THE DIMENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF GENDERED RACISM ONLINE

A Dissertation

by

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ABSTRACT

A 2017 national survey conducted by Pew found that “online harassment” is a pervasive experience for young adults aged 18 to 29, who are most likely to encounter hate speech, sexual harassment and stalking. Inductive, qualitative studies of online harassment are scarce. An analysis of how social actors make sense of their gendered and racialized experiences provides insights into the societal impact of these interactions, as well as the interventions that would be appropriate to address them. Through interviews with 60 college students, I analyze the experience of and responses toward identity-based online harassment. Treating the everyday as a site for reproducing, enacting, and resisting racial and gender inequality, I situate online harassment as part of the recurring and familiar daily practices through which people sustain as well as resist racism and sexism. In my first article, I use the concept of “entitlement racism,” to explore how victims of racist online harassment explain, and, ultimately, justify the rights of others to target racial minorities online. The second article examines how overt sexism operates as a form of “soft repression,” silencing women in online spaces. The final article considers both the emergence of new forms of intimate labor and the changing conditions under which it is performed. This dissertation furthers the sociological study of social inequality by demonstrating how race and gender are negotiated in online settings, particularly in response to discrimination. Using insights from structural and cultural theories of racism and sexism, I demonstrate how patterns of inequality manifest in a new site of interaction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I argue that overt racism and sexism experienced online are a key feature of young adults everyday lives. These experiences challenge their adoption of a colorblind and postfeminist, framework by highlighting the centrality of racial and gender domination. I use Essed's concept of entitlement racism to explain how respondents make sense of this contradictory, "racists without racism" situation — by invoking the "right to be racist" online. I also uncover the dimensions of everyday sexism that women experience online, which subsequently allow them to identify their experiences as forms of sexism, and link these online experiences to offline interactions, including sexual assaults. Finally, I explore young adults agentic responses to racism and sexism, findings four strategies: education, directly respond, care, and intellectualize. I argue that these strategies may reveal how race and gender, as systems, organize social action onto specific trajectories, which can work to reproduce and challenge social inequalities.

2. RACISM WITHOUT RACISTS? FROM COLORBLIND TO ENTITLEMENT RACISM ONLINE

Introduction

Much of the recent literature on racism has been drawn from Bonilla-Silva's (2017) Colorblind Racism framework, which describes how the post-Civil Rights racial structure unequally distributes resources along racial lines, and examines the ideological justification of this covert racism through colorblind frames (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Foreman 2000; Bonilla-Silva, Lewis and Embrick 2005; Bloch 2107; Doane 2017; Lewis 2001). The record scratch of President Donald Trump's overt racist rhetoric, including xenophobia and support for white nationalists (Bobo 2017; Perry 2018; Subtirelu 2017) "shatters the collective hallucination of post-racialism" (Ray et al 2017:147). Bonilla-Silva (2017, 2019a, 2019b) maintains that despite the rise in overt hate crimes and overt racism in frontstage settings, which characterize Trumpamerica, the "New Racism" racial structure and accompanying colorblind racism ideology remain hegemonic.

Indeed, there is no compelling evidence to suggest that the New Racism he describes, marked by covertly racist practices across political, economic and social domains, is no longer the dominant form of racism. But racial ideologies are fluid, context-specific constructions; as political and social contexts shift, the racial ideologies tied to the particular practices within a racial structure shift as well (Doane 2017). To be sure, Bonilla-Silva never argues that overt racism disappeared, neither does he imply that no

other racial systems or ideologies exist simultaneously. Yet the literature has not adequately addressed the racial ideologies that either contest or compliment colorblind frames, which may also bolster the racial structure.

While whites and some people of color adopted abstract liberalism and other dominant frames for making sense of racism during/post-Obama, the vile, overtly racist discourses and harassment fled to online spaces, within message boards, virtual game rooms and social media sites (Gray 2014; Daniels 2009). The work of race scholars studying the online domain demonstrates that colorblind practices and ideology never became hegemonic online; rather, overt racism is the norm (Daniels 2009). White supremacist ideologies and discourses online have also been linked with the offline mobilization of white nationalists and alt-right groups, as well as a rise in hate crimes and attacks against antiracist scholars of color (Daniels 2013; Ferber 3018; Fuchs 2018). These online practices, along with their offline implications, have not been studied in relation to the broader racial structure or the ideologies that sustain it.

Such a shift raises important questions from a theoretical perspective. How is racism in the contemporary era, marked by an authoritarian, racist political regime, and normalized overt racism across online spaces, ideologically explained and justified? To evaluate how racism is conceptualized by everyday people, I interview 60 United States-based young adults, the group most likely to experience and witness racism online (Pew 2017). I explore how they make sense of their firsthand and vicarious experiences of racism, both online and offline. Perceptions of racism, including the frames and stories people use to evaluate what is or is not racism supports the racial order (Bonilla-Silva,

Lewis and Embrick 2004). I find that this is the case with young adults, whose experiences of racism are markedly different from previous cohorts due to the overt nature of the racism they experience in everyday lives. Respondents' experiences of overt racism are mundane; they describe racist discourses and harassment as a key feature of their online experiences, which aligns with Essed's (1991) theorization of everyday racism. While I do not find evidence that a colorblind racist ideology remains hegemonic among young adults' explanations of racism, their racial ideology nevertheless justifies the racial order. I find support for Essed's (2013) hypothesis that racist social media use would usher in *entitlement racism*. Essed argues that entitlement racism is when people feel they are allowed to say whatever they want, whenever they want, about whomever they want, in the name of freedom of expression, often in service of humiliation. Overt racism is beyond the explanatory scope of colorblind racism; hate speech and racist epithets are obvious examples of racism that render race-neutral explanations for racist practices ineffectual. But this does not mean that young adults challenge or question the racial order. Entitlement racism, like colorblind racism, ideologically justifies racism, removing the potential to question, critique, or otherwise address how racism manifests in social actors' everyday lives. Race and racism are at the forefront of how young adults make sense of their experiences; the centrality of race is obvious and they make no efforts, or "epistemic maneuvers" (Mueller 2017) to reframe their experiences within a colorblind framework. Whereas colorblind racism justifies covert racism, entitlement racism justifies and excuses overt racism, and ideologically removes the possibility for agentic responses of social

actors. Respondents defend the rights of others to be racist online, evoking freedom of speech to justify the negative experiences.

Theories of Racism

Structural theorists maintain that *racisms* are temporally- and geographically-bound, and incorporate both historical and contemporary social practices at multiple levels that vary in scale (Omi and Winant 2014; Bonilla-Silva 1997, 2017; Jung 2015). Bonilla-Silva (1997) argues that racial phenomena best be understood in terms of racialized social systems, "societies in which political, economic, social and ideological levels are partially structured by placing people in races" (1996:469). A racialized social system is hierarchical, with the race at the top conferring psychological, cultural, and material benefits. The social practices and relationships that shape the distribution of these benefits is the racial structure, with all social actors participating in service of their racial interests. The racial structure changes because of contestation at the ideological, social, economic, and political levels. While Bonilla-Silva designates "racism" to describe the racial ideology that justifies the racial structure, Jung's (2015) reconceptualization, *racism as a system of domination based on race*, is more appropriate. The precise relationship between ideology and racism is contested; ideology can be what maintains the racial structure (Bonilla-Silva 1997) or *race* can be the ideology that justifies racism (Cazanave 2015; Essed 1991). Nevertheless, scholars do agree that racism has an ideological component. As Jung's (2015:32) discussion of racialized social systems theory highlights, the levels or spheres that make up the racial structure are neither discrete or autonomous; they overlap and interplay. Thus, social actors' actions at one level evoke and shape other

levels, meaning that ideological shifts can have material and symbolic implications (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Jung 2015).

As Bonilla-Silva's work demonstrates, racism in the post-Civil Rights era is characterized by covert, seemingly race-neutral practices. This New Racism is obscured and reproduced through colorblind racism, a set of rhetorical styles, stories and frames that purport a reality wherein the impact of race as an axes of social inequality is minimized, and solutions for addressing issues based on race are dismissed. Colorblind racism is the ideology that maintains and justifies how racial domination manifests in covert ways. In the most recent edition of *Racism Without Racists*, Bonilla-Silva (2017) argues that despite the increase in overt racism post-Obama, colorblind racism is still hegemonic. Bonilla's Silva (2017) maintains that the racial politics of the Obama presidency and the 2016 Presidential election, especially the emotional politics through which whites used their "felt racism" as a basis for voting (Ioanide 2015), are evidence that colorblind racism remains hegemonic. While scholars may be tempted to view Trump's racial animus as counter to a colorblind racism framework, Bonilla-Silva contends that racism is systemic, and is more than the individual prejudices and acts of overt racism. To be sure, Bonilla-Silva does not argue that overt racism disappeared, and acknowledges that other ideologies and racisms are always at play. Yet the question remains of how the public resurgence of overt racism, foreshadowed by two decades of overt racism and white nationalist organizing online, are perceived, experienced, and justified. Everyday people's meaning-making processes are central to how ideologies are

shaped and reproduced, and these narratives should not be downplayed in relation to the systems they then enact and create.

Essed's (1991) theory of Everyday Racism is particularly useful in this regard, as it focuses on the subjective impact of the daily experiences of racism, without making claims as to the specific contours of what that racism entails at any given point in time. Within this framework, racism describes a system of structural inequalities, where system refers to how social relations are organized as regular social practices. Racism as a system is produced and reproduced through routine practices, which become part of normal, everyday life for all social actors. For Essed, the macro/micro divide in conceptualizing racism is a fallacy, as structures cannot be divorced from the social agents that create and maintain the racial structure. An Everyday Racism framework compliments a Colorblind Racism framework, as everyday people's experiences of racism are shaped by overarching colorblind ideologies and broader, normalized racist practices across social domains. Mueller's (2017) focus on the everyday mechanisms through which whites produce a way of *not knowing* about racism, reveals how significant seemingly mundane rhetorical and cognitive strategies are for restoring ideologies. When whites' ignorance of race and racism is challenged with self-collected familial wealth data that show unjust enrichment, whites perform defensive maneuvers that ultimately protect and restore white moral investments and colorblind ideology as "cloaking mechanisms of white supremacy" (Mueller 2017:234). Breaching colorblind ideology is thus not enough to render the ideology meaningless, neither is interacting in spaces where race and the implications of racism are salient, such as historically Black colleges and universities, and hip-hop

(Jayakumar and Adamani 2017; Rodriguez 2006). Overt racism, especially through racist epithets and hate speech, is a clear breach of colorblind ideology in the everyday context. Yet, scholars know little about how overt racism impacts racial ideologies, especially within the contemporary era.

Overt Racism Online

A turn to scholarship on online spaces demonstrates that covert racism never became hegemonic in gaming, news, forums, blogs, or social media. Lisa Nakamura's (1995; 2016) canonical work on race online from the 1990s to the present day, has traced how racial formations are mediated through technology use, where racial identities become reinscribed through textual and visual images that are tied to broader representational politics. Race thus remains a resource that facilitates conflict, exclusion, and inclusion online (Creswell, Whitehead and Durrheim 2014; Gray 2014; Eschmann 2019). The majority of studies of racism online, operationalized as language that denigrates people of color, rely on content analyses of text, focusing on racist discourses and "jokes" circulated, racist propaganda, and the recruitment tactics adopted by white nationalist groups (Billig 2001; Bluic et al. 2018; Daniels 2009). Beyond content analyses, some studies have utilized experiments to test how people perceive and respond to racism (Tynes and Markoe 2010; Williams, Oliver, Myers 2016), and surveyed college students about their racial attitudes and general experiences of racism online (Tynes et al. 2012).

Daniels' (2009) oft-cited review of the study of race and racism online points out that much of this literature tends to focus on racial formations, which she argues creates blindspots in the study of racism. I do not agree that a racial formation framework is ill-

suited for studying racism, nor do I agree that a systemic racism framework (Feagin 2013) is the most promising avenue. Instead, I offer two critiques that the present study seeks to address. First, studies tend to assume from the onset, or eventually conclude that the anonymous nature of online interactions, and the technology itself, are foundational for understanding racist interactions, including how and why they emerge in such overt ways. Surely the contextual factors of anonymity, and the cultural norms of online spaces play a role in how racism manifests, but the focus on technology leaves the question of *how racism online is symptomatic of, and impacts, the racial structure more broadly* unanswered. This focus on anonymous individuals who subject others to their "hate," prejudice, and microaggressions, are important for their insights into the psychological profiles of whites, but the individual actions and perceptions of whites must be linked to how those actions shape offline phenomena, collective ideologies, or the racial structure. Second, few studies address the perspectives and experiences of the groups who have been targeted online. Content analyses cannot tell us about the perspectives, meaning-making processes, and responses that span to offline situations and interactions. Some qualitative studies have focused on the targets of racism, but these have been bound to specific sites, such as on gaming spaces (Gray 2011; Ortiz 2019a, 2019b) or an unaffiliated campus-based social media sites (Eschmann 2019; Gin et al).

Young adults' online use is a promising site to explore the connection between experiences of racism and broader implications. Young adults, aged 18-29, are distinct from older cohorts, as the majority of their social lives have been experienced online. According to Pew, in 2015, 91% of 13-17-year-olds accessed online sites and social media

from a smartphone, 94% of whom reported going online daily *or more often.* While the earliest adopters of social media, these teens are now within the young adult age-range and continue to be the most active on social media, with 90% active on at least one social media account (Pew 2019). This social media use has also been marked by negative interactions, including sustained harassment on the basis of social identities (Pew 2017). While young adults are exposed to colorblind racism in public and political discourse, in school and in the media, overt racism in the form of racist "cyberbullying" (Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2007), hate speech while playing video games (Gray 2011, 2014; Nakamura 2012; Ortiz 2019a), and on social media sites (Chaudry 2015; Jakubowics 2017) has simultaneously been central to their social lives.

