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## Perceptions of Racism Among College Students: Race, Gender, and the Influence of Social Media

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PUBLIC POLICY

PERCEPTIONS OF RACISM AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS: RACE, GENDER, AND  
THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

By

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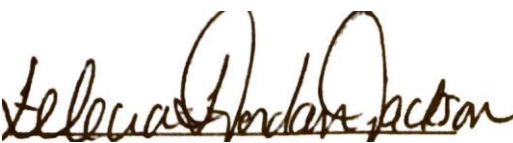
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Presently, race is at the forefront of many sociopolitical discussions. Although talking about race may be uncomfortable at times, we cannot deny that race relations play a significant role in our daily lives and in society more broadly. Opinions on racial inequality vary, including those who are concerned about racial inequality, those who feel it no longer exists, and everyone in-between. With myriad opinions existing on all sides of the spectrum, this study aims to analyze and understand these varying perceptions of racial inequality. In particular, this paper analyzes whether perceptions of racism vary by race and gender, progressive attitudes about race-related issues, and access to political information on social media platforms.

This study was inspired by a research project conducted in the summer of 2016 for a Methods of Social Research course. The project focused on differences in perceptions of racism between male and female college students. The pilot study found that female participants were more aware of and sympathetic towards the issue of institutional racism. I decided to expand on this project for my Honors Thesis by conducting a more comprehensive study and including social media use as a variable.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Although empirical data supports the notion that systematic racism still exists in the United States (Reich, 1981; Reich, 1996), there remains a wide range of difference when it comes to how individuals perceive this inequality. Research suggests that these differences may be correlated to various independent variables, such as race, gender, and class. However, research in this area is limited, as past studies tend to center only on the perceptions of specific population segments and have rarely included transmission mechanisms that inform people's perceptions. By taking an intersectional approach, I hope to build upon this research by accounting for race, gender,

progressive political attitudes, and social media use for information gathering. In sociological terms, intersectionality refers to “the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but rather as reciprocally constructing phenomena” (Collins, 2015). Therefore, it is important to consider multiple aspects of a participant’s identity, because the axes in which these identities exist are interdependent of one another, and exposure to racially charged perceptions and information vary depending on social location (i.e., findings that result from studying white female students cannot necessarily be applied to black female students and vice versa).

### The History of Racial Inequality

Before we can address racial inequality as it currently stands, we must first establish a historical framework for the foundations of racism that set the stage for what exists today. African-Americans have been at a socioeconomic disadvantage in the United States from well before the country’s inception. African-Americans were deprived of basic human rights from colonial America until slavery was abolished with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. However, the abolition of slavery did not equate to a new, egalitarian society. Centuries of imprisonment had not only left African-Americans at a place of disadvantage, but had also fabricated the false ideology that Black people were inherently inferior to Whites. Those who were economically invested in the institution of slavery justified the enslavement of African-Americans using religious and pseudoscientific arguments (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). Religious proponents of slavery maintained the “inferiority” and lack of humanity of African-Americans was ordained by God (Haynes, 2002). Other proponents of slavery used so-called “scientific” explanations to support their positions, which we now classify as biological racism. Claims of biological and evolutionary differences between Black and White people were used to insist that those of African

descent were physically, morally, and intellectually inferior (Hanson & Hanson, 2006). This is important to mention, because such attitudes did not dissipate after the Civil War and carried on long after the abolition of slavery.

This climate of deeply ingrained racial prejudice ultimately led to the system of racial segregation that we know today as the Jim Crow Era. Jim Crow segregation barred people of color from public places and utilities, as well as from attending decent schools and fully participating in elections, labor, and housing markets. This system of de jure segregation lasted until as recently as 1964, 53 short years before today. This is not to mention generations of xenophobic attitudes towards other non-White people of color, like those of Eastern European, Italian, Asian descent or of mixed races, that have contributed to the ongoing discrimination against all racial minorities. Although brief in my explanation, this history of racial inequality set the tone for the systematic, institutional racism that exists today, thus demonstrating that this history is not behind us.

### Racial Inequality Today

Empirical data supports the assertion that institutional racism persists today at virtually all levels. Centuries of enslavement, followed by years of discrimination in social and economic institutions, such as housing, labor, and criminal justice, have created enduring disadvantages for people of color that extend into the present day lived experiences of African-Americans and other racial minorities. Research on the subject is extensive and shows that accomplishments made towards civil rights during the 1960s did not fully cure our society's problem of racial inequality. For example, despite the Fair Housing Act of 1968, which was designed to put an end to housing discrimination, African-Americans still experience discrimination in about one out of every five experiences related to buying homes (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Inequalities are also present in the building of credit and acquiring mortgages (Pager and Shepherd, 2008). In even more cases,



African-Americans are excluded outright from certain areas of the housing market (Roscigno, Karafin, & Tester, 2009). This steering of African-Americans towards lower-income neighborhoods also steers their children towards lower-income schools, depriving them of opportunity and perpetuating the generational cycle of poverty.

Racial disparities in wealth have also been studied at length. Researchers have identified a significant wealth gap between Black and White Americans, such that White households possess “between five and ten times the net worth of black households” (Barsky, et al, 2002; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006). This is largely due to disparities in generational wealth that date back as far as slavery (Avery & Rendall, 2002; Conley, 2001). Discrimination also persists in the job market. A 2001 survey found that over 33% of Black participants and over 20% of Asian participants felt they had experienced racial discrimination in regard to getting a job or a promotion (Schiller, 2007). In fact, a White person with a criminal record is more likely to be called back by a potential employer than a Black person with no criminal record (Pager & Quillian, 2005). There is evidence that African-Americans have unequal access to healthcare (Williams & Sternthal, 2010); evidence that people of color receive harsher legal punishments than White offenders for the same crimes (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2004); and evidence that the stress alone of experiencing racial inequality over the life course is linked to mental illness (Brown, 2003). These few example studies demonstrate only a fraction of how racial inequality has persisted in virtually all social and economic institutions and, thus, further the assertion that racial inequality has not gone away.

