

Digital Resistance: How Online Communication Facilitates Responses to Racial Microaggressions

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Abstract

Recent research finds negative impacts of racial microaggressions, defined as racial slights, on a variety of outcomes. Targets of racial microaggressions often report feeling pressured to remain silent in the face of these subtle interactions, which can be coded as aracial by perpetrators or bystanders. This article explores the ways Internet-based communication can change this dynamic and structure distinct responses to racial microaggressions. Drawing on in-depth interviews with undergraduate students of Color, I find that in some online spaces, students of Color have access to unique technology-based tools that increase their perceived and actual capacity to respond critically to racial microaggressions. I discuss implications for understanding online racial discourse and resistance on college campuses and beyond.

Keywords

race, social media, technology, higher education, microaggression, resistance

During the Jim Crow era, the U.S. racial system was typified by overt expressions of racism and openly discriminatory policies and institutions (Sears and Henry 2003). In contrast, the post–Civil Rights Movement era is characterized by an avoidance of or subtle usage of race in interpersonal and political discourse and covert social mechanisms that reproduce inequality (Bonilla-Silva 2017). While the shift from overt to covert may decrease the visibility of racism, the primary function of racism—to maintain the racial status quo (i.e., White supremacy)—remains the same. For example, contemporary racist frameworks explain the well-documented persistence of racial inequality as being due to individual-level freedoms and differences in talents and choices, not systemic racism (Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith 1997).

In contexts wherein overt racism is unwelcome, racial inequalities can be maintained and reproduced through microaggressions, defined by Sue and colleagues (2009) as intentional or unintentional negative racial slights. Microaggressive

words and actions are driven by dominant racial narratives and filtered through multiple layers of stereotypes (Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). In questioning the intelligence, criminality, or appearance of people of Color (Yosso et al. 2009), microaggressions reinforce people of Color's subordinate status.

A defining characteristic of racial microaggressions is how difficult they can be to recognize and respond to (Pierce 1995). Subtle attacks on marginalized identities are often interpreted as being related to race by the victim but ignored or seen as being aracial by the perpetrator or bystanders. This dynamic can increase the perceived difficulty of responding to microaggressions, as targets may

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believe that responding to racial slights could hurt their social status or standing (Yosso et al. 2009).

Research on resistance to microaggressions is limited, although some work has explored maintaining silence in the face of microaggressions as a self-protective practice (Evans and Moore 2015), private resistance behind closed doors or in safe spaces (Solórzano et al. 2000), or organized resistance through protest or activism in response to prolonged or acute experiences with microaggressions (Pérez Huber and Solórzano 2015). Highlighting these multiple forms of resistance helps avoid the implication that targets of microaggressions are victims without agency, persons who are being acted on but who themselves do not engage in meaningful action.

In this article I build on this analysis and investigate active resistance against microaggressions. Using data from in-depth interviews with undergraduate students of Color, I explore how students use technology-based techniques to directly counter racial microaggressions. I suggest that Internet-based communication, such as social media, gives students access to unique tools that increase their perceived and actual capacity to respond critically to racial microaggressions and challenges traditional racial power dynamics on campus. Students of Color increase their own agency on campus as they subvert the dominant ideologies, practices, and power structures that allow microaggressions to go unopposed in many social spaces.

BACKGROUND

Racial Microaggressions

Sue's (2010) taxonomy of microaggressions includes three types: microinsults, subtle demeaning messages that can take the form of rudeness or stereotyping; microinvalidations, language or actions that disregard the experiences or perceptions of people of Color; and microassaults, disparaging words or actions that tend to be more conscious and explicit than other types of microaggressions. While some researchers have included racial slurs as forms of verbal microaggressions (Harwood et al. 2012), other scholars not only differentiate between microaggressions and macroaggressions (the latter referring to more overt acts of racism) but also discuss how microaggressions can lead to macroaggressive acts (Levchak 2018; Pierce 1970). The relatively broad conception of racial microaggressions captures their subjective nature;

microaggressions can be perceived as overt racism to some, while others see them as being harmless.

To date, most research on microaggressions has focused on the individual- and interpersonal-level consequences of these acts. College students of Color who experience microaggressions are more likely to engage in binge drinking, have higher levels of anxiety (Blume et al. 2012), have higher levels of depression (Keels, Durkee, and Hope 2017), and have lower self-esteem (Nadal et al. 2014) and may be less likely to seek help if they believe doing so would reinforce negative stereotypes (Duster 1991). Recent work in sociology has shifted focus from individual to social effects of racial microaggressions, finding that witnessing microaggressions can affect interracial attitudes by decreasing perceived intergroup commonality (Hughey et al. 2017).

There is consensus in the literature that microaggressions typically go unchallenged by both targets and witnesses (Sue 2010). A series of experiments by Kawakami and colleagues (2009) found that witnesses of both overt and subtle microaggressions overestimate the extent to which they will be distressed by, and speak out against, these acts. Levchak (2018) calls individuals who fail to intervene when witnessing a microaggression inactive bystanders and suggests this nonresponse is unhelpful as it neither challenges the microaggression nor supports the target. Yosso and colleagues (2009) found that targets of microaggressions not only are sensitive to the potential negative social consequences of speaking out against microaggressions but also feel guilty for staying silent and not defending themselves or their race/ethnicity when targeted by microaggressions. Not responding to microaggressions enables their reproduction, as the attitudes and behaviors behind microaggressions are not challenged as being problematic.

