The Role of Color-Blind Racial Attitudes in Reactions to Racial Discrimination on Social Network Sites

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This study examines associations between responses to online racial discrimination, more specifically, racial theme party images on social network sites and color-blind racial attitudes. We showed 217 African American and European American college students images and prompted them to respond as if they were writing on a friend’s “wall” on Facebook or MySpace. Reactions to racial theme party images were not bothered, not bothered-ambivalent, bothered-ambivalent, and bothered. A multinomial logistic regression revealed that participants differed in their reactions to the images based on their racial group and color-blind racial ideology. European Americans and participants high in racial color blindness were more likely to be in the not bothered reaction group. Further, these students were more likely to condone and even encourage the racial theme party practice by laughing at the photos and affirming the party goers. Conversely, those low in color blindness were vocal in their opposition to the images with some reporting that they would “defriend” a person who engaged in the practice.

Keywords: social network sites, online racial discrimination, color-blind racial attitudes, Internet, diversity

As growing numbers of underrepresented minority students enroll in predominantly White colleges, concern is mounting over increased racial conflict, including hate crimes (Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, schools and college campuses report the third highest rate of hate crimes after homes and streets (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). These experiences place additional stressors on students of color and may ultimately lead to lower rates of college graduation, completion of advanced majors, and enrollment in graduate programs. In addition, the spaces in which groups can experience these stressors are now extending to the online world. For example, students have reported receiving racist e-mails through their college accounts (Macavinta, 1998; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002). Despite its heightened frequency, little is known about how individuals respond to online racial discrimination in social network sites (SNS). Scholars also have yet to examine the role color-blind racial attitudes might play in encouraging and inciting these behaviors.

With the creation of social networking sites, the locations for the development of relationships on campus, especially peer-to-peer, have expanded from physical spaces to the online world as increasing numbers of users flock to these sites (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). For example, in 2008 Facebook had over 140 million users and 600,000 being added each day (Smith, 2008). Scholars have noted that large numbers of college students have become among the users creating this flurry of activity. In a recent study of 1,440 first year students, 95% of college students had heard of Facebook by their first week of school and 95.5% were members by their second semester (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006). These students reported using the site for “social searching,” most commonly defined as getting information about people who...
live in their dorm, fraternity, sorority, or their classes. In addition, SNS are arguably the “social glue” used to help students settle in to the university, with 55% of a sample of 221 freshmen joining the site to make new friends and more than a third discussing academic issues on the site (University of Leicester, 2008). A similar study of students at four universities showed that those with Facebook sites had an average of 145 friends in their network from their school communities and more than half of them felt connected to those friends (Vanden Boogart, 2006). Meta-analyses of longitudinal studies show that the Internet actually increases offline contact with friends over time (Shklovski, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2006). Through these connections, individuals may feel more of a connection to the campus environment.

Conversely, they may also be exposed to negative or harmful material on these sites. After a game at the Ohio State University, for example, many students staged a postgame riot. Photos from the riot were then posted on SNS (Read, 2006). Students may also experience online racial discrimination. For example, images from racial theme parties, events in which attendees are expected to dress, act, and utilize symbols that are stereotypical of racialized others began to proliferate on Facebook in 2007. In one image from “a celebration” of Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday, students dressed in blackface and stuffed their buttocks with tissue to represent the African American female body. These images and the parties where they were taken provide opportunities for participants to engage in “rituals of rebellion” or practices that allow the freedom to temporarily disobey cultural norms (Gluckman, 1963). And although these rituals allow the reversal of social roles, they also reproduce and strengthen racial hierarchies and social inequality (Mueller, Dirks, & Houts Picca, 2007). Once they are placed online and are viewed by targets of these racialized performances, they become a form of online racial discrimination (Tynes, Giang, Williams, & Thompson, 2008). The photos and discourse about them can spread more rapidly through campus communities online and potentially lead to a decreased sense of cohesion among community members. Little is known about factors that may determine whether people who participate in the racial theme parties feel emboldened to place the images online. Racial group and racial attitudes are important to investigate from both practical and theoretical perspectives as particular racial groups are more often represented in the images than others. It follows that they may be more likely to condone the practice.