### New Racial Attitudes

The data discussed above clearly demonstrate the existence of contemporary racial stratification and supports the assertion that people of color experience disadvantages in the United States because of their race. Yet, research also shows that the jury is out among Americans when

it comes to acknowledging this inequality. Many Americans today believe that we live in a “post-racial” society (Bonilla-Silva, 2017); meaning the United States as a collective no longer discriminates based on race. While it is true that discrimination based on race is no longer legal, Bonilla-Silva explains that it does still occur, under the guise of a new racial ideology known as “color-blind racism” (2017). Color-blind racism differs from racism of the past by upholding racial hierarchy through thinly-veiled, less overt mechanisms. These mechanisms maintain a status of disadvantage for people of color, whether it be through mass incarceration or by job discrimination, in ways that are much less conspicuous than slavery or segregation. For example, a common aspect of color-blind racism is the de-racialization of otherwise racial conversations (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). Phrases like “I don’t see color” have become commonplace, often used by White individuals trying to rid themselves of culpability (Bonilla-Silva & Foreman, 2000).

Other researchers have uncovered similar concepts, such as symbolic racism (Henry & Sears, 2003) and racial resentment (Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Taken together, these concepts refer to the ideology that encompasses those who feel racial inequality no longer exists, that racial minorities have demanded too many “handouts” (Henry & Sears, 2003), and that any racial problem in the United States exists only in the imaginations of people of color. However, on the other side of the aisle are those who find racial inequality to be an urgent and persistent social problem. Social movements that advocate for the advancement of racial justice, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, proselytize this point of view. This leaves us with a dichotomy between those who advocate for racial equality and those who feel that racism is a thing of the past—all existing at once in an increasingly polarized political arena.

## Racial Perceptions by Race

Research indicates that a gap exists between Black and White Americans in their perceptions of racial inequality. White Americans perceive that greater levels of progress have been made towards racial inequality, while Black Americans perceive that much more work needs to be done (DeBell, 2017). When focusing on college student populations, researchers have found that White college students are less likely to believe that their campuses are racist than Black students at the same institutions (Rankin & Reason, 2005). Furthermore, a study conducted by Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) found that most White students did not believe racial discrimination to be a pressing problem; rather, they minimized the issue. However, it is worth noting that this finding can only be applied to White college students because this study did not include students of color. When researchers expanded on the work of Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) with students of color considered, they found little difference between White and Black college students in terms of their perceptions of racial discrimination (Graham & Brooks, 2010). They found that most of the students surveyed, both Black and White, believed racial discrimination is still a problem. However, Graham and Brooks (2010) emphasize that their sample of students was from a rather liberal campus, which may account for this similarity in attitudes. Furthermore, their study was conducted ten years later than Bonilla-Silva's. These discrepancies in the literature further promote studying all populations' attitudes about racial injustice if we are to better understand their subsequent perceptions of discrimination and inequality.

## Racial Perceptions by Gender

Little research has been conducted regarding the differences between men and women in their perceptions of institutional racism. A 2005 study did find that women are more likely than men to favor policies like Affirmative Action (Feldman & Huddy, 2005). Another study conducted

in 2013 found White female college students to hold less racial resentment than their White male counterparts (Smith, Senter, & Strachan, 2013). We may also consider that certain aspects of being female as opposed to being male (i.e., experiencing gender inequality over the life course) may contribute toward female students' sensitivity and awareness of racism. However, because this study only included White participants in its population, we are unable to generalize this finding to all female college students more broadly. While finding a difference between White males and White females is significant, it is difficult to say that the same would be found if Black college students were surveyed. Further study is needed to determine whether gender, and possibly experiences with gender inequality, are correlated with a greater awareness of racial inequality.

#### Race and Social Media

All of the studies reviewed so far, however, do not explore links between perceptions of racial inequality and the study of social media. Existing studies within the two disciplines focus primarily on cyber racism and unequal access to online media platforms. Researchers do know that access to social media is racially stratified, just like access to any other economic resource (Schradi, 2012). Furthermore, the anonymity provided by social media has made the expression of unfiltered opinions more comfortable for some (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012), although this anonymity does not reveal the whole story. Data shows that in the days following the election of President Barack Obama, traffic to white supremacist websites skyrocketed, so much so that their servers crashed (Daniels, 2009). Changing media and social landscapes seem to have influenced the ebb and flow of racial discourse and social justice online. A significant portion of social media research has also been dedicated to the study of online social movements, such as Occupy Wall Street (Adi, 2015) and the Arab Spring (Affaya, 2011), which have led researchers to coin the term "digital activism" (Mitu & Vega, 2014). This online mobilization has extended

into the realm of racial justice, most notably through movements like Dream Defenders and Black Lives Matter.

Not only has the online discourse mobilized by the Black Lives Matter movement translated into real-life mobilization, but it has also allowed issues like police brutality to be illuminated at times where they have historically been ignored by traditional media (Kidd, 2017). Furthermore, recent data from the Pew Research Center shows African-Americans and Latinos are particularly attracted to Twitter, where racialized discourse is common (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). This speaks particularly to the rise of spaces like “Black Twitter,” an online space dedicated to the Black community and the sharing of Black culture (Kid, 2017). Such spaces are of interest to researchers who are looking to understand the relationship between racial socialization and social media.

We must keep in mind that all sides of the racial discourse use social media. White supremacist groups have been known to mobilize online (Brown, 2009) and hate groups in general have long used the Internet to spread their ideas and recruit new members (McNamee, Peterson, & Peña, 2010). Racial incidents on college campuses have also translated into online social spaces. College students were found to frequently express anti-Black sentiment on anonymous social media apps like College Leak and Yik Yak (Gin, et al, 2017). This is not to say that expressions of racism on social media have replaced in-person racism on campus, but rather that social media has provided a new place to express racial prejudice.