Given the difficulty of responding to microaggressions in mainstream spaces, people of Color may look to process these experiences in counterspaces, defined as social spaces where people of Color seek to avoid hostile racial interactions and celebrate and affirm their racial/ethnic identities (Solórzano et al. 2000). On college campuses, counterspaces can include clubs, study halls, or even informal peer groups, and they often are formed in response to student experiences with microaggressions on campus (Yosso et al. 2009). Within counterspaces, students can engage in identity work that challenges dominant narratives, cultural expressions as acts of resistance, or acts of relational or social support (Case and Hunter

2012). Largely populated by people of Color, the norms about talking about race or racial microaggressions in counterspaces may differ from those in mainstream spaces.

Race Online

As young people spend more time socializing and learning in online spaces, it is important to recognize how this medium can affect racial messaging. Tynes and colleagues (2008) find that more than 70 percent of both Black and White students report witnessing racist images, jokes, or language online, an occurrence that is linked to increased depression and anxiety. On college campuses, exposure to online racist comments can change the ways students of Color think about race, racism, and interracial interactions on campus (Eschmann 2019).

The Internet also can offer young people of Color tools for resistance against racism at institutional and individual levels. The most visible examples come from large-scale resistance efforts, including the amplification of activist efforts against police violence toward Black people in Ferguson and beyond through Twitter (Brown et al. 2017; Ray et al. 2017). Groshek and Han (2011) suggest that alternative media are more likely to give coverage to activism, creating counterpublics, or spaces that enable resistance. Hill (2018) writes about the digital counterpublics of Black Twitter that challenge hegemonic structures and narratives. Similarly, Jackson, Bailey, and Welles (2020) suggest that the intersectional and Black feminist analytical frameworks in Twitter-based counterpublics can help shape networks of resistance and strengthen social movements. Moreover, Tynes and colleagues (2011) found that race-related groups on Facebook and MySpace can create racial safe havens and spaces for discussions about race. Research also finds that participatory politics, defined as peer-based and interactive online political activity, both is effective and can increase traditional political participation among youth (Cohen and Kahne 2012). On college campuses, students have used social media to communicate about protest in response to racist events on campus and publicize incidents of microaggressions (Reynolds and Mayweather 2017; Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2007).

METHODS

This article comes out of a larger project exploring online racial discourse at an elite Midwestern University, hereafter referred to as “Mid-U.” My

goal was to understand how students perceived differences between online and on-campus racial discourse and the impact explicitly racist online messages had on student experiences, perceptions of the campus racial climate, and cross-racial interactions at Mid-U.

I conducted interviews with 38 students including 23 women and 15 men, of whom 5 identified as Latino, 3 identified as Afro-Latino or mixed with Black and Latino, 19 identified as Black or African American, 5 identified as multiracial or mixed with Black and White, 5 identified as Asian, and 1 identified as Indian. While I highlight individual racial backgrounds when presenting quotes, I also refer to all students in the sample as students of Color—that is, non-White students whose racial/ethnic identities have been minoritized. This purposive sample was recruited from student cultural organizations and minority student leadership groups, which attract students interested in talking or engaging about issues of race or identity. This sampling strategy is influenced by the critical race tradition in education, as I aim to center the experiences of students of Color to uncover mechanisms of oppression and highlight resistance strategies (Smith et al. 2007).

These in-depth interviews were guided by the open-ended survey instrument, influenced by Hurtado and Carter’s (1997) framework for understanding institutional climate and Tynes, Rose, and Williams’s (2010) online victimization scale. I asked students questions about their backgrounds, including family and neighborhood characteristics; campus involvement at Mid-U; their perceptions of the campus racial climate; and their experiences with racialized interactions online. In line with Small’s (2009) sequential interviewing strategy, I modified, added, or removed questions during the interview process to allow what I learned with each case or participant to influence subsequent interviews.

Upon beginning the interview process, I almost immediately began to uncover unexpected and theoretically surprising findings that changed the direction of the study. I found that despite being exposed to brutal language in online spaces, students of Color did not shy away from online environments. Instead, they used online social media to construct spaces of critical resistance to racial microaggressions. While students discussed engaging in racial discourse on a variety of social media sites, including blogs and microblogs like Tumblr and Twitter, and forums like Reddit, the primary location for challenging microaggressions from fellow students was Facebook. As findings were

surprising given existing theory, or outside of the scope of my project's original theoretical framing, I not only explored new literature but also sought to develop new theoretical concepts (Timmermans and Tavory 2012).

College students are in a unique developmental period, learning about themselves, their views, and the world in a context that is characterized by increased independence. At the same time, however, students are subject to university rules and regulations. Racial discourse on some campuses, therefore, can reflect students' being cautious with their language, a practice that can privilege White student comfort over honest discourse (Cabrera, Watson, and Franklin 2016). Mid-U is a highly selective institution, and the styles of racial discourse represented in this article may reflect a relatively privileged and highly educated sample. While students of Color represent a more marginalized population on campus, the students of Color at Mid-U may be less vulnerable than other groups of Color in less elite or less protected social spaces.

