

Unmasking Racism: Students of Color and Expressions of Racism in Online Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Expressions of racism in the post-Civil Rights Era are expected to be more covert than overt and more unconscious than conscious. But some internet-based communication takes place in technological contexts that are not bound by the same norms as face-to-face interactions, and can structure more explicit presentations of racist ideologies. I explore the changing expressions of racism in online spaces and their effects on students of color using in-depth interviews with 27 undergraduate students of color and their reactions to and interpretations of an online, anonymous student forum. I argue that covert racism is unmasked in online environments, and that exposure to unmasked racial ideologies can challenge students' racial worldviews, adaptive coping responses to racism, relationships to White students and institutions, and dominant racial narratives.

KEYWORDS: race; racism; higher education; social media; technology.

Over the past half-century, survey results have demonstrated significant changes in racial attitudes. For example, approval for interracial marriages increased from 5 percent in the mid-1950s to almost 90 percent in 2015, and support for integrated schools increased from 50 percent in the mid-1950s to 95 percent in the mid-1990s (Krysan and Moberg 2016). These declines in self-reported racial prejudice, however, are not paralleled by declines in the manifestations of subtle racial bias (Dovidio and Gaertner 2000). Neither does the imperceptibility of racism on an interpersonal level suggest that it has been eliminated on an institutional level. For example, while overt prejudice has waned in the post-Civil Rights Era, the number of people of color behind bars has increased as communities of color have been disproportionately targeted by the purportedly color-blind war on drugs (Alexander 2012).

Whereas racism during the Jim Crow Era was characterized by social distance, beliefs of biological inferiority, and overt discrimination, post-Civil Rights Era racist ideologies and institutions are understood to be more subtle (Sears and Henry 2003). There are a number of theoretical and empirical traditions that examine this shift from overt to more covert presentations of racism, including aversive racism (Dovidio, Glick, and Rudman 2005), color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva 2017), laissez-faire racism (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997), two-faced racism (Picca and Feagin 2007), and research on

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racial microaggressions (Pierce 1995; Sue 2010). These frameworks analyze racism that is masked behind seemingly race-neutral language, practices, and cognitive processes in order to identify underlying systems of racial inequality, racist ideologies, and bias.

While more nuanced, covert racial discourse has served as the empirical foundation for the above theories of racism, recent trends in social media and internet-based racial discourse reveal explicit expressions of racism to be more common in some online environments. Far from the subtle language and silences that characterize many face-to-face racial interactions, for example, each day there are thousands of posts to Twitter that use racial slurs in a derogatory manner (Bartlett et al. 2014). Furthermore, the resurgence of White nationalism through a rebranding as the Alt-Right (Ganim, Welch, and Meyersohn 2017) has largely taken place in online spaces (Morgan 2016), and the 45th president of the United States has been known to follow and repost comments by a number of online social media users with White supremacist ties (Kharakh and Primack 2016).

In this paper I explore the characteristics of internet-based communication that can structure more explicit expressions of racist ideologies and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of internet-based changes in racial messaging by pursuing these questions: How is online racial discourse distinct from in-person discourse, and what does this distinctive style of racial messaging teach us about contemporary racial ideologies? How do people of color experience, interpret, and respond to more explicit expressions of racist ideologies in online spaces? To answer these, I draw on in-depth interviews with undergraduate students of color on a college campus that was home to an online, anonymous student forum where racial messages were common. I use examples from the anonymous website to demonstrate the distinct style of racial discourse students were exposed to, and I rely on interviews to analyze students' perceptions of this discourse and its relationship to their racial realities on campus.

I argue that racism – which has long been masked by color-blind norms, subtle offensive interactions, unconscious bias, and covertly embedded in institutions – is being *unmasked* through online racial discourse. Online environments characterized by increased perceived anonymity, less moderation, and fewer perceived social consequences than in face-to-face interactions can structure a more explicit style of racial discourse as users are disconnected from the societal norms that make overt racism taboo in many mainstream spaces. As a result, students of color are confronted with what they perceive to be a resurgence of old-fashioned racist ideologies. This exposure to unmasked racial discourse challenges student racial worldviews, relationships, adaptive coping responses to racism, and dominant racial narratives. These findings, from one American institution of higher education, can provide insight into the ways technology can shift racial discourse in other contexts.

BACKGROUND

Masked Racism

Prejudice is defined in the psychology literature as an individual-level attitude that reflects an overall evaluation of a group (Dovidio et al. 2005). The aversive racism framework suggests that well-meaning individuals can harbor unconscious or implicit prejudiced attitudes towards people of color that manifest themselves in subtle biased interactions and actions (Dovidio and Gaertner 2000). In one example of this type of research, Correll and colleagues (2002) asked participants to play a computer game called *The Officer's Dilemma* that showed either White or Black individuals holding either guns or other nonthreatening objects. Participants were tasked with making the decision whether or not to fire on suspects based on whether they were armed. Not only did participants shoot Black characters with guns more quickly than they shot White characters holding guns, they decided not to shoot unarmed Whites faster than they decided not to shoot unarmed Blacks. This type of experimental research on implicit prejudice illuminates the cognitive processes that precede discrimination and has deep implications for the way race is experienced, even in the absence of explicit racial bias.

Sociological explanations of the shift in racial attitudes tend to focus less on individual attitudes and more on structure, or the relationship between racial attitudes and racial inequality. For example, [Bonilla-Silva's \(2015a\)](#) conception of prejudice is as a collective attribute, not an individual disposition, because it is an "ideological expression of Whites' dominance (77)." [Bonilla-Silva \(2015b\)](#) suggests that the color-blind racist ideology is the dominant racial ideology in the United States and is indicative of the new racism, a racial order that maintains White dominance without using explicit racist language or interpersonal hostility. As color-blind Whites frame issues of racial inequality in individual terms, rather than racial terms, they ignore and sustain unequal systems while purporting to not see race ([Bonilla-Silva 2017](#)). Because the function of racist ideologies is to maintain White dominance, they need not include hate or hostility. Color-blind stories, frames, and styles of engaging with race produce racial inequality independent of individual-level racial attitudes.