There is a significant dearth of literature on how racism online shapes broader worldviews and interactions, as well as offline outcomes. Sociologists may fall into dualistic thinking, where offline and online are conceptualized as two distinct spheres with little crossover or capacity for interaction between them. But research suggests that racism witnessed and experienced online shapes how young adults (Eschmann 2019) and adults of color (Gray 2011; Ortiz 2019a, 2019b) think about their social world. Eschmann (2019) frames this process as an unmasking, situating online racism as a portal through which students of color at a PWI learn that students at their school hold racist views. I broaden the scope from a campus-specific page to *online sites in general*, asking how racism online shapes young adults' meaning making around racism, and the racial ideologies they employ to explain racism writ large.

Methods

To explore how young adults conceptualize racism online, I employed semi-structured interviews with undergraduate students at Southern U. While surveys may have provided data around general attitudes about racism, the purpose of the broader study was to examine how young adults make sense of "negative online interactions around race and gender." To date, there exists one nationally presentative survey regarding online harassment; Pew's (2017) survey is invaluable, but there are many questions we cannot answer using these data. Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to grant contradictions, elisions, and avoidances some level of significance within an interview and ask respondents to elaborate or explain these incoherencies (Hollway and Jefferson 2000:37). Such incoherencies have the potential to create important findings about the aspects of, and responses to, online harassment. Finally, semi-structured interviews create the opportunity for expansion, which is crucial because no study has captured online harassment in such an open-ended manner. Instead, predetermined types of online harassment have been provided to respondents as response categories without any open-ended questions about how respondents might conceptualize or define each type. Due to this standard methodology within online harassment literature, little is known about any additional types of harassment, how respondents interpret each dimension of harassment, or what range of behaviors each dimension encompasses. These interpretations are important to consider because there is the possibility that what researchers assume to be one type of harassment might be interpreted as a different form by those experiencing it. For example, researchers might subsume the sharing of another person's private pictures

under the theme “sexual harassment,” but respondents might interpret this act instead as “purposeful embarrassment.” This can potentially shape policy and other interventions to address the issue if the people being harassed would not think to report this problem as sexual harassment or seek out resources due to being sexually harassed. Examining respondents’ meanings, appraisals and coping strategies through interviews will remedy these issues. Interview data allows me to fill these gaps, learning how young adults categorize the incidents they witness and experience, and what meanings they attach to them. Young adults, between the ages of 18-29, are most likely to witness and experience online harassment, including race-based attacks (Pew 2017). The age of college students overlaps with this age range and provides an ideal sampling frame.

Part of the goal of the broader project was to evaluate how campus climate extended online, and how negative race- or gender-based online interactions shaped students’ conceptualization of campus climate. The subset of data analyzed for this paper will not explicitly address this question, but I nevertheless describe the organizational characteristics to provide some of the context for respondents’ racial common sense. I recruited from Southern U, a large, research institution nationally recognized for free speech. Southern U students, like other institutions, are active on social media and maintain networks within their schools. “Southie” Twitter, for example, is a collection of tweets with inside jokes and local happenings of campus. GroupMe, a messaging app, is popular among undergraduates, who create closed groups for each of their courses, sharing notes, concerns, complaints, or generally venting about their class and professor. There is a Southie meme facebook page, and a Southie Free and For Sale page with thousands of

members each, including former and new students. Southern U also boasts an impressive placement history of graduates, possible through the Southie Network on LinkedIn and Facebook. More broadly, Southern U Values are paramount to the campus culture and institutional workings, which shape how Southern U students interact with each other via campus organizations. At the time of data collection, Southern U's main campus undergraduate enrollment was 50,854. Forty seven percent of these students were female, 61% white, 23.5% Hispanic, 3.5% Black and 7% Asian.

My recruitment flyer specified that I was seeking to interview students between the ages of 18-29 about their "negative online interactions around race or gender." I did not specify that I was studying online harassment, racism or sexism, as the purpose of the study was to learn *which* interactions or incidents respondents categorized as harassment and why. The connecting thread between racism, sexism, and harassment are that they were experienced negatively, but not all negative experiences will be perceived of as fitting into those categories. Leaving the call open allowed me to develop the typology from the interview data. I found it useful to recruit in person, in large introductory courses in Political Science, Sociology, Engineering and Biology, as these are required general education requirements for students across majors. I also emailed specific student organizations and programs, such as the Honors program, residential life, athletics, Greek life, the free speech student group, the democratic and republican students groups, and each of the racial/ethnic-oriented student groups. To be included in the study, students must have spoken English, been at least 18 years old, and attended Elementary school and

beyond in the United States, since the meanings of race and racism are nationally-bound (Omi and Winant 2014). I offered respondents a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive.

My final sample consisted of 60 respondents. While it is generally agreed-upon that saturation is possible with a sample as small as 6-10 (Cresswell 2004), my sample is considerably larger because I wanted to analyze data between and within strata. I was also interested in saturation of *meanings* as opposed to saturation of themes. Thematic saturation occurs when the research has essentially "heard it all" (Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi 2017); that is, respondents relay the same types of information or their narratives generally cover the same range of topics. Code saturation will stabilize a codebook and identify the prevalence of themes, but it does not necessarily lead to understanding of those themes, or speak to the richness of data that contribute to the researcher's understanding of the code in relation to the broader research question (Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi 2017). As Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi note, "a code may be identified in one interview and repeated in another, but additional interviews are needed to capture all dimensions of the issue to fully understand it" (2017:605).

For the vast majority of interviews, respondents met in a small room in the library, located centrally on campus. Eight of the 60 interviews were conducted over the phone to accommodate respondents who needed to travel home or who were having public transportation issues and could not arrive on campus on-time for the interview. I noted no differences in rapport established or quality of data compared to interviews conducted in person; while body language was missing, this was not an aspect of my analysis. The interview guide was designed to lead the interview from grand tour questions about

respondents' social media use, preferences, and dislikes about the platforms, to witnessed experiences of negative interactions based on race or gender. I then asked respondents about personally experienced incidents, and asked them to compare those interactions to in-person negative experiences. Probes were standardized across interviews to elicit information regarding the who/what/where/how of each incident; initial reactions or feelings toward incidents; how they responded and why; and if they ever shared their experiences with others and why. Prior to data collection, questions were piloted with six volunteers who fit the inclusion criteria in order to determine which questions were confusing or difficult to answer fully without specific probes.

I did not use the words "harassment" or "racism" in any of the question stems until after respondents described their "negative race- or gender-based interactions." Only then did I follow up with questions about whether and why respondents considered those experiences to be harassment and/or racism. If respondents answered "no" to those questions, I followed up with the question, "Do you think harassment and racism exist online at all? If so, give me an example of what that would look like? How would you recognize it?" Respondents then provided examples of what "real" racism and harassment online is, sometimes including examples that closely resembled the experiences they had just explained to me earlier in the interview. The strength of semi-structured interviews is the ability to make sense of contradictions in real time (Miles and Huberman), thus, I would ask for clarification when these contradictions arose. Many respondents then backtracked and claimed that perhaps *they did* experience racism after all. This sudden insight led to a line of questioning about why they did not categorize their experiences as

such earlier in the interview, which provided data about social desirability, past experiences, and broader discourses around what "actually" constitutes racism. This information about comprehension of racism is critical, as knowledge about racism is not static; it is constantly tested, reinterpreted when new information is presented, and previous models potentially shifted as new knowledge is gained vis-a-vis firsthand and various experiences (Essed 1991:74). My interviews were thus able to tap into the how racist events are assessed and justified, and respondents' general comprehension of racism. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and were also audio-recorded and transcribed.

Using a thematic analysis technique, my initial coding focused on describing the patterns and meanings within the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This is different from latent coding, which seeks to describe the discourses that shaped the underlying meanings and structures within the data in order to construct a theory (Braun and Clarke 2006). I assigned codes to descriptions of processes, affective experiences and evaluations, and attributions and evaluations of the magnitude of online harassment (Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014). Following this initial coding, Essed's (1991) theory of everyday discrimination provided me with an analytic schema for further analyzing interview data within the thematic analysis coding technique. First, macro and micro dimensions of discrimination were identified by distinguishing generalized and specific statement about situations, acts and attitudes (Essed 1991:69). Second, descriptions of discriminatory events are reconstructed through the identification of setting, agents, observers, acts and attitudes (Essed 1991:69). Third, different types of experiences were identified by

distinguishing between witnessed and reported events (Essed 1991:69). Finally, Essed (1991:69-74) states that the researcher must identify interpretations and evaluations of discrimination in the interview text because knowledge of discrimination is a process of constant interpretation and remodeling of previous strategies to make sense of these experiences. This involved analyzing *descriptive* statements that speak to the processes of online harassment and respondent reactions, and *explanatory* statements that speak to respondent "theories" about the causes and functions of online harassment (Essed 1991:109).

Findings

Race and racism are at the forefront of young adults' everyday social context, shaping the negative interactions they witness and experience firsthand. The overt nature of racism, both online and off, renders a colorblind framework meaningless and baseless. While everyday racist experiences online are commonplace for young adults, the process through which they assess these racist events leads them to conclude that racism does not exist online. Thus, rather than using a colorblind ideology to justify the racial order, young adults express what Essed (2013) refers to as entitlement racism. Entitlement racism is the use of freedom of speech and the language of rights to ultimately defend the right to use racist speech. The intersubjective definition of racism as ignoring online spaces, and the ideology of entitlement racism, sustain the racial order similarly to how colorblind racism functions- removing the capacity to critique or challenge racism. Because their experiences were online, respondents often defended the rights of others to be racist, freedom of speech, and the language of rights to defend the "right to be racist." While

colorblind racist frames are not used to explain away the racist practice, or "exonerate or punish" individual racists (Doane 2014), entitlement racism ideologically justifies the racial structure.

Everyday Racist Experiences

The "negative interactions around race" that respondents described witnessing and experiencing were situations where racial epithets and racist stereotypes were used against people of color, as well as when public discourse relied on racist tropes during discussions of police brutality, immigration, and affirmative action. Public discourses that trivialized, minimized, or implied that instances of suffering among people of color were their fault were also negative for respondents. Everyday experiences of racism online, and racist discourses respondents connect to the 2016 Presidential Election, make it difficult for respondents to present a colorblind assessment of the social world. Whereas the post-civil rights era is marked by covert forms of racism in everyday life-microaggressions where the social actor spends energy determining *if* race is the cause or subject- young adults' experiences are quite different. Almost half of the respondents have experienced overtly racist encounters since as early as elementary school. Negative interactions around race, through seeing racist memes, comments, or being targeted is a mundane aspect of social media use. Everyday racism is activated through personal encounters, vicariously through experiences of other people of color, through the media, and through daily injustices experienced in society (Essed 1991).

Part of this normalization is in part due to how much of respondent's lives have been spent online. Almost half of my sample first began experiencing racism, either

firsthand or vicariously, as early as second grade. A sharp distinction from the more covert forms experienced in other domains of everyday life, respondents have almost always witnessed or experienced overt racism online, across websites. For many, it was their earliest exposure to racist speech in general. Riley, a 20 year old Asian American man explains:

> I found my political consciousness online. I connected with activists around the country, learned about Yellow Power, and organized protests through social media. But social media has never been a safe space. It's always been racist, everyday and every site… I was called zipperhead on Twitter before I had even been called it person. I had to ask my mom what it meant... I was ten.

Pearl, an 18 year old Black woman shares a similar story:

> When I was little, I would sneak on chat rooms. I sent my picture to a boy once and he called me a roach. I asked what he meant, and he said I was dark and dirty… I'd say things like that teach you to keep your posting to a minimum… I still see racist stuff all the time, especially toward Black women. There are pages dedicated to making fun of us with hundreds of thousands of followers.

Respondents such as Riley and Pearl describe positive aspects of social media use—from the ability to engage in social interactions, to learning about and participating in social movements. At the same time, however, respondents acknowledge that they are being targeted on the basis of race and gender across websites. Negative interactions based on race were always described as "racist" by respondents, who noted exhaustion, sadness, hopelessness, anger, as well as physical implications such as loss of sleep and stomachaches. Respondents also noted a process, wherein such racist experiences were once appalling, but now normalized as a par for the course. Part of this normalization is

due to lack of social support for processing these experiences (Ortiz 2019a), as well as what others have referred to as racial battle fatigue online (Eschmann 2019). Bree, a 22-year-old multiracial woman, explains the normalization and burnout:

> When you're little, seeing racist posts online is shocking. You sit there with your jaw on the floor, reading words you'd never heard before… Once I got into high school I would confront racists left and right. I didn't care who they were, friend, stranger, country ass uncle, they got it. You burn out though. It's exhausting and depressing to be the only one challenging this… The morning after the election, my Facebook timeline was just [pauses] I mean, I cried. So many people I called friends, and teachers I respected, were just championing Trump and saying they don't have to be ashamed anymore for not supporting "illegals" and #BLM. So I don't post much about things I care about anymore. I don't have the energy to fight anymore.

Bree and others describe an exhaustion from challenging racist posts online, as well as an isolation bound to a sense that they are the only people doing the necessary work of disrupting racist speech. The 2016 Presidential Election marked an event for most respondents, who reported that the racist incidents they usually witnessed from strangers were now directed from people with whom they had relationships with offline. Notably, respondents were never asked about the election; they were asked if they thought that what they experience online is linked to anything happening in society more broadly. Fifty-two of the 60 respondents directly reported that the election signified the beginning of an uptick of racist posts, especially by people who respondents did not know shared racist views.