I used the abductive grounded theoretical approach, a modification of grounded theory that allows codes and concepts to emerge inductively from the data but also focuses on surprising findings to build theoretical concepts (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). The first step of analysis was to create a coding log, which took note of demographic characteristics and contextual data. Second, I engaged in open coding of the interview data to highlight emerging themes and patterns. Next, I engaged in focused coding of my initial codes, testing some of my theories and assumptions by looking for code saturation and disconfirming information. As focused codes took shape, they began to highlight differences in participant experiences, behaviors, and responses to external forces.

Finally, I engaged in theoretical coding and began to use concepts developed during the focused coding stage to build new theoretical concepts. In this stage I developed frameworks for organizing my focused codes, sought to elucidate the relationships between existing codes, and compared my findings with existing theories. Throughout the analytic process, I engaged in memoing and a constant comparison between theory and data, taking note of the relationships between codes, prevalent themes, existing theories, and emergent theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

This process resulted in two new theoretical concepts representing types of resistance that have not been explored previously: *online counterspaces* and *online racial checking*. Online counterspaces are defined as online social spaces that

structure critical racial discussions as students of Color challenge the reproduction of dominant paradigms for understanding race, highlight and critically react to vicarious or direct experiences with microaggressions, and provide support for other students of Color in the midst of what are perceived to be hostile racialized interactions. While I borrow the term "counterspace," online counterspaces are conceptually and practically distinct from the traditional counterspaces discussed in the Background section and can be permanent or temporary online spaces created by students where critiques of covert racism, like racial microaggressions, are normalized and supported.

Second, I explore how students of Color engage in what I term *online racial checking*, defined as critical responses to microaggressions or the expression of racist ideologies. Online racial checking can act as a mechanism of informal social control as students who engage in microaggressive behavior are publicly rebuked for racially offensive actions and words that go unpunished in many other contexts. Online counterspaces and online racial checking represent a drastic shift in how we think about how students of Color respond to racial microaggressions on college campuses and how technology-based tools can empower students of Color to engage in active and critical resistance to subtle expressions of racism.

Throughout the Findings section, I use the term "microaggression" to refer to racial slights, racial jokes, or other comments about race that students of Color perceive to be offensive, even if students of Color do not use the term "microaggression" to refer to these experiences (Sue et al. 2009). To preserve students' unique voices, quotes are unedited except where identifiable details are changed.

FINDINGS

Finding Space to Talk about Race: Online Counterspaces

Bonilla-Silva (2002) suggests that speech about race-related issues will be scarce in contexts characterized by the dominant color-blind racial ideology. This idea is consistent with how students of Color describe conversations about race on campus as being rare and largely avoided by White students. But students also make a distinction between face-to-face racial discussions on campus and online racial discussions, the latter occurring with more frequency. Tiffany, a Black woman, talks about the clear distinctions between online and in-person racial discourse:

Compared to more face-to-face interaction, I think they talk about it more online because I think obviously, you know, sort of being behind a computer is much more easier to sort of articulate your thoughts. . . . You can sort of form an opinion and sort of lay down your argument much more easily than if you're like in the heat of debate or anything like that.

Some basic characteristics of online communication—such as the ability to interact with others without being in their physical presence and being on your own time, not theirs—may increase the comfort level many students have talking about race. And students in the “heat of debate,” as Tiffany puts it, are less likely to back down out of discomfort when they are more comfortable, hence the increased prevalence of racial discourse online.

More people talking about race means that students are exposed to a broader set of ideas. For instance, Tiffany continues to share how many of the online racial discussions start:

The friends I associate with—they're very like “activist,” you know? So they're always sharing articles, like, “What do you guys think?” And also, here there's a lot of academic debates. If there's anything going on in the world, they really want to talk about it and see other people's point of view.

A common sentiment among students interested in generating discussions about race is frustration with the lack of outlets on campus. Students at Mid-U are not alone in this perception, as research suggests that racial discourse on college campuses is often avoided by White educators and students (Sue and Constantine 2007). One reason counterspaces exist, in fact, is because issues of racial identity and justice are not perceived to be welcome in mainstream campus spaces. On the Internet, however, “activist” students, or students who are racially conscious or engaged, have more agency in shaping and advertising racial discussions. They need not wait until the monthly Black Student Union meeting to talk about the latest Ta’Nehisi Coates piece. Instead, by simply sharing a link they can start this discussion immediately. And they may be interacting with a larger group online than they typically would in person.

Bringing these discussions online has important consequences for how race is experienced. Rebecca, an Afro-Latina in her first year, attends both Black and Latino student groups and spends a lot of time engaging with race issues. She laments the fact that

on campus, she talks about race only once a week or less. Online, however, she notes that race is “wildly discussed.” She has this to say about talking about these online discussions: “It also gives us more room to process. It gives you more room to keep thinking and to find space, because people are so much more willing to talk and also answer questions when asked like appropriately.”

Like Tiffany, Rebecca appreciates the way she can take the time to reflect on racial issues before discussing them online. One of Sue's (2010) six barriers to responding to racial microaggressions is the time-limited nature of responding, a dynamic that is less prevalent for online responses. Most noteworthy here, however, is what she means when she says that she can “find space” online in a way that she cannot in person. On campus, there are few spaces where race can be discussed. For example, Rachel, a Black woman, notes,

If you would take the same conversations or the same ideas that you discuss online and try to put them in the school cafeteria or the library, it definitely . . . it definitely wouldn't be as welcoming of an environment. People seem unwilling to listen, and people usually, umm, in person like to deny that there is a race issue from what I've experienced.