Social media plays a significant role in sharing social justice information and, as a result, awareness of racial injustice and online racial activism are growing. A recent study conducted at the University of Central Florida examined the use of social media as a resource for information about the Black Lives Matter movement (Cox, 2017). Of the students surveyed, two-thirds

reported that they received their information about Black Lives Matter from social media (Cox, 2017). In my pilot study for this thesis, one of my findings was that female participants were more aware of and sympathetic towards the issue of persistent, institutional racism. This sympathetic alignment was due, in part, to their previous experiences with discrimination, which I examine more thoroughly in this paper. Based on the aforementioned research on online activism, the transmission of information about politics and racial injustice through social media might have also accounted for female participants' awareness of systematic racism. Accordingly, I have also included variables on social media use for political and race-related information to compare with participants' perceptions of racial injustice.

## **VARIABLES AND HYPOTHESES**

I will be using race, gender, attitudes about inequality, past experience with inequality, and social media use as my independent variables. Attitudes about inequality refer to one's perception of racial progress as well as ideas about affirmative action and the Black Lives Matter movement. Past experience with inequality refers to personal experience with gender inequality, racial inequality, and inequality based on sexual orientation. My dependent variables are how participants perceive racial inequality and how they perceive racial discrimination. Both dependent variables will be measured on their own individual scales. The inequality scale measures the extent to which a participant perceives racial inequality to be a problem in the United States, while the discrimination scale measures the level to which the participant perceives racial discrimination is still occurring. Higher scores on each scale indicate agreement or alignment that racial inequality and discrimination are still problems, while lower scores indicate denial or disregard. My hypotheses are as follows:

1. Women and people of color who have experienced discrimination will be more likely to perceive racial discrimination and inequality as real and pressing problems.
- 2a. People who have progressive attitudes about affirmative action, increased social spending, and Black Lives Matter will be more likely to perceive racial discrimination and inequality as real and pressing problems.
- 2b. People who say we have made a lot of progress eliminating racial injustice will be less likely to perceive racial discrimination and inequality as real and pressing problems.
3. People who use social media to discuss and read about politics and race-related issues will be more likely to perceive racial discrimination and inequality as real and pressing problems.

## **METHODS**

### Survey Design

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the use of an electronic survey. The survey was conducted with Qualtrics Survey Software and consisted of twenty-one questions, including multiple choice, sliding-scales, and long answer questions. The first block of questions collected demographic data including the sex, race, and ethnicity of each respondent. Subsequent questions regarding perceptions of racial inequality and discrimination were pulled from the Detroit Area Study conducted by Bonilla-Silva at the University of Michigan (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Questions were also included from the “Symbolic Racism 2000 Scale,” which was created by Henry and Sears (2002). These studies were used because they measured similar variables pertaining to individual perceptions of racial inequality and race relations. Their questions were then used to create two separate scales, one to measure perceptions of inequality

and the other to measure perceptions of discrimination. Both scales displayed inter-item reliability and validity using Cronbach's Alpha tests where the inequality scale yielded an alpha of 0.8862 and the discrimination scale an alpha of 0.9119.

The survey included one long answer qualitative question. This question provided respondents with an opportunity to express their feelings towards present-day racial inequality, whatever they may be, in their own words. Subsequent survey questions touched on other variables, such as past experiences with discrimination and social media use. Other questions asked about attitudes towards things like affirmative action, spending on racialized social programs, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Participants were also asked if they had ever experienced inequality and if this inequality was based on race, gender, or sexual orientation. To avoid any discomfort for students, they were provided with an "I prefer not to answer" option. The purpose of asking about experiences with discrimination was to explore the link between experience with various forms of inequality and perceptions of racial inequality. The remaining questions considered social media use in order to determine if social media use relates to differing perceptions of racial equality.

## Sample

The population of focus for this research study was college students. Although there were 209 responses to the survey, many participants indicated that they were not college students and were subsequently excluded. I have a final convenience sample of 110 college students, 88 of which were female and 22 of which were male. Respondents were solicited through class email rosters and social media websites. Given greater resources, it would have been preferable to conduct this study using random probability sampling, especially to acquire greater diversity and accurately apply an intersectional approach.



## **FINDINGS**

### **Quantitative Results**

This study analyzed the influence of several different variables on college students' perceptions of racial inequality and discrimination. These variables were race, gender, attitudes about inequality, past experiences with inequality, and social media use. Various statistical tests using Stata/SE were conducted to examine the relationships between these variables.

#### **Race, Gender, and Experience**

Seventy-nine percent of all respondents reported having experience with some kind of discrimination. Of the 73 female respondents who reported discrimination, sixty-three said it was due to gender inequality, while eight said it was due to racial inequality. Of those who specified gender inequality, forty-two were white, eight were black, and two identified as mixed race or other. Of those who specified experience due to racial inequality, one was white, five were black, and two were mixed race or other. No correlation was found between these experiences and perceptions of discrimination or inequality.

#### **Attitudes about Racial Progress and Policy**

When asked how much progress they felt has been made in eliminating racial inequality, 16% of participants perceived that there has been not much real change, 70% perceived that there has been some progress but not a lot, and the remaining 14% perceived that there has been a lot of progress. Students were split on the issue of Affirmative Action, with 49% saying they oppose and 51% saying they favor such measures. Questions regarding the Black Lives Matter movement revealed that 69% percent of students feel that racial activists are going at about the right speed,

while 16% feel that racial activists are going too slowly and 15% reported that racial activists are pushing too fast.