In a similar vein, [Bobo and colleagues \(1997\)](#) suggest that under Jim Crow, society needed explicit racist ideologies to justify the harsh treatment of Blacks. But in the post-industrial economy, White privilege is maintained with a much gentler racist framework. Rather than seeking to hurt people of color, laissez-faire racists simply refrain from helping them. As an example of this, [Bobo and colleagues \(1997\)](#) present survey results indicating that between 1972–1986, support for integrated schooling rose from 84 percent to 93 percent, while support for government desegregation efforts dropped from 35 percent to 26 percent. Laissez-faire racism is exemplified in this support for equality in principle, but not in practice. The racial order is maintained without overt racism, and racial inequality is explained away as being based on talent and effort ([Bobo 2017](#)).

[Picca and Feagin's \(2007\)](#) two-faced racism theory suggests that the egalitarian attitudes Whites display in public settings, termed the "front-stage," may not be consistent with their private racial attitudes, shared only in protected settings, or the backstage. Social norms that frown upon open discrimination in public spaces encourage presentations of egalitarian racial views in many social contexts. This distinction between "front-stage" and backstage racial performances, therefore, would suggest that changes in post-Civil Rights Movement racial rhetoric may be front-stage performances that do not correspond with privately-held beliefs and only masquerade as actual changes in racial attitudes.

One of the primary ways the new racism manifests itself interpersonally is through racial microaggressions, defined as commonplace racial slights or insults ([Sue and Constantine 2007](#)). [Sue's \(2010\)](#) typology of racial microaggressions includes unconscious and demeaning microinsults or microinvalidations that negate the lived realities of people of color, or more conscious microassaults, which can include language, behaviors, or interactions meant to be hurtful. On college campuses, research finds that students of color worry that their peers would think them too sensitive if they respond critically to racial slights, and therefore hesitate to speak out against the microaggressions they experience ([Yosso et al. 2009](#)).

There are several ways that expressions of racist ideologies in some online spaces depart from our expectations of post-Civil Rights Era racial discourse. For example, in two-faced racism theory, racial presentations in public settings are distinct from presentations in private interactions. The internet, however, represents a hybrid social space that can be at once public and private ([Daniels 2013](#)). Similarly, [Sue \(2010\)](#) writes that because overt racial microassaults are frowned upon in public spaces, they are most likely when there is some degree of anonymity, when perpetrators know they can get away with the assaults, and when individuals lose control and share sentiments they typically keep private. Each of these conditions can be met in some online environments, and in the next section I explore the features of internet-based communication that structure the unmasking of racist ideologies.

Racism in Online Spaces

More than just an information highway, the internet offers over four billion users the chances to interact across social and geographic boundaries through a variety of mediums ([World Internet 2018](#)).

While some face-to-face settings are characterized by a general unwillingness to discuss race (Pollock 2004), there are over two million race-related posts on Twitter each day, 60 percent of which are related to race-related public events (Anderson and Hitlin 2016). Twitter is just one of a variety of technological contexts that are distinct from the face-to-face environments and which structure unique styles of racial messaging. There are several characteristics of internet-based communication that can influence racial discourse, as online interactions have increased potential for anonymity, are often text-based, less moderated, are driven by user-generated content, and have fewer perceived social consequences.

Anonymity in online communication can refer to both technical anonymity, where there is no identifying information in interactions or posts, and social anonymity, which refers to situations when users perceive anonymity but in actuality can be identified through user names, email addresses, or even real names on social networking sites (Christopherson 2007). Anonymity is one way that individuals can begin to feel as if their actions have no real world consequences, since they can express taboo racial ideas without public social sanctions (Christopherson 2007). Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) use the term “online disinhibition” effect to explain the way online communication can become more aggressive and hostile when users perceive increased freedom from societal standards.

Even in contexts where physical cues like skin color or phenotype are inaccessible to users due to online anonymity or text-based communication, research has pointed to the activation of race through other means. For example, a study of an online special interest community reported that White and Black users got along perfectly, until users who were people of color happened to mention their race (West and Thakore 2013). After months of online group interactions without incident, users who self-identified as people of color were excluded from group discussions and activities. Similarly, another study found that when a popular online video game gave players the option of playing with Black avatars, users of Black avatars reported negative gameplay experiences based around user responses to their avatars of color (Kafai, Cook, and Fields 2010).

The internet also encourages a user-generated, participatory culture, which is characterized by low barriers to expression and engagement (Daniels 2009). While there are some positive implications for these new-knowledge generating and dissemination processes, exemplified by user-driven websites like Wikipedia, the internet also creates opportunity for forming non-traditional special interest groups across geographic boundaries. For example, research has explored the proliferation of online racist hate sites (Glaser, Dixit, and Green 2002; Leets 2001), which can cloak and disguise themselves as mainstream websites in order to spread their message of hate to unsuspecting or accidental visitors (Daniels 2009). On mainstream news sites, racist and offensive comments have become so pervasive that many news sites have taken steps to either prevent anonymous commenting, or to attempt to put other moderating strategies in place, such as both human and robot monitoring of content (Hughey and Daniels 2013).

In another study Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) explored the relationship between private, racist internet searches and political behavior by mapping google searches for the n-word by state. Results showed that after controlling for education levels, church attendance, and gun ownership, the numbers of racist google searches in a state predicted whether Obama, but not other Democratic candidates, would do worse in the 2012 election than John Kerry did during the 2008 election in that state. Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) suggests that google searches may be a window into the human psyche which is capable of revealing the types of sentiments that people may feel uncomfortable revealing in interviews or surveys.

While online data sources can offer unique insights into human behavior, they may also be limited in their ability to tell us about real-world experiences and meaning-making processes. For example, in the Stephens-Davidowitz (2017) study, we know the frequency of these searches and their effects on aggregate voting behaviors, but do not know the racial identities of those behind the searches, the contexts in which they were made, or the potentially complex motivations behind them.

