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Abstract

Black Americans post about race and race-related issues on social media more than any other racial group. In this study, we investigated whether Black Americans who post about racism on social networking sites (i.e., Facebook) experience evaluative backlash during the employee selection process. Participants ($N = 154$) were given a Black job candidate's cover letter, resume, and a scanned printout of their social media. Depending on what condition they were randomly assigned to, the applicant's social media contained posts about racism or posts that were race neutral. Results indicated that Black individuals whose posts were about racism were evaluated less favorably than Black individuals whose posts were race neutral. Specifically, they were perceived as being less likable. In addition, Black individuals whose social media posts were related to racism were less likely to be offered an interview for a job. Implications, limitations, and future directions are discussed.

Keywords

social media, evaluative backlash, employee selection, Black Americans, racism

Introduction

In the last decade, social media use has become increasingly prominent in individuals' daily lives (Zaidi, 2018). Today, approximately 231 million people in the United States use at least one social networking website (SNW) and/or mobile application (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram; Perrin & Anderson, 2019). SNWs allow users to connect with other users and generate and share content with others. As such, social media users often share a variety of aspects of their lives on these platforms ranging from engagements, their opinions on politically charged topics, new employment, and pictures from parties they have attended, to name a few. Although there is some commonality in what users choose to share on social media, recent surveys suggest that certain topics are more likely to be shared by some social media users than others. For example, Black individuals are much more likely to discuss and share posts about race and race-related issues on social media compared to any other racial group (M. Anderson & Hitlin, 2016; Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Desmond-Harris, 2016). Twenty-eight percent of Black social media users say most or some of their posts are about race compared to 67% of White social media users who say their posts never pertain to race (M. Anderson & Hitlin, 2016; Desmond-Harris, 2016).

Although social media posts are primarily seen by people in an user's social network (e.g., Facebook friends, twitter followers), there are also situations in which an individual's social media profile and posts are seen by people outside their social network. In either case, what an individual chooses to post online has been shown to influence the perceptions that others have of them (Becton et al., 2019; Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Forest & Wood, 2012). For example, it is becoming increasingly common for human resource (HR) personnel and recruiters to use the information found on SNWs to help them determine whether to hire someone (Becton et al., 2019; Roth et al., 2013). Indeed, 70% of employers reported using social media to screen applicants during the hiring process and 54% of those employers stated that they did not hire at least one applicant based on the information they found (Salm, 2017). Another poll revealed that 89% of employers indicate that their likelihood of hiring

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an applicant decreases substantially if the applicant has unprofessional social media content (Driver, 2020).

Recent research provides empirical evidence that individuals use an applicant's social media to form impressions about their dispositional traits (e.g., personality, intelligence, leadership, and work ethic), which in turn influence perceptions of the applicant's employability (Scott et al., 2014). From various reports, it seems that employers tend to primarily look for inappropriate and unprofessional content (e.g., profanity, comments about or pictures of being intoxicated, drug use) when screening applicants' social media profiles (Driver, 2020; Stoughton et al., 2013). One survey of employers found that 46% would not hire an applicant due to provocative or inappropriate photos they shared on social media, 41% would not hire an applicant if they shared content on their profiles of them using drugs or drinking alcohol, 36% would not hire an applicant if they were talking unfavorably about a previous employer, and 28% would not hire an applicant for posting discriminatory comments (Gurchiek, 2014).

To date, most of what we know about the influence of what people post on social media on hiring selection decisions comes from polls and survey data. Although this data is informative, it is limited because it only provides us descriptive information. The empirical studies that have examined how social media posts influence perceptions of applicants have primarily focused on how inappropriate and unprofessional social media content influences hiring selection outcomes (Baert, 2018; Becton et al., 2019; Bohnert & Ross, 2010; Roth et al., 2013). No studies to date have examined whether individuals' experience bias during the hiring selection process due to their social media posts about experiences of racism.

In this study, we were particularly interested in examining the influence that social media posts related to race and racism have on the perceptions of Black job applicants and their employment-related outcomes. We focus on Black individuals for four reasons. First, because past research has shown that Black individuals are likely to face discrimination in employment contexts (Quillian et al., 2017), research focusing on Black targets specifically is warranted. Second, although past research has shown that some social media content (e.g., about alcohol consumption and drug use; profile picture; Baert, 2018) can negatively influence how prospective job applicants are evaluated and the likelihood on whether they are interviewed and hired, these studies have primarily focused on White targets (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). Third, because we are interested in how posts about racism can influence perceptions of perspective job applicants' employment-related outcomes, we decided to use Black targets because research suggests that Black individuals face greater evaluative costs discussing anti-Black racism relative to their White counterparts (Schultz & Maddox, 2013). And finally, as mentioned above, Black individuals are much more likely to post about race and race-related issues on social media compared to any other racial group.