Color-blind racial attitudes, also called color-blind racism, are based on the belief that “race should not and does not matter” (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000, p. 60). It is the prevailing racial ideology of the post-Civil Rights era and is viewed as a noble goal for many Whites who are socialized to think that seeing race is inherently wrong (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Recent research has shown however, that color-blind racial attitudes are negatively associated with multicultural competence (Chao, 2006) and negative views toward affirmative action (Awad, Cokley, & Ravitch, 2005). Those with color-blind racial attitudes also often deny the existence of ideological and structural racism that often perpetuates these prevalent social ills (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Pewewardy & Frey, 2002; Yosso, Parker, Solórzano, & Lynn, 2004). Minimizing the role of race in perceived racist events and opting to not discuss racial differences in efforts to appear nonbiased are also common (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008; Bonilla-Silva, 2002).

Findings from a qualitative study of college life for 75 undergraduates of Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American backgrounds revealed that students experienced pressure to assimilate (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). In small group interviews these participants also reported feeling marginalized or excluded from European American peer groups. Despite the fact that many European American students endorse color-blind racial attitudes students experienced academic and behavioral stereotyping in the form of expectations to behave in specific interpersonal and cultural styles. Of even greater concern is a growing body of research that suggests individuals with color-blind racial attitudes may be more likely to engage in discriminatory behavior. In a study of Midwest and West coast college students’ self-reported beliefs, higher rates of color-blind racial attitudes were associated with higher racial and gender prejudice (Neville et.al., 2000). These same students also were more likely to report that the
world is more just, that social status is based on merit, and unrelated to social structures.

A qualitative study of European American college students’ responses to societal racism is also relevant for this study. In depth interviews of 11 students revealed that respondents had affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses that include denial of race and racism, discomfort discussing racial issues yet a disapproval of racist attitudes or behaviors of other Whites (Spanierman et al., 2008). Interviewees also had empathic reactions that involved feeling hurt, angered, or saddened by witnessing overt discrimination of their peers. Respondents were asked to recall experiences that had happened over their lifetimes. Research is needed that explores college students actual responses immediately following being confronted with discriminatory behavior. Given the prevalence of color-blind racial attitudes, it is also important to determine the role they may play in college student reactions.

This study explores whether college student responses to online racial discrimination relate to color-blind racial attitudes. Using images of racial theme parties as prompts, participants are asked to write on their friends’ walls (profiles) as if they were responding to an image posted on their Facebook or MySpace page. They then are asked to provide a three word reaction to the image. As European Americans have been noted to endorse color blindness more so than African Americans (Ryan, Hunt, Weible, Peterson, & Casas, 2007), this study examines whether there are racial group differences in color blindness and in the reactions to the images. Another goal of this study is to determine whether racial color blindness impacts student responses to the images. These questions are examined using an online survey method with a sample of African American and European American college students from a Midwestern university.

Method

Participants

There were 282 undergraduate educational psychology students from a Midwestern University who agreed to participate in the online survey for course credit. Of the 282 students, 261 students actually completed the study once they began the survey. Although the sample was ethnically diverse, (Asian American = 9, 3.5%; African American = 48, 18.5%; Latino = 15, 5.8%; European American = 169, 65.3%; multiracial = 16, 6.2%), only two groups had a large enough representation to be included in further analyses. Therefore, the study will focus on the 217 African American (AA) and European American (EA) students. This subsample included 82 men and 134 women. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 37 years ($M = 20$), with the majority of African American undergraduates at the freshman and sophomore level (18 to 19 years of age, 69%) and the majority of European Americans at junior and senior level (20 to 23 years of age 70%).

