

Black Instagram users' propensity for political posts

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Credit: Omkar Patyane, via Pexels

In a time when Americans have largely retreated to their own political corners on social media, it's hardly surprising that they tend to share more political content on platforms where they believe they are among the like-minded.

But one finding in a new study of U.S. [social media](#) habits surprised a pair of University of Kansas researchers: Black Instagram users tend to

share more political content on the platform than non-Black users, despite many not knowing whether most of their IG followers share their beliefs.

Titled "What Will They Think If I Post This? Risks and Returns for Political Expression Across Platforms" and published Nov. 12 in the journal *Social Media + Society*, the research was co-written by Cameron Piercy, KU assistant professor of communication studies, and Elnaz Parviz, doctoral candidate in communication studies. They expanded upon a paper Parviz wrote for Piercy's Network Analysis class, examining nationally representative data collected by the nonpartisan Pew Research Center during the summer of 2016, as voters prepared for the U.S. presidential election.

"The driving question was, "How do the people in your social [media](#) network affect what you're willing to post online?" Piercy said. "And homophily is a prominent feature of networks, where we find people connect with like-minded others in pretty much any context. You always have to worry about homophily in network research. And, surprisingly, there are some studies out there that say that those with social media heterophily—having different-minded others in your network—are actually more likely to post political stuff. We thought, "That doesn't seem logical." And so we tried to chase it down with this Pew dataset."

Piercy said he and Parviz found that "half of participants had changed their privacy settings, and if you had done that, you felt more empowered to speak your voice about politics. Further, regardless of platform, if users saw online discussion as less civil than face-to-face, they were less likely to post about politics."

Their analysis showed that almost everyone has a guess about their Facebook friends' political beliefs. That is less true of Twitter users and even less true of Instagram users.

"On Facebook, 6% of people don't know the political leanings of their friends," Piercy said. "On Twitter, 26.9% say they don't know, so about one-fourth. But on Instagram, almost half say that they don't know the political leanings of their friends."

Perhaps, Piercy speculated, users are unsure about the political leanings of their connections on Instagram because of the photo-centric nature of the platform, as compared to other major social media. But that doesn't explain why Black Instagram users who comprehend their connections' political leanings are so much more willing to share political posts on the platform.

"I think it's undeniable that something is going on here," Piercy said. "The effect is too big, relative to all the other effects that we see in our study. It really is the case that Black Americans are more likely to engage in political expression on Instagram. I feel confident about that."

Black Facebook and Twitter users act no differently in this realm than their white peers on those platforms, Piercy said of the findings. Nor do other [ethnic groups](#), with the exception of white users on Facebook, who engaged in slightly less political expression on the [platform](#).

"Political expression" may not necessarily be Democrat-versus-Republican stuff, Piercy said of the study. Such posts might be issue-oriented, such as a post advocating the #BlackLivesMatter movement.

Piercy said that, to a certain extent, he and Parviz were able to answer the "what" question from the Pew data. They wrote that more research is needed into the "why."

"I think there's a logic to it, based on the affordances of the various social media," Piercy said. "What you can do is different on Facebook than it is on Twitter or than it is on Instagram. So if we start with that

assumption, then what people are doing on Instagram and the way that they share is different, and the way that Black people share about political matters is different. The why and how of that— someone should dig into that, for sure, and compare the content that's posted by white Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans."

More information: Elnaz Parviz et al, What Will They Think If I Post This? Risks and Returns for Political Expression Across Platforms, *Social Media + Society* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/20563051211055439](https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211055439)

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