Not talking about race reinforces White color-blind norms and maintains campus social spaces as being dominated by White culture and norms. In contrast, when Rebecca says she can “find space” online, she is referring to the spaces created by “activist” students who, in sharing race-related material, are creating online counterspaces. Finding these spaces is important for all of the reasons that traditional counterspaces are important—they affirm racial/ethnic identities and facilitate critical thinking about dominant racial structures. But unlike on-campus counterspaces, which are typically populated by students of Color, online counterspaces are racially integrated. The ability to craft mainstream spaces of resistance, visible to both students of Color and White students, gives students of Color increased agency in molding the racial climate of their institution.

Rebecca continues to discuss other characteristics unique to online spaces that facilitate the construction of online counterspaces:

They have access to more resources to like back themselves up quickly. So you can just pull up a link. Umm, like direct someone towards

information . . . being able to say, “this is what I’m talking about. You can’t deny this. This is proof of it.” So I think there’s that confidence in that you’re online. Also, when you’re online, you’re not face to face with someone, you’re not dealing with issues of like aggression, in like a physical sense, and being in a space where you have to absolutely leave. There are spaces, like spaces online where you, um, can just sort of step away from it.

Productive discussions about race can be difficult in contexts where both sides not only experience heightened emotions but also use different paradigms for understanding race and therefore talk past one another. For example, the dominant mode of thinking about race in ahistorical and individual terms limits the extent to which some Whites can understand the complexities of racial interactions, let alone racial injustice (Moffatt 1989). Having immediate access to sources and data, in this example, gives students of Color the confidence and tools to poke holes in dominant paradigms for understanding race. Rachel shares how increased access to empirical resources and time to craft careful statements affects the norms about online racial discourse:

I didn’t really care about grammar, but if you’re on Facebook and you’re talking to a [Mid-U] person, you should make sure that you have like a nice thesis, an intro, some citations. . . . It encourages you to sit and kind of meditate on what other people say before you respond and type out a very thoughtful response, and make sure you have evidence to back it up.

Part of the importance of having the time to gather one’s thoughts and carefully construct one’s contribution comes from the expectation that your comments will be read by more people, who are more likely to critically engage with you than they would be in person. Another consideration is that it takes this increased effort, soundness of argument, and relevant evidence to counter commonly held folk beliefs about race. The normalization of formal language, evidence, and peer critique, then, helps establish online counterspaces as uniquely capable of facilitating resistance to dominant norms about racial discussions, including silence and color-blindness. Individual-level and ahistorical explanations for racial inequality, for example, may be less convincing in contexts wherein respondents can quickly share information about the structural or

historical antecedents to various forms of inequality.

Not all online racial discourse, however, is as nuanced as what Rachel describes. While on-campus counterspaces are structured to be safe spaces for students of Color, insulated from racial micro-aggressions, online counterspaces are not safe spaces. Hank, a Black man, talks about how online norms structure racial messaging online:

There’s a certain degree of like liberation where you can say what you feel right and like people can scrutinize you but there’re not scrutinizing you to your face. So it’s not as like harmful. . . . It’s not as like conflicting like if you were to say something like potentially controversial and people like call you out on it, like in class or something and then you are forced to defend yourself, but like in person . . . so I feel like online people are probably more likely to say like certain things . . . to give more like controversial opinions because they have like time to defend it and like look up statistics and like they are not actually face to face with the person.

The same characteristics of online communication that make racial dialogues easier to hold, then, also make it easier to share fringe or offensive ideas. Ahmed, a Black man, talks about what he sees as the negative and positive of social media-based racial discourse. While the positive includes increased discussion, attention, and activism around issues of racial justice, he characterizes the negative as being the way many people, “hide behind the veil of social media to pretty much say whatever they want, specifically regarding race.” David, who is Black and Latino, has had similar experiences:

I see more stereotypes, more racism on the Internet than I do in real life. It doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist in real life. It means that it is tucked away in places and it doesn’t mean who I surround myself with, you know, even though they may not be talking about race and even though our conversations are decent, superficial, or whatever. They could be harboring or thinking a whole bunch of other things they are more willing to express like anonymously. And so for me, the fact that you can see that reflected on the Internet reflects, ah, to a very large degree what society is actually thinking about and doing.

For David, the prevalence of racist attitudes online is indicative of how Whites really think about race, and this affects the way he thinks about his superficial interactions with some Whites on campus. Research suggests that experiences with ambiguous racist events, where Blacks feel race could have influenced how they were treated, but are not certain, can have a more negative impact on cognitive resources than situations where they encounter overt racism (Salvatore and Shelton 2007). This may be because at least with overt racism, people of Color can externalize their negative treatment. There is greater uncertainty, however, around ambiguous experiences with discrimination, such as microaggressions. In online spaces, the increased comfort with which Whites can express their racial ideologies means there is less uncertainty about the salience of race in a given discussion, and some students use this as evidence to counter postracial and color-blind ideologies.

Angela, a Black woman, also believes that people are more blunt and honest on social media, even when they are not anonymous. She has this to say about reading online posts that might be considered racially offensive:

It's a very interesting way to see how people actually feel about racial issues. . . . In many ways it's actually kind of refreshing because people can have like really honest debates that for some reason they feel like they can't have in person. . . . It also doesn't mean that everything that people say is intelligent. It actually means that people have no filter . . . whereas you know you might be a little more careful, right, or a little bit more nuanced . . . in a front of a person.