Procedures

The first author and a research assistant described the study in a 7- to 10-min presentation to undergraduate students. The explanation described in general terms an interest in participants’ Internet practices and an understanding of intergroup relations online. Participants were given a flyer that outlined the procedures for participating in the study. The flyer included the url to the survey that was placed on SurveyMonkey.com. If participants expressed interest in participating they inputted the url that directed them to an online consent form that further explained the study and their rights as participants. They were then instructed to click either “I agree to participate in this study” or “I would not like to participate in this study.” Completion of the survey took approximately 30 min, and students were given course credit for their participation. There were no penalties for not participating in the study as students were informed about several research projects at the beginning of the semester from which they would choose two to fulfill their research requirement.

Measures

Racial theme party images—open-ended responses. Using images of racial theme parties as prompts, participants were asked to write on their friends walls as if they were responding to an image posted on their Facebook or MySpace page (e.g., “Imagine this photo with captions appeared on one of your peer’s Facebook or MySpace page, please write a comment as if
you were writing on their wall”). Following the image, they were asked to provide a three word reaction to the image (e.g., “Imagining this photo appeared on one of your peer’s Facebook or MySpace page, please list three words that describe your initial reaction or thoughts about this photo”). It is important to note that Facebook and MySpace have terms of use policies that prohibit harassment of any kind. These sites are monitored by their employees as well as by their users who may report infractions, yet due to the volume of activity, racist material can go unchecked.

The first image was a photo of students attending a “gangsta party” to celebrate Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. In the image, some of the participants attended in blackface, wearing fake buttocks and with aluminum on their teeth to mock some hip hop performers. The second image portrayed students wearing landscaping shirts with “Spic and Span” written across the back to mock Latinos. After each of the photos, students were asked to give two open-ended reactions.

CoBRAS. The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS; Neville et al., 2000) is a self-report 20-item scale that assesses three dimensions of color-blind racial attitudes: (1) racial privilege (e.g., White people in the United States have certain advantages because of the color of their skin), (2) institutional discrimination (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities have certain advantages because of the color of their skin), and (3) blatant racial issues (e.g., talking about racial issues causes unnecessary racial tension). Items are scored on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree; α = .89).

Coding-Qualitative Responses

Open-ended responses. Responses were cut and pasted from Surveymonkey.com into an Excel file for analysis. Using inductive thematic analysis, participant responses to the two prompts were read and reread until clear patterns emerged (Boyatzis, 1998). Major themes were identified and ranked, with lower scores indicating either a lack of understanding or approval and higher scores rejection of the images. Images were coded using the following coding system: 0 = no comment, doesn’t understand picture; 1 = positive response, encouraging image, laughing; 2 = questioning reasoning for posting image; 3 = disapproval of image, seen as ignorant or stupid; 4 = strong denouncement of image, seen as racist, a mockery, or strong forms of disapproval. An average score was created from the two commentaries written.

Three word reaction. Participants wrote three word reactions to each of the racialized performance photos. The three word reaction for each image was coded for cognitive responses: 0 = no reaction or unclear on what is being done in the image; 1 = agreement—expresses beliefs that are in accordance with throwing the party and or posting the image; 2 = ambivalence—expresses beliefs that may be both in accordance with throwing the party and or posting the image as well as beliefs that acknowledge that the party and image were discriminatory and/or degrading; 3 = disagreement—expresses beliefs that the party and image were discriminatory, degrading, morally wrong and/or socially unacceptable. In addition, the two three word reactions were coded for affective responses: 0 = no affect; 1 = funny, humorous, pleasurable; 2 = mixed emotions; 3 = apathy, indifferent; 4 = disappointment, ashamed; 5 = sadness, hurt feelings; 6 = outrage, anger. Averages were computed for the two cognitive and affective responses. Both first and second author coded 20% of the data. Interrater reliability was assessed using the kappa statistic and ranged from .7 to .9. The second author went on to code the remaining data.