### Social Media Use

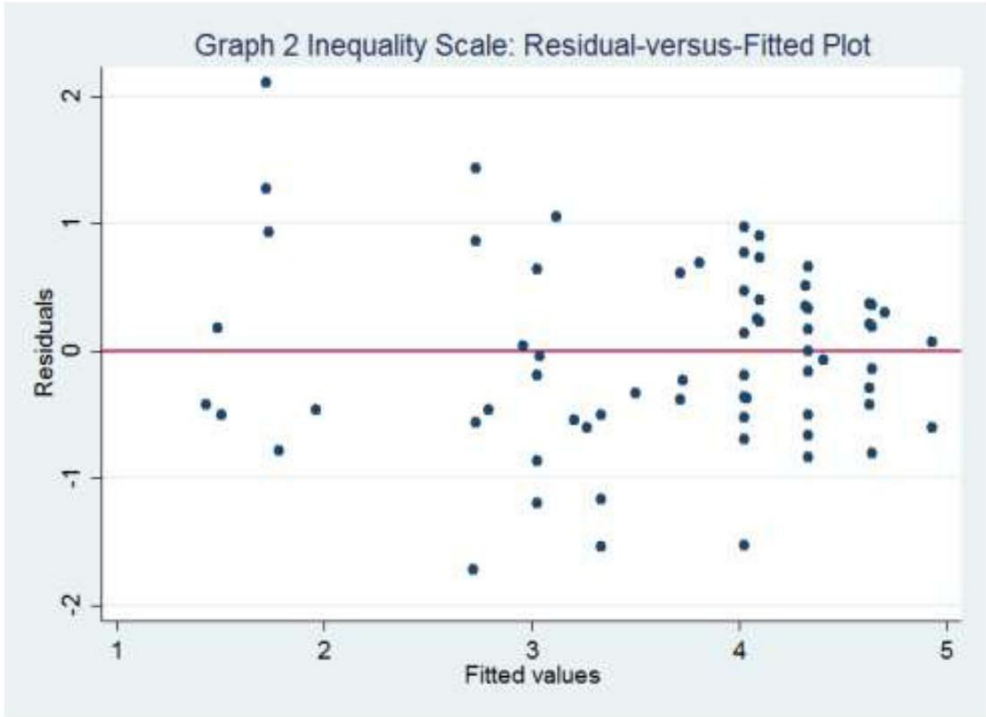
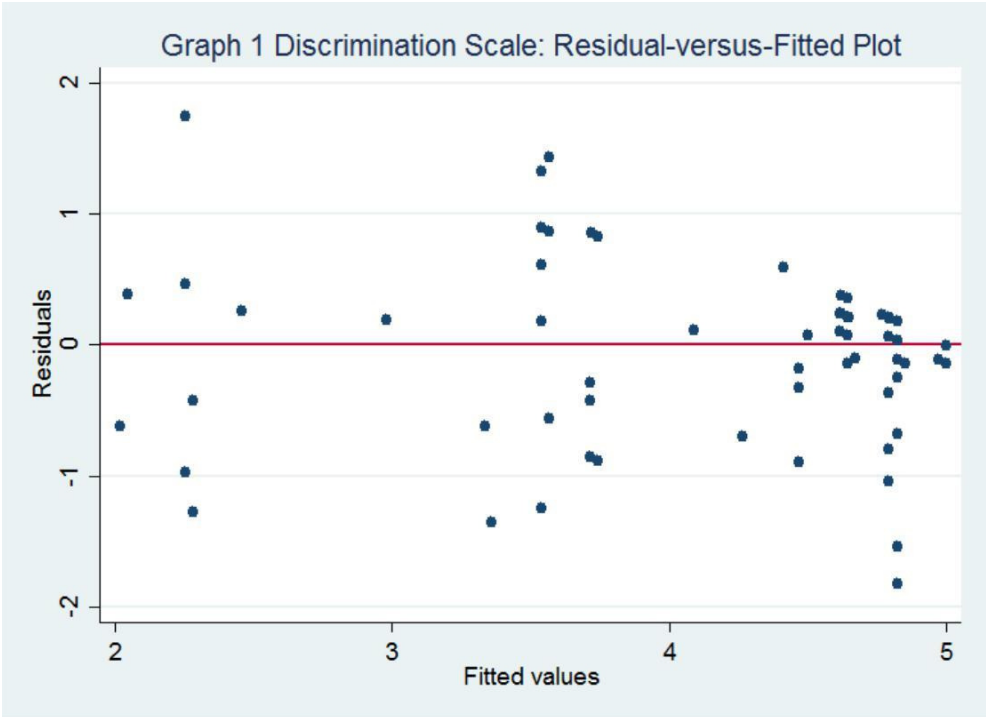
Ninety-four percent of participants reported that they use some form of social media, with eighty-six percent of those reported that they use it on a daily basis. Ninety-four percent of participants who use social media reported having read about or discussed politics on social media in the past. Ninety-two percent of social media users reported having read about or discussed specifically race-related issues on social media.

After conducting several preliminary analyses, including t-tests and ANOVA to compare group means and bivariate correlations, I determined that differences between group means existed for many of my variables of interest and warranted additional analysis. Unfortunately, the results of the t-tests and one-way ANOVA for sex and race did not meet the assumptions necessary for further analysis and were excluded from the following models. To further this intellectual exercise and expand my statistical skillset, I worked with Dr. Klein to learn Stata and Multivariate OLS Regression to model the best possible fit among several predictor variables of interest. We conducted pre- and post-estimation regression diagnostics to test assumptions necessary for sound linear modeling.

### Post-Estimation OLS Regression Diagnostics

Despite the Shapiro-Wilk test for normality indicating that residuals are normally distributed, the residual-versus-fitted plots appear to have heteroscedasticity (see Graph 1 and Graph 2). A subsequent Breusch-Pagan/Cook-Weisberg test for heteroscedasticity confirmed

violating the assumption of homoscedasticity where the null hypothesis of constant variance was rejected.