Evaluative Backlash Toward Black People Who Talk About Racism

The extant literature on the evaluative costs of confronting racism demonstrates that Black individuals experience evaluative backlash when they confront racism or talk about race-related issues (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Kaiser et al., 2006; Kaiser & Miller, 2001, 2003; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). When Black people claim that racial discrimination is a factor that influences their outcomes, they are viewed less favorably than other Black individuals and are more likely to be derogated (Kaiser & Miller, 2001). For example, Kaiser and Miller (2001) found that a Black male who attributed a failing test grade to discrimination was labeled a complainer and evaluated less favorably than a Black male who attributed his failure to race-neutral explanations (i.e., the quality of his test answers). This overall devaluation occurred regardless of the objective likelihood that discrimination occurred (i.e., knowing that evaluative panel who graded the Black student held anti-Black attitudes). In other research, Schultz and Maddox (2013) found that when Black individuals discussed the importance of having culture houses (e.g., Africana House) on campus for Black students to connect, they were evaluated more negatively than White individuals discussing the same topic and Black individuals who discussed race-neutral topics (i.e., dorm life in general).

As mentioned above, SNWs have afforded Black Americans a space to discuss the racial prejudice and discrimination experienced personally and by the Black community generally (M. Anderson & Hitlin, 2016). Although using social media in this manner has been shown to be associated with positive outcomes such as increased feelings of collective identity and engagement in collective action (Mundt et al., 2018), given the negative evaluative costs Black individuals experience for talking about racism, there may also be some unintended negative consequences associated with this practice. One potential negative consequence is Black individuals being evaluated negatively for their social media posts about race during employment selection processes. Thus, we hypothesized that Black job candidates who post about racism on their social media profiles will be evaluated less favorably (i.e., be viewed as less likable), less likely to be extended an interview, and less likely to be hired than Black candidates whose social media posts were race neutral.

Method

Participants, Design, and Procedure

A total of 179 participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and compensated US\$0.50 for their participation. Twenty-five participants failed to complete all dependent measures or failed a manipulation check; their data were excluded from the study. Of the remaining 154 participants ($M_{Age} = 36$, $SD_{Age} = 11.46$), 55.5% identified

as female, 44.2% as male, and 1.3% as nonbinary. Racially, 71.4% of sample identified as White, 14.3% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7.1% as Black/African American, 3.9% as Hispanic/Latino, 1.3% as multiracial, and the remaining 1.8% as some other race. In terms of sexual orientation, 84.4% of the sample identified as heterosexual, 2.6% as gay, 12.3% as bisexual, and 0.6% preferred not to say. Politically, 29.2% of participants identified as Democrat, 29.2% identified as Republican, 25.3% as Independent, 3.9% as other party not listed, 11.7% said they were not interested in politics, and 0.7% preferred not to say. In addition, 77% reported having held a job where they were involved in hiring decisions, with an average of 6.9 years of experience with hiring. Approximately half of our participants (49.4%) reported that their employer used a search engine such as Google to screen job candidates.

The experiment was a between-subjects design where participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (race-related posts or race-neutral posts). Participants were told that they would assume the role of a hiring manager filling a position for an entry-level office supervisor. In line with the cover story, participants first answered questions about their current or previous employment in which they helped make hiring decisions. Next, participants were given a job description of the position for which they were hiring. After, participants were told they would be given some information about at least one of several job candidates. This information consisted of the candidate's cover letter, resume, and information obtained through a routine background investigation of the hiring company (e.g., social media printout). After reviewing the applicant's information, participants were asked to rate the candidate on several traits that were counterbalanced (e.g., competence, likability), the likelihood they would interview the candidate, the likelihood they would hire the candidate, and the starting salary they would offer the candidate. Finally, participants completed a demographic questionnaire before being thanked for their participation and debriefed.

Materials

Social Media Profiles, Applicant Resume, and Cover Letter. Two mock Facebook profiles (one with race-related social media posts and one with race-neutral posts) were created for a Black prospective job applicant named David Williams. Both profiles were identical except for in the experimental condition two out of seven of applicant's posts were about racism (e.g., "Just got pulled over in my own neighborhood! Officer asked what I am doing here #drivingwhileblack), while in the control condition all seven posts were race neutral. Facebook profiles were used because it is the most popular social network site (SNS; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019) and it is one of the most frequently screened by employers (Jobvite, 2013). Alongside the social media posts, participants evaluated the applicant's resume and cover letter which

were identical in both conditions. The resume illustrated the applicant's qualification for the job (e.g., college major and previous work experience), while the cover letter demonstrated the applicant's interests and qualifications for the position. The resume and cover letter were adapted from Bohnert and Ross (2010).