Results

SNS Usage

Students were asked whether they utilized either MySpace or Facebook. Almost all the students in the study reported participation in at least one of the SNS (AA = 96%, EA = 94%). This is slightly higher than recent studies that show 75% of adults 18 to 24 have a social network profile (Lenhart, 2009), but consistent with college student samples that show that 95% were users (Lampe et al., 2006). Of those students with an SNS, the majority of the students were on their SNS sometime during the week and no more than 1 hr a day (AA = 54%, EA = 72%). Another quarter of the students
were on their SNS 2 to 3 hr every day (AA = 24%, EA = 23%). Some students reported being on their SNS as many as 3 to 5 hr a day (AA = 22%, EA = 5%). Of the total sample, about half, or 46.6% said that they used the site to discuss school related issues. These numbers demonstrate the wide usage of SNS in today’s society especially among college students.

**Reaction Groups**

Four groups were created based on a total score from the commentary along with affective and cognitive responses for the two racialized performance photos that were hypothetically posted on an SNS. The not bothered group \((n = 24; AA = 1, EA = 23)\) was comprised of students with a combined score of three or lower. These students did not express any form of negative reaction to the photos. Not bothered-ambivalent group \((n = 47; AA = 7, EA = 40)\) scores were greater than three and lower than six. These students for the most part condoned or encouraged at least one of the pictures. They also often recognized something was wrong with the images but did not explicitly mention the images were racially inappropriate. Bothered-ambivalent group \((n = 82; AA = 12, EA = 70)\) were students who were more ambivalent about at least one of the pictures and recognized that the images were socially unacceptable. The bothered group \((n = 64; AA = 28, EA = 36)\) included participants who disapproved of both images with total scores between 10 and 13. Figure 1 illustrates the proportional racial breakdown for each of the reaction groups.

Students in the not bothered group were amused by the pictures and even encouraged it with their own commentary. For example, one student exclaimed, “Wow, good work!” and described it as good costumes without regard from the socially undesirable aspects of the image. Another student posted, “Looks like a crazy night . . . was it a gangsta themed party?” and described the image as a funny event that took place in a dorm. One student not only condoned it, but made an additional comment unrelated to the context of the picture: “That’s a

![Figure 1. Picture reaction groups by racial group.](image)
nice name guys but I would have to question the short shirt the guy is wearing.”

Students in the not bothered-ambivalent group either were not particularly bothered by the pictures or condoned and encouraged one picture but not the other. For example, when one student was presented with the Martin Luther King picture, the response was “Where’s the Colt 45?” However, even though this student made light of the pictures in the written “wall” response, the three word description included surprise. A mixed reaction was not uncommon such as “OMG!! I can’t believe you guys would think of that!! Horrible . . . but kinda funny not gonna lie.” Whereas, another student encouraged one of the pictures stating, “Party like a rockstar!!!!” Yet the student expressed disapproval regarding the other calling the picture “dumb and stupid.” This group recognized that there was something wrong about posting the image, but did not voice specifically what for either photo.

Conversely, students in the bothered-ambivalent group explicitly mentioned that images were racist and/or socially inappropriate (often in their three-word reaction to the photo), but were either not as vehement in their protest or felt less strongly about one of the images. For example, a student posted, “That looks like a crazy party” and went on to say such pictures should not be posted and that they were racist. Another student strongly disapproved of one of the pictures stating, “This looks like tacos and tequilas party shirts . . . NOT’ cool!” and went on to say it was disgusting, racist, and rude. However, regarding the Martin Luther King picture, the student posted, “Crazy pic!” and described it as drunk, intoxicated, and ridiculous. The student voiced disapproval, but not to the degree of the second picture. Other students recognized the pictures as being socially unacceptable but were still amused. For example, a student posted, “Are you guys supposed to be Mexican? What was the occasion?” and described the picture as kind of funny but stereotypical.

Students in the bothered group were very vocal in their opinions regarding the pictures. One student posted, “You are very racist” and described the picture as not only racist but also as a hate crime. Another student stated, “This is obscenely offensive. I’m surprised there aren’t nooses in the background. Way to reverse centuries of human rights efforts.” The student went on to say that the image was offensive and disappointing. Reactions for the bothered group were strong and adamantly expressed (e.g., using strong language, exclamations, and all capital letters) through the written word. Students would admonish the peer for posting the pictures,

You cannot be serious! I cannot even believe that this is something that you would be okay with, much less supportive of! This is disgusting and it makes me so sad that someone whom I consider a friend would ever participate in and especially endorse this kind of blatantly racial and offensive activity.