These potential data limitations can be addressed in studies that explore the relationship between online and in-person discourses, behaviors, outcomes, or phenomena. For example, Coffey and Woolworth (2004) investigated responses to a string of violent incidents in a small town, including both a town hall meeting, and an online discussion board. Residents who attended the town hall meeting were peaceful, and race was not discussed in relation to the crimes. In an online discussion board started in response to the incidents, however, not only were Black and Hispanic youth blamed for the violent crimes, but posters also used racist language and advocated for both violence and vigilante justice against adolescents of color. In-person, residents did not discuss these violent incidents in racial terms, but on the internet, race was front and center.

Another study that explores the impact of online behavior on real world outcomes is a survey of 264 high school students, which found that about three-fourths of Black students witnessed discrimination online, and about a third of Black students reported discrimination – defined as racist messages, pictures, videos, or comments – directed at them personally (Tynes et al. 2008). Exposure to both targeted and vicarious discrimination was shown to be related to depression and anxiety, but students with higher self-esteem and racial identity were less affected (Tynes et al. 2012).

There is a dearth of research on the ways people of color perceive racism in online spaces. In Lowery's (2017) book on the Black Lives movement, activist Netta Elzie talks about not recognizing the connection between racism on the internet and the real world until she saw racist online comments discussing the death of one of her friends. And in an exploratory study of the ways 15 undergraduate students (including 13 students of color) experienced and interpreted online racial messages, experiences with anti-Black hostility in an anonymous online setting led some students to wonder whether students of color were in danger of actual physical harm on campus (Gin et al. 2017). For students of color, racialized experiences in online spaces may be directly tied to the ways they experience racial climates on campus.

In this study I build on these works to address this gap using examples from a campus-based website to explore the technological mechanisms that can enable unique styles of racial discourse in online spaces, and in-depth interviews to understand the ways it affects the perceptions and life experiences of students of color.

METHODS

In the spring of 2013, a private, selective Midwestern University (hereafter Mid-U) was rocked by the appearance of a controversial Facebook page entitled, "Politically Incorrect Mid-U Confessions," hereafter PIMC. The page was purportedly designed to give Mid-U students an outlet through which they could anonymously share their honest opinions about race, religion, gender, sexuality, and any number of other topics that they may have felt uncomfortable discussing in person. In practice, however, the site became a safe haven for hate speech.

I chose Mid-U as a research site because the PIMC offered a unique opportunity to not only study online racial discourse – how technology might shape the ways racism is expressed – but also to study how these online racial messages were interpreted and experienced by students of color. Most anonymous racist comments on the internet are untraceable; they might be written by anyone and about anyone. The PIMC, however, is distinct because it was endemic to the Mid-U community. The racial messaging on the site, therefore, had a more direct and measurable impact on students of color than does less-targeted anonymous racial discourse in other online contexts. I use examples from the PIMC page to provide context for and confirm findings from in-depth interviews. There are both limitations and opportunities associated with doing research on a college campus. In this case, the benefits of doing research at Mid-U far outweigh the drawbacks of sampling from a highly educated and relatively privileged population.

Brock, Kvasny, and Hale's (2010) critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) is an analytical tool rooted in critical race theory that puts an emphasis on the technological context of racial

discourse in internet spaces in order to understand how the digital ecology facilitates racial meanings in online interactions. I use this framework as I present examples from the PIMC, highlighting the page's structure and the ways it provided opportunities for certain types of racial messaging, while constraining other types of online messages and meaning making.

For example, the technological context of the PIMC page structured a safe space for students at Mid-U to anonymously post explicitly racist language without needing to worry about how they would be perceived by their peers. Anonymity can complicate research design because there is no way to determine the social identities of those behind anonymous comments, or to quantify the prevalence of the sentiments expressed therein.

The structure and content of the PIMC page, however, provide more clues about some group identities of the anonymous posters than do anonymous online comments in many other technological contexts. In order to submit to use the page, users had to be connected to Mid-U. Users were instructed to submit "Mid-U related" content to the page moderators, ensuring that while comments were made anonymous, they originated from a specific imagined and geographic educational community. Furthermore, as many PIMC comments made specific references to settings, groups, and individuals at Mid-U, it was clear that the users behind the racist comments were members of the University community.

Over a period of 18 months, nearly 900 comments were posted to the PIMC page. The structure of the site allows only a certain number of posts be viewed at one time; once 40 new posts have been added to the site, the previous 40 posts are no longer accessible. I utilize a convenience sample of 91 comments that were posted to the page and available for download on the days I visited the site. While it is unclear whether this 10 percent sample of comments is representative of all comments published to the PIMC, these comments provide concrete examples of the distinct style of racial messaging on the page and are consistent with the ways students of color described the page in interviews. In this way, the PIMC page serves in a complementary role, corroborating interview findings (Barbour 2001).

I focus my analysis around the way students of color understood and responded to the site. The particulars of who was behind the anonymous posting matter less than the ways the post was perceived and the ways this online racial discursive project influenced on-campus racial discourse and interracial interactions. My centering of the perspectives of students of color is in line with the critical race tradition in education (Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007).

I conducted 38 in-depth interviews with students of color at Mid-U, including 23 women, 15 men, five of whom self-identified as Latino, three as Afro-Latino or mixed with Black and Latino, 19 as Black or African American, five as multiracial or mixed with Black and White, five as Asian, and one as Indian. These in-depth interviews were guided by an original open-ended survey instrument influenced by Hurtado and Carter's (1997) framework for understanding institutional climate and Tynes, Rose, and Williams' (2010) online victimization scale. Questions were asked about student background and racial identity, involvement at Mid-U, perceptions of the racial climate, perceived discrimination on campus and online, and experiences with online racial discourse, including but not limited to the PIMC. Using Small's (2009) sequential interviewing strategy, questions were modified throughout the study as what I learned from each participant influenced subsequent interviews.

I limit the sample in this paper to the 27 interviews that engage with the PIMC. Each of these participants was aware of the page and articulated a range of internal and external responses to the site. The consistency, depth, and breadth of these student responses to the PIMC constituted what Small (2009) calls saturation, or the point at which each case no longer offers new information and the researcher need not continue to ask about a particular topic. Furthermore, while participants were asked a broad set of questions about their college-based race-related experiences, data extracts used in this paper focus specifically on how students experienced and responded to the PIMC.