To test model specification, I used linktest and found that the dependent variable was correctly specified ( $\chi^2$  was insignificant for all models). Additionally, I ran a Ramsey RESET omitted variables test to see whether there were omitted variables in the model. The null hypothesis stated that the "model has no omitted variables," which was supported for the two models using the discrimination scale and was not supported for the two models using the inequality scale. Attempts to add variables to pass the omitted variable test for the two models using the inequality scale were unsuccessful, and there appears to be one or more concepts that I did not measure on the survey.

Regarding the assumption for no or little multicollinearity, pre-estimation tests showed bivariate correlations between two sets of variables, including (1) act1 (affirmative action hiring), act2 (social spending), and act3 (Black Lives Matter); (2) soc (social media use), soc2 (how often), soc3 (for politics), and soc4 (for race); and (3) exp (experienced discrimination), prog (extent of progress made), and soc4 (social media use for race). In post-estimation tests, the combination of a low Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (1.02 to 1.22) and a high Eigensystem Analysis of Correlation Matrix Condition Number (20.21 to 31.58) further indicates multicollinearity. After running tests on all combinations of variables within each set, I determined that the effects between act1 and act3, exp and prog, and exp and soc4 did not differ significantly from each other. Therefore, to reduce the effects of multicollinearity created by keeping the variables separate, I generated three new variables from those pairs to include in the models: act1plusact3 (attitudes about affirmative action and Black Lives Matter), expplusprog (experience with discrimination and attitudes about progress for racial injustice), and expplussoc4 (experience with discrimination and using social media for race-related information). The four models described below reflect changes resulting from these diagnostic tests.

## Regression Models

The first model estimates how a number of possible variables can predict perceptions of discrimination. Independent variables included past experiences with discrimination, progressive attitudes, and using social media for reading about or discussing race-related issues. Taking only the significant predictors into account, for each unit increase in participants' favorable views on affirmative action hiring and racial activism, participants' predicted perceptions of discrimination increased by 0.18. For each unit increase in participants' favorable views on increasing spending for social programs that assist people of color, participants' predicted perceptions of discrimination increased by 1.11 ( $Y = -0.03 + 0.18act1plusact3 + 1.11act2$ ). These two independent variables were significant predictors of participants' perceptions of discrimination (see Table 1).

**Table 1** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceptions of Racial Discrimination

VARIABLES	Coefficients ( $\beta$ )	Robust Standard Errors (SE)
Personal Experience with Discrimination + Perception of Racial Progress	0.03	0.113
Personal Experience with Discrimination + Social Media Use for Racial Discussion	0.17	0.145
Views on Affirmative Action + Views on Racial Activism	0.18*	0.080
Views on Spending for Racial Programs	1.11***	0.139
Constant	-0.03	0.554
Observations	90	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.65	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.63	

Note: \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

The second model builds on the first model and adds the predictor for using social media for reading about or discussing political issues. Regarding the significant predictors, for each unit increase in participants' favorable views on affirmative action hiring and racial activism, there was a 0.23 increase on the discrimination scale. For each increase in participants' favorable views on increasing spending for social programs that assist people of color, there was a 1.03 increase on the discrimination scale. For each increase in participant's use of social media for political discussion, there was a 0.68 increase on the discrimination scale ( $Y = -0.92 + 0.23act1 + 1.03act2 + 0.68soc3$ ). These independent variables were also significant predictors of participants' perceptions of racial discrimination (see Table 2.)

**Table 2** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceptions of Racial Discrimination

VARIABLES	Coefficients ( $\beta$ )	Robust Standard Errors (SE)
Personal Experience with Inequality + Perception of Racial Progress	0.05	0.108
Personal Experience with Inequality + Social Media Use for Racial Discussion	0.04	0.116
Views on Affirmative Action + Views on Racial Activism	0.23**	0.080
Views on Spending for Racial Programs	1.03***	0.137
Social Media Use for Political Discussion	0.68**	0.224
Constant	-0.92	0.588
Observations	90	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.67	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.65	

Note: \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

Using the discrimination scale as the outcome variable, there were few significant predictors of change among our independent variables. This is likely due to the small, unequal sample size and the wording of each item included in the scale. Despite the lack of significance in these two models, when I included social media use for reading about or discussing political issues, there was a slight increase in overall model fit (Adjusted  $R^2=0.65$ ), and the participants' favorable views on affirmative action hiring and racial activism became significant. This result could mean that people with progressive attitudes who use social media for political information gathering tend to have more awareness about racial discrimination.

The third model mirrors the first model, but measures the effects of the predictor variables on the inequality scale rather than the discrimination scale. Independent variables included past experiences with discrimination, progressive attitudes, and using social media for reading about or discussing race-related issues. According to the significant coefficients, for each unit increase in participants' experience with discrimination and attitudes about progress for racial injustice, there was a 0.29 decrease on the inequality scale. For each unit increase in participants' experience with discrimination and use of social media for race-related discussion, there was a 0.53 increase on the inequality scale. For each unit increase in participants' favorable views on affirmative action hiring and racial activism, there was a 0.31 increase on the inequality scale. Lastly, for each increase in participants' favorable views on increasing spending for social programs that assist people of color, there was a 1.00 increase on the inequality scale ( $Y = -0.82 - 0.29\text{expplusprog} + 0.53\text{expplussoc4} + 0.31\text{act1plusact3} + 1.00\text{act2}$ ). These variables were significant predictors of change in the dependent variable (see Table 3.)

The fourth model builds on the third model and adds the predictor for using social media for reading about or discussing political issues to estimate change in participants' perceptions of

inequality. Four predictor variables remained significant from the third model. For each unit increase in participants' experience with discrimination and attitudes about progress for racial injustice, there was a 0.29 decrease on the inequality scale. For each unit increase in participants' experience with discrimination and use of social media for race-related discussion, there was a 0.49 increase on the inequality scale. For each unit increase in participants' favorable views on affirmative action hiring and racial activism, there was a 0.32 increase on the inequality scale. Finally, for each increase in participants' favorable views on increasing spending for social programs that assist people of color, there was a 0.98 increase on the inequality scale ( $Y = -1.08 - 0.29\text{expplusprog} + 0.49\text{expplussoc4} + 0.32\text{act1plusact3} + 0.98\text{act2}$ ). Like the model described in Table 3, these variables were significant predictors of change on the dependent variable (see Table 4.)