Because one of the images directly targeted African American students, discourse analysis was performed to explore qualitative differences between African Americans’ responses to the image from the Martin Luther King party (M) versus the “landscaper” (L) photo. The wall posts of four respondents appear below:

**Respondent 1.** M: You should be ashamed of yourselves! This photo is degrading, and disrespectful to the entire Black race. It is also very disrespectful to the people who sacrificed so much during the Civil Rights Movement.

L: This photo is very, very, very disrespectful to people who make their living as landscapers. And this photo is also very stereotypical! It saddens me that such ignorance still exists in the world.

**Respondent 2.** M: Wow. I hope you know that this is a very disrespectful, derogatory, and insensitive photo. I can’t believe that you of all people would actually have the nerve to participate in this kind of thing yet alone put it up on your Facebook photos. This just shows pure ignorance.

L: This is a ridiculous photo! I can’t believe that you would partake in something as degrading as this!

**Respondent 3.** M: This is really unnecessary. If someone portrayed you in such a way you would be offended. I know I am.

L: This is ridiculous . . . RACIST!

**Respondent 4.** M: This picture is pretty offensive, and I don’t get offended that easily. On MLK’s Birthday???

L: Whether someone is a gardener or not doesn’t depend on race. You know that term is pretty offensive to Latinos, right?

In the majority of cases (58% of African Americans were in the bothered group), if an African American student reacted strongly to the Martin Luther King party picture, the par-
participant often also had an equally strong reaction to the other picture. However, key differences emerged. When discussing the first photo they often mentioned how it personally offended them and other African Americans. Conversely, participants mentioned the offensiveness of the other photo either specifically for Latinos or in more general terms.

In addition to expressing strong opposition to both photos, African Americans attempted to educate their “friends” about the insensitive, derogatory nature of the photos. In doing so, they provided social context such as explaining how people who struggled for civil rights might feel and that the term in the second photo is a racial slur that is offensive to Latinos. African American participants appeared to take on the role of advocate and speak on behalf of Latinos in the second photo (Tynes, 2007). They also empathized with Latinos (e.g., “It saddens me . . .”) sometimes expressing their anger at the racism inherent in the landscaper photo (e.g., “This is ridiculous . . . RACIST!”). In addition, as with the larger sample, they shamed their friends by explicitly stating that they should be ashamed and by expressing dismay that someone that they had thought highly of could engage in this type of activity.

In other cases, African Americans either strongly opposed the photo directed at them and were not familiar with the derogatory reference to Latinos or felt it was socially inappropriate, but took an indirect approach to showing it. For example a respondent posted, “This is completely degrading and I wish that you could understand that people get offended at things like this. It does not seem as though you understand the feelings others encounter when you do things like this” for the Martin Luther King photo, but then posted, “I really do not understand your reasoning for this” for the landscaper photo. Based on the participants’ three word reaction to the photo (confused, angered, ignorant), she did, in fact, see the photo as inappropriate. However, she chose to show this indirectly by questioning her friend’s reasoning.

In contrast to African Americans, few European Americans were unequivocally bothered by the photos (21%). Instead, the majority of these participants were represented in the bothered-ambivalent (41%) group. Twenty-four percent were in the not bothered-ambivalent group and of the total number of participants in the not bothered group European Americans made up 96%. A common occurrence in their responses was an identification of the enjoyment that partygoers appeared to have in the photos. For example, they mentioned, “Looks like a fun party . . . why wasn’t I invited??” :) and “Wowww! Looks like you had a good time; I want to hear all about it!” In addition, there was a focus on what may be considered extraneous aspects of the photo. For example, in the Martin Luther King image one of the individuals pictured wore clothing with another school’s name on it. A participant commented “what the hell is that Michigan fan doing at [name of participant’s university]!!??!!” and went on to say “wow that man is really dark” and “I hope there were some chick drinks for the ladies.” Another participant wrote “The girl on the right looks like an idiot.” Participants also joked about the photos, “Wow when did you get that negrtopasty?” “You don’t have to be Black to be gangster” and “my lawn needs a trimming.” Despite the fact that the images had a man in blackface and a woman wearing a shirt with a racial slur written on it, European Americans often either ignored or minimized the racial implications in the photos in their wall posts for at least one of the photos.