I recruited participants by attending cultural organizations and minority student leadership group meetings where I introduced the study and invited interested students to sign up for interview times.

The research calls cultural organizations on college campuses counterspaces, or settings where students of color can celebrate their racial/ethnic backgrounds (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). It is possible that my social position as a relatively young Black man (at the time of the study, I was a graduate student in my late 20s) contributed to both the way I was welcomed in these counterspaces, as well as the high level of comfort students seemed to feel in interviews as they shared their experiences with racialized interactions on campus and online, which were sometimes rather traumatic. While these settings attract students interested in learning about or discussing race, I found considerable variance in student backgrounds and racial identity development.

I wrote memos after each interview and while coding interviews in order to engage in a continuous interaction between data and theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The first round of thematic coding and memos focused on highlighting themes and patterns within and between participants. The second round of coding, focused coding, looked for code saturation and disconfirming information in order to test emerging theories. The final round of coding, theoretical coding, built on emergent concepts to clarify relationships between codes, compare findings with existing theories, and generate new theory. All interviews were transcribed and analyzed in the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. I present data extracts with minimal editing to preserve students' unique voices, except when I change minor details in order to protect subjects' identities.

FINDINGS

Politically Incorrect Mid-U Confessions

On the front page of the Confessions Page is a picture of a construction-style sign reading:

WARNING: POLITICALLY INCORRECT AREA: ALL P.C. PERSONNEL ENTERING THESE PREMISES WILL ENCOUNTER GRAVELY OFFENSIVE BEHAVIOR AND OPINIONS: RAMPANT INSENSITIVITY AUTHORIZED.

Political correctness refers to a careful use of language that avoids being offensive, and is often framed as being overly cautious or unnecessary (Robbins 2016). On college campuses, students with conservative backgrounds sometimes feel that their views are censored by the need to be politically correct (PC) (Carlisle 2016). In contrast, the self-proclaimed anti-PC crowd, which in recent years has been characterized by Trump and the so-called Alt-Right, prides itself on not shying away from discussions or language that might be deemed offensive around race, gender, religion, or sexuality (Kilgore 2016).

Below the sign were instructions for anonymous posters saying:

Share your Mid-U related, politically incorrect thoughts and feelings. We'll say them for you, so you don't have to!

Through a submission link on the PIMC page Facebook users could send site moderators their comments, which were then anonymously posted to the page. Posts were numbered so that users could reference previous posts in their comments. And while original posts to the site were anonymous, if Facebook users wanted to reply directly to a comment their profile names would be visible.

The structure of the PIMC site represents an intentional utilization of some of the characteristics that make online communication distinct. By making the comments anonymous, moderators created an online environment where students could engage in sensitive discussions without risking their reputations on campus. As illustrated by the following post to PIMC, this feature was important for some users:

I think it's a positive thing that this offers a forum for people to voice some of their most controversial thoughts without fear of character assassination. There are many lived realities on the

surface of this planet. Using the type of safe, institutional language and rhetoric favored by the Provost or the US State Department does not always do justice to these realities. Occasionally, even the language and examples which we feel comfortable publishing under our own names do not suffice to articulate a truth.

In referencing the “safe, institutional language” used at Mid-U and by the government, the poster seems to be referring to the type of PC language favored by the new racism, which departs from the openly discriminatory state-sponsored rhetoric and policies during the Jim Crow Era. The poster suggests that this language, which can protect marginalized groups from offensive or alienating language, precludes honest and robust discourse around controversial topics such as race. To some degree, this is true, as color-blind language or apprehensiveness around discussing race can prevent the naming of racism entrenched in institutions or everyday interactions.

But there is a contradiction here. The poster resents the need to use safe language on campus to make others feel comfortable, but celebrates the increased safety the PIMC provides for students who want to post offensive content. The online environment of the PIMC, then, privileges and creates a safe space for a subset of students who are opposed to the existence of safe spaces for those with marginalized identities on campus. Additionally, the PIMC operates in a hybrid space that functions as both front-stage and backstage; the poster can publicly share the type of thoughts typically reserved for backstage interactions, without facing the consequences that are associated with those types of thoughts being shared on the front-stage. Another user writes:

I hate when people argue against hurtful speech without actually knowing why. People presuppose that racism is bad and political correctness is good without even challenging their own assumptions. Furthermore, I hate how people are criticized for defending this page and defending freedom of speech.

Here the poster suggests that racist ideas can be legitimate social positions taken in debate. This post calls into question the idea that PIMC was created to foster dialogue. Instead, for this poster, the PIMC page represents a protected social space where taboo racist ideologies can be communicated. Whereas the poster’s racial performances on campus (presumably) adhere to color-blind norms, the PIMC structures a context that allows the poster to be open with more overt racist ideology.

Not all of the posts on the PIMC were race-related or offensive. Some posts were innocuous or personal, such as student crushes, confessions about mental health, or academic struggles. But when I asked students of color about the PIMC page, it was universally remembered as a social space dominated by racist, sexist, and homophobic content. The following posts taken from the Confessions Page illustrate the tone of racial messaging that was frequently seen on the site:

Every time I see a Black person with an iPhone, I reach into my pocket to make sure it isn’t mine he’s holding.

As if we need any more proof that Asians can’t drive whether it’s a car or an airplane. Maybe those pilots should turn to another profession, like cooking. After all, they really outdid themselves with that Korean barbeque à la Boeing today.¹

I’m predicting that the top three items sold at the upcoming Whole Foods store in [a Black neighborhood near campus] will be organic fried chicken, organic watermelon, and organic

1 This quote refers to the tragic death of two Chinese students on a plane which crashed while flying from South Korea to San Francisco, an event that was in the news shortly before the comment was published.

grape drink to wash it all down. The real question is, will they accept [welfare] cards and food stamps?