Here there seems to be a conflict between Angela's view, that folks are more careful about talking about race in person, and Rachel's view, that folks are more careful about how they talk about race online. Indeed, Rachel's characterization of online racial discourse as being more articulate and intentional than in-person discourse is counterintuitive, given what we know about how online discourse tends to be more virulent. But Angela and Rachel are using the term "careful" in different ways. For Angela, "careful on-campus interactions" refers to the politically correct style with which Whites on campus approach racial discourse, ensuring that they do not say anything offensive. Rachel, on the other hand, is referring to how students construct logical and evidence-based arguments about race in online spaces.

For these students, online racial discourse is characterized by both increased controversial content—as students have "no filter" online, according to Angela—and increased critical content—as students have the time and resources to craft meaningful responses to controversial posts, dominant racial views, or microaggressions. For those students who would engage in careful silence while on campus, online discourse provides freedom from the need to be kind and careful about race. For those students of Color who wish to engage in careful but rigorous discussions, online discourse provides freedom from the need to avoid making Whites feel uncomfortable when talking about racism on campus. Far from being a contradiction, this dynamic is at the core of what makes online counterspaces unique.

While Angela perceives a distinction between online and in-person racial discourse, here she does not express an understanding of where this difference comes from—only that Whites "for some reason" do not feel they can be honest in the way they talk about race in person. This assessment is consistent with the literature on how race is talked about—or not talked about—in some educational settings. Pollock (2004) uses the term *colormute* to refer to the way some Whites see race, and are therefore not color-blind, but choose not to speak about or acknowledge it.

Students of Color can be frustrated by colormuteness, or silence around race, but may not acknowledge or realize how these norms can be protective for them. On one hand, not talking about race can be a shield for Whites, who use silence to avoid being labeled a racist for saying the wrong thing. But on the other hand, colormute norms can limit more harsh expressions of racist ideologies.

Here Angela suggests that when Whites are preoccupied with not saying anything offensive, their interactions, though less offensive, can come across as being disingenuous. Even when online racial discourse becomes offensive, she at least feels that she is not being lied to. Rachel is more than happy with this distinctive tradeoff, more offensive content for more perceived honesty, and feels strongly that the less-careful style of racial discourse she experiences online can fuel productive dialogue: "The negative is much more harmful and if not checked, can be more problematic. But . . . if I don't know what you're thinking, we're not really going to get anywhere."

Here she characterizes racist speech as negative and acknowledges that it can be harmful. But the problem, for Rachel, is not as much the explicit

expression of racist ideologies but the idea that these expressions might go unhindered. Unchecked, these comments can become normalized and, like silence, reinforce the dominant racial ideology. Rather than worry about the negative effects of being exposed to these microaggressions online, Rachel's focus is how, given the increased honesty about race that is seen online, these comments can spark racial discourse, potentially leading to individual or structural changes on campus. In online counterspaces, students of Color are more at risk of being exposed to overtly racist ideologies but also have access to a unique set of tools that lets them identify and counter these ways of thinking about race.

Furthermore, students of Color have more support in online counterspaces. In-person microaggressions are heard only by people in the immediate vicinity, limiting the pool of people who can potentially respond, and putting pressure on students of Color to be race representatives. Not all students are equally equipped or inclined to respond. Along these lines Amanda, a Black woman, says the following: "I know how White people are on this campus, and I know that they say things that are just blatantly racist, and I wonder what happens when these like 'Uncle Tom' people are around and they are just like, 'I'm cool with that.'"

Amanda speaks critically of students of Color who do not counter microaggressions, but the decision to respond to a microaggression is more complex than she indicates. In fact, at a different point in our interview, Amanda shared an example of a time that she heard a White student use the N-word but Amanda chose not to respond because she wanted to "pick her battles" and not seem like an angry Black woman; she altered her behavior because of perceived stereotypes around her intersectional identity as a woman of Color.

Still, her sentiment is indicative of how students of Color think about responding to racial slights on a majority White campus. As the only or one of only a few students of Color in a classroom, students have to decide if and when to speak up against racial microaggressions made by students or faculty. Many students shared that when race came up in class, as the only member of that race/ethnicity, the entire class would look at them as if it were their responsibility to respond. Students of Color are saddled with the pressure of choosing between defending one's racial group and offending one's peers by being too militant. Not all students are willing to risk the social consequences that they believe could result from their gaining a reputation as someone who takes racial jokes or comments too seriously.

In online spaces, however, this pressure is reduced. Cristina, an Indian woman, explains:

In the context of the university community, when people make racial jokes, I think they are uninformed. And if you talk to them, if I talk to them, and people speak up, you know? It's great. Because like our university is filled with people who will comment on a joke you make . . . online. And say like, "Hey, that's not okay and this is why," which leads to a conversation. . . . There are people who put forth academic arguments that are flawed, and it's very hard to argue against those kinds of people. But then again, there's like an entire legion of people who exist to argue against these people.