Dependent Measures

Competence. To assess participants' perceptions of the applicant's competence, we created a composite variable by combining participants' responses to four questions asking them to describe the applicant as you think he or she generally or typically is, as compared with other persons you know of the same sex and of roughly their same age ($M=5.75$, $SD=0.89$; $\alpha=.79$) Using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Not At All* to 7 = *Extremely*) participants were asked how intelligent, lazy, responsible, and competent did they believe the applicant to be.

Likability. To assess participants' perceptions of the applicant's likability, we asked participants the degree to which they agreed with six statements using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *Strong disagree* to 7 = *Strongly Agree*). An example item reads, "this candidate seems easy to get along with." ($M=5.26$, $SD=1.16$; $\alpha=.94$; adapted from Kaiser & Miller, 2003).

Job Interview. A single 7-point Likert-type scale item (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 7 = *extremely likely*) was used to assess participants' thoughts regarding the likelihood that they would interview David Williams for the job opening ($M=5.83$, $SD=1.19$).

Job Offer. A single 7-point Likert-type scale item (1 = *extremely unlikely* to 7 = *extremely likely*) was used to assess participants' thoughts regarding the likelihood that they would offer David Williams employment for the job opening ($M=5.55$, $SD=1.27$).

Salary Offer. Using a slide scale starting at US\$30,000 and ending at US\$42,000, participants were asked to determine what salary they would offer the target applicant (Bohnert & Ross, 2010). The scale was in US\$1,000 increments ($M=36,732$, $SD=2,490$).

Manipulation Checks. We included two questions in our study that served as manipulation checks to ensure participants had read the job description and job applicants' materials. The first question asked, "For what position are you hiring?" and the second question asked, "Whose application did you review?"

Results

An independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to assess the influence of social media posts about racism on individual's perceptions of a Black job candidate's competency, likability,

likelihood of being interviewed for a position, likelihood of being hired for a position, and starting salary recommendation.

Competence

There was no effect of social media content on participants' perception of a Black candidate's competence $t(147)=-0.516$, $p=.606$, $d=0.09$ ($M_{\text{race related}}=5.79$, $SD=0.85$; $M_{\text{race neutral}}=5.71$, $SD=0.89$)

Likability

There was a significant main effect of social media content type on participants ratings of a Black job candidate's likability $t(147)=-2.13$, $p=.035$, $d=0.35$. Participants rated the Black candidate who posted about race ($M=5.05$, $SD=1.32$) as significantly less likable than Black candidates whose posts were race neutral ($M=5.45$, $SD=0.93$).

Job Interview

There was a significant main effect of social media content type on the likelihood participants would offer a Black candidate an interview $t(148)=2.26$, $p=.025$, $d=0.36$. Participants were less likely to extend an interview to a Black candidate who posted about race ($M=5.61$, $SD=1.35$) than Black candidates whose posts were race neutral ($M=6.04$, $SD=0.96$).

Job Offer

There was no effect of social media content on participants decision to offer a job to a Black candidate $t(148)=1.93$, $p=.06$, $d=0.09$ ($M_{\text{race related}}=5.30$, $SD=1.48$; $M_{\text{race neutral}}=5.77$, $SD=1.00$).

Salary Offer

There was no effect of social media content on participants' salary recommendation (in thousands), $t(147)=-0.122$, $p=.903$, $d=0.00$, $M_{\text{race related}}=36.76$, $SD=2.18$; $M_{\text{race neutral}}=36.71$, $SD=2.77$.

Discussion

There is an emergent body of evidence that suggests that individual's social media posts influence evaluative decisions during the employee selection process. The findings of this study advance research in this area. Whereas past research has primarily focused on the effect that unprofessional posts (e.g., excessive comments and/or pictures related to alcohol consumption, the use of profanity, sexually explicit language, pictures, and/or references to sexual activity; Becton et al., 2019; Bohnert & Ross, 2010) have on an evaluator's perceptions of job applicants, this study focused on

how social media posts about racism influence an evaluator's judgments of Black job applicants.

Our findings provide initial evidence that posting about racism on social media can have professional consequences for Black Americans. A Black job candidate who posted on Facebook about racism was viewed as less likable and was less likely to be offered a job interview than a Black candidate whose Facebook posts were race neutral. In other words, Black individuals posting about their experiences of racism may have similar negative consequences during the employee selection process as individuals who post pictures of themselves drinking alcohol excessively (i.e., reduced likelihood of being interviewed). Moreover, Black Americans already face persistent hiring discrimination due to their race (C. Anderson, 1994; Quillian et al., 2017) and our findings suggest that if they post about their legitimate experiences with racial bias this may, incidentally, exacerbate racial disparities in hiring.