These posts appear to be attempts at irony or humor. Research finds that White male college students make racial jokes often, but are careful to avoid making these jokes in front of students of color (Cabrerá 2014). The PIMC page thus exposes students of color to the types of racial jokes, comments, and stereotypes that are typically reserved for backstage interactions. This type of overt racism is atypical for Mid-U. While there was variance in the degree to which students in this sample perceived subtle forms of racism on campus, all students in the sample reported that Mid-U was characterized by surface-level PC language around issues of race.

This is consistent with the literature – overtly racist and hostile language is much more common in online anonymous spaces (Daniels 2013) – but what distinguishes the PIMC page from the types of racial messaging that typify some anonymous online spaces is its connection to the Mid-U community. Anonymous posts are typically experienced vicariously, but the racist comments on the PIMC were more direct. Here another post demonstrates the way these messages were perceived to be made by and about Mid-U students:

Seriously WTF is up with the onslaught of Black people invading Mid-U? My first year, there were barely any on campus, and now they're infiltrating the [library] too (of all places). Now, I'm not usually racist but they really need to stop being so fucking LOUD. Seriously, if I wanted to be surrounded by a cacophony of vernacular I would've taken the [train] down to [a Black neighborhood].

“Onslaught,” “invading,” and “infiltrating”—this language signifies that Black students are perceived to be part of an unwelcome group of outsiders whose presence is having a forced, negative impact on the Mid-U community. Mid-U is near urban, low-income African American communities and students receive racially coded formal and informal messages around safety on campus that symbolically separate the safe campus space from its surrounding community, which is depicted as violent and dangerous (Márquez 2012). This post suggests that Black students are perceived to have more in common with the dangerous other that represents Mid-U's surrounding communities than with, presumably, White Mid-U students. And despite the poster's insistence that s/he is not “usually racist,” this post appears to reveal an anti-Black sentiment that the poster has kept secret while engaging in surface level-PC interactions on campus. In part stimulated by perceived increases in diversity and threat, this overt admission is enabled by the PIMC, a safe context for hidden racist sentiments to be shared with impunity.

Another important point here is that this post appears to be written by a Mid-U student who is referencing a specific interaction with students of color on campus. I suggest that this type of targeting makes the post more hurtful than both the random, racist posts that appear often in various online spaces and the more general Mid-U themed posts on the PIMC. This surveillance of Black students using the library, which is posited to be a White space, may not only be hurtful, but also influence Black students' behavior as they decide which spaces on campus they feel comfortable utilizing for social or academic purposes. Some Black students might avoid the library as a result, cutting them off from academic resources, while others may waste valuable energy looking over their shoulders while in the library space. Another post also speaks directly to the marginal social positioning of students of color at Mid-U:

It's odd to note that minorities made up a higher percentage of students in the Intro Chem section in comparison to the General and Honors sections.

By prefacing the statement with, “it’s odd,” the poster frames this comment as a legitimate question that is guided by curiosity and observation. The post then goes on to suggest students of color are concentrated in low-level classes, implicitly questioning whether students of color are smart enough to handle the academic rigor at Mid-U. Research on the racial climate at the University of California, Berkeley, found that students of color are bothered by narratives that suggest they are less prepared for college than their White peers, and as a result – in order to avoid fulfilling a stereotype – may be less likely to seek help (Duster 1991). Both of these posts illustrate the mechanisms through which online discourse can have tangible negative effects on the way students of color perform academically.

Narratives couched in notions of individual deservingness – such as whether students of color at Mid-U are smart enough to have earned their admission – are typically experienced as subtle forms of discrimination. In this example, however, the line between subtle and explicit racism is blurred. It appears that subtle racism, like the above post that questions the racial distributions in advanced classes, forfeits some of its subtlety when posted in the context of the PIMC. Comments and posts that use the logics or discursive strategies of subtle racist ideologies may be interpreted differently within the context of internet-based spaces designed to protect open racism. In this way, not only did the PIMC unmask privately-held explicit racism, but it also had the unintended effect of unmasking subtle racist ideologies.

Student Responses

The PIMC represented a distinct shift in racial discourse on campus. In order to demonstrate the varied pathways through which the unmasking of race challenged racial understandings, performances, and discourse at Mid-U I have organized student responses to the PIMC into four non-mutually exclusive categories, including: 1) challenges to worldview for students who felt the racial messages on the PIMC page were inconsistent with their understanding of racism on campus; 2) challenges to adaptive strategies for coping with racism; 3) challenges to relationships with individuals and institutions; and 4) challenges to dominant racial narratives, as some students adopted the PIMC as evidence of the continuing prevalence of racism on campus and in the United States. In coding primary responses to the PIMC page, eight students were in the *challenge to worldview* group, four students were in the *challenge to coping* responses group, six students were in the *challenge to relationships* group, and nine students were in the *challenge to dominant narrative* group.

Challenging Worldview

Chris is a second year Latino man in the sciences who is involved in several academic student organizations. Because Chris did not perceive race to be a major problem on campus, the PIMC page called some of his assumptions into question:

Before the PIMC, like I said there were a few incidents that I mentioned earlier, but I think the overall tone wasn’t too bad. Like I had, you know, good friends, I had good spaces, so it didn’t seem that real . . . So then when the PIMC page came up, I just realized there are people who hold these things. Maybe they don’t say them directly to people, or maybe they don’t take action.

The “few incidents” Chris references here were highly publicized race-related incidents involving fraternities, racial epithets, and racially themed parties. While Chris did perceive these events to be racist, he saw them as being isolated events that were not indicative of the embeddedness of racism at Mid-U. His evaluation of the campus racial climate was less affected by these events, and more driven by his own positive interpersonal experiences.

In contrast, anonymous posts on the PIMC led Chris to believe that the race problem was more widespread. The unmasked online racial discourse on the PIMC introduced the possibility that the racial harmony on campus might be surface level, and that his peers might hold negative racial attitudes in secret.

Chuck is a third-year Latino man involved in several cultural organizations and is a member of a majority-White fraternity. He has a small group of racially diverse friends and, like Chris, talked about having only positive interracial experiences on campus. He says about Mid-U, “race shouldn’t matter . . . we’re all academics here.” This idea, that intellectual elites are beyond the race problem, was called into question by the PIMC:

[They] immediately just started posting just like vile, horrendously racist things and there was like a lot of people that were going like oh yea, like I totally agree with that . . . at [that] point it’s like these are . . . these are my classmates and this is like how they feel about like minority groups . . . this is something like that you would read about that like the Klan is doing in the 50s not like now.

