

From my living room to yours: Research examines race and social media discussions

August 12 2013, by Dottie Stover

Discussions surrounding race and racism are prevalent in an online community in which users can hide their own race, gender and any other identifying information. Russell Spiker, a doctoral student in the University of Cincinnati's Department of Sociology, will present his research at the 108th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in New York, N.Y.

Spiker's presentation, "From My Living Room to Yours: A Grounded Theory of Typology of Racial Discussions on YouTube.com," examined English-language comments posted from YouTube's top 10 most viewed videos of the day, over a 14-day period in February, 2012. Twenty-three videos—generating approximately 200 comments each—were examined for the study.

The analysis found that 34 [discussions](#) from nine videos contained racial content. Spiker found that three major themes surrounding the racial discussions emerged: [hostility](#), overt [racism](#) and racial stereotyping. Two minor themes—claims of racism and racist slurs—also were observed.

Spiker adds that claims of racism tended to originate discussions, but not characterize them.

Spiker found that themes of hostility occurred in seven videos and 20 discussions. Overt racism was found in five videos and 16 discussions.

Variations on a racial slur occurred in three videos and eight discussions.

Racial stereotyping was found in four videos and 14 discussions, but Spiker says [racial stereotypes](#) did not necessarily appeal directly to overt statements of racism.

Spiker says claims of racism, which occurred in eight videos and 22 discussions, were the most common theme, as well as how most of the racial discussions began.

Spiker says hostile responses were frequent in racially-themed discussions, including hostile responses to claims of racism and hostile responses to racism. "In the first, comments involved insults such as 'idiot' and 'moron' alongside evidence to disqualify the perception of racism as preposterous," says Spiker.

"In the second, responses to racist remarks involved insulting the intelligence and moral worth of the perceived racist poster, but did not provide counterexamples."

Spiker also discovered that hostility to racism and denial of racism—seemingly contradictory trends—were nearly universal in racial discussions.

The study also notes that YouTube guidelines explicitly forbid behavior that was examined in Spiker's study. Those guidelines forbid hate speech attacking or demeaning any group; predatory behavior such as intimidation or stalking; or inciting others to commit violent acts. Spiker also states that because of the massive size of the social network, it's "incredibly difficult to monitor all content."

As a result, Spiker says YouTube users regularly see examples of unpunished violations which in turn may loosen their own online interactions.

"Online hostility about racial topics results partially from the violation of norms of race avoidance and partially from the ability to express attitudes in an uninhibited environment," states Spiker.

Spiker says racial topics in social media arise in ways which are uncommon in face-to-face communications, opening up the possibility for a revival of "old-fashioned" racism (more often hidden in supremacist websites), acting as an anonymous public space where there is little insulation from racial harassment, and demonstrating—through the use of racial slurs as insults—"the idea of racelessness" that Spiker says dominates thinking on the Internet.

"If race truly did not matter in online contexts, the hostility toward the topic as well as the racial tension would not exist," Spiker concludes, in the paper. "Instead, racial discussions occurred in nine of the 23 videos and racial comments occurred in 13."

Spiker says he focused his research on comments surrounding the top-10 most popular videos because he could examine feedback without purposefully choosing videos with racial content.

"The ultimate goal of this collection plan was to allow for analysis of the discussions occurring in the most popular spaces on YouTube on a given day," Spiker explains in the paper.

Analysis software separated discussions into categories and also provided a rough estimate of how much of the comments involved racial discussions.

The study suggests that future research explore sites where Internet users were more likely to discuss racial topics, as well as explore sites where race matters and where it does not matter. Spiker adds that the current study focused only on YouTube videos and not specifically on YouTube

personal blogs, amateur news shows and such.

Spiker also recommends future data collection over a larger time period, noting that events during the random dates that the February 2012 top [video](#) comments were studied (including the funeral of singer Whitney Houston and the Super Bowl) may have affected data collection.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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