**Table 3** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceptions of Racial Inequality

VARIABLES	Coefficients ( $\beta$ )	Robust Standard Errors (SE)
Personal Experience with Inequality + Perception of Racial Progress	-0.29*	0.115
Personal Experience with Inequality + Social Media Use for Racial Discussion	0.53**	0.165
Views on Affirmative Action + Views on Racial Activism	0.31**	0.108
Views on Spending for Racial Programs	1.00***	0.180
Constant	-0.82	0.592
Observations	92	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.63	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.62	

Note: \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05



**Table 4** Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Perceptions of Racial Inequality

VARIABLES	Coefficients ( $\beta$ )	RobustStandard Errors (SE)
Personal Experience with Inequality + Perception of Racial Progress	-0.29*	0.117
Personal Experience with Inequality + Social Media Use for Racial Discussion	0.49*	0.153
Views on Affirmative Action + Views on Racial Activism	0.32**	0.108
Views on Spending for Racial Programs	0.98***	0.186
Social Media Use for Political Discussion	0.21	0.288
Constant	-1.08	0.667
Observations	92	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.64	
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.61	

Note: \*\*\* p<0.001, \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05

In sum, two of my four hypotheses were correct and two were incorrect. Women and people of color who had experienced discrimination were not found to be more aware of racial inequality and discrimination. As for hypothesis 2a, students with more progressive views on affirmative action hiring and Black Lives Matter did show higher awareness of racial discrimination and inequality. Those who favored increased spending on social programs also displayed a higher awareness of racial discrimination as well as inequality. However, perceptions of racial progress when combined with having experienced discrimination did not influence perceptions of discrimination, but it did have an effect on awareness of racial inequality more broadly meaning that hypothesis 2b was correct. Hypothesis three was half correct in that those who used social media to discuss politics showed a higher awareness of racial discrimination, but now inequality.

Further, those who had previously experienced discrimination and used social media to discuss race-related issues showed higher awareness of racial inequality but not racial discrimination. These findings are a bit confusing, likely due to the complexities of the measurement scales that are probably better suited for a larger sample size and not being able to fully meet the assumptions needed for sound OLS regression results.

### Qualitative Results

Participants were presented with one long answer question that asked them to describe their feelings towards racial inequality. The question asked if they felt that racial minorities are still at a disadvantage or not, and to explain their reasoning in their own words. Out of ninety-nine responses (eleven participants opted not to answer the question), eighty-percent acknowledged the existence of racial inequality. Thirteen percent expressed the belief that racial inequality no longer exists in the present day. Many such responses attributed any racial inequalities to the behaviors and attitudes of racial minorities themselves, not to racial stratification. Some acknowledged the possible existence of a systemic problem, but pivoted their reasoning away from race in favor of other explanations. The remaining seven percent of students expressed mixed or ambiguous feelings that could not be categorized as acknowledgement or denial of racism.

The demographic makeup of the qualitative responses is quite interesting. Out of ninety-nine responses, seventy-five were written by White students. Most White students (77%, or 58 students) wrote responses acknowledging the existence of institutional racism. Ten White students wrote responses denying the existence of racial inequality and the other six remained undecided. In contrast, all Black students who wrote long answer responses (eleven students in total) affirmed the existence of racial inequality. No denials were written by Black students. The same goes for Asian and Native American students, who all affirmed racial inequality. The remaining three

responses that denied racial inequality were written by students who reported non-specified mixed race. The last undecided participant was of mixed race as well. Of course, there were fewer students of color in total compared to White students in this study. Still, it is interesting that the students of color who participated in long answers unanimously agreed that systematic racism exists.

Gender was also found to play an important role in the qualitative responses. A higher percentage of male students (White males in particular) denied racism than did female students. Males were also more likely to be undecided. Furthermore, 83% of those who acknowledged racism in their responses had a personal experience with discrimination, as opposed to only 54% of those who denied. Moreover, mirroring the quantitative results, a higher percentage (23%) of those who denied racism were found not to use any kind of social media, compared to only three percent of those who acknowledged racial inequality reporting no social media use.

*“Yes, People Be Racist”*

The overwhelming theme in the qualitative responses was that racial inequality in the United States does exist and has existed for some time. Many participants responded enthusiastically, some even with multiple paragraphs, explaining their perceptions of what they feel is an unjust system. They explained the elements of sociopolitical life that they feel present obstacles to people of color, such as disparities in education, implicit biases, wealth gaps, and more. They also related these perceptions to historical foundations of racism, such as slavery and Jim Crow, to support their positions. The following are just a few quotes that are representative of the many similar feelings expressed by respondents:

“All the institutions this country was founded on were created in such a way to keep the status quo the same, thus negatively affecting racial minorities hundreds of years later.”

“Whils (sic) white families had years to build and succeed in life, they surpressed (sic) minorities using slavery, ghettos, and pre-conceived notions.”

“It is hard to better one's condition if the tools to further successes are unreachable, unattainable, or denied.”

Answers like these were not uncommon. Another theme that emerged among these students was the idea that institutional racism has not been alleviated largely because it has not been properly acknowledged. A few examples:

“Black people and other minorities will never truly cease to see violence and discrimination against them as long as the system that they live refuses to see that there is a problem ...”

“White peoplr (sic) benefit from a system of oppression of minorities and because it doesnt (sic) affect us- or because it does affect us in positive ways- we are unable to see it or choose to ignore it.”

“There is a regrettable unwillingness for the majority of white america to acknowledge this (systematic racism and white privilege) and so continues to limit the potential for significant, effective communication between racial minorities and the currently privileged.”

