Color-blind racial ideology linked to racism, both online and offline

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Brendesha Tynes, a professor of educational psychology and of African American studies at Illinois, discovered that white students and those who rated highly in color-blind racial attitudes were more likely not to be offended by images from racially-themed parties where attendees dressed and acted as caricatures of racial stereotypes. Credit: Photo by R. Hanel Photography

Images from racial theme parties that are posted on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace not only elicit different reactions from different people based on their race and their attitudes toward diversity, they also represent an indirect way to express racist views about minorities, according to published research by a University of Illinois professor who studies the convergence of race and the Internet.

In a study that examined the associations between responses to racial theme party images on social networking sites and a color-blind racial ideology, Brendesha Tynes, a professor of educational psychology and of

African American studies at Illinois, discovered that white students and those who rated highly in color-blind racial attitudes were more likely not to be offended by images from racially themed parties at which attendees dressed and acted as caricatures of racial stereotypes (for example, photos of students dressed in blackface make-up attending a "gangsta party" to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day).

"People who reported higher racial color-blind attitudes were more likely to be white, and more likely to condone or not be bothered by racial-theme party images," Tynes said. "In fact, some even encouraged the photos by adding comments of their own such as 'Where's the Colt 45?' or 'Party like a rock star.' "

To conduct the study, Tynes showed 217 ethnically diverse college students images from racially themed parties and prompted them to respond as if they were writing on a friend's Facebook or MySpace page.

"Since so much of campus life is moving online, we tried to mimic the online social network environment as much as we could," Tynes said. "What we saw were people's responses almost in real time."

Fifty-eight percent of African-Americans were unequivocally bothered by the images, compared with only 21 percent of whites. The majority of white respondents (41 percent) were in the bothered-ambivalent group, and 24 percent were in the not bothered-ambivalent group.

In the written response portion of the study, the responses ranged from approval and nonchalance ("OMG!! I can't believe you guys would think of that!!! Horrible … but kinda funny not gonna lie") to mild opprobrium and outrage ("This is obscenely offensive").

The students also were asked questions about their attitudes toward racial privilege, institutional discrimination and racial issues. Those who

scored higher on the measure were more likely to hold color-blind racial attitudes, and were more likely to be ambivalent or not bothered by the race party photos.

Respondents low in racial color-blindness were much more vocal in expressing their displeasure and opposition to these images, and would even go so far as to "de-friend" someone over posting those images, Tynes said.

According to Tynes, a color-blind racial attitude is the prevailing racial ideology of the post-Civil Rights era, and is the view that seeing race is inherently wrong.

"If you subscribe to a color-blind racial ideology, you don't think that race or racism exists, or that it should exist," Tynes said. "You are more likely to think that people who talk about race and racism are the ones who perpetuate it. You think that racial problems are just isolated incidents and that people need to get over it and move on. You're also not very likely to support affirmative action, and probably have a lower multi-cultural competence."

Tynes, who recently was awarded a $1.4 million grant to study the effects of online racial discrimination by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, said that along with the role children and adolescents play in producing online hate, her inspiration for the study was the numerous racially themed parties that occurred on college campuses across the country in 2007 and the resultant blowback when images from the parties were posted on Facebook and MySpace.

"I wanted to see whether color-blind racial attitudes played a role in condoning images," she said. "What we found is that the color-blind ideal commonly socialized and valued among whites may actually be

detrimental to race relations on college campuses."

Tynes' research also revealed an incongruence of reactions among white students that she's dubbed "Facebook face."

"To their friends, they would express mild approval of the party photos or just not discuss race," Tynes said. "But in private, in a reaction that they thought their friends wouldn't see, some students would let us know that they thought the image was racist or that it angered them. We think that it's because whites have been socialized not to talk about race."

While the anonymity of social network sites can contribute to indirect racism, Tynes also says that the very same websites can be used for good, not only by throwing light on what happens at racially themed parties, but also by crowd-sourcing users' opposition to the parties.

"Just as people use Facebook and MySpace to post photos from the racial theme parties, others use it to criticize and protest against the parties and the images," she said. "They would use it as a forum for long discussions about the implications of throwing these types of parties, and why they're fundamentally wrong."

Since a color-blind racial ideology is associated with endorsement of the racial theme party photos, Tynes says that mandatory courses on issues of racism and multicultural competence are necessary for students from elementary school through college.

Specifically, beginning in elementary school, texts should provide a more comprehensive view of American history and culture, not just focus primarily on whites.

"Simply telling people to celebrate diversity or multiculturalism or saying, generically, that we believe in tolerance isn't sufficient," Tynes

said. "We need to teach people about structural racism, about the ways that race still shapes people's life chances and how the media informs our attitudes toward race."

More information: Tynes and co-author Suzanne L. Markoe of the University of California, Los Angeles, published their research in the March issue of the Journal of Diversity in Higher Education.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign