

Are outspoken social media users more polarized in their views on racial equality?

December 8 2022, by Sharita Forrest



In a study of social media expression and the polarization of users' views on the Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter movements, communication professor Stewart Coles found that people low in racial resentment who expressed themselves more frequently on these media were less supportive of BLM and marginally less supportive of ALM. Credit: Fred Zwicky

Stewart Coles is a professor of communication at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. He also is the co-author of [a recent study](#) that examined political polarization in the context of social media users' support for Black Lives Matter or All Lives Matter and the influence of racial resentment on users' views on these movements. Coles spoke with News Bureau research editor Sharita Forrest about this trend and its societal implications.

In what ways does racial resentment differ from garden-variety racism, and what types of beliefs are fueled by it?

Paradoxically rooted in a concern for fairness, racial resentment locates the source of racial inequality in the belief that Black people do not work hard and do not adopt other American values such as discipline, self-reliance and a Protestant work ethic. It casts Black people as undeserving recipients of benefits that more "deserving" groups—particularly white and Asian American people—should receive instead.

Rather than acknowledge the deep injustice of centuries of anti-Black discrimination and systemic oppression, the racially resentful individual sees any attempt to alleviate these as unfair because they do not believe that Black people have worked hard enough.

Does racial resentment play a role in the opposition to other race-related initiatives in the U.S.?

The implications of racial resentment are evident in the uproars over critical race theory and affirmative action. Not only would many critics of critical race theory struggle to accurately define it, but their central objection is the accurate teaching of U.S. history. Acknowledging historical and ongoing systemic anti-Black racism would challenge their

belief that racial inequalities persist because Black people simply have not worked hard enough.

As a broad set of policies, laws and practices, affirmative action is intended to rectify forms of discrimination such as those that Black people and other racial minorities often face.

Although it seems reasonable to blame opposition to affirmative action on the economic threat of, say, not getting a promotion or college acceptance, racial resentment rejects [affirmative action](#) on the grounds that Black people could not possibly have worked hard enough to deserve it. Seeing Black people make social, economic or political gains may invoke resentment within racially resentful individuals.

Your study indicates that All Lives Matter is a reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement rather than a movement per se. What role does racial resentment play there?

Unfairness toward [white people](#) is a core sentiment of ALM, in direct response to the affirmation that "Black lives matter." Critics assert that BLM unfairly privileges Black people over other groups. Individuals high in racial resentment may perceive the BLM movement to end police brutality against Black people as being a loss for white people or other groups.

Our study found a strong, independent relationship between racial resentment and both BLM and ALM support. As racial resentment increases, support for ALM increases and support for BLM decreases. This relationship persisted even when we controlled for factors such as political conservatism.

Are frequent social media users more polarized in

their views on these social justice issues?

We cannot think of social media expression as reliably leading to greater or lesser polarization; rather, we must consider users' psychological predispositions such as racial resentment, the information environment and cognitive processes that may lead to the adoption or dismissal of attitude-inconsistent information.

Comparing social media users who are high versus low in [racial resentment](#), we find greater polarization for ALM support—and less polarization on BLM support—among those who more frequently expressed themselves compared with people who reported never expressing themselves.

Social media expression regarding attitude-consistent content—e.g., commenting on a post that you agree with—is very strongly correlated with expression regarding attitude-inconsistent content—e.g., commenting on a post you disagree with.

While we may become familiar with and more tolerant of viewpoints that we would have otherwise rejected, we also may dismiss contradictory information and reinforce our existing views.

Composing a social media post or comment may affect how we cognitively process information. Anticipating that we may engage in future discussion also will affect how we think about information.

Could other factors such as the timing of your study have affected the findings on social media users' levels of racial resentment and polarized views on BLM and ALM?

We considered two possible explanations. First, the sociopolitical context in which we collected our data—one week prior to the 2016 U.S. [presidential election](#)—coincided with the "take a knee" protests in which athletes knelt during the national anthem to protest racial injustice, spearheaded by NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. He and the protests became associated with the BLM movement, despite having no formal relationship with it.

Opposition to these protests was particularly high among political conservatives, and an overwhelming majority of white people—including half of white Democrats.

Critics labeled these protests unpatriotic and disrespectful of military service members and veterans.

This accusation provided a race-neutral reason to withhold support, reasoning that the protests were too uncivil or went too far. This is known as aversive racism—the rationalization of a racist outcome or event, or in this case the denial of support for an anti-racist effort, on some factor seemingly unrelated to race.

One can find examples of aversive racism in white liberals' and moderates' responses to both the [civil rights movement](#) and the protests in response to the murder of George Floyd.

Detractors argued that they would support equal rights if only Black people did not riot. Or march. Or quietly take a knee. In every instance, the goalpost gets moved to provide a nonracist reason for why the aversive racist refuses to support equality.

The second explanation is opinion uncertainty. Low-resentment social media users who express themselves more frequently are less supportive of BLM—and marginally less supportive of ALM—because they are less

assured of their opinions.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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