While Chuck did not seem to be aware of subtle racism on campus, he was shocked by the messages on the PIMC that he associated with the old-fashioned racism of the Jim Crow Era. In this way, exposure to the PIMC may have accelerated his racial consciousness development by highlighting the incongruence between his perceptions of a post-racial campus and the overt racist messages on the PIMC. In this instance, unmasked online racial discourse revealed to Chuck that friendly campus interactions may belie hidden racist attitudes, challenging his understanding of how racism operates.

Challenging Coping Responses

Students who had a more critical lens towards understanding race relations prior to the PIMC had different types of interpretations of the site. Rachel, a second-year Black woman is involved in a number of campus organizations and actively seeks out opportunities for discussions on race. Throughout our interview, she emphasized that because she grew up in a predominantly African American community she had a different frame of reference from most students on campus. For her this meant that she was critical of majority White institutions, including the racial climate at Mid-U. Rachel was not fooled by masked presentations of racism, such as microaggressions, and talked about differentiating between White students who were allies, versus those who may be ignorant or antagonistic around issues of race. By engaging in this informal peer classification, she determined whether she could feel she belonged in a certain social space and who she would interact with on campus. This adaptive strategy to dealing with perceived racial hostility on campus was made less effective, however, by the anonymity of posters on the PIMC. Here Rachel discusses her interpretation of the PIMC:

Oh, that was astonishing! I remember the first [time] we saw it. It was honestly unbelievable . . . I couldn’t believe that people would honestly be actively submitting things, or actually seize that opportunity. And I thought too, it was so cowardly, because I mean, if you just have raging hatred or ignorance inside of you, but you wanna own it, then go ahead! You know? Like that’s your life. But, for you to wanna play both sides and be secretly racist or homophobic, but then you still want me to smile at you when I see you [on campus], or you still want me to sit by you without walking away, or you still want to be welcomed into smaller circles of the campus community that are more [vulnerable]. Like, it’s just, it was unbelievable.

Rachel was surprised by the racism on the site, but also noted she felt it was “cowardly” for posters to hide behind anonymity rather than be open with their racial views. If students were open with their “raging hatred,” then the adaptive coping response she discussed elsewhere in the interview – coding certain students as “racist” and avoiding them – would work just fine. The challenge to her coping strategy comes, therefore, from the anonymity of the PIMC.

Because Rachel was unable to connect racist ideas on the PIMC to specific members of the student body, she was not only surprised, but also disempowered as she had lost her primary strategy for dealing with racism: the identification and avoidance of perceived perpetrators, even those who engaged in subtle, masked racist behaviors. While Rachel felt capable of highlighting and critiquing masked racism on campus, in this instance the unmasking of racism made it more challenging for her to identify racists whom she notes want to “play both sides” by posting racist comments on the PIMC, while still being friendly with students of color on an individual-level.

There is no way of knowing how effective Rachel’s methods of identifying racists actually were, as there is no foolproof way to measure anyone’s “true” racial ideologies or privately held attitudes. But for Rachel, this was a perceived difference that hurt her own sense of racial self-efficacy.

The PIMC was also disempowering for Reese, a third-year Latina woman and student-activist who was profoundly aware of racial tensions on campus, heavily involved in cultural organizations, and has a history of engaging the administration around issues of race and racism on campus. For example, in response to a colonialist-themed fraternity party, Reese was part of a group of students who wrote a letter to and met with Mid-U administrators. Even though the administration rarely responded in the way she wanted them to, as a student activist she felt capable, empowered, and skilled at interacting with the power structures on campus. Here she talks about how the racial messages on the PIMC changed her view of her place at Mid-U:

You asked earlier if I felt that I belonged at the University, and after the PIMC I really felt that I didn’t. That I was in a place that was unsafe for me, that I was in a place that didn’t take what I cared about seriously at all, that really didn’t even mind to try to care. Not only did they not care they were never going to because they didn’t really want to. And the scary thing about it being anonymous is, then everyone was a possible person who had written that.

Reese’s work as an activist was clearly defined when she had a visible target. But because the antagonists on the PIMC page were anonymous, Reese began to see herself as a perpetual victim with a seemingly infinite pool of enemies against whom she was unable to protect herself. As a result of her adaptive coping responses to racism being disrupted by the PIMC, Reese felt distanced from her peers on campus and undervalued by Mid-U. There was nothing she could do to remove offensive posts or confront the anonymous students behind them. Both Reese and Rachel felt confident in their abilities to identify and dismantle masked racism, but they believed that the unmasked racism on the PIMC was too big and too elusive a problem to tackle. As online technologies alter the expression of racist ideologies, students of color can be forced to recalibrate their coping responses to racism.

Challenging Relationships

The unmasking of racism on campus can also increase the perceived distance between students of color and not only their White peers, but also Mid-U. Sara, a Black woman, was bothered by not knowing who among her peers was responsible for the hateful content online and noted the impact the PIMC had on her interracial relationships, saying, “it makes it difficult for me to form friendships with people of different races. . . . I know how you really feel.” This perspective assumes a widespread acceptance of the racial messages on the PIMC, something that may or may not be true. But the unmasking of racism on the PIMC was perceived to reveal the true racial ideologies behind the façade of post-racial color-blind interactions. Lisa, a woman who identifies as multiracial (Black and White) speaks more to this:

I know a lot of students didn’t necessarily feel afraid, but they definitely felt more like they should be more wary of like, who they’re hanging out with on campus or like, who their friend circle is or like – because they don’t know if like, any of these bigot posts are coming from

people in their classes or people like, they're interacting with and so I know for a lot of students, specifically underrepresented students like, when this came out like, they felt more close knit to like, students that looked like them and they felt they didn't want to even try to interact more with other students, because they weren't for sure who was doing this, since it was all anonymous.