Despite the general sense that these experiences are not only about race but are in fact racist, respondents do not categorize these negative racist experiences *as racism.* Vicarious and firsthand racist experiences are an everyday reality of online spaces, and

colorblind frames are not used to explain away racism online. As a pliable interpretive framework, colorblind racism allows whites to "misinterpret the world," justifying racial domination, and obscuring the centrality of race and the impact of racism on people of color. If colorblind racism was a master framework to explain racial matters, we would expect that respondents asked to explain overtly racist incidents might resort to a combination of the colorblind frames. Yet I find competing evidence. No respondent, including whites, uses a colorblind framework to describe what they witness and experience online. Instead, events are described as racist without any hesitation, and the role of race is highlighted. Pat, an 18-year-old Latino explains his most recent negative interaction around race, a discussion under a video of a Mexican street vendor:

> I remember there was a lot of racial conflict, arguing back and forth about whether it was glorifying this stuff. White people were saying 'He's clearly illegal and should be deported!' … It had a huge hint of racist tones. They were calling him wetback, and they wanted to drive him out just because he was Mexican.
>
> *[Ortiz: You used the words racist tones. Did you think these comments were racist?]*
>
> For the ones that specifically went at him for being Mexican, and people calling him wetback? Or you know, those stereotypical things? Oh yes. Yeah.
>
> *[Ortiz: So is that an example of racism?]*
>
> I say no being that the way racism is defined, like historically, with the African-Americans being slaves and stuff like that. You know, how they were chained up, forced to work on plantations, receiving nothing in return. That's physical, you *know* it is racism. In my head, I visualize it and conceptualize it to be very physical. But this scenario, I wouldn't call it racism because it's online.

This sentiment that racism cannot exist online was shared among 49 of the 60 respondents. How is this possible for an experience to be racist but not an example of racism? I argue that the process of how people assess racist events is riddled with uncertainty with regard to what to make of online experiences, primarily because of how the intersubjective definition of racism is constructed. That uncertainty results in respondents overwhelmingly reporting that racism does not exist online, creating a situation where there are "racists without racism."

The Subjective Assessment of Racist Events

Whereas others have found that confrontations with such data will lead to the active production of colorblindness and especially racial ignorance (Mueller 2017), I find that respondents will easily state, without much tension at all, that what they see and experience is undoubtedly racist. Yet, asked if they have experienced or witnessed *racism* online, most respondents will say that racism does not exist online. Racism is conceptualized as a singular, in-person, physically violent attack; or an institution like slavery, or organizations like the Alt-Right or KKK. In this section, I will outline how the process through which individuals assess whether or not event are examples of racism ultimately lead most respondent to reject the notion that what occurs online is racism. Whether or not an event is interpreted as racism firstly depends on what their intersubjective definition of racism is (Essed 1991). Individuals acquire knowledge of what racism is through a process involving personal experiences from the past; family attitudes; education; media; and large-scale struggles (Essed 1991). Past experiences, including hostility, discrimination, and general negative interactions provide a foundation

for interpreting racist events later in life (Essed 1991). The formal education systems also shape knowledge of racism; scholars of education and race demonstrate how schools explain away racism or focus on historical examples (Lewis 2001). The media, including television, film and news media often portrays racism as blatant hate speech, or one individual's extreme ignorance or bigotry (Nilsen & Turner 2014). The family is where informal conversations about what racism is and how to navigate it occur (Essed 1991). We do not have evidence to suggest that families of color are reinforcing colorblind racism at home, Ortiz (2019a) found that family members can dismiss hate speech that occurred online *because* it occurred online, which was often tied to a lack of firsthand experience. Finally, large-scale struggles in the form of social movements can shape how racist events are assessed by setting ideological agendas. The social movements mentioned by respondents were #MeToo and #BLM, which were organized online, but do not explicitly address online matters. Overall, the definition of racism is not aligned with addressing the online domain.

This definition of racism becomes the basis for the young adults' assessment process. When people of color experience potentially racist events in their day to day lives, they assess, evaluate, and then categorize what they experienced, following a basic sequence:

1. Is the event acceptable?
2. Are there acceptable excuses?
3. Is the event happening because of race?
4. Is this specific event excusable?

5. Is it socially significant?

The first step is evaluating if the event or practice is acceptable. Generally, behavior considered acceptable will not induce further questioning. This is the case for the one respondent who accepted that racist posts online are so normal that they are therefore acceptable, and the sequence for them stopped there. Pedro, 19-year-old biracial man:

> … I get that it makes some people feel bad to read racist stuff or get called names. But it's just the way it is online. That's not racism, it's just how people are. At this point everyone knows this. People should get offline if they don't like it.

The second step is to then consider if there is an acceptable excuse for this event. Four respondents noted that while it's unacceptable because people are harmed in the process, racist posts are merely about people trying to ruin the fun, or get a rise out of people of color online. Four respondents believed this "normal" aspect of "human nature" is not an example of racism. Kelsey, 19-year-old white woman:

> It's disheartening to see racist posts all the time, but I try to remember that a lot of it is, you know, just trolling or people joking around, just trying to get a reaction. It's not really racism. I mean, people are being hurt, sure, but it's just different online… It's just more serious when it's in your face. You can walk away from the computer.

In the online context, an acceptable excuse for this unacceptable behavior is that it is normal and therefore acceptable for people to just try to upset or evoke a response from people of color, therefore, it is not racism. But if there are no acceptable excuses, it becomes relevant to know if the person is targeted because of their race. If not, then it is not interpreted as racism. Not one respondent claimed that racist posts were not about a person's race. A colorblind racism framework would be most effective here and we might

expect that respondents would explain away the significance of race. Every respondent attributed what they witnessed and experienced to race. If the event is interpreted as targeting toward someone because of their race, then the process moves to step four, which has the respondents consider if specific event is excusable. This often leads to blaming people of color for the discrimination they experience, or saying that people of color put themselves into these situations. This usually looked like the following: Zoe, 20-year-old Latina:

> I won a full ride to Southern U and posted a picture on Facebook of me and the other award winners. People shared it dozens of times, and it had almost 100 comments, mostly all really negative… I'd say they were racist. They were saying we minorities get so many opportunities over hard working white people, that we didn't even do anything to deserve the money… no, I wouldn't say it's racism when people said that stuff, because at the end of the day, I shouldn't have shared that news on Facebook anyway.

Since respondents understand the risks of being targeted as higher if you make yourself accessible to potential perpetrators through posting content, simply sharing one's achievements online becomes the cause of the racist event. Perceiving oneself as the cause of the event removes the possibility of categorizing the event as racism. Ten respondents were adamant that what they witnessed and experienced was not racism because the event could have been avoided through more mindful strategies, such as not sharing content at all. If an excuse for this specific event does not exist, then the final step for the interpreter is to decide if the event is socially significant. If one has worked their way all the way down this sequence, but feel like this is a personal problem, that it has no bearing on anything remotely significant for others or for society, then they are going to be very unlikely to categorize this as racism. Thirty-four respondents agreed that racist events

online were not socially significant, *because* they occurred online. Reece, 22-year-old Black man:

> I'm not saying it's not serious, but like, how do we look calling this racism? It's disrespectful to other people who had hoses turned on them, who are getting kidnapped by ICE, who are having their churches blown up. All that leaves a mark on history, but nobody cares about this online stuff.

The intersubjective definition here is clearly tied to historical references to racism, familiar/community experiences, and the broader lack of care and response to what occurs online. Like Pat earlier, who conceptualized racism as physical violence and chains of slavery, Reece evokes imagery of physical violence that is undoubtedly racism, while the verbal harassment he witnesses is not a strong enough indicator of a socially significant event. This does not mean that respondents exclusively consider physical violence socially significant and therefore racism. Verbal harassment experienced in person, especially on Southern U's campus, were examples respondents used when asked if they have had negative racial interactions in person. Sixty-five percent of the sample (39 young adults of color) almost exclusively describe incidents where they were harassed, slighted, or alienated based on race through overt racial stereotypes and epithets. To provide an example of a standard response to the question asking about negative interactions around race in person. Marissa, an 18-year-old Latina told me about the following experiences:

> I experienced racism my first weekend here. One of my roommates recorded me on the phone with my mom, and posted it on Snapchat saying the wall couldn't be built fast enough … I had to call the police because I was almost dragged into a car on my walk home, and they said maybe they needed my help with a construction job… my TA told me that Spanish girls give the best head, which explains why I got into the engineering program...

Respondents shared experiences with professors, teaching assistants, academic advisors, students on the campus buses, but also at sporting events, and parties. Verbal harassment resonates as socially meaningful to respondents, who referred to those occasions as "racism." However, this breach does not result in respondents backpedaling their initial narratives that racial epithets and stereotypes online are not racism. Instead, in making sense of the contradiction that events can be racist but *not* examples of racism, respondents defend the rights of others "to be racist."

Entitlement Racism: Defending "The Right to be Racist"

Overtly racist language is rationalized and justified using the language of free speech. Racism is described as a right people have to exercise. This logic compliments the language of neoliberalism, which prioritizes individual accountability and personal choice, above systems of privilege and disadvantage (Essed). Targeted people can choose to be offended, but the logic follows that we cannot plausible address racism at all since people have the right to offend. Philomena Essed refers to this concept as entitlement racism. In 2013, Essed suggested that racism was moving toward bold, unapologetic expressions of white supremacy, which would manifest as a backlash toward the norms that whites felt infringed on their ability to express themselves. This entitlement racism would be framed as truth-telling, and as simply speaking one's mind about people of color and racial matters. Essed suggests that people would feel that they have the right to offend others, openly admitting the intention to perform symbolic violence on those they seek to humiliate. My findings demonstrate that this ideological justification of racism as a set of rights is central to how young adults navigate overt racism, especially in a space where

they perceive there to be little agency in reshaping. While denouncing racism writ large, white male respondents, and one multiracial man, were far more concerned about the implications of developing interventions to address or prevent racist harassment online than the racism itself. For example, Paul, a 22-year-old white man reported:

> Obviously racism is wrong, but we can't take away human rights. We have to use logic and facts and reason to protect those rights. People have a choice to stay online or get off, and at this point, everyone knows what to expect. I just get really uncomfortable with talking about solutions because people have rights.

Recall Marissa who described the racist experiences she's encountered both online and offline. Despite the brutal nature of those experiences, she nevertheless uses the language of rights to obscure any possible solutions or actions in response.

> It's miserable, but what can we do? We can't do anything because people have the right to say what they want… We just have to be strong and not let it get us down.

Georgia, 21 year old Asian American woman echoes this sentiment:

> People have the right to say what they want to say, even if it's racist. It's up to us to challenge racism… I personally don't say much anymore when I come across it online. For one, I'd be depressed, and two, that would literally be never-ending! ... I guess Facebook and Twitter could moderate, but there's free speech, you know?

Georgia mentions the possibility of some solutions in response to racist posts, even if people have the right to target others. Such an individual-level solution, however, is immediately pointed out as an unsustainable course of action, due to the sheer volume of posts and disturbing content. When she considers organizational-level responses, she returns to the issue of rights, as do other respondents, who cannot imagine neither a realistic—or ideal—solution to the problems they have described.

The language of rights is closely related to how whites use abstract liberalism to explain racial matters that on the surface do not seem to be related to racism at all (Bonilla Silva). However, the situations respondents in this study are justifying are overtly racist, which is an important distinction and why Essed's concept of entitlement racism is useful. It speaks to the shifting social and political contexts preceding Trump online, and following Trump in public settings— an unapologetic acknowledgment of domination, a bravado that relishes in wrongdoing. If colorblind racism is used to maintain whites perceptions of themselves as good, non racist people, entitlement racism allows people to rationalize the right to support and engage in racist practices which they perceive as morally and legally legitimate.

Entitlement racism is not a denial of knowledge in the ways that colorblind ideology functions as a form of ignorance, nor does it fit into the broader strategies people use to repair colorblind ideology when the worldview has been fractured (Bonilla Silva; Doane 2014, 2017; Mueller 2017). Jung (2015) argues that the absence of knowledge is only one form of ignorance that bolsters the dominant racial ideology. Ignorance also involves implicitly denying explicit knowledge of domination, a collective practice rooted in indifference. This symbolic coercion (Jung 2015:121) "denotes the conscious disagreement of the dominated that goes unconsciously unrecognized by the dominant." This coercion results in subaltern discourses or arguments of the dominated as illegitimate to the point of registering below the dominant's conscious recognition; symbolic violence and physical coercion ensue as legitimate forms of violence. White respondents and respondents of color alike recognize the aspects of domination involved in racist

harassment online. What is produced through entitlement racism is not ignorance regarding the existence of racial inequality, but rather an inability to imagine alternative possibilities for the racial structure. In explaining away solutions and interventions at the levels of the individual, organization, and policy, entitlement racism as a method of symbolic coercion provides the justification for the continuation of racist practices.

Conclusion

Following the trajectory of structural theorists of racism, I have argued that overt racism online, as well as the rise in overt racism offline, demands a revisiting of ideologies beyond colorblind racism. Colorblind frames function to provide the ideological mechanisms to deny the existence of racial inequality, and justify racially unequal practices by avoiding discussions of race. However, colorblind frames alone cannot explain away the overt racism experienced in everyday life. Respondents, when confronted with clear examples of how race and racism shape their social lives reject colorblind explanations for their experiences, describing their experiences online and off as in fact "racist." Yet in their assessment of these racist events, respondents simultaneously argue that overtly racist epithets and racial stereotypes are not examples of racism *because* they occur online. While colorblind frames are rejected by respondents in their meaning-making narratives of racism, the implications of colorblind racism nevertheless remain: racism, while denounced as a social ill, nevertheless remains justified as a normal feature of social life, where interventions are inconceivable. Instead of claiming not to see the significance of race in shaping society, entitlement racism becomes yet another arm of a racial structure

increasingly marked by overt racism in the everyday context— a sibling ideology to colorblind racism.

