Mentioning 'white privilege' increases online polarization, finds a new study

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If there's an online discussion about race, using the term "white privilege" can create a polarized situation, say University of Michigan researchers.

The mention of white privilege can create internet discussions that are less constructive, more polarized and less supportive of racially

progressive policies, says Christopher Quarles, a doctoral student at the School of Information and the study's lead author.

With online political polarization on the rise and race at the forefront of today's news, it is important to make cross-cultural online communication effective and inclusive, he says.

In a study published in *PLOS ONE,* Quarles and co-author Lia Bozarth, also a School of Information doctoral student, looked at how language used in online discussions can impact who participates in them and how they respond. These, in turn, can influence perceptions of public opinion.

Specifically, the study examined how the term "white privilege"—whose origins existed as early as the 1980s but became widely used in the last decade's heightened racial tension—affects online communication.

The study does not directly examine the concept of white privilege itself, or whether whites think they have advantages due to their race. Instead, the goal was to look at how use of the term affected online behavior.

In two lab experiments, nearly 1,000 U.S. residents—of whom 82% were white—were given a chance to respond to a post asking their opinions about renaming college buildings. Using the term "white privilege" in the question decreased the percentage of whites who supported renaming, the research indicated.

In addition, those whites who remained supportive when white privilege was mentioned were less likely to create an online post, while opposing whites and nonwhites showed no significant difference. The term also led to more low-quality posts among both whites and nonwhites, Quarles says.

The relationship between question language and the content of the responses was mediated by their support or opposition to renaming buildings. This suggests that rather than causing people to think differently about the world, the term "white privilege" causes an [emotional reaction](#) that then affects their response, Quarles says.

Inclusive ways of speaking about [race](#) online, such as the term "[racial inequality](#)," are more likely to create a sense of shared purpose, he says. Policymakers who want to promote racial equity should consider how their language can either unite people or alienate potential allies, he says.

"There are very real racial inequities in society today. Choosing language that promotes constructive conversation will not solve those problems," Quarles said. "But it is an important step toward collectively understanding their dimensions and working together towards a solution."

Provided by University of Michigan