Because online racial discussions do not require participants to occupy the same physical space nor be engaged at the same time, there is a larger pool of potential respondents to microaggressions online than in person. While it is common for a student of Color to be the only student of Color in a classroom, he or she is never the only person of Color on the Internet. Therefore students of Color are less pressured to respond to microaggressions or to be the voice for their race/ethnicity in online counterspaces, where responses are more collective in nature.

To further illustrate this point, Jelani spoke about a White student who made online comments disparaging the community surrounding the university and voicing how he felt unsafe with Black community members walking around or begging for money close to campus. The online response to these types of situations, according to Jelani, is consistent:

There's never been a situation where no one has responded back to a comment like that. Someone always will step up, and it's not just like a Black person to a White person; it's like any race will comment and start saying what you're expressing is, it's stupid. And like it's offensive. And like you really need to check yourself.

While the Internet may increase the risk of students of Color being exposed to microaggressions or overt racism, it also increases immediate access to allies and support. Online, there exists a critical mass in perpetuity. And being a member of a group that is a numerical minority matters less in online spaces, where small groups can have a large voice. The decreased power differential between Whites and students of Color in online counterspaces can

lead to Whites' facing increased peer accountability for making racial slights. Rachel speaks about the potential consequences of making offensive posts online:

If someone says something really racist, you get a message like, "Did you see what she said? She's in my such and such class." And then, they get "side-eyed" until you actually bring it up to them. . . . That's a very, very easy way to be ostracized. . . . You're not going to be able to still be accepted if you post something like racist or homophobic.

This outcome, Whites' being made to feel uncomfortable on campus, or being less accepted because of their views or comments about race, is different from what we expect on college campuses. Students of Color in online counterspaces have access to informal sanctioning mechanisms that not only punish perpetrators of racial slights but also may discourage further racial slights. I use the term *online racial checking* to refer to critical responses to microaggressions or the expression of racist ideologies.

Online Racial Checking

Several students told me about an online incident where a White student took a picture of a Black dining hall employee sitting down and reading the school newspaper, and posted it on a campus Facebook page captioned with "haha." Miguel, a Black man who reported that he wrote 15 to 20 comments on the post, believed that the comment was laughing at a Black working-class man reading—as if this were an oxymoron. But some online users did not accept this analysis:

People were like, "Oh no no no, you just, you just don't get it. It's 'cause someone is actually reading [the school newspaper] guys, like you know 'cause no one reads [the school newspaper]." . . . One guy was like . . . "Oh you know I definitely think that this dining hall employee can read . . . maybe the fact that [you] took such offense to this only shows that you have insecurities about him not being able to read" . . . and I was like, "or maybe this is just racist."

As part of the style of the color-blind ideology, Bonilla-Silva (2017:78) talks about the semantic moves Whites use to "save face" when talking about

race. One can imagine how this joke would be more defensible in person. If the offending party were criticized for making a joke based on the stereotype that Black men can't read, they could easily respond by saying, "No, the joke was about the newspaper—I didn't even notice the guy reading it was Black." A person of Color, whether or not they believed the explanation, might concede that it was a misunderstanding. To suggest otherwise could be interpreted as defamation of character—calling the person who made the comment a liar, or worse, a racist. And as indicated in the above quote, the only racist thing about the joke, for some Whites, is the misguided suggestion that race was implied in the first place.

Online, these types of color-blind rhetorical strategies are less effective. Persons of Color feel less alone and outnumbered in online counterspaces, so they are less likely to be intimidated into accepting that the incident was a misunderstanding. Given this increased support around their understanding of the joke's being about race, they experience less uncertainty about its racial implications, and, using the tools unique to the online counterspace, are better able to articulate their arguments that support their interpretation. The usual ambiguity around racial microaggressions, which Sue (2010) suggests decreases responses to microaggressions, is therefore lessened in online counterspaces.

In this example, after about 100 comments, the poster said he had made a mistake and deleted his original post. While deleting the post does not necessarily signify a change of heart, it is indicative of a shift in power. For students of Color, this event is not remembered as just another time that a White student got away with a hurtful microaggression or racist joke. Instead, students of Color engaged in online racial checking by combatting the microaggression, denying the legitimacy of a color-blind interpretation of the joke, and demonstrating that it was ultimately not welcome in the online counterspace.

Angela, a Black woman, recounted the same incident and described her thinking about why the poster could not understand the racial implications of his post:

How did he learn that this would be an okay thing to do? That's a very serious question I have. It makes me think that he's not the only one. . . . He might've said it was a mistake, but it reflects, in some ways, how he's been taught to think. . . . There are some people walking around thinking like that, and they're not being

challenged to not think like that. . . . Is it partly [Mid-U]? I think partly [Mid-U] but also whatever kind of social circles that he's found. Either at home, you know, if he's in a fraternity or whatever; or if he's in other organizations. . . . His other circles, right, have influenced that thinking.

Elsewhere in her interview, Angela spoke about how seriously she takes posts on social media and how she believes they are indicative of how people think when their guard is down. In this example she suggests that the perceived appropriateness of the comment, on the part of the original poster, was learned in other campus spaces. This idea is consistent with research that documents marked differences in racial conversations White students have on the frontstage, or in public, versus on the backstage, in private (Picca and Feagin 2007). In some instances, I suggest, online conversations can give us a glimpse into the backstage as users share backstage-style comments in digital spaces that have frontstage-style audiences. Because the expression of racial stereotypes and microaggressions can go unchallenged in many other campus spaces, this online racial checking incident may represent the first time the poster's racial ideology had been critiqued. Furthermore, while this type of racialized interaction can easily be minimized by Whites in other contexts, some color-blind semantic strategies to avoid accusations of racism may be less effective online. Claiming innocence is not enough to absolve you of racial sins in the context of an online counterspace.