While not a study of universities or diversity discourses, it is important to note that the potential impact that organizational context may have had on my findings. Moore & Bell (2017) argue that race scholars exploring colorblind racism have inadequately addressed the persistence of overt racism, specifically on college campuses. Overt racism within the institutional space of a college campus provides the university an opportunity to reaffirm colorblind commitment to diversity but also to the reproduction of an abstract liberalist construction of freedom of speech, producing a discourse that defends the right to be racist. Thus, overt racist practices work in connection with colorblind practices to reproduce white supremacy within institutions. It is plausible that the white institutional space of Southern U, nationally recognized by conservative outlets for its commitment to free speech, shaped respondents' meaning making of racism writ large, adopting institutional-level discourses to justify the racism they claim does not exist.

This study makes two contributions to the study of racism. First, it meets the call of race scholars to study racial ideologies, not as individual attitudes that cause racial inequality per se, but as meaning making frameworks that uphold, and are derived from, the racial structure (Doane 2017). Entitlement racism, like colorblind racism, emerges at a specific point in time, in a particular political and social context, to justify the overt racial practices that constitute the racial structure. Second, this study adds to the growing body of literature that demonstrates the connection between online and offline racist practices. Specifically, I show that overtly racist practices online are a form of everyday racism for

respondents, who anticipate mistreatment and change their behaviors in an effort to avoid abuse. The hegemony of colorblind ideology offline means that institutions across domains are invested in maintaining the illusion of racial equality, while respondents' experiences of everyday overt racism clearly contradict this reality. This leaves respondents in a situation where their online experiences are met with little concern from other social actors; a sense of collective indifference places pressure on respondents to minimize their experiences of racism.

3. REPRESSION, EVERYDAY SEXISM ONLINE, AND THE INCOHERENCY OF POSTFEMINISM

Introduction

The harassment and abuse of women online through the use of sexist language, stalking, and revenge pornography are clear examples of how sexism remains a salient form of inequality in the contemporary era (Sobieraj 2018). While scholars have documented the persistent, overt sexism aimed at women, and the social implications of this violence on democracy and women's activism (Megarry 2014; Sobieraj 2018, 2020), there remains little work on how women make meaning of sexism in their everyday lives. Everyday sexism refers to the unfair treatment, harassment, and routine slights experienced by women in daily life, across social domains, such as work, public leisure spaces, and school. The impact of sexism on the everyday lives of women has mental and physical health implications, and provides a mechanism for the subordination of women (Essed 1991).

This paper addresses the following questions: What are the dimensions of everyday sexism women experience online? How do those experiences shape how young women articulate and conceptualize sexism more broadly? I argue that the texture of everyday sexism online is a combination of overt sexism and benevolent sexism, resulting in the perception of online space as a hostile environment. The impact of this hostile environment is twofold. First, this hostile environment renders the ideology of postfeminism incoherent for women, who name sexism as a key part of their experiences online, and draws attention to the ways gender inequality functions offline. Second,

combined overt and benevolent aspects of sexism within the hostile environment create an effective silencing mechanism. Thus, online sexism removes any doubt about the nature of gender domination, women find themselves avoiding discussions of that reality.

This paper makes two contributions to the study of how sexism persists in the contemporary era, especially through online interactions. First, I shift the analysis from the digital technologies and platforms—and the sexist discourses themselves—to how women *interpret* their vicarious and firsthand experiences of sexism. Second, I center how women negotiate *everyday sexism*. While blatantly hostile sexist language clearly reflects and reproduces gender inequality, the pernicious combined impact of the overt and more mundane forms of mistreatment women experience online has been given scant attention. By rejecting technologically deterministic explanations and focusing on women's interpretations of everyday sexism in a social domain overrun with hostile sexism, this paper demonstrates how gender inequality shapes young women's perceptions of their social world, including their roles in it. This paper shows the impact of sexism on women, mainly the capacity for both the repression and the emergence of a collective, feminist consciousness.

Online Incivility and Violence Against Women Online

Women's experiences of sexism online have been predominantly studied within an online incivility or violence against women framework. While online spaces have the capacity to revive the public sphere, ushering in robust debates and deliberation about democracy (Papacharissi 2004), scholars find that offensive, abusive comments and incensed discussions largely dominate online spaces (Coe, Kenski and Rains 2014; Gardiner 2018;

Papacharissi 2004; Singer and Ashman 2009). The online incivility framework thus foregrounds rhetoric within public spaces of civic life, and frames uncivil language, which largely goes unchallenged, as threats to women's full civic participation within a patriarchal society (Citron 2009; Sobieraj 2018, 2020). Other scholars have framed women's experiences using a violence against women framework, studying online sexual harassment inclusive of stalking, rape and death threats, revenge pornography, and targeted misogynistic speech, and sustained harassment (Fox & Tang 2017; Nobles et al 2014; Fairbairn 2015; Megarry 2014; Jane 2014; Thompson 2018; Ferber 2018; Henry & Powell 2015a, 2015b, 2016). These studies theorize and empirically demonstrate how gendered inequalities are reproduced online through overtly violent acts against women.

Scholars across frameworks agree that overtly sexist discourses are clear forms of sexism, operating within a space with little reprieve for women who merely seek to exist and participate in social and civic interactions online. Sobieraj (2020) demonstrates that men most typically intimidate, shame and discredit women who call into three categories: women who are members of multiple marginalized groups; women who speak publicly in or about male dominated spheres; and women who are perceived as feminist or in some way noncompliant to traditional gender norms. The focus on *what* is said or done to women has provided important insights into the mechanisms of social control (Hill and Johnson 2019) possible through symbolic violence (Gray et al. 2015; Lumsden & Morgan 2017) enacted against women, as well as how misogynist speech reinforces the gender hierarchy more broadly (TG Levey 2018). However, with the exception of Sobieraj's (2018, 2020) work, scholars have not examined the impact of

online incivility or violence against women online, neither on a societal level or on women's lives beyond their capacity to participate in digital publics. Further, this body of work has focused on overtly sexist speech and sexual harassment, which is just one aspect of the lived experience of gender inequality.

Everyday Sexism

Everyday discrimination (Essed 1991) examines the impact of discrimination on the everyday lives of people, and draws attention to the mundane interactions that involve unfair mistreatment, harassment and routine slights experienced firsthand and vicariously. To be sure, the overt sexism women experience falls into an everyday sexism framework. The relationship between gender and interpersonal interactions is the subject of much research across theoretical paradigms within sociology, either with expectation states (Ridgeway & Berger 1986), gendered framing of social relations (Ridgeway 2009), or gender as an interactional accomplishment (West & Zimmerman). Everyday sexism is a shift from the interaction itself or the performance of gender, to the *subjective perception* of the interaction. In other words, how people make meaning of the negative experiences they attribute to their gender identity. These interactions both reflect and reproduce gender domination on a broader scale (Essed 1991). Everyday sexism is typically measured using survey items that gauge the extent to which people subjectively perceived mistreatment experienced within public social domains as linked to their gender, though diary methods and interviews are also used (Essed 1991; Swim et al). Everyday sexism functions as a chronic stressor in the lives of women, impacting anger, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and self-esteem issues, as well as how women then navigate social spaces

in anticipation of mistreatment (Berg 2006; Swim et al 2001; Hurst & Beesley 2013; Syzmanski et al 2009).

Everyday sexism and overt sexism are not mutually exclusive; in fact, some forms of violence against women online, and sexual harassment in person, may became so commonplace in women's lives as to be rendered mundane (Sobieraj 2018; Monson 1997). This paper's aim is to demonstrate which other aspects of sexism resonate as mundane and trivial to women. An everyday sexism framework is sensitive to the contemporary economic, political and cultural realities, as they shaped how sexism is lived out and enacted (Essed 1991; Ridgeway 2011; Blumber 1984). Since the 1990s and certainly in the Trump era, postfeminist discourse, operating within a broader neoliberal framework, organizes the meaning making processes of sexism by most notably removing the power of *naming* sexism (Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013). Yet, I find that due to the frequency and sheer impact of sexism online, respondents deem postfeminist discourse antithetical to their realities. This means that women name sexism in their everyday lives online, categorizing both mundane and overt examples of gender inequality as ways in which women are dominated. At the same time, the repression of sexism online functions to silence women's efforts at engaging in discussions of social justice issues.

Methods

This paper draws from a subset of data from a larger study regarding how young adults experience "negative interactions regarding race and gender online." Rather than focus on the racist or sexist *content*, the specific aim of this study was to understand how young adults conceptualize racism and sexism online, including how they drew boundaries

between a negative interaction, harassment, and racism and sexism. Young adults (ages 18-29) are most likely to witness and experience online harassment (Pew 2017). Respondents were recruited from Southern U, a large, public research university located in the Southern United States. To recruit, I used class visits to introductory, general education courses that all students have to complete to graduate, such as sociology, biology, psychology, and political science, as well as upper-level courses in business and engineering. I sent emails to interest-based student groups such as conservative and liberal political organizations, ethnic and racial-oriented student groups, the Honors program, athletics, and Greek life organizations. To be eligible for the study, the person needed to be between the ages of 18-29, fluent in English, a current student at Southern U, and have been formally educated in the United States since elementary school, as the experiences and meaning-making of everyday discrimination are bound to the cultural and political contexts of a specific nation (Essed 1991). Respondents were given a $25 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate.

Semi-structured interviews were used, as the specific aim of the study to understand how young adults make meaning of their everyday online experiences, especially those that were racist and sexist. Retrospective methods have been critiqued in the study of everyday discrimination for their neglect of the more mundane aspects of sexism; that is, respondents may be less likely to report aspects of their everyday lives that seem normal or trivial. However, results from diary methods studies are consistent with results from retrospective studies (Swim et al 2001). Further, to address the potential issue of ignoring the mundane experiences of sexism, the interview protocol was designed to

prompt answers regarding the *trivial* online experiences and interactions first, before the topic of discrimination was even addressed. Respondents were asked grand tour questions about general social media use and site preferences. I then asked about their witnessed negative interactions around race and gender, and their personally experienced negative interactions. Respondents were then asked to distinguish negative interactions from harassment, and harassment from racism and sexism. The final part of the interview probed for offline experiences, as well as the role of the university, peer groups, and family in framing online experiences. These interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, and were audio-recorded and transcribed. I used Essed's analytic scheme for coding everyday discrimination, which focuses on four analyitcal tasks. First, I distinguished generalized and specific statement about situations, acts and attitudes. Second, I coded descriptions of discriminatory events by setting, agents, observers, acts and attitudes. Third, different types of experiences were coded by distinguishing between witnessed and reported events. Finally, I coded *descriptive* statements that speak to the processes of online harassment and respondent reactions, and *explanatory* statements that speak to respondent "theories" about the causes and functions of online harassment.

Findings

Every woman that described a negative interaction around gender believed those experiences to be examples of sexism. Sexism online has two dimensions: hostile and benevolent, each of which can be experienced firsthand and vicariously. Overt sexist discourses, along with more benevolent forms of sexism, lead to the perception of online spaces as extensions of the "real world"—unwelcoming, dangerous, and stigmatizing.

Beyond limiting women's civic participation, everyday sexism online shapes social relations such that women experience the online space as a hostile environment itself. Online space, as a hostile environment, challenges the notions of postfeminism, which posits that sexism exists only as an individual problem of prejudice. Postfeminsm then advises that Individual women can address this problem because they are powerful and independent (Pomerantz et al 2013). Respondents easily classify their negative interactions around gender as sexism, describing their interactions as bound to beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that ultimately undermine women's power in online spaces.

Impersonal Comments About Women

As Sobeiraj (2018, 2020) argues, the vitriol directed at women online, such as bitch, cunt, and slut, are *impersonal comments about women as a class*. These comments are not about any one particular woman on the receiving end, so much as *what* her presence online represents to the men seeking to humiliate, harass, and silence women more generally. I extend this conceptualization to consider how general, impersonal comments about women resonate *as sexism,* despite the absence of sexist name-calling. That is, young women have a nuanced understanding of sexism that moves beyond the conceptualization of sexism as an ideology of hatred. Instead, young women consider the general mistrust toward women's autonomy and victim blaming around sexual assault as examples of sexism in tandem with sexist vitriol. Women witnessed discussions around issues aligned with feminism, as well as sexual assault, and report a clear one-sided commentary where women were belittled, humilated, and rendered voiceless. Women witnessed and were targeted firsthand in private messaging of dating sites, on their personal social media

accounts, and campus groups they were a part of. Family, friends, strangers all targets, a sense that women as a class were hated and disrespected.

Online, particular issues and events become the topic of discussion across platforms, which captivate respondents' attention. The 2016 Women's March, abortion, the 2016 Presidentional election, the President's rhetoric around sexual assault, and Dr. Christine Blassey Ford's 2018 testimony are described by respondents as more memorable topics in which negative interactions around gender occur. As Pearl, an 18-year-old Black woman stated, "People are normally disgusting toward women online. But some issues simply become magnets for all the toxic discussions. Anytime someone famous is involved, or if women's place in the world is questioned, that's when it gets really nasty." Clara, a 20-year-old white woman, shared Pearl's sentiment that toxicity is the norm online. Clara explains:

> There's so much negativity, and really cruelty, when it comes to women's rights online. I've seen people say women shouldn't be allowed to live; that we're scum of the Earth and whores for wanting the right to abortion… I'd say it's sexism. They're making a statement about the worth of half of population based on their beliefs about how we should act in our bodies, and it's not just the belief part, because then they vote on those beliefs and mistreat the women in their lives… I try to avoid all that stuff, so I keep my opinion to myself, and just keep scrolling when I do come across it.