Many of them did, however acknowledge that the photos were either stereotypical, racist, or inappropriate in their three word reactions. This resulted in a pattern of incongruence between what will be labeled here as their “Facebook face” and their private reactions to the photos. In the following examples, participant wall posts are listed followed by their three word reaction to the photos in parentheses.

**Respondent 5.**
M: OMG, what are you guys doin? You must’ve been pretty wasted . . . (disgusted, ashamed, and disappointed).
L: Wow guys . . . creative. (possibly racist, not classy, discriminating).

**Respondent 6.**
M: Interesting you guys . . . (inappropriate, hurtful, dangerous).
L: Ummm . . . I don’t get it. (confusing, silly, pointless).

**Respondent 7.**
M: Someone looks like they are having fun. (ignorant, wow, drunk).
L: I would not comment (racist, ignorant, wow).

**Respondent 8.**
M: Wow, what was the theme of this party? Dress like a different race? (drunk, racist, slutty).
L: Don’t you think that’s kinda rude? (racist, rude, wrong).

Rather than explicitly saying to their friends that the images were wrong, they often chose to either encourage the practices in the photos (e.g., “Wow guys . . . creative”), ask questions, or make comments about drinking. These questions and comments were often nonconfrontational, rarely addressing the larger social implications of the photos. When they did comment on the problematic nature of the photos, they often avoided or reduced the appearance of challenging their friends by using rhetorical devices such as “kinda rude” and “a little insensitive.” In their personal reactions that would not be shown to their friends, however, they were more forthright in their criticism of the photos, specifically labeling the images as racist and expressing disappointment, disgust, shame, and anger.

A small number of students appeared to both have an understanding of racial issues and express this knowledge in the wall posts. One participant wrote about the landscaper photo

Hey, I forgot how priveledged you were for a second! Thanks for reminding all of us that you are at the top of the food chain and have the power to not only benefit from people less priveldged than you, but make fun of them too!

Although most comments of this type focused on the effect on people of color, others mentioned that the photos should be taken down because of consequences the perpetrator would face (e.g., “You should probably take that down unless you want a visit by the Chancellor” and “I would take these pictures down if I were you because they may cause some incriminating questions when looking for a job.”)

Color-Blind Racial Attitudes

Students differed in their color-blind racial attitudes by both racial and picture reaction groups. European American students reported higher color-blind racial attitudes ($M = 3.23, SD = .20$) than African American students ($M = 2.77, SD = .07$). Color-blind racial attitudes also differed by reaction group as depicted in Figure 2. Students color-blind racial attitudes decreased as their opposition to the photo increased. Not bothered ($M = 3.72, SD = .80$) and not bothered-ambivalent ($M = 3.41, SD = .75$) reaction

![Figure 2](image-url)

**Figure 2.** Students mean scores for color-blind racial attitudes by picture reaction group. Groups with different subscripts are significant at $p < .05$. 
groups had the highest color-blind racial attitude mean scores. Whereas, the bothered-ambivalent (M = 3.07, SD = .73) and bothered (M = 2.73, SD = .82) reaction groups had the lowest color-blind racial attitude mean scores.

To determine whether a student’s reaction group could be predicted by either his or her color-blind racial attitudes or racial group multinomial logistical regressions were conducted. There were no significant gender differences; therefore, gender was not included in the analyses. Multinomial logistical regressions allow categorical variables of three or more groups to be the outcome variable and determines whether any of the groups are statistically significantly different from each other based on predictors (Lindridge, 2005). The multinomial logistic regression provides goodness of fit for each predictor variable for the model ($\chi^2$); in addition, the beta indicates likelihood of the predictor variable for the categorical group versus the comparison group. A negative beta indicates a decreased likelihood of belonging to the group. If the range of upper and lower values of the 95% confidence interval does not include one, then it can be deduced that the groups are different.