Rachel talks about another example of racial checking that took place on the same campus website: "This one girl posted, like, 'Overthought while walking behind a Black guy, what if I robbed him just to be ironic?' And someone was like, 'What? . . . How is that ironic? Like, so you're admitting that you expect a Black guy would rob you?'"

Like the post of the dining hall worker, this post garnered a large number of comments. In this instance, however, the post was deleted by the student moderator of the campus page for being offensive. This is something that happens less often for racial slights but is more likely to happen when a post is overtly offensive. Rachel noted that the consequences of the post extended to campus and said, "For the next couple of weeks when everybody saw that girl walking around on the quad, they're like, 'It's her!'"

As previously discussed, implying the criminality of persons of Color is a textbook microaggression. And while colleges and universities are known for making statements against overtly racist

incidents that cause headlines, racial slights like this are more difficult to police, especially online. Even though we know online spaces are less moderated in general, this example suggests that online racial checking can function as a form of peer-based accountability that can carry over from online counterspaces to on-campus spaces.

In this example, as the poster was being ostracized by many on campus, an activist of Color approached her in person to talk about the incident. The poster acknowledged how she was wrong and showed interest in increasing her racial consciousness. Later that academic year she came with the activist to a Black student party, where her interactions with students of Color indicated to Rachel that she had changed how she thought about race. Online racial checking not only increases the extent to which students are made accountable for microaggressing but also may potentially be a part of an effective strategy for combatting racist ideologies. This is an avenue worth exploring, even though we can be certain not all students on the receiving end of online racial checking will respond as positively as Rachel believes the student in this example did. While beliefs that responding to microaggressions would be pointless keep targets of racial microaggressions from speaking out in many contexts (Sue 2010), students may be more confident in the efficacy of online racial checking than in-person responses to racial microaggressions.

Students who experience racial microaggressions in person but are dissatisfied with their ability to react can turn to online racial checking as a means of responding to a racial event. Jeremiah relayed a story that began when he used the word "doe," slang for "though," in conversation on campus. A White student responded to him, saying, "'I didn't know we were talking about deer, here,' you know, and then I was just like, 'Well, I wasn't talking about deer. I was very clearly using a form of slang and that's how language works.'"

When Jeremiah attempted to engage this student in conversation about the incident, the student simply walked away and was unwilling to participate. At this point in the interview, Jeremiah took out his laptop and read me the online post he made about the episode, which had garnered more than 100 comments in a week's time. After hearing the post, I told him that it read like an essay, and he responded,

I like to write in a very provocative manner, so like I write it—I sit down, I have like a topic or I have like an article, you know, and I'll put my opinions about it and then I get to writing about

it in a way I know people are going to come talk to me about it for. Certain people that either agree with me are going to say, “I agree, but this is what I don’t agree with,” or certain people are going to say like, “I don’t agree with you at all,” and that’s where the conversation happens. These specific posts usually are written in a very long prose manner. . . . The ones that garner the most attention are very—are written in like an intricate manner.

Jeremiah was powerless to respond in person, as the person who made the comment was unwilling to talk about why Jeremiah thought it was problematic. In making a detailed, articulate, and critical online posting about the incident, however, Jeremiah started a discussion not only about this specific microaggression but also about how students think about race and speech. Using social media, Jeremiah was able to engage in online racial checking and critique the microaggression, even though he did not have access to the agent of the microaggression. And although the responses to his post were mixed, with some support and some critique of his interpretation, the act of engaging in online racial checking prevented the microaggression from being further engrained in campus life as normal and acceptable. Had he simply shared the incident in a traditional counterspace he would have had access to moral support from other students of Color. But by engaging in online racial checking, Jeremiah created an online counterspace where he not only had immediate access to personal support but also increased his personal agency by using his experience to engage Whites and students of Color in a discussion that critiqued the prevalence of racial microaggressions on campus.

In another example, Stephanie talks about how a student posted an article about Harriet Tubman’s being put on the twenty-dollar bill. A White male student responded to this post, indicating that he was going to miss Andrew Jackson. A flurry of comments ensued, with many students responding by pointing out how, among other morally questionable actions, Andrew Jackson had been involved in a genocide and therefore was not a historical figure that should be honored by having his face on our currency. As the student continued to defend Andrew Jackson, Stephanie says this of her own response:

I commented something like—oh my god, I can’t even remember what this comment was, but it was, it was gold, it was really good. . . . A whole bunch of people liked it, and I felt

validated by the fact that a whole bunch of people liked my like shaming of this guy.

The idea that a White man can be shamed by a Black woman because he defends a prominent White man and American historical figure, and that this shaming garners much support (in the form of Facebook likes), is a shift in how we have traditionally thought about racial dynamics on college campuses. By engaging in online racial checking, Stephanie participated in the creation of an online counterspace where dominant historical narratives were questioned. She does not remember the words she used in her post, but she remembers the social impact it had, the support she received, and how in that moment the campus racial power dynamics were turned upside down.