While overt sexism centers around high profile issues, the more general comments about women and women's role in these hot topic issues, play out in the everyday context, when women share seemingly benign posts that strike a nerve with others. Jayla, a 21-year-old white woman, grew up "conservative" around "uneducated Church goers," shared the sample's sense that negativity online is par for the course. Jayla nevertheless had one

memorable negative experience around gender that contributed to her strategy of avoiding posting about politics:

> It was shortly after I graduated high school. There was this cute infographic that my friend sent me once about taxes on feminine products, and I reposted it on my Facebook, along with some information on the wage gap. Within an hour, I had a family members texting and calling me to tell me it wasn't true, that I was posting lies and it was embarrassing for them. My own father eventually got so riled up that he commented telling me I was a disappointment … later on when I joined a sorority, I finally learned not to post about politics the same way I wouldn't talk about it in person. I would be alienated for sure. I hear my sisters gripe about what someone else posted about abortion, or rape, or like how women in STEM are being harassed, and I can't have them doing that to me.

Respondents, especially those who disclosed their own sexual assaults, were also deeply disturbed by the conversations they witnessed with regard to the Kavanaugh hearing and rape more generally. As June, a 20-year-old Latina describes,

> The way people talk about rape online is really negative for me. Like, with the Kavanaugh hearing, the testimony was playing everywhere, and everyone was talking about it… It hurt me to see people I know and trust not pick the right side, or to say they're torn because they can't trust a woman who's waited so long to speak up. And then there's the same old blaming her for drinking too much… It made me feel like if something ever happened to me, I'd have no one to tell… I would say that kind of way of talking about rape is a form of sexism, definitely. Because women are more likely to be raped, and raped by men. And when it becomes normal and ok to doubt women across the board, it means women don't get the help they need, and men can continue to harm us.

I asked June if she ever became involved in those discussions, perhaps by commenting in support for survivors, or voicing her concern that such positions were sexist. June replied that she "isn't looking for drama" and that starting an argument with an aunt, a classmate, or a member of her student organization would result in her being targeted herself. She

notes, “I feel like once you confront people online, they remember your stance on things, and will look for you in the future to harass you again.” Across the board, women respondents believed that confrontation online, especially in response to negative, but not overtly sexist, comments–such as “bitch” or “cunt”—was a direct pathway to overtly sexist harassment. That is, defending oneself, or merely responding to comments that sought to invalidate, dismiss, or make light of issues negatively impacting women’s lives, would turn into the tirade of vitriol they sought to avoid.

Hostility toward feminists, or even women perceived to be feminist, is long documented across social domains (Ferree 2004; Sobieraj 2018). All but three women described themselves as “not really into politics” at some point during their interview, despite mentioning deep interests in, and knowledge of, political issues throughout the interview. Many women nevertheless desired to connect with others over issues regarding fair pay and equal treatment free from sexual harassment, and all women found the commentary that played out over these issues disheartening. All but four women described avoiding posting as a strategy for coping with both firsthand and vicarious harassment, as well as for navigating the general hostile terrain that might plausibly lead to their own harassment.

As Sobieraj (2020) argues, online harassment is about the power to control women’s participation in digital publics. Here, I add specificity to that argument by demonstrating part of the process through which that silence is eventually undertaken as a viable strategy by women. Due to an overwhelming frequency of witnessed and experienced hostile and benign comments, women find themselves personally ridiculed,

collectively stigmatized, and then silenced. Soft repression is a useful framework for analyzing the process of harassment, as well as women's meaning-making of the hostile environments. As Ferree (2004:88) explains

> Whereas hard repression involves the mobilization of force to control or crush oppositional action through the use or threat of violence, soft repression involves the mobilization of non-violent means to silence or eradicate oppositional ideas.

These non-violent means involve ridicule at the level of interaction, stigma at the collective group level, and silencing at the macro level. Ridicule as a boundary-policing activity involves name-calling and generally making fun of cultural challengers, which aligns with overt sexism respondents experience and witness. Stigma refers to an impaired collective identity, and is a strategy to "prevent collective action by actively discouraging identification with a group that could make claims against an institution," in this case, sexism (Ferree 2004:92). As respondents report, being associated with feminist causes can spark their own harassment. Finally, Ferree conceptualizes silencing as a macro-level issue, involving the role of media in essentially ignoring feminist issues or the perspectives of feminist leaders. The question for Ferree is not whether or not the media is free, so much as to what a free media *does*. Considering the profit-making capacities of online harassment (Bartow 2009), the general lack of enforcement of anti-harassment policy by platforms (Sobieraj 2019), and the deplatforming of vocal antiracist and feminist users (Gray 2016), the silencing that women adopt in their everyday lives is endemic of the broader systemic silencing of women online. A woman need not be directly intimidated, shamed or discredited (Sobieraj 2020) to feel pushed into silence; the hostile environment

functions as an imminent threat to women's participation online free from harassment, most notably with regard to issues deemed "feminist." To be sure, hostile sexism, and general negative comments about women, are not the only ways women experience sexism online.

Benevolent Sexism

Ambivalent Sexism Theory (Glick and Fiske 1996) posits that while prejudice in the form of hatred (hostile sexism) undoubtedly shapes gender inequality, seemingly positive attitudes and beliefs about women (benevolent sexism) are also central to women's degradation. This benevolent sexism is defined as

> a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver) and also tend to elicit behaviors typically categorized as prosocial (e.g., helping) or intimacy-seeking (e.g., self-disclosure) (Glick and Fiske 1996: 491).

While sexism itself cannot be exclusively be conceptualized as a set of attitudes, such attitudes, beliefs and assumptions about women become the ideological justification for the social practices and relations that sustain the patriarchal social order (Ridgeway 2004). Specifically, women report that men use an array of strategies aimed at complementing women's intellect, boosting women's self-efficacy, and situating themselves as allies against women's disempowerment. Lori, an 18-year-old Latina, described frequently posting about immigration and especially how women in detention centers were treated. Lori experienced racist and sexist name calling frequently, "at least once a day," and noted blocking anyone who used offensive language toward her. But Lori also noted harassment that began quite differently:

> I've been harassed by guys, but it didn't start out negative. It started with them replying to one of my tweets, saying I'm smart or interesting, and that they wanted to learn more… We'd chat privately for a few days, even weeks. Then like clockwork, they'd ask for my number. Then they'd ask to see pictures of me. Or they'd tell me they're starting to have feelings, because I was such a caring woman and made them feel safe. I was never interested in any of them, and when I communicated that, they turned on me, called me a fat ugly bitch, said I probably smelled like old refried beans, told me I needed to learn my place… I'd have to block them… I told my older sister and she basically just shooed me away. She told me I should have known better.

Ariana, a 22-year-old white woman, described herself as a "body positivity advocate," curating her Instagram to be a "feminist safe-haven" where she could learn about issues, and find community among people who shared her "passion for gender equality." Ariana described being privately messaged by "at least a dozen guys" who followed similar accounts. Ariana recounts:

> Looking back I feel so stupid for falling for it. It takes you off guard, in a good way, to have guys want to bond over feminism, to tell you that he believes women shouldn't have to lose weight, or have him call out the diet industry. To have men not ask for naked pictures, but instead say that women should have the choice when to be sexy. I got close with like four of these guys, like I thought we were friends. I'd share things about myself, and they'd share things about themselves too, like their fears and how they think they suffer under masculinity. But then boom, the nice guy switch goes off and the asshole comes out when they want to sext or be romantic. Then it's bitch and slut and tease.

Men appropriated feminist discourses of empowerment, body positivity, and sex positivity to build intimate friendships with women, capitalizing on women's supposed predisposition for intimacy-seeking. While seemingly positive, women note that these friendships are artificial, and erode quickly when they do not give men what they seek: naked pictures, sexual conversations, sex, and romance. Most women of color remain

skeptical of men's advances, however kind or caring they seem, noting the need to protect themselves. While all women shared a sentiment of bringing sexual harassment upon oneself based on the types of pictures one posted, women of color were also adamant that forming relationships with strange men online was also a source of danger. Slyvia, a 21-year-old Black woman shared that:

> Guys try to get close to me all the time, especially with compliments about how smart or socially aware I am. You know that saying you attract more flies with honey? It's like that. They're not dumb, they know if they come on too strong with the sexy talk they'll just be shut down, but they know complimenting us might get us to trust them.... My mother always told me to watch out for a wolf in sheep's clothing, and there are plenty online.

Georgia, a 21-year-old Asian American woman echoes this concern in navigating relationships with men:

> I was always taught to look out for myself, especially around men. I see my friends getting tricked and taken advantage of my guys so often, and I'm thankful that that isn't me… There's a certain level of trust you have to have with someone to let them in, to give them the chance to hurt you. I don't do that. When guys try to talk to me online, it's a swift rejection from me. The same way I wouldn't just go off talking with some guy I met on the street, I'm not paying strange men any mind online.

While no respondents' family had explicit conversations about the dangers of manipulation and harassment online, most women of color described using strategies related to offline interactions to navigate the toxicity online, and "protect" themselves from the dangers they witnessed of friends and strangers. Rita also discussed have been groomed at the age of 17, but by a guild leader in her gaming community. Well-respected, charismatic, and armed with a repertoire of feel-good body positive narratives, the guild leader collected naked pictures from several adolescent members of the community. Rita explains,

> The body positive shtick was really effective at making me feel comfortable having intimate conversations about my body and my insecurities. It slowly turned into him wanting to see pictures. I didn't send any naked ones, just clothed selfies, and he'd compliment me. He eventually asked for naked pictures, and told me that I was oppressing myself for not being confident enough to share them… I asked around and found out he was doing that to other girls.

Relatedly, the coercion of women happens indirectly, not by individual men, but through cultural norms around beauty politics and visual self-expression, which posit that women's value is in their *mastery* of their appearance, their ability to successfully engage in aesthetic labor. This is interpreted as a positive, as opposed to repressive, characteristic for women. Instead of women being valued for how they look, their hard work around cultivating style and beauty is what is valued. Part of benevolent sexism is that it is a "subjectively favorable, chivalrous ideology that offers protection and affection to women who embrace conventional roles" (Glick & Fiske 2001:109). If postfeminism has become hegemonic (Pomerantz et al 2013), then a conventional role expected of women would be an industrious independent, entrepreneurial spirit, aimed at working to look beautiful (Gill 2015). Indeed, the idea that women are autonomous and can "take on the world" is a core tenet of postfeminist discourse (Gill and Scharff 2011). Within this discourse, body positivity and sex positivity become mobilized within the confines of neoliberalism, in terms of "choice" as opposed to the removal of the racist and patriarchal ideologies and practices that organize women along a hierarchy. The call to action for women then becomes that they should merely choose to love their bodies and be sexually confident, as opposed to seek freedom from the cultural hegemony that reinforces beauty standards and rape culture in the first place.

Aesthetic labor scholars also note the complexities involved in the increasingly commodified use of social media in women's lives, where neoliberalism's entrepreneurial spirit has extended to self-image, and *working* to look beautiful is both a display or, and way to acquire, cultural capital (Winch 2015). The logic follows that women should feel sexy, they should look sexy, and they should share that sexiness with others. Feminist representational politics have considered the agentic possibilities of women's selfie posting behaviors online (Curray 2015), including feelings of beauty and self-empowerment, but also the retrenchment of racial and gendered stereotypes (Williams and Marquez 2015). Debates over the agentic possibilities versus the imposed cultural hegemony aside, what the collective ideologies of postfeminism, neoliberalism, and beauty politics do for women online is create a tension. One the one hand, women are supposed to feel beautiful and sexy and want to share images of themselves with others; those images become evidence of confidence and self-love, which women are supposed to have. Yet on the other hand, sexual agency around beauty politics and image sharing are enmeshed in rape culture, where women who are harassed after posting an image of themselves are blamed for their harassment. Indeed, as Nicole, a 20-year-old Black woman recalled, "I made the mistake of posting a selfie on Twitter and had white guys debating whether or not I was pretty for a Black girl." The mistake here is the initial posting, because it is "common sense" that sharing images of oneself will result in harassment. Postfeminism also dictates that you must love yourself and your body enough to want to post about it, but not seek attention or affirmation. As respondents note, doing so brings about men's negative attention. Rita, a 20-year-old white woman, is an artist

who accepts commissions online for her work. Rita mostly used her Instagram to post pictures of her art, and describes what occurred once it was "revealed" she was a woman:

> I started posting selfies because I thought I looked cute. The pictures weren't sexual in nature or anything. I wasn't inviting attention, or even pretending to be a sexual person, but suddenly men's interest in me became about me as a sexual object and not my art. I even posted a picture of my cute new shoes and a guy commented on it asking me to turn the camera the other way. To me, that obviously was a reference to an up-skirt picture. And I mean, I don't post risque pictures. I don't post anything that welcomes that type of attention, just my face, or like that one instance, new shoes… my guy friends tell me that if things were really that bad, I wouldn't be posting. But, I post because I feel pretty and I should be allowed to feel pretty and post it.

Clara a 20 year old white woman shares similar negative experiences:

> When I was in 8th grade, I made an instagram. I would just post silly pictures, nothing to really warrant harassment. And still, these creepy guys would find me, message me dick pics, or send me really sexual things… it was definitely harassment. It was a constant experience across men and across apps.

As Pomerantz, Raby and Stefanik (2013) argue, young girls are essentially stuck between the lived experience of sexism, and the discourse of postfeminism. Online, and with young women, there is an added layer of victim-blaming, which effectively invalidates their experiences (Cross 2014). As Rita explained, people often tell her that if sexism was "that bad," she wouldn't be posting anything. The solution to collective issues of gendered harassment is thus in the individual choice to be silent. As all respondents note, peers and family believe women make choices that put them in the situation to be harassed online; those choices are then what explain the sheer frequency of harassment against women. As evidenced by some of the narratives above, many respondents endorse the idea that certain content brings about hostile outcomes, and they are flabbergasted when they find

themselves victims despite avoiding such "attention-seeking" behavior. Benevolent sexism has been associated with endorsement of hostile sexism overtime (Hammond et al 2017), suggesting that the cultural expectations of women undertaking aesthetic labor could be why so many women justify sexual harassment of women who post sexy images.