Multinomial logistic regression analyses on reaction groups yielded a good fitting model for color-blind racial attitudes, $\chi^2(3) = 26.31$, $p \leq .001$, and racial group, $\chi^2(3) = 14.76$, $p = .002$. Table 1 depicts the results of the multinomial logistical regression when comparing the bothered group to each of the other three groups on color-blind racial attitudes and racial group. African American students were less likely, in descending order, to be not bothered, $p = .04$, odds ratio (OR) = .11, 95% CI [.01, .86], not bothered-ambivalent, $p = .03$, OR = .34, 95% CI [.13, .92] and bothered-ambivalent, $p = .001$, OR = .26, 95% CI [.12, .59] than their European American counterparts. In addition, color-blind racial attitudes were significantly related to reaction groups such that students with higher color-blind racial attitudes were more likely to be in the not bothered, $p = .001$, OR = 4.67, 95% CI [2.25, 9.77] or not bothered-ambivalent, $p = .001$, OR = 2.86, 95% CI [1.62, 5.03] groups than in the bothered group. However, students in the bothered-ambivalent group, $p = .08$, OR = 1.51, 95% CI [.95, 2.39] did not significantly differ from the bothered group in color-blind racial attitudes. Therefore, one can deduce that student’s reaction to the images could be predicted based on students’ color-blind racial attitudes and racial group such that a student not bothered by the pictures was more likely to have higher color-blind racial attitudes and be European American. Although a student bothered by the pictures was more likely to be lower in color-blind racial attitudes and be African American.

Table 1

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Note. OR = odds ratio; COBRA = color-blind racial attitudes; AA = African American; EA = European American.

a The reference category is bothered. b This parameter was set to zero.

*p < .05. **p = .001.
Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine associations between responses to online racial discrimination, more specifically racial theme party images, on SNS, and color-blind racial attitudes. Other goals of the study were to determine racial group differences in the use of SNS, color-blind racial attitudes, and reactions to racial theme party images. Findings of this study showed that European Americans and African Americans have similar rates of participation on SNS and that they were widely used by both groups to discuss school related issues. African Americans and European Americans did differ, however, in their color-blind racial attitudes. Consistent with recent research, European Americans were higher in color blindness than African Americans (Ryan et al., 2007).

Reactions to racial theme party images ranged from not bothered to bothered. A multinomial logistic regression revealed that participants differed in their reactions to the images based on their racial group and color-blind racial ideology. European Americans and participants high in racial color blindness were more likely to be in the not bothered reaction group. Further, these students were more likely to condone and even encourage the racial theme party practice by laughing at the photos and affirming the party goers. Conversely, those low in color blindness were vocal in their opposition to the images with some reporting that they would “defriend” a person who engaged in the practice. Participants in this group also reported that the photos were racist and or socially wrong.

Discourse analysis of European American versus African American wall postings and reactions to photos revealed a level of incongruence. European American students had a “Facebook face” in which explicit discussion of race that would be viewed by friends was rare. Conversely, in private three-word reactions they labeled the images as racist, inappropriate, and disgusting. This may be the result of European Americans learning not to discuss race. By age 10 and 11 European Americans underperform on social categorization tasks that require them to recognize racial differences, a task that 8 and 9 year olds do well on (Apfelbaum, Pauker, Ambady, Norton, & Sommers, 2008). By the time they reach college age, they appear to have learned these lessons well, as research has shown a discomfort in discussing racial issues (Spanierman et al., 2008) and in interracial interaction (Trawalter & Richeson, 2008) by the time they reach college. This is vastly different from the experiences of African Americans who discuss race often and in more depth (Tatum, 1997). Differences in both quantitative and qualitative responses between participants are also consistent with research that has shown that European Americans perceive the campus climate differently than African Americans (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella & Hagedorn, 1999; Gloria, Hird, & Navarro, 2001). For example, Ancis et al. (2000) noted that European Americans perceived less racial tension and had significantly more fair treatment by teachers and other students than African American and Asian American students.