This reaction, perhaps more than any other, illustrates the trauma that was associated with this page. For some students of color who were happy on campus – or at least did not feel like they were under racial attack – the PIMC was like finding out that all of a sudden they were trapped behind enemy lines. Whereas they had once believed that they had been surrounded by allies on campus, the PIMC revelation challenged this assumption and gave them cause to reconsider many of the relationships they used to take for granted.

Jelani, a Black man, talks about a completely different way that the PIMC page changed his interactions with Whites:

I would just say it makes me more cognitive. I think um, of how I'm interacting with people. . . And maybe not so much trying to read and like see what are you trying to, what do you think about me because I'm like a Black man, but more so just making sure that I'm giving off the message that I want to give off. . . so that it can't be misconstrued in any way because of different races. Um, but I, I think it's something that like, is definitely more prevalent now in my daily like actions and relationships with people. And it's not made me like cold or bitter or anything, it's just made me more so like concerned about the potential of something like that coming up, and how it would affect me or that relationship.

For Jelani, bearing witness to more explicitly racist ideologies caused him to modify his behavior in order to make sure that he did not fulfill any stereotypes; he wanted to make Whites more comfortable. While it is possible that Jelani devoted cognitive energy to this type of racial performance even before the PIMC – consciously or unconsciously – he became intentional about this behavior after being exposed to this unmasked discourse.

When I followed up by asking Jelani what he meant when he said the “potential of something like that coming up,” he talked about the way he thought the publication of the PIMC could influence Whites on campus. Even if they did not share the overtly racist views expressed there, Jelani believed that Whites could use the ugliness of those PIMC-ideas in “heated moments,” which could range from intramurals to informal arguments. This notion is consistent with research that suggests that individuals who are not open racists are more likely to reveal bias when they lose control (Sue 2010). For Jelani, the activation of the more overt unmasked racial discourse on the PIMC increased the likelihood of the language of that discourse being used on campus.

Some students, who also felt powerless, turned to Mid-U for help. When students of color pressed Mid-U to respond to the PIMC, administrators claimed to have limited power because they could not control an external website. The only concrete administrative response to the PIMC was to demand that the moderators take Mid-U out of the page name – and this did not take place until five weeks after the page first appeared. The makers of the site replaced the Mid-U name with the school colors in the title of the PIMC, thereby still clearly marking its connection to Mid-U. Jerry, a Black man, discusses why he believes Mid-U did too little, too late:

I stopped doing my work because I couldn't, I couldn't, I was just like, really in awe that this was something that I was reading, that I was – because this is – it's just really very worrisome and you know, it makes you feel really unsafe when you know, you know that there are a lot of students around you who have these very fucked up feelings about you based on what you look like . . . how are we supposed to build community when you're allowing your students to do

things that, that creates distrust in your community? . . . I want to be able to trust my, that the university is going to have my back . . . we expect that we're going to be treated as Mid-U students and so, you know, after my time here, it's like, you know, am I a Mid-U student?

While the online setting may take away from Mid-U's ability to moderate the space, it does not take away from the impact of the digital discourse on the student body. Given the perceived lackluster institutional response to this PIMC, Jerry felt undervalued as a member of the Mid-U community. It is particularly troubling that this revelation impacted his academic engagement, which demonstrates another potential pathway through which the PIMC could exert tangible influence on educational outcomes among students of color. The online unmasking of racism on the PIMC challenged the racial status quo and caused students of color to reevaluate their social positions and relationships at Mid-U.

Challenging Dominant Racial Narratives

While the PIMC does negate some strategies for combatting racism that require one to identify an attacker, some students thought that the PIMC was evidence that confirmed the prevalence of racism in an era typified by masked racial interactions. Gina is a second-year African American woman who is a student leader in campus diversity focused and cultural organizations. Her reflections highlight a different adaptive strategy for making sense of unmasked racism on the PIMC:

I guess [it was] enlightening to also know that there are people like that, like functioning just regular people out there like that . . . it made me realize that, I mean that racism is nowhere non-existent. It's still definitely prevalent and affects like how a lot of people think and it's also just kind of sad, like you never know like how you look in front of someone. You could be talking to like a White person that you think is your friend and they could be like dogging you out behind their back. Like that could be one of the people who are really upholding White supremacy on that page. That could be one of your friends, or your so-called friends and you – and they think that you're like garbage . . . I think it's good that people still know that racism is out there because a lot of people just think it's dead and that's like not even close to being true.

Gina was somewhat disillusioned by the PIMC page, but unlike students who felt disempowered by the PIMC page, she was able to identify a silver lining: the page is a clear indication that society is not post-racial or color blind. In this case, PIMC challenged the racial narrative on campus, as the site made it clear that Mid-U, despite its elite, liberal, and “regular” student body, was not beyond the race problem.

David gives another example of using the PIMC page as evidence. David is a fourth-year man double majoring in the social sciences and race studies. Before the interview he communicated that he was heavily invested in having racial discussions, and knew he was interested in being interviewed when he heard the words “race” and “research” together. David is mixed with Black and Latino heritage, identifies strongly with both groups, and is involved in both Black and Latino student organizations. When asked about the PIMC, David said:

It surprised me that someone would come up with an idea like that but it then again it wouldn't, it really didn't surprise that people held those beliefs. So, it was more obnoxious and annoying but for me I actually saw [it] as more of a body of evidence to present to other people to say, “Hey look, all that stuff I was complaining about and talking about. This is it right here in the flesh for you to see or online for you to see, instead of you thinking I am crazy coming up with conspiracy theories. This is it right here.” So, I guess this that's how I sort of treated it.

Throughout our interview, it was clear that David was familiar with ideas like White privilege, structural disadvantage, and covert racism. So despite the general absence of presentations of traditional racist ideologies on campus, he was not surprised by the attitudes expressed on the PIMC page, even though he was taken aback by their open presentation. About one-third of the sample echoed David's conflicted mindset – being both surprised and not-surprised by the site. Surprised because the PIMC was contrary to the way racial discourses typically played out on campus, but also not *really* surprised because they knew that racism existed, even if it was being masked by gentle racial discourses. David used the PIMC page as evidence of the continued relevance of race and existence of racism when communicating with students who were unable or unwilling to acknowledge subtle presentations of racism on campus.