Sexual Exploitation and Rape

As discussed throughout this paper, men use digital technologies to abuse, humiliate, and attack women, and also use digital technologies to become friends before subjecting women to abuse and humiliation. This section will describe how for some women, this harassment culminates with a sexual assault. Seven women in the sample disclosed that they have been sexually assaulted by men they met online with whom they formed a close friendship with first. Four of the seven women were groomed as children, from as young as the age of ten.

Kelsey a 19-year-old white woman, used much of her discussion on "negative interactions around gender" to discuss her general disgust for how men talk about young women online, especially in news stories where young girls went missing or ran away. She referred to it as a "intentional ignorance" for how young girls are exploited online. I asked her to explain to me how it occurs:

> I'd say there's a lot of like avenues online where it happens. Chat apps, or mainstream apps like Instagram and Facebook. I got exposed to it at the age of 10. I was coming from a place of loneliness. These men were paying attention to me, and wanting to talk to me. And going through puberty and getting curious about my sexuality, it felt good to have that positive attention around my body… With sexual exploitation, like to me, it's all a form of grooming. You're being exposed to these sexual things, and more comfortable with it. First it's "hey talk to me," then it's "send me pictures," then it's "send me a video of you fingering yourself. And watch this porn and tell me how you'd do those things to me."

At the age of 17, Kelsey was raped by one of the men (who was "in his 30") who groomed her from the age of 15. She explains that:

> It gets more and more exploitative and bad. I think it actually leading to my sexual assault was just, like, my entire perception of myself and my body and worth was tied to these men. And then to be told by them that it's ok and normal, and that I'm mature enough for it, that it's not a big deal. It led to me being put into a position for something to actually happen… The repeated exploitation distorted my understanding of sex and relationships. I think I would have understood their motives for talking to me, and knowing like I was being taken advantage of. But back then, well especially all my life, I was told I was so mature, so it was like, oh, I can talk to these men, and I'm in control, I can do anything. But looking back, I wasn't.

Here, Kelsey suggests that she accepted postfeminism's key tenet that young girls can take on the world. She explained that the initial "thrills" around taboo subjects, with men who found her sexy and beautiful, often turned violent when she sought to end communication, including in a rape. Kelsey has been in therapy for over a year for the trauma she endured since childhood. Kelsey explained that she has not disclosed her victimization to her family, in part due to how family members dismiss, invalidate and criticize victims of sexual assault online. As she notes,

> How they talk about girls in news stories about rape, or their comments on like infographics about sexual assaults really makes me sick. I don't think they understand how them saying those things would shape other girls' sense of safety in coming forward with their experiences.

Despite her therapist's advice to seek out fellow survivors online, and become vocal about her experiences as justice for years of silence, Kelsey is concerned that her older brother and parents would notice her sudden interest in themes related to sexual violence against

young girls, and "harass" her as aggressively as they do other women online. Vee, a 20-year-old Black woman, noted a similar experience. Vee was raped by a man (who was "around 26") she met online at the age 16, and both the ease with which men can exploit young girls, and the discourses that play out surrounding sexual violence of young girls, signals to Vee that she should keep her experiences to herself:

> Seeing my guy friends and older family members defend these ideas about how little Black girls ask for this by having "grown" bodies or being flirtatious with older men, it really gets to me. Like I get it, I put myself in a bad place by talking to men online, but that's not the main problem. And I feel like people are so quick to blame Black girls for the awful things done to them… to me sexism is about doubting women's truth, about making choices *for* women. I'd say what I see online is sexism, because it's about making women look like liars.

Like Kelsey, Vee has not shared her experiences with family due to how she observes their interactions online. Diana, a 20-year-old Latina, became acquainted with a fellow student online who showed interest in her student organization. Trying to mobilize "white allies" had been a goal of her organization for several semesters, and Diana noted that "he seemed really interested in our cause and like he wanted to learn." Planning and recruiting online was safer, Diana noted, because doing so physically on campus was more prone to conflict with dissenters. Online, the organization could control the audience by only allowing pre-screened members to join their private group. Upon meeting privately in his dorm, the student assaulted Diana. Diana reported the assault, but there were no consequences for the student. To add greater insult to Diana's experience, the student spread rumors online that Diana was lying to get attention, as he was a "catch" among the Southern U student body. Diana is exasperated:

> It's really fucked up, you know. Like Southern U praises all of these values and claims to not tolerate sexism, but they don't look out for women when

> we're harassed… I've been a wreck over it. I'm still organizing around campus, but the ways our harm is ignored doesn't leave a lot of hope that anything will change.

The role of the university's inaction toward sexism online, and how it shapes campus climate, is the subject of another paper. However, what I seek to draw attention to here is that Diana, like other respondents, identity this mistreatment *as sexism*, a form of embodied, social, and psychological harm experienced both on campus and online. For other respondents who have not personally experienced grooming and sexual assault, the relationship between the manipulation of young girls and technology was also a clear a tool of sexism. As Nelly notes,

> I have a younger sister and I'm on top of her online use. I've seen it happen too often where a nice exchange of pictures turns into a rape or like an attempted rape… for me sexism is using a woman's gender against her. It's harming her because you think she's beneath you. When people go for little girls, and then get away with it, that's discrimination, because it sends a message that little girls don't matter.

Henry and Powell (2015) coin the term technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV) to describe a number of offenses that range across the spectrum of sexual violence. There is a small literature on TFSV, with some emphasis on the strategies offenders use to coerce young girls and women online (Henry and Powell 2018; Thompson and Morrison 2013). Few studies, however, examine how that subsequent targeting impacts women who experience coercion firsthand, along with the commentary around sexual assault online. My findings corroborate those of Sobieraj (2020), suggesting that women learn to calculate how they should navigate the online space as they do offline spaces. The fear of harassment functions to constrain behaviors, but beyond limiting women's participation

in civil discourse (Sobieraj 2020), everyday sexism in this form shapes how women understand and relate to their social world offline. Respondents often bridge the false binary of offline/online in explaining the implications of everyday sexism online, noting the consequences for how sexism writ large is sustained through the real threat of physical violence.

Conclusions

A focus on overt sexism in the form of sexual violence and misogynist name-calling has provided important insights into the substance, intensity, and democratic costs of sexism online. I began by arguing that in addition to this overt sexism, the experience of everyday sexism needs scholarly attention. Everyday sexism as a framework for understanding the lived experience of gender domination orients our analysis to how sexism fashions the ligatures that connect institutions and rules to people in everyday life. That is, the daily experience of the normal, business-as-usual interactions across a range of social domains informs our understanding of how sexism as a system becomes enacted and sustained. I argued that normal aspects of sexism online involve both overt sexism and benevolent sexism, which encompass general comments about women as a class as well as hate speech. I showed that the broader impact of this hostile environment was twofold.

First, women experienced repression on the individual level, often choosing to remain silent in response to witnessed and experienced sexism, as well as with regard to public discussions on feminist issues. This soft repression (Ferree 2004) has consequences at the level of social movement mobilization, but also for young women's sense of ability

to freely navigate online spaces. Scholars who examine the mental health implications of everyday sexism note that anxieties and fears around the anticipation of harassment can lead to mental health consequences (Berg 2006; Swim et al. 2001). Our current instruments, including the Everyday Discrimination Scale and Online Victimization Scale, are not necessarily attuned to the ways young women experience and understand sexism, and may be invalid in their attempt to uncover health consequences of sexism online.

Second, everyday sexism signals to young women the incoherency of postfeminism, a discourse that suggests both the pastness of sexism and the success of feminism in eliminating gender inequality. While other scholars have found that postfeminism can be momentarily unsettled by experiences of sexism, young women report that the reality of everyday sexism online─including the scope, substance, and intensity of attacks and general negative commentary about women─ highlights the unfounded basis of postfeminism altogether. Everyday sexism online, while performing its key function of repression, simultaneously unmasks the ideological fallacies of postfeminism professed by institutions, groups, and individuals. This unmasking, as discussed by Eschmann (2019) with specific regard to racism, challenges women's worldviews, adaptive coping responses, relationships to men, and dominant gender narratives. Considering the similarities between racism and sexism, as well as the significant differences in how racism and sexism are perceived and navigated, the final article will explore how gendered and racialized notions of care and community responsibility become adopted, or rejected, in response to everyday racism and sexism online.

4. RADICAL ETHICS OF CARE? RESPONSES TO RACISM AND SEXISM ONLINE

Introduction

While racism and sexism online are increasingly becoming topics of public and academic concern, little is known about how people respond to firsthand and witnessed racism and sexism online. Cognitive, behavioral, and attitudinal responses to inequalities are important to examine because they tell us about the negative and disparate impact of discrimination for groups (Grollman 2014; Swim et al. 2001; Williams et al. 1997). Everyday responses to racism and sexism also point to how the social structure is organized, contested and maintained (Essed 1991; Smith 1987). Scholars utilizing intersectional frameworks have been concerned with the historically-contingent processes through which systems of inequality are reproduced. However, racism and sexism online have not received much attention in this regard, despite the potential to gain insights into how inequalities emerge in a new space and how those inequalities interplay with structural racism and sexism in other domains of social life. Utilizing an intersectional framework, I assess how 60 young adults respond to everyday racism and sexism online. I find four response categories (educate, respond, care, and intellectualize), which I argue illuminate the social implications of racism and sexism writ large. Each response category corresponds to a specific social group that was most likely to discuss that response as what they practice and what they believe should be done to navigate hostility online. These gendered and raced responses serve ideological and social purposes, as respondents in turn justify, invalidate, resist, or retrench racism and sexism.

Intersectionality as a Framework for Studying Racism and Sexism

Born from Black Feminist Thought and the work of lesbian women of color coalitions, intersectionality is first and foremost about power, specifically the power to recognize, name, and resist multiple, "interlocking forms of oppression" (Collins 2002; Combahee River Collective 1982). In the context of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, many women found that anti-racist, feminist and labor organizations placed one form of domination over others (Combahee River Collective 1982; King 1988). Single-issue struggles (Lorde 1984) are ineffective and dangerous for marginalized women because they work to promote silencing in fear of alienation and rejection (Lorde 1984). This silencing can also extend to a practice of ignoring one's power over others; indeed as Lorde (1984) and others (Moraga & Anzaldua 2015; Collins and Bilge 2010) argue, such a passive acceptance of "we" as a homogenous collectivity oversimplifies struggles for liberation. Organizing alongside white women, many women of color faced frustrations, erasure, and dismissal. They ultimately found that identity politics, collective and structural, would be a meaningful tool of resistance (Combahee River Collective 1982; Collins and Bilge 2010). Thus, a collective is absolutely necessary for unity, especially for the radical work of "fighting despair" in the face of continued and emerging policies that target those with few material resources (Lorde 1984). Intersectionality is a therefore an inquiry—a way of interrogating and assessing—but also a praxis (Collins & Bilge 2010) that guides community organizing and efforts to address and eradicate structural inequality.

An intersectional analysis can be organized around what Collins (2002:246) calls the matrix of domination, a description of social organization within which multiple axes of power are originated, developed, and contained. This matrix is composed of systems such as race, class and gender, that are crosscut and each contain *multiple domains of power*. These domains of power are structural, disciplinary, interpersonal, and hegemonic; they form relationships that must be examined relationally (Collins 2002; Glenn 2002). The task in utilizing intersectionality then, is not merely to examine intersecting categories of difference, but to "identify the local and historically particular configurations of inequalities, since every system is contingent and path dependent" (Choo and Ferree 2010:136).

Everyday Racism and Sexism Online

Examining racism and sexism online through an intersectional framework is a promising endeavor for several reasons. First, racism and sexism online are historically specific insofar as the internet has only been accessible to the public since 1991. Put another way, inequality online may have distinctive features, as well as commonalities bound to larger patterns of racism and sexism in the United States, which must be explored and analyzed. Second, intersectionality requires an attending to structures of domination and resistance, yet the literature has overwhelmingly focused on discourse. on racism and sexism within online spaces range from gaming spaces (Gray 2011, 2014; Ortiz 2019; Cote 2017), public forums and news website comments (Hughey and Daniels 2012), to private forums and groups (Eschmann 2019). Studies that look beyond discourse analysis examine what people think or feel about their experiences of racism and sexism online, noting, a

desensitization effect (Ortiz 2019) as well as an unmasking effect (Eschmann 2019) wherein people of color become numb to or exceedingly aware of overt racism in their everyday lives. Finally, scholars have largely examined racism and sexism as separate issues (see Gray 2012 as an exception). This oversight overlooks how such inequalities reproduce one another and how different social groups experiences and participate in discrimination. To address this issue, Gray (2015) has developed a Black cyberfeminist theory to account for the particular intersections of systemic oppression that occur online, with attention to how Black women navigate and internet technologies. Women are not able to "opt out" of their identities (Gray 2015); women marginalized on the basis of race and sexual orientation find themselves facing additional modes of control online. The task for Gray (2015) becomes recognizing the distinctions in women's experiences, and examine how they make sense of their realities. An additional way that racism and sexism are connected online is through the reproduction of cultures that support those systems (Ortiz 2019). Such cultures can be aimed, for example, at recruiting young men into sexist organizing. Young white men are especially vulnerable to dual white supremacist and sexist organizing; forums aimed at providing space to air grievances of failed heterosexual exploits become easy targets for white nationalists (Romano 2016).

Following an intersectional framework, scholars could examine how people response to racism and sexism. Online, these inquiries have almost exclusively been within the context of online gaming (Gray 2011, 2012, 2014, 2018; Cote 2018; Fox and Tang 2018; Ortiz 2019), with the exception of Sobieraj (2018, 2020) who examined sexist vitriol broadly online. While different sites and platforms influence the mode of

harassment (imagery versus auditory versus text), there is no literature to suggest that the mode of racism or sexism would have distinct features in how it is perceived and responded to. In fact, examining general experiences of racism and sexism across platforms might be closer to how people understand harassment, i.e. as online harassment, as opposed to platform specific experiences. Thus, this paper explores how racism and sexism are responded to, with a focus on race and gender as structures that organize experience.