These students (and many others) expressed a belief that a widespread cultural reluctance to acknowledge racism is preventing the United States from moving past it.

*“Stop Making Everything a Race Thing”*

On the other side of the spectrum, thirteen percent of participants expressed the belief that racial inequality has already been overcome. These participants felt that equal opportunities are available to all regardless of race and that racial minority status is no longer a disadvantage. Many explained that discrepancies in life outcomes among the races are not due to racial injustice, but stem from other factors such as work ethic and upbringing. Several students invoked familiar stereotypes about African-Americans in their responses, such as those of the absentee father and dependence on welfare. A few examples include:

“I think it's because of all the social programs the government has set up, such as welfare and racial quotas. It's killed any motivation people have to improve their situation.”

“This is also largely due to them expecting handouts and doing harm to their own race instead of advancing it.”

“Racial minorities are at a disadvantage because the government has supported the breakup of the minority family through the use of welfare that rewards single-parent families. Research has shown how the presence of a father in the home stabilizes most families and promotes the well being (sic) of children. Children without fathers in the home essentially grow up damaged.”

It should be noted here that data collected by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that African-American fathers are the most involved fathers of any racial group (Jones & Mosher, 2013). Still, these students are exhibiting several elements of symbolic racism as described by Sears and Henry (2002) by implying that disadvantages experienced by African-Americans are due to entitlement. Another idea commonly expressed among students was the perception that minorities have it easier than other groups because of the “advantages” provided to them by the government and other organizations. One student wrote:

“I do believe that some racial minorities have advantages in today's society that the majority doesn't, such as affirmative action.”

Another said:

“Minorities have it easy to get scholarships or grants for schools while white people have a difficult time getting scholarships because so many are aimed at racial minorities.”

There clearly remains a perception among students that policies like Affirmative Action create unfair advantages for minorities rather than serve as remedies for disadvantages.

### Racial Resentment

Other responses included common elements of racial resentment and racial prejudice.

Bonilla-Silva often describes color-blind racism as a rhetorical strategy for blaming racial inequality not on social institutions, but on racial minorities themselves (2017). One student said:

“IF THEY WANT TO GUARANTEE A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE IT IS SIMPLE: Get a job, Graduate HS, Do Not have kids before marriage and you will stay out of poverty. They think they're entitled to everything but you see those who are successful actually worked towards something.”

This view expresses the idea that the position of racial minorities is due to poor work ethic and the making of bad “decisions” such as dropping out of high school or bearing children out of wedlock. Institutional racism is not thought to be a factor.

Another student said:

“... I live in AZ, and have been the victim of crime 5 times, including having my car stolen. ... Each time, it was illegal immigrants who perpetrated the crimes. When a blac (sic) family moved next door to us, they sold drugs from their driveway. People don't like to hear this--it's not "PC" to call certain races out on their behavior. It's unfair that I'm afraid to walk in my neighborhood at night, but if I complain I'm a racist. I guess I am now, but my views were earned through personal experiences ...”

This student expresses clear racial prejudice towards minority racial groups. Other students expressed racial resentment in more muted ways. For example, some felt that racial inequality might be an issue, but that those trying to remedy it are going about it the wrong way. Those students described movements such as Black Lives Matter as “violent” and “divisive.”

#### Political Affiliations

Students were not asked to report their political leanings at any time. Still, many students related their perceptions of racial inequality directly to their political beliefs, and did so unprompted. For example, some students related the election of Donald Trump directly to institutional racism:

“When your own president judges your character as a person based on your skin color and allows other citizens to do the same how can you not feel disadvantaged.”

“Racism is alive and well. The proof is in the White House.”

“It was clear with the election of a wealthy, white, racist, sexist, Islamophobic president that American minority lives have long been undervalued by the upper class and many of these people are devoted to keeping minorities down.”

Others expressed a belief in small government and a dislike of government programs. They related these political views directly to the perception that racial inequality is no longer a problem and that race-specific social programs are no longer necessary. It is worth noting that Sears and Henry (2002) consider traditional conservative values, such as individualism and self-determinism, to be core elements of symbolic racism.

## **DISCUSSION**

In sum, the college students who participated in this study displayed a decent awareness of racial inequality. Participants averaged a score of 4.17 out of 5 on the discrimination scale, with 5 indicating agreement that racial discrimination is still a problem. Participants also averaged 3.69 out of 5 on the inequality scale, with 5 indicating agreement that institutional racism exists. Race, gender, and personal experience with discrimination were not found to influence perceptions of racial injustice. Progressive attitudes and the use of social media for political and race-related information gathering were the only variables found to have an impact on perceptions of racism. Data indicated a positive relationship where higher levels of awareness were correlated with social media use and lower levels associated with no use.

Qualitative responses revealed that most students agree that racial minorities are still at a disadvantage in the United States. Many students were also quite knowledgeable about the mechanisms that uphold institutional racism as well as the history behind it. On the other hand, some students expressed a belief that the disadvantaged position of racial minorities is of their own doing. Many invoked age-old stereotypes about dependency on welfare, bad parenting, and

entitlement to “handouts” to explain why minorities can be unsuccessful in their endeavors. They also perceive that programs like affirmative action give minorities an unfair advantage that gives them an “easier” time than White people.