Based on these findings, companies may want to make anti-racist education workshops, which are repeated annually, mandatory for HR specialists. Most individuals in the United States do not understand systemic racism and the ways in which anti-Blackness impacts every facet of Black people's lives (Salter & Haugen, 2017). Thus, one reason why we continue to see racial bias is individuals do not understand how it is perpetuated and manifested across various contexts in the United States, including the workplace. Educating HR specialist about systemic racism may help prevent biases such as these from occurring. It may be that if individuals understand how anti-Black racism operates, they will not perceive Black individuals who talk about their legitimate experiences with anti-Black racism as complainers, reducing the evaluative backlash Black job applicants who post about racism experience.

This study, however, is not without limitations. First, our research was conducted in the United States and thus our findings may not generalize beyond a US context. However, taking the broad literature on evaluative backlash into consideration, we believe that our results would replicate in non-US contexts. Contexts in which a person who is from a racially stigmatized and subordinate group, these individuals will likely experience evaluative backlash for their posts about their own or racial ingroup's experience with racism. Future research is needed, however, to determine the generalizability of these effects.

Second, our experiment employed a laboratory design rather than a field experiment where real job candidates would be considered for actual employment. Although field experiments, relative to laboratory experiments, are higher in external validity, they often suffer from internal validity. Using a laboratory design for this study allowed us to minimize confounding and extraneous variables that would be extremely difficult to control for in the real world. In addition, it is common within the field of psychology and schools of management to conduct laboratory experiments to examine questions regarding hiring selection (e.g., see Howard &

Borgella, 2019; King et al., 2006; Okoroji et al., 2020). With that said, future research studies should attempt to replicate our research findings using a field experiment.

A third limitation of our study is our participants were from the general public and were not HR personal or recruiters and thus there may be some concern about the generalizability of our results to hiring professionals. However, it is important to note that over two-thirds of our sample (i.e., 77%) self-reported having, on average, 6.9 years of experience in employee selection processes, which suggests that recruiters and hiring professionals may respond similarly.

Fourth, in our experiment individuals only evaluated a single target, whereas it is common for recruiters and hiring managers to review multiple applicants. However, it is important to note that in the real world, HR specialists are often in fast-paced environments that are cognitively taxing (e.g., Stone & Daedrick, 2015). Research demonstrates that when individuals are under cognitive load, they are most likely to make biased decisions (e.g., Macrae et al., 1993; Sherman & Frost, 2000; Wigboldus et al., 2004). Thus, having participants evaluate a single target versus multiple targets, which would have caused more cognitive load, can be seen as a conservative test of our hypothesis. However, future research should have individuals review multiple targets to more closely mirror actual employee selection processes.

Future research might also consider replicating this study using other stigmatized targets that experience evaluative backlash for talking about their experiences of bias. For example, women often experience evaluative backlash for confronting or discussing sexism (Hyers, 2007). Thus, women who post on social media about experiences of sexism may be evaluated more negatively by hiring professionals than women who do not have any posts related to sexism.

Another future direction that warrants further investigation is examining when discussing race-related content on social media may result in favorable evaluations of job applicants. For example, an individual who posts about racism on social media may be evaluated more favorably by a hiring professional or recruiter at a non-profit organization centered on racial equity and social justice than an individual with race-neutral posts. Another example would be situations in which non-stigmatized individuals (White individuals, men) post about issues experienced by marginalized individuals (e.g., racial/ethnic minorities and women) and receive more favorable evaluations relative to a marginalized individual who posts the same exact content. Past research has shown that White people and men do not experience the same level of evaluative backlash that Black people and women experience for discussing anti-Black racism and sexism (Gervais & Hillard, 2014; Schultz & Maddox, 2013). In fact, in some cases they receive more favorable evaluations (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Future research is warranted to explore if non-stigmatized allies face similar backlash as stigmatized individuals or an evaluative boost.

In closing, we would caution those who conclude that the solution to prevent Black individuals from being evaluated unfavorably due to social media posts about racism would be for Black people to simply stop posting about racism. Although this may be reasonable advice regarding unprofessional social media posts, a racial groups' experience with racism should not be equated with alcoholic consumption and drug use. For instance, digital activism, which is fueled by social media post about racism, has been used to raise national conversations about race and to start movements like Black Lives Matter (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Desmond-Harris, 2016). Instead, we join previous researchers who call on HR professionals to not only be aware of the challenges caused by the emergence of SNS but to also develop clear policies about how information found on individuals' social media will be used in recruitment and selection decisions and to understand how our biases may influence these processes (Roth et al., 2013; Yokoyama, 2016).

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Simon Howard (PhD/MS, Tufts University) is a Professor of Psychology at Marquette University. His research examines how sociocultural ideas associated with race (i.e., stereotypes) influence

the psychological processes of both racially marginalized and non-marginalized group members.

Kalen Kennedy (MS, Marquette University) is a doctoral student of clinical psychology at Marquette University. His research interests include cross-racial perceptions, bias, and social hierarchy.

Francisco Tejeda is an undergraduate student at Marquette University. His research interests are centered on how race/ethnicity influence our perceptions of people across various contexts.