Methods

These data are from a subset of findings from a broader study on how young adults experience, conceptualize, and respond to "negative interactions around race and gender" online. While the topics of online harassment and cyberbullying have amassed a small literature, scholars tend to overlook the extent to which interactions and responses themselves are both bound to and reproduce racism and sexism. Thus, the specific aims of this broader study were to understand the dimensions and implications of racism and sexism online. Part of examining structural forms of domination is understanding the lived experience, the everyday aspects (Essed 1991) of racism and sexism within daily practices. This methodology requires attending to everyday people's meaning making of their experiences. In the case of this study, I examined which aspects (and why) of online interactions resonated as racism and sexism with young adults, the age group most likely to witness identity-based harassment online (PEW 2017).

Young adults, ages 18-24, were recruited from Southern U, a large research university in the Southern United States. Recruitment materials specified that the study

was to understand "negative online interactions around race and gender," with a $25 Amazon gift card incentive. Emails and in-person solicitation were utilized across introductory classrooms in required general education courses, and in political, cultural, and sport-themed student organization meetings. In total, 60 respondents were interviewed on Southern U's campus.

Qualitative studies on the experiences of racism and sexism online are scarce, but necessary. First, data on the subjective experiences of racism and sexism can uncover the mechanisms that sustain the social order through seemingly ordinary and mundane social practices. Second, we cannot assume that survey instruments designed to capture experiences of discrimination offline maintain validity when used online. Qualitative data are therefore needed to assess how people interpret their experiences. The interview guide was organized to explore four major themes: general online use, witnessed experiences, firsthand experiences, and offline experiences. I asked questions about respondents' social media use, preferences, and dislikes about the platforms. Then, I asked respondents about their witnessed experiences of negative interactions based on race or gender. I then asked respondents about personally experienced incidents, and asked them to compare those interactions to in-person negative experiences. Probes were standardized across interviews to gather information regarding the who/what/where/how of each incident; initial reactions or feelings toward incidents; how they responded and why; and if they ever shared their experiences with others and why. Prior to data collection, questions were piloted with six volunteers who fit the inclusion criteria in order to determine which questions were confusing or difficult to answer fully without specific probes.

Anthias (2012) suggests that scholars utilizing intersectionality should identify specific societal arenas to analyze. As Anthias (2012:10) explains, "concrete social relations in terms of social divisions relate to positionalities and hierarchies as they are… articulated within different societal arenas. Each arena acts as a context for the others and enables an exploration of how they interlink with each other." Here, I focus on the experiential and intersubjective arenas, which examine narratives and meaning-making, and practices in relation to others. I utilized index coding (Deterding and Waters 2018) for how participants described how they respond, and how they believe others should respond to racism and sexism. I then employed analytic coding, grouping together data based on similar narratives of ideological justification or purpose for the response. That is, while many respondents offered the strategy of "teaching people about racism/sexism" some maintained that this educational process should aim to teach the "evils and harms" of racism and sexism, while others argued that this process should highlight how online interactions "aren't actually racism/sexism at all, and don't matter."

Findings

Almost all respondents initially said they "ignore" racism and sexism online. As I find elsewhere, ignoring hate speech was not the initial response, but one that was later adopted to avoid the negative emotional reactions associated with other strategies (Ortiz 2019). I find here that beyond believing that ignoring racism and sexism are worthwhile solutions, young adults also expressed a desire to educate, respond, care, and intellectualize. White women most often discussed the need to educate other people about the harms of racism and sexism online, believing that perhaps those spewing vitriol simply were not educated

about how their believes and actions were harmful. Some men and women of color discussed responding to racism and sexism directly as the most important strategy to addressing the problem. Rejecting the notions that others are unaware of the racist and sexist bases of their posts, or that the solution is education, these respondents were adamant that providing alternate discourses online was necessary for resisting racism and sexism.

Black and Latina women most frequently focused their narratives on how they practiced caring for each other following racist and sexist attacks online, positing that sustaining each other was critical for combatting structural oppression. Finally, white men, and some multiracial men and men of color, were adamant that remaining objective and unemotional about the nature of racism and sexism online was the best strategy for navigating the toxicity of online spaces. White men consistently described guiding their white women and men of color friends and family to avoid discussing and reacting to racism and sexism. Below are the four categories of responses, each with assumptions about the nature of racism and sexism online, which inform the ideological justifications for the particular response. These categories are not fully discrete, meaning that many respondents noted more than one of the categories in their interview, mentioning many possibilities for how to respond to racism and sexism online. To be sure, interviews cannot confirm what it is people actually do. The point then is not to report the strategies people use when responding to racism and sexism online, but to illustrate the values people place on specific responses, what they think should be done, as well as why. These meanings inform broader believes about the roles people play in these problems. I argue that these

response categories are racialized and gendered outcomes; that is, broader racialized and gendered processes shape the ways young adults understand how to address the social problems they face online. These responses to inequality online may reproduce young adults' racialized and gendered social positions by reinforcing action on the basis of those imposed categories.

We Have To Educate People! Knowledge as Corrective

Most white women and men of color suggested in their interviews that the problem with racism and sexism online was one of ignorance. Ignorance across multiple dimensions meant that their responses were aimed at educating others online, though strangers were often not viewed as worth the efforts to educate. Education and reaching out to discuss issues was typically saved for people respondents knew offline, such as friends and family members. The first dimension of ignorance is an antagonizer's ignorance of appropriate behavior; the normalization of racism and sexism online means that overt racism and sexism become the acceptable way to interact. As Laura notes, "These kids just think this is how you can act online, it's all they've seen and known. Has anyone really sat them down and told them otherwise?" Respondents thus claim that younger children and teens are simply ignorant to proper interactions online. When antagonizers were older adults, such as family or community members, the problem of ignorance was no longer one of lacking knowledge of proper interactions, but one of not knowing the impact on racism and sexism.

The second dimension of ignorance relates to antagonizer's ignorance of the emotional and physical impact of racism and sexism on targets. For a multitude of reasons,

those who choose to harass others with racism and sexism may not be aware of how their actions are harming others. This could mean not understanding the symbolic violence of hate speech or cultural racism, as Francisco explained:

> I think about that sticks and stones saying, how words can't hurt, and how that's meant to help kids not get bogged down by bullying. But that saying also tells people who want to use words to harm that it's ok, too. I think whether out of ignorance or rage, or maybe it's ignorance and rage, people say things to vent online, not knowing how it hurts other people.

The final dimension of ignorance described by respondents is ignorance of "the facts." According to respondents, racism and sexism are predicated on lies, stereotypes, and propaganda; as Bryce mentions: "People are ignorant of the truth, they accept what they hear on the news or from their church and just spew their nonsense based on those lies." Respondents explained that the response best fit for remedying ignorance is education, or disseminating knowledge, though respondents did not share a consensus on whom should be undertaking that work. Often, respondents would suggest that a collective "we" should be educating racist and sexist users online, through classes in public schools, and even workshops offered at the college level. Some white women explained that if a younger family member or classmate they knew offline said something sexist, they would share their own personal experiences to try and evoke compassion. As Clara states,

> This guy from my human rights org said something really shitty about women dressing like sluts and you know, I private messaged him to tell him that this looks really bad for the org and can mess with recruitment, because he doesn't know who's been attacked for how they dress in the past. And I told him how I was called slut in high school and how it really hurt me. [Ortiz: how did he respond?] I think because it was me saying it, and he knew me, he had some empathy… He deleted his comment.

Within a matrix of domination framework, white women and men of color offer an interesting parallel. Advantaged on the basis of race, white women may exclusively focus on organizing against sexism, while men of color may only organize around race, ignoring or downplaying the extent to which gender provides forms of advantages over women of color counterparts. Indeed, according to most white women and men of color respondents, sexism has no race, and racism has no gender, despite reported events clearly invoking *both* race and gender. Around 30% of men of color respondents shared examples of witnessed racism that involved women of color, but not one respondent commented on the gendered nature of that racism. Further, when President Trump's rhetoric of Mexican immigrants as rapists and criminals was mentioned by any respondent, the gendered aspect of this racism (implied that these Mexican immigrants were men) was not a focus of respondent narratives.

This specific response category thus proliferates an epistemology of ignorance, both in respondents' ignorance of multiple, simultaneous oppressions, but also in projecting ignorance onto those who harass others online. Ignorance in an active reproduction of not knowing, which protects ones' worldview, including the ways one benefits from ignorance (Mills 2007; Mueller 2018). On the basis of one's standpoint (Smith 1989) or belief sets based on their social location (Alcoff 2007), certain realities are in fact out of reach; seeing and knowing the ways one benefits from one system at the same time that another system disadvantages them is not entirely obvious to white women and men of color respondents. The issue here with only understanding racism and sexism

online as singular issues it is can obscure how oppressions are connected, and can undermine possibilities for organizing across multiple forms of inequality.

Furthermore, framing racism and sexism as *individual* ignorance is part and parcel of idealist understandings of these complex, systemic inequalities (Bonilla-Silva 1997). As I argue in the preceding articles, overt racism and sexism challenge a colorblind and post-feminist assessment of the social world. However, ignorance persists for many white women and men of color regarding effective strategies of resistance. Implied in an ignorance framework is innocence, because ignorance is not viewed as an active construction, defended and maintained over time. Instead, ignorance is seen as an accidental and passive process (Mills 2007; Mueller 2018). Ignorance on the part of harassers implies a shortcoming of sorts on the part of family, community and education, who *should* have provided harassers with truth or appropriate means of interacting. The implicit denial that racism and sexism online as an intentional act overlooks the possibility, albeit an unfortunate one, that online spaces offer tools to systemically target marginalized people. The next category, however, takes this possibility as its key assumption.

We Have To Be Louder! Responding as Resistance

About half of the women of color, as well as the remaining men of color, described a need to collectively respond to harassers online. As opposed to a careful process of formal education, responding was described as an assertive, public rebuttal that *everyday people* should undertake. As Riley explains,

> I still think we all have a responsibility to fight back, you know? Facebook and Snapchat and Twitter aren't invested in our wellbeing, it's something we have to do. We have to speak up. For a long time I think we all feel that pull to say something, and for those that do, we get hell in return. And then

> we get tired and go back into hiding, where we just read racist posts and not respond. But it's really important that we say something, and say it for other people to see.

Young adults in the same placed little responsibility on new media leaders to intervene, , be it for concerns of free speech or larger moral failings on the part of corporations to want to make sure it's consumers were not being harmed. Still, as Riley and others within this category note, everyday people create and recreate the environment they all interact in. That ability to speak up against racist and sexist posts is something that should not be surrendered, despite how exhausting and harmful those efforts can be. To be sure, responding is exhausting. Respondents note a range of negative implications associated with "always being the one to speak up." Loss of sleep, headaches, anxiety around interacting online, and anger were all normal and expected outcomes of challenging racist and sexist posts online.

The other aspect of this category is the awareness that people harassing others online cannot have their perspectives changed, but that silence in the face of racism and sexism oversaturated online spaces with vitriol. Respondents believed this oversaturation could be harmful to those simply witnessing these interactions. As Bree described, "I don't believe the people being racist can be educated or changed. But I still think we have to offer different voices on those conversations." Part of offering these alternative voices and perspectives meant replying to comments directly, or posting alternatives to a racist and sexist post to demonstrate to those observing the space, but not necessarily posting themselves, that they are not alone in their desire for a more just community. As Georgia explains, "It's exhausting for sure, and I don't do it all the time, but when I see people

spreading racist lies, I will confront them. Other people need to know that they're not alone, and that that isn't the only view worth having." When spaces are oversaturated with hate speech or stereotypes, or racist and sexist tropes, respondents note the general sense that they and others may get the impression that justice "has lost." Indeed, Diana notes:

> Just how white racists and sexists can use online tools to shame and harass us, we also can use that space for our own purposes. Sometimes that means we post counterpoints and facts to shut them down. But something it's also just like pointing out that they're just being racist or sexist for harms sake, like they just want to hurt us. I think when they're the louder ones in a space its this thing where they can act like they've won. When they haven't, because we're still here.

What Diana and others describe is that the act of making oneself visible and present in response to racism and sexism. This visibility in turn challenges the silencing mechanism of harassment, which would give racist and sexist organizers the impression that they have successfully disarmed people of color and white women. Responding here is not in the vein of classic free speech rhetoric, wherein the marketplace of idea inherently leans toward the more just speech. Rather, responding is conceptualized as an offensive tactic, providing a blow to the efforts of racist and sexist organizers, while also hoping to sustain others witnessing the interactions. The following response category focuses exclusively on sustaining the targets of racism and sexism.

We Have To Look Out For Each Other! Care as Intersectional Praxis

The remaining women of color, and three white women suggested that caring for each other is the most "radical" response to have in the face of racism and sexism, an act critical to combatting multiple oppressions. Marissa shared that:

> Racism and sexism are a reality in every facet of where we go, but it's also relatively safer than in person. The lack of physical danger online means we can fight back but also make sure other women of color don't feel so alone. I think people invest so much in pretending to not be bothered. And like sure, it doesn't sting as much anymore like when we first see this, but like Trump probably isn't going anywhere and we need to look out for ourselves... I check in on women of color who I see being attacked.

Jo also explained that:

> It's pretty radical if you think about it… Because if there's power in numbers, and we all connect online, then it doesn't matter how far away we are, we can find each other... we can help each other be strong… I DM Black women friends, and even like mutuals on Twitter who are going through it… I'd say having that community to rely on is important.

