

For students of color, online racism leads to real-world mental health challenges

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Whether it's a "Zoombomb" filled with racial slurs, a racist meme that pops up in a Facebook timeline, or a hate-filled comment on an Instagram post, social media has the power to bring out the worst of the

worst.

For college students of color who encounter online [racism](#), the effect of racialized aggressions and assaults reaches far beyond any single [social media](#) feed and can lead to real and significant [mental health](#) impacts—even more significant than in-person experiences of racial discrimination, according to a recently published study from researchers at UConn and Boston College.

"I think we all suspected that we would find a relationship between the racism online in social media and [student](#) mental health," says lead author Adam McCreedy, an assistant professor-in-residence with UConn's Neag School of Education. "I think we may have been a little surprised that it was more salient, or held a stronger relationship, than in-person experiences."

Published in the February 2021 edition of the Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, the study asked nearly 700 students of color from five different four-year colleges and universities to complete surveys in the spring of 2018 and 2019. The surveys asked students about their daily encounters with racism online and on-campus and about the quality of their interactions with various faculty and staff at their school. It also included a mental health assessment, a measurement of their sense of belonging at their institution, and questions designed to gauge their sense of ethnic identity—how strongly they felt attached to their racial group.

The findings, the researchers said, support assertions that social media now constitutes an important element in the [traumatic stress](#) that students of color experience.

"Most powerfully we found that students' reported encounters with racial hostility on social media directly predicted their mental health outcomes and, to be more clear on that, we found that increased encounters with

racism or discrimination online predicted increased self-reported [mental health issues](#)," McCready says. "And even when we added to our models and factored in students' in-person experiences, actually the online encounters were more salient predictors of mental health outcomes than the in-person experiences."

McCready says the study dispels a notion that online life is detached from in-person or offline experiences, especially for so-called "digital natives"—generations that have lived with the dynamics of online life often since early childhood. For these students, their online interactions represent a portion of their identity and experiences.

"If you think about it, if someone is experiencing racism on social media, in some ways it might be more targeted or it might be more explicit," he says. "There's a seamlessness, less distinction between the online experience and the in-person experience for digital natives, than there might remain for others of us who are 'digital immigrants,' who became accustomed to being engaged in social media later in life."

While the study data were collected prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, McCready suspects the transition to a college experience that is significantly more virtual and online would only heighten the impact of racialized aggressions on social media. The disparate effect when compared to in-person experiences may be greater, he says, because there are far fewer opportunities for in-person interactions during the pandemic.

"I think, at the broadest level, we just can't discredit an individual's online experience, and it's important to recognize that these experiences with discrimination and racial hostilities on social media do have an impact on mental health," says McCready. "And so within the college experience, and more broadly, we just can't ignore the effect of those encounters."

The researchers noted that counselors, administrators, and mental health professionals who work with students of color should take into account the impact of online experiences that the real trauma that online racism can cause. They recommended that university counseling centers include racialized trauma in their intake policies and procedures, asking questions about connection to ethnic communities and experiences with racism and discrimination, including racialized aggressions on social media.

They also stressed the importance of faculty, staff, and administrative diversity on cultivating a critical sense of belonging for students of color.

"The fact that these everyday or routine encounters with discrimination in social media continued to predict mental health issues is certainly a very strong finding and, in our minds, an important one for scholars and for practitioners to be aware of," McCready says. "I think our study opens new avenues to understand the experiences of students of color and to really consider how their encounters with racism on social [media](#) affect outcomes such as their mental [health](#)."

More information: Adam M. McCready et al. Students of Color, Mental Health, and Racialized Aggressions on Social Media, *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/19496591.2020.1853555](#)

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