based on the online interventions, what do you think your school could do to help tackle online racism?

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4 What factors might make you unwilling or reluctant to stand up to an online racist comment?

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5 What would you do if a friend posted something that you thought was racist?

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