These efforts can be conceptualized as intimate labor: the work individuals do to sustain other people, social relationships, and themselves, through care (Ward 2010; Bernstein 2010; Kang 2003; Weitz 2010). Black Feminist Thought has long theorized intimate labor, recognizing that an "ethic of caring" is central to community building; care work is a way to express love and resist oppression (Collins 2002). Human connectedness becomes a way of knowing which creates possibilities for action, through dialogues that build empowering communities (Collins 2002). One way to examine intimate labor is to attend to how social actors negotiate social, emotional, and structural barriers to community building and find ways to care for each other (Sueyoshi 2013). Indeed, as these respondents explain, caring in the absence of structural support or accountability from the university or the social media sites themselves, works to sustain themselves and their community. These sites where social actors exert and accept intimate labors can be thought of as "unthought locations," forming possibilities for transformative solidarities "for us as

human beings who care for each other" (Cannella & Manuelito 2008:48). Twine's (2010) work also suggests that intimate labor is an act of community building performed out of care in response to oppressive conditions, and that strategies of care from one space can shape and transform another.

Protecting and caring for others is tied to fulfilling a profound social purpose around deep alliances (Ibarra 2010:124). To be sure, dedication in this manner can be emotionally costly for these women. As Nicole explains, "There isn't an end in sight for me or for us, really. It makes me sick most of the time, like the anger and hopelessness is almost too much." However, as Ibarra (2010:129) argues, scholars should not discount how women of color would "like anyone else, feel ashamed to go against their core impulse to do the right thing." These women do associate these efforts with a core impulse, one driven by justice and responsibility in the absence of care from others. Ahmed's (2010) discussion of the orientation of certain women around certain practices is useful for understanding why these women undertake this work, why they have a core impulse in the first place. This is because ideas about one's worth and one's purpose are racialized and gendered (Collins 2002; Glenn 2002), suggesting that agentic practices often reflect the broader meanings of identity categories. That is, while women of color may feel called to this work, and conceptualize it as resistance, we should also be critical of the costs to these women, and why white women and men of color do not invest energy into this work.

A key difference between this category and the "Responding as Resistance" category is the focus of efforts. Respondents here are not concerned with harassers whatsoever. These women are refusing to engage in conversations where they are being

expected to educate, debate, or otherwise empathize with someone ignorant to their particular struggle or someone actively seeking to harm them. Women of color are particularly apt in recognizing and naming the emotionally draining process of navigating such expectations, risking harassment from others online who seek to discipline and punish them for exerting power over their labor and energies. For example, one of Zoe's primary networks both offline and online are her sorority sisters, predominantly white, conservative women. Zoe believed that the sorority would offer her friendship but found that she expressed many of her beliefs or shared her racist and sexist experiences, including on her own social media pages. She explains,

> It's like I'm in hiding. I volunteer in a [ICE] camp and I'm really proud of that work and I care deeply about justice for immigrant children. But I don't share that. I know they'd expect me to like defend my decision because they're all big supporters of Trump… I feel like they don't deserve my time like that.

Zoe and others note the feeling of surveillance that eventually leads to a practice of concealing oneself to avoid uncomfortable interactions online and off, including harassment and alienation from key social groups. While acknowledging that such people are undeserving of their time and efforts, respondents still allow such people access to their social media accounts. Respondents across race and gender note rarely blocking other users, noting a coercive cultural norm that often implies an irrational sensitivity for being "so offended" as to block someone. White male respondents illuminated this norm in their narratives, arguing that apathy clocked as objectivity was a proper way to respond to racism and sexism online.

We Have To Teach People Not To Take It So Seriously! The Posturing of Objectivity

In this section, I explore how white men's conceptualization of the nature of the problem, and reasonable solutions, illuminate how they are able to personally benefit from racism and sexism, while bolstering these systems they critique in their interviews. White men, like the other groups in the sample, described witnessing racism and sexism often. In their narratives, however, they situate themselves as objective observers, able to "rationally" assess conflict online, without any negative emotional responses. White men respondents "pride" themselves as not being "emotional enough to be riled up" by racism and sexism online. Richard a 19-year-old white man, described witnessing "vicious attacks on girls" on Twitter "all the time," including threats of rape. I asked Richard how he feels about the fact that it is so common for women to be attacked online. Richard explained:

> I take pride in not letting these things get to me. For me, it comes down to analyzing the situation fully, understanding that humans are emotional and that causes so much conflict, especially online where it's just chaos… using logic, it becomes pretty clear that we can't reasonably allow words to damage us.

Richard and the other white men all described using "logic" and "facts" to outwit their emotional responses, such as anger and sadness, when they witnessed clear examples of racial and gendered harassment online. Interestingly, white men were the only group who mentioned encouraging others to adapt their strategies, tempering others' emotional responses. That is, no other respondents mentioned attempting to shape others' reactions to racism and sexism. Doug, an 18-year-old white man, shared that what he witnesses most often is negative comments about Black people, especially victims of police brutality.

Doug explained, however, that he makes it a point to intervene when his friends get involved in "arguments" online. Doug noted,

> I have lots of Black friends, and I know they get upset about the #BlackLivesMatter stuff. I tell them to try and relax, ya know, because they have to be level-headed and not get angry from making assumptions about police when we don't have all the facts… yelling about it online just makes them look crazy, not like calm, rational people willing to have a discussion.

I asked Doug what having a rational discussion would look like. He responded,

> Well, like, for instance, I think that would have to be calm, ya know? Like no emotions, no bad faith, just willing to hear both sides and come to an agreement on the truth. When I see my friends calling for politicians to get involved, or for more protests, that's clearly not very calm, they're coming into the conversation having their minds made up.

Doug suggests here that part of the irrationality of emotions such as anger and sadness is that it might motivate his Black friends to not only respond to harassers, but also call for accountability, justice and social change. Like other white men in the sample, Doug held keeping an "open mind" as tantamount to navigating online spaces marked with racism and sexism. Claiming themselves to be objective in response to racism and sexism allows white men to position themselves as intellectually superior to others; as Paul explained in great detail, he is "logical enough not to be bothered." At the same time, white men also claim moral superiority, doing the selfless work of helping others not succumb to their emotions. While others might validate or encourage emotional responses and action in response to racism and sexism, white men described themselves as helping their white women friends and relatives and friends of color essentially ignore what they witness and experience. White men also thought this work at the collective level was a viable and

promising solution. As Paul mentioned, "We have to encourage a literacy of how to interact online. I think that would include teaching people not to take everything they read and see so seriously. Not everything is some violation." Being able to manipulate others' reactions to racism and sexism through a reframing of such incidents as non-events is key in this strategy of inaction.

White women and men of color corroborate white men's narratives. Several white women mentioned that their older brother or boyfriend encouraged them to respond through downplaying their emotional reactions and silencing. As Rita explained,

> My boyfriend definitely keeps me grounded. I'll catch myself feeling angry and wanting to cry or vent, and he reminds me not to invest that much energy into it. He taught me to be more level-headed and not blow up.

Similarly, Pat explained how his white roommate helped him,

> I remember I brought it all up to him once. I was upset and kinda hurt from it. But he helped me through it. He's a really smart guy. He's a philosophy major, so he knows how to stay objective and use logic to understand things. He started asking me questions about how I knew the person was racist, and told me to consider that person's perspective, and how they were raised. And he explained how getting angry and writing back to the guy would be useless. And ya know, I started to see it more clearly and less emotional, because it's true, like I *don't* know what that person was thinking, and it doesn't make much sense for me to keep thinking about it or let it bother me.

Ultimately then, this cool objectivity is a façade used to maintain the status quo. Encouraging others to "stay rational" works to silence those who are targeted, while also overlooking critiques of the initial racism and sexism itself. When asked why they do not invest the energy in messaging harassers online to try and reason with them, white men report "you can't change people's minds" or "people have the right to say what they want." Further, interviews suggest that white men *are* emotionally invested in racism and sexism

online. Consistent with research on reverse racism, white men situate themselves as victims of racism and sexism (Cabrera 2014), though here they do not argue that they are the "true" victims. Instead, white men ignore the distinctions between their experiences and the discourses they witness online, and those of people of color and white women. What white men report as experienced racism and sexism are most often critiques of whiteness and toxic masculinity. When I asked Richard if he had experienced negative interactions around race or gender, he exhaled forcefully:

> Oh yea! It's so common and so acceptable to trash men online. People will make these wildly generalized statements about privilege without knowing anything about my life. It's unfair… I get the conversation around #MeToo, because there's a rape culture. But like we don't all rape women and we don't all benefit from that. That's the definition of sexism, making unfair judgements based on someone because of their gender.
> *Ortiz: Earlier you mentioned that you stay pretty objective online. Could you help me understand why that was negative for you?*
>
> Well it got really personal. Some people were talking on this long thread about rape culture, so I tried to explain to them that they were missing a key perspective from men who don't rape. So I gave them some statistics on false allegations and how many men don't rape. And they blew up on me and called me entitled… they said I was privileged, and that the point that I didn't see how I benefit proved it. Which doesn't make sense. I got upset at the lack of facts and how they didn't care about what I had to say.

While Richard believed that people should not respond to racism and sexism, he became involved when he witnessed what he perceived as an attack against men who could not otherwise defend themselves. White men's objectivity becomes compromised when they find themselves targets of critique, a sense of enclosure threatening their sense of power (Spanierman et al 2012).

Conclusion

Racism and sexism online require an analysis of the social impact of this discrimination. I used an intersectional framework to focus on the ways various social groups responded to complex inequalities; this allowed me to assess how social positions shaped by structure of race and gender relate to both experiences of oppression and agentic responses, which in turn impact those inequalities. I have explored one aspect of this social impact by examining how young adults respond to complex inequalities online. The four response categories I found are intimately tied to group identities, which structure action in ways that challenge or reinforce inequalities. White women and men of color tended to reproduce an ignorance framework, where solutions were seemingly feasible ("we should educate people") but largely unaware of the systemic nature of their mistreatment, and the ways women of color would experience multiple forms of discrimination online. Women of color were either focused on responding to harassers as a form of resistance to white men's hegemony online, or caring for other women of color who had been harmed as a way to combat inequality and envision alternate possibilities for themselves. White men also frame their responses are care, noting their efforts to "teach" white women and men of color to ignore their experiences and replace emotional reactions with intellectual thought exercises.

Part of the social impact of racism and sexism is that it shapes how people relate to and interact with one another. Across race, women's interactions are guided by apprehension and often fear in how they will be treated, and how they will be faced with a dilemma of whether to respond, care, or ignore a situation that strikes them as morally

wrong. White women were largely silent with regard to issues of racism, commenting on "race issues" as a broad category possible of solving through education. White women and some men of color implied that others lacked knowledge, which became problematic because it undermined empathy for those different than oneself. They also feared backlashes for responding, including from women of color who might be respond angrily to ill-suited efforts of helping. White women and men of color positionality meant that it was not entirely obvious how women of color experiences were distinct, but it also contributed to a social distancing of sorts, on an emotional level, where fear and anxiety shrouded possibilities for allyship.

Some people of color and white women suggested that publicly responding to racist and sexist posts was a form of resistance against the silencing mechanism of harassment, though unlike the previous set of respondents, they did not believe those sharing and creating racist and sexist posts could be addressed effectively. Instead, responding was a way to signal to those witnessing the interactions that the initial behavior was not to be tolerated, and that people vicariously experiencing harassment were not alone. These respondents lacked faith in new media leaders capacity to reshape online spaces in ways that would make them more equitable, and believed that using their voices would disrupt white, patriarchal hegemony. Women of color most often undertook care work to build community in the aftermath of everyday sexism and racism, which did not always translate to offline mobilization, but it seemed to function to sustain their resilience and belief that they could survive the worst of identity-based harassment. White men framed their responses as care, but their narratives suggest that their efforts were mostly

organized around protecting the status quo and keeping attention away from the ways their actions and inactions supported racism and sexism. White women and men of color corroborated these strategies, many able to name a white male friend or relative that "helped" them cope or manage their experiences, primarily through encouraging them to not think about the broader social implications of online experiences.

Racism and sexism online can obviously undermine antiracist and feminist efforts through the normalization of overt hate speech both vicariously and firsthand. Still, young adults find ways to navigate those experiences using the repertoires they see as best fit for their positions and which match their skills and perceived personal and group-level stake in the situations they encounter online. Notably, there is little precedent for how to respond to racism and sexism online. Universities, peers, and family members suggest certain pathways of action and inaction, which young adults mold to fit how they envision the world. The insidious nature of racism and sexism, however, is that it manipulates the parameters of that vision for a more just world, working overtime to replace a spirit of resistance with hopelessness and apathy. The compounded aspect of racism and sexism both online and off provides a new possibilities for domination to infringe on the most mundane aspects of young adults life. But as I have attempted to argue, these experiences also offer sociologists new considerations for how members of a distinct cohort develop ways to challenge these forms of control. Most promising is young adults' insistence that a "we" capable of intervening and addressing racism and sexism in fact exists, and merely needs a trajectory and a course of action to undertake.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the so-called colorblind and postfeminist era, racism and sexism are a key feature of young adults' daily lives. I have argued that online spaces provide one major site for the this overt racism and sexism. The process of defining, making sense of, and responding to this racism and sexism is complicated, often not aligning with how overt forms of inequality are managed offline. Respondents described online processes involving an intersubjective aspect that functions to downplay or justify inequality. Future studies should therefore examine the role of family, peers, and universities in shaping how racism and sexism are experienced and responded to. The data provided in this project should also be used to reconsider how experiences of discrimination online are measured. Survey instruments designed to measure subjective experiences of discrimination offline may not simply be modified to include "online" questions. Rather, survey items need to take into account the important differences in how online racism and sexism resonate with participants. Finally, it is important to consider the potential health implications of racism and sexism online, namely, the mental and physical consequences of experiencing such a deleterious chronic stressor.

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