DISCUSSION

In this article I answer a call to study microaggressions from a sociological perspective, recognizing these interpersonal acts—or resistance against them—in the context of a racialized society (Embrick, Domínguez, and Karsak 2017). Because microaggressions function as mechanisms of the new racism, a racialized system characterized by subtle racism and the color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2015), participating in online counterspaces and online racial checking is radical and subversive. For just as microaggressions are interpersonal acts that reinforce racist structures, online racial checking is an interpersonal act that challenges White hegemony on college campuses and beyond. In the absence of an institutional push against microaggressions, both in person and online, students of Color in this sample use technology and social media to independently assess, critique, and sanction racial microaggressions in new and effective ways.

There are several characteristics of online counterspaces that distinguish them from in-person counterspaces, including norms of discussion that privilege evidence, logic, and clarity of argument—characteristics that are often missing from in-person racial discourse and that seem to run contrary to the hyperaggressive style of discourse seen in other online contexts; their student-driven creation, maintenance, content, and ability to function without institutional support; their being integrated spaces, bringing racial discussions from the margins to the mainstream; their not being limited by physical distance between parties and ability to include a larger audience than on-campus counterspaces, giving students of Color immediate access to increased support and amplifying their messages; their ability to be

either temporary or permanent; and their being characterized by online racial checking, a potentially collaborative process that decreases the social pressure on any one student to respond and increases the support students of Color perceive when critiquing racial microaggressions or dominant racial ideologies.

Sue (2010) reports that the most common response to microaggressions is to do nothing for the following six reasons: (1) not being sure a microaggression has occurred, (2) not knowing how to respond, (3) not being able to respond quickly enough, (4) the tendency for targets of microaggressions to make themselves think the microaggression did not actually occur, (5) the belief that responding to racial microaggressions is futile and won't change anything, and (6) fear of potential negative consequences of responding to racial microaggressions due to racial power dynamics in various social contexts.

These reasons that microaggressions are ignored are largely negated in online counterspaces, as (1) collective interpretations of racial microaggressions lessen attributional ambiguity, (2) increased social support lessens the need for individual students to know how to respond to racial microaggressions, (3) the structure of online discourse decreases the degree to which responses to microaggressions must be immediate, (4) collective interpretations and discussions of microaggressions makes it less likely for targets of microaggressions to deny these experiences, (5) the perceived potency of online racial checking reinforces critiques of racial microaggressions, and (6) online counterspaces become liminal spaces where racial power dynamics are flipped, as collective resistance to racial microaggressions normalizes resistance and challenges the norms that allow microaggressions to go unchecked in other contexts.

These findings add more complexity to the discussion of racial microaggressions on college campuses. Prior research largely focuses on the negative impacts of microaggressions and students' *internalized* responses to these incidents (including self-care as a form of resistance; hooks 1990). But here the focus is *externalized* responses, including individual- and group-level processes and collaborative actions taken to combat racist ideologies. Furthermore, this research builds on prior work that explores counterpublics (Groshek and Han 2011; Hill 2018; Jackson et al. 2020) and racial safe havens (Tynes et al. 2011) and adds an investigation of not just online resistance activities but also the connection between online resistance and face-to-face interactions on campus. Outside of the college environment, some aspects of these

processes will differ, as online discussions are less likely to be tied to tangible in-person communities. But these concepts still can be used to understand the distinct style of responses to microaggressions that typify many online contexts.

One example of online racial checking outside of a university context, or Facebook, comes from the Twitter account @YesYoureRacist. The account is known for its clever responses and creative ways of shaming Twitter users who post microaggressive or overtly racist comments. In the wake of the 2017 White supremacist march in Charlottesville, @YesYoureRacist tweeted pictures of march participants to its 400,000 followers, asking them if they recognized any of the White supremacists (Blay 2017). This collaborative effort between @YesYoureRacist and its followers resulted in several Alt-Right demonstrators' having their identities exposed and losing their jobs.

This is not the only Twitter account that has gained popularity from its critical and clever engagement with dominant racial ideologies. I suggest that the perceived consequences of responding to microaggressions in person—being labeled too sensitive or militant—not only are lessened in many online contexts but are reversed. On Twitter in particular, where movements and discussions that critique dominant narratives and structures (such as #BlackLivesMatter) are highly visible, users can expect that engaging in online racial checking will not bring shame but instead will be met with support and positive feedback from users who empathize with or share in their experiences. Far from scaring users away from responding to racial slights, these dynamics create social incentives to engage in online racial checking. The increasing prevalence of online racial checking shifts the norms around racial discourse and the social acceptability of microaggressions, creating and solidifying online counterspaces.

Within the distinct confines of online counterspaces, people—and not just people of Color—are more available and willing to talk about race. This reflects part of what makes discourse on the digital stage—neither backstage nor frontstage—distinct from discourse in face-to-face interactions. In online counterspaces Whites are not *silent*, and people of Color are not *silenced*. This shift away from silence weakens one of the more effective mechanisms of covert racism, wherein Whites ignore issues of race or explain them in racial terms. Young people of Color are empowered by explicitly acknowledging and critiquing the racist ideologies that support practices like microaggressions, refusing to accept the prevalence of

microaggressions as normal, acceptable, or immutable. Online counterspaces and online racial checking have the potential to change the way race is experienced by young people of Color, on college campuses and beyond. Future research will explore these processes in different settings, with other populations, and using alternative methodologies.

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