As the explicit use of racist language is no longer socially acceptable, the posting of the racial theme party images represents an indirect way to express racial views about minorities. As in Bonilla-Silva’s (2002) “The Linguistics of Color-blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty About Blacks Without Sounding Racist,” where indirect language replaced racist language; this study performing their racial attitudes through these images does the work of racial epithets under the guise of having fun. In addition, engaging in the party, placing the images online and then engaging in both explicit and coded disparaging language about the images (e.g., “Where’s the Colt 45?”) is a type of cultural racism similar to that discussed in Bonilla-Silva, Forman, Lewis, and Embrick (2003). In this study, the images mock the stereotypical music and work practices of racial minorities while at the same time suggesting the mocking is deserved and justified because of the target’s “deficient” culture.

This research suggests that the color-blind ideal commonly socialized and valued among European Americans may actually be detrimental to race relations on college campuses. As research has shown that negative racial attitudes can influence behavior when interacting with racial others (McConnell & Leibold, 2001), educators will need to assist students in unlearning color blindness rather than encouraging this type of ideology as is the case in many high schools (Pollock, 2004). As research has sug-
gested, completing a year-long diversity training intervention can be effective at reducing color-blind racial attitudes (Neville et al., 2000). These programs should be developed for college students. In addition more effort should be made to understand why there is such a ubiquity of color blindness in the United States and how the Internet and SNS might encourage and even shape color-blind racial attitudes. Scholars have begun to note that color blindness, although associated with racial prejudice also reproduces White privilege. In this case, it may serve European American interests socially and economically to maintain these attitudes (Hutchison, 2010). Indeed, color-blind policies in several states now shape who is able to go to college and be apart of the college social networks. In this case, the approaches to eradicating color blindness must address its systemic and structural nature.

Scholars have begun to investigate SNS as a site for communication and identity formation among adolescents and emerging adults (boyd, 2008; boyd & Heer, 2006) and their impact on well-being (Ellison et al., 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006). Information contained within profiles has been shown to affect how the profile owners are seen by others (Walther, Van der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008) as well as how profile owners see themselves (Valkenburg et al., 2006). With regard to race, scholars also have noted that experiencing online racial discrimination in online settings, including SNS is associated with depression and anxiety (Tynes et al., 2008). These findings along with the results of this study taken together heighten the importance of addressing color blindness as one way to curb online racial discrimination.

This study is the first to explore how racial ideology is associated with racial discrimination on SNS. Extant literature shows that students of color have more problematic racial experiences on predominantly White campuses than European Americans (Lewis et al., 2000) and that they experience more racial micro-aggressions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Research also has shown that color-blind racial attitudes and racial-ethnic harassment predict both general campus climate as well as racial-ethnic campus climate (Navarro, Worthington, Hart, & Khairallah, 2009; Worthington, Navarro, Loewy, & Hart, 2008). Future research should examine how online racial discrimination relates to campus racial climate. With reports of increasing racial tension on college campuses as a result of racial theme parties and the proliferation of images on SNS, more research is needed on how they may impact student perceptions of the campus climate.

Limitations of the study include the fact that participants were asked to respond on a hypothetical friend’s wall. It is not clear that participants would respond similarly if they were writing to a real friend. Research suggests, however, that completing surveys remotely via computer engenders more open and honest reporting about racial issues than in the presence of an experimenter (Evans, Garcia, Garcia, & Baron, 2003). It is possible that real friends may serve as a social control that inhibits a respondent’s true feelings. The anonymity afforded participants in this study may allow participants to express their views more openly. Second, because the sample is drawn from a single campus in the Midwest, readers are cautioned against generalizing findings to the larger population on predominantly White campuses.

References


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