These findings suggest that awareness of racial injustice is not as related to identity and experience as it is to progressive attitudes and exposure to information on social media platforms. While it is known that social activists are using social media to share information, it is doubtful that all survey participants have racial activists in their online circle of friends. This implies that there may be other elements at play. Future research should investigate this relationship in order to determine what kind of influence social media is having on awareness of racism and on racial socialization more broadly. This discussion is important, as it is possible that social media use may be influencing perceptions of other social issues, such as gender inequality, income inequality, LGBT rights, and more. In turn, those who are unable or who choose not to use social media may not be getting the information they need to make fully-informed sociopolitical decisions. Future research should focus on social media as a significant factor in the development of such sociopolitical perceptions, including but not limited to that of racial justice.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A – Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Memo



Office of the Vice President for Research Human Subjects  
Committee Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2742  
(850) 644-8673 · FAX (850) 644-4392 APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

Date: To: 05/15/2017

Kristen Amaya <kma14d@my.fsu.edu>  
Address: 2181 Timberwood Circle South, Tallahassee, Fl, 32304

Dept.: SOCIOLOGY

From: Thomas L. Jacobson, Chair

Re: Use of Human Subjects in Research  
Perceptions of Racism Among College Students and the Influence of Social Media

The application that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be Expedited per 45 CFR § 46.110(7) and has been approved by an expedited review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals, which may be required.

If you submitted a proposed consent form with your application, the approved stamped consent form is attached to this approval notice. Only the stamped version of the consent form may be used in recruiting research subjects.

If the project has not been completed by you must request a renewal of approval for continuation of the project. As a courtesy, a renewal notice will be sent to you prior to your expiration date; however, it is your responsibility as the Principal Investigator to timely request renewal of your approval from the Committee.

You are advised that any change in protocol for this project must be reviewed and approved by the Committee prior to implementation of the proposed change in the protocol. A protocol change/amendment form is required to be submitted for approval by the Committee. In addition, federal regulations require that the Principal Investigator promptly report, in writing any unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Human Research Protection. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: John Reynolds <john.reynolds@fsu.edu>, Chair  
HSC No. 2017.20355

## Perceptions of Racial Inequality Among College Students: Race, Gender, and the Influence of Social Media

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### Consent Form

Q0 This study is being conducted by Kristen Amaya, an undergraduate student, in partial fulfillment of an Honors Thesis. Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey about your views on various race-related issues. Your answers will help me understand how college students feel about race and how other factors, such as gender and social media use, may affect those views. Your participation is completely voluntary and your answers are completely confidential. You may stop taking the survey at any time. Thank you for participating!

---

### Demographic Information

SEX What is your sex?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)

COLL Are you a college student?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

ETHN Are you Hispanic or Latino? (A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race.)

- Yes, Hispanic or Latino (1)
- No, not Hispanic or Latino (2)

RACE How would you describe yourself? (Choose from the following racial groups. You may select multiple categories.)


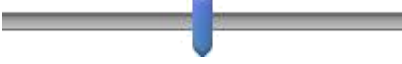





- Native American or Alaska Native (1)
  - Asian (2)
  - Black or African American (3)
  - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (4)
  - White (5)
  - Mixed Race (6)
  - Other (Please Specify): (7) \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 

**Racial Discrimination**

PROG Over the past 20 years or so, how much progress would you say has been made in getting rid of racial discrimination?







- Not much real change (1)
  - Some progress but not a lot (2)
  - A lot of progress (3)
-

**DISCRM How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (Be sure to click on the scale even if your answer is strongly disagree/zero!)**

Discrimination against people of color is no longer a problem in the United States. (1)	
Equal opportunity for both black and white people to succeed is important, but it's not really the government's job to guarantee it. (2)	
Most people of color make too big a deal about race. (3)	
It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if people of color would try harder they could be just as well off as white people. (4)	
A person of color in the United States has as good of a chance of getting ahead as a white person these days. (5)	
Many of the problems that racial minorities in this country have today are brought on by racial minorities themselves. (6)	
The government unfairly favors racial minorities over white people. (7)	

**Racial Inequality**

**INEQ How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (Be sure to click on the scale even if your answer is strongly disagree/zero!)**

Black people and other people of color are in the position that they are as a group because of present-day discrimination. (1)	
Racial minorities are not achieving equality as fast as they could because social systems are set up in such a way that makes it difficult for them. (2)	
The government should make every effort to improve the social and economic position of people of color living in the United States. (3)	
It's surprising that people of color do as well as they do, considering all the obstacles they face. (4)	
A small group of powerful and wealthy white people control things and act to keep racial minorities down. (5)	
Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for black people to work their way out of the lower class. (6)	



**ACT1 Do you oppose or favor giving preferences in hiring and promotion to certain racial groups who have experienced past disadvantages?**

- Oppose (1)
- Favor (2)

**ACT2 Should spending on programs that assist people of color be decreased, increased, or not changed at all?**

- Decrease spending (1)
- Not changed at all (2)
- Increase spending (3)

**ACT3 Do you think that racial activists, such as those of the Black Lives Matter movement, are pushing too fast, going too slowly, or moving at about the right speed?**

- Too fast (1)
- About right (2)
- Too slowly (3)

---

**Start of Block: Long Answer Responses**

**OPIN** In your opinion, are racial minorities still at a disadvantage in our society today? Why or why not? Please answer in your own words. (There are no wrong answers!)

---

**Start of Block: Experience with Inequality**

**EXP** Have you ever experienced discrimination or inequality based on your race, gender, or sexual orientation?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I prefer not to answer (3)

*Display This Question:*

*If Have you ever experienced discrimination or inequality based on your race, gender, or sexual orie... = Yes*

EXP2 What kind of inequality or discrimination did you experience? Please check all that apply.

- Gender inequality or discrimination (1)
- Racial inequality or discrimination (2)
- Inequality or discrimination based on sexual orientation (3)
- I prefer not to answer (4)

**Start of Block: Social Media Use/Influence**

SOC Do you ever use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or others?

- Yes (1)
- 

*Skip To: End of Survey If Do you ever use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or others? = No*

SOC2 How often do you use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, or others?

- Rarely (1)
- Sometimes (2)
- Daily (3)

SOC3 Have you ever read about or discussed politics on a social networking site?

- Yes (1)
-

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SOC4 Have you ever read about or discussed race and/or race-related issues on a social networking site?

Yes (1)

---

**Start of Block: End of Survey**

Q21 You have reached the end of the survey. Thank you for your participation!

**End of Block: End of Survey**

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