Along these lines, Cristina talks about how the PIMC page influenced racial discourse on campus. Cristina is a third-year Indian American woman who is passionate about race and justice issues, as evidenced by her involvement in cultural and service-oriented organizations, events, and student employment opportunities. Here she talks about changes in informal conversations about race on campus:

In some ways it kind of took the trigger [of] something as appalling as PIMC for people to kind of be like, "Oh wait, we think racism isn't a thing on this campus. Turns out, it totally is . . . Let's talk about it." Umm, amongst ourselves at lunch, You know? Like, "did you hear about this shit? Uh, like, that's incredible; that's disgusting." You know? . . . People talk about it more.

In a paper articulating the linguistic style of color-blind racism, [Bonilla-Silva \(2002\)](#) suggests that language that can sound racist is seen as taboo, and that "because the dominant racial ideology portends to be color-blind, there is little space for social sanctioned speech about race-related matters (43)." But Cristina suggests that the PIMC shattered notions of color blindness amongst students at Mid-U, weakened the color-blind rationale for why race-related matters did not need to be discussed, and led to an increase in the number of conversations being had about race on campus. The PIMC challenged the perceived dominance of color-blind discourse on campus, and for many students was an indication of how problematic the racial climate at Mid-U was, despite the rarity of overtly racist incidents on campus. This led to an increase in online and in-person discussions of race that students of color suggested had been easier for Whites to avoid before the PIMC.

DISCUSSION

Racism was mainstream during the Jim Crow Era, but came to be seen as immoral and distasteful as images of violence against Blacks during the Civil Rights Era changed the public perception towards overt racism ([Jackson 2008](#)). This trend towards egalitarian norms in post-Civil Rights Era racial discourse has been widely studied and theorized. In this paper I explore internet-based discourse that departs from this trend and its influence on the way students of color understand racism and interpret interracial interactions on campus. While the data come from one college campus, these findings can be extrapolated to other contexts. The technological mechanisms through which the PIMC rewrote the rules of racial discourse and the processes through which this discourse influenced the ways students of color perceived the campus racial climate demonstrate the potential impact of technology on the way we think about and experience race and racism in the 21st century.

Examples from the PIMC enhance our understanding of the ways post-Civil Rights Era racist ideologies operate and indicate that color-blind rhetorical styles can coexist with old-fashioned racist ideologies. Posters on the PIMC reported feeling pressured to act according to dominant color-blind styles on campus and resented the perceived need to censor their thoughts on race and mask their true racial ideologies. Internet-based communication, like the PIMC, can provide opportunities for individuals to bypass the surface-level egalitarian norms that characterize many mainstream spaces,

thereby enabling more explicit expressions of racist ideologies. In future research, targeted use of on-line data sources may complement survey or interview findings and boost our understanding of the prevalence and nature of racist ideologies in contexts outside of Mid-U.

Because students of color interpreted messages on the PIMC as being indicative of hidden feelings about race, this unmasking disrupted many students' understandings of and adaptive responses to racism. Students who believed that racism was in the past found their worldviews challenged by unmasked racial messages that indicated members of their campus community held attitudes consistent with old-fashioned racism. Other students were forced to reconsider their behavioral responses to racism, as their strategies for identifying and avoiding racism were rendered ineffective by the anonymous unmasked racism on the PIMC. Furthermore, the "it could be anyone" mentality associated with the anonymous campus website put students on edge and altered the way they believed they fit in on campus, both with their White peers, and with Mid-U as an institution.

These findings suggest that students of color perceive direct connections between online racial messages and campus racial climate, interracial relationships, or institutional support. Many colleges and universities wrestle with the sometimes competing ideals of free speech on campus and the desire to protect students from harassment (Jaschick 2016), and some schools have punished students for their involvement in circulating racially or sexually offensive content online (Kamenetz, Lattimore, and Deppenbrock 2017). As our understanding of institutional climate expands to include online social spaces (Rowan-Kenyon et al. 2016), schools must develop policies formalizing approaches to moderating these spaces or responding to student concerns about online racial messages that impact campus climate or student wellbeing.

Students who had long been able to articulate the subtle nature of contemporary racism were able to use examples of unmasked racism from the PIMC as a vehicle through which they could help others identify the manifestations of racism. Given the dominance of masked racism in mainstream institutions and interactions, this is one way the online unmasking process can expose racism, both on and off college campuses: it highlights the embeddedness of racism in interactions and institutions that, prior to the unmasking, were visible only to those with the language to understand the way racism operates in seemingly race-neutral interactions or institutional practices.

For example, while calling the police is not commonly seen as being a racist act, in the past year, social media has driven a renegotiation of popular conceptions of racism through the application of the "racist" label to Whites who call the police on Blacks for no apparent reason (Herron 2018). Social media users have thus used technology – sharing and commenting on videos of Whites calling the police on Blacks as they wait in Starbucks (Siegel 2018), barbeque in public parks (Herreria 2018), or go swimming (Perez 2018) – to highlight the way Whites have the ability to wield a public institution to harass and potentially endanger Blacks and people of color. This represents an unmasking of racism at interpersonal and structural levels; it problematizes not only individual-level prejudices that led the Whites in the videos to assume criminality and call the police, but also the ways purportedly race-neutral institutions can reproduce and reinforce racial inequality.

Racism is unmasked in online spaces, therefore, not only when internet-based communication facilitates the sharing of overtly racist sentiments, revealing these old-fashioned racist ideologies to be alive, not defunct, but also when online users highlight the previously hidden mechanisms through which contemporary covert racist structures are maintained. Just as unmasked racism on the PIMC changed the way students in this sample thought about race and racism at Mid-U, it is possible that the unmasking of racism in other online spaces can challenge dominant racial ideologies and expose more people to the ways racism works in the post-Civil Rights Era. Future research will explore the educational, developmental, and theoretical implications of the unmasking of racist ideologies in other online contexts, and with different populations.

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