

Online racial discrimination linked to depression, anxiety in teens

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In the early days of the Internet, some scholars once predicted a lessening of racism and race-based discrimination in online interactions thanks to the anonymity and race-neutral nature of the medium. But according to a new study published by a University of Illinois professor who studies race and the Internet, adolescents are increasingly experiencing both individual and vicarious discrimination online, which in turn triggers stress, depression and anxiety.

Brendesha Tynes, a professor of educational psychology and of African American studies at the U. of I., believes that with teenagers increasingly tethered to the Internet (93 percent of whom have Internet access in some form, at last count), more consideration should to be given to race-related online victimization not only as an Internet safety issue, but also as a public health concern for parents.

"There's been a lot of publicity about cyber-bullying and teenagers protecting themselves from online predators, and justifiably so," Tynes said. "But people don't know much about online racial discrimination and its effects on adolescent emotional well-being."

Tynes along with co-authors Michael T. Giang, David R. Williams and Geneene N. Thompson published their findings in an article titled "Online Racial Discrimination and Psychological Adjustment Among Adolescents" in the December 2008 issue of the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

Tynes said that while there have been several studies that have explored online victimization and its effect on psychological functioning, there haven't been any studies on the effects of race-related online victimization.

"The whole goal of this study was to see if there were associations between race-related victimization and negative psychological adjustment," she said. "I wanted to make a distinction between online racial discrimination and offline racial discrimination. Since people of color experience racial discrimination in both face-to-face settings and online, I wanted to find out whether online racial discrimination impacts adjustment over and above what's experienced in offline settings. We've found evidence to suggest that it does."

For the study, Tynes created a measure for race-related online victimization. She discovered that 71 percent of African-American adolescents, along with 71 percent of white and 67 percent of multiracial/other adolescents, experienced vicarious racial discrimination online at least once. Twenty-nine percent of African-American adolescents, and 20 percent of white and 42 percent of multiracial/other adolescents also reported experiencing individual discrimination directed at them while online, according to the published findings.

Tynes's research indicated that, regardless of a victim's racial background, increased exposure to online racial discrimination was significantly related to increased depression; females were found to experience significantly more depression and anxiety than males. Victimization occurred in the usual online mediums - instant messaging, discussion forums, online games and social networking sites - and in text messages received by the victim.

Tynes's findings depart from previous research in the field, which had shown discrimination to disproportionately impact the emotional and

physical health primarily of people of color. The variance in her findings could be attributed to the sample or the measures used in her study, she said, since the discrimination gap between whites and blacks is profoundly different, both online and offline.

"More research is needed to determine the impact of those differences," Tynes said.

Tynes said that another disturbing finding in her research was discovering online hate groups who actively try to recruit new members by creating child-friendly Web sites.

"There are white power groups who, for example, lure teens and kids by creating Web sites that are advertised as being for kids," she said, citing the Stormfront "White Pride For Kids' " (sic) Web site.

"That site differs from the main site in that it's only tinged with negative language, not out-and-out racist language," she said. "It's masked racism that uses a bait-and-switch to entice unsuspecting kids."

While the Internet can be seen as an open marketplace of ideas, Tynes said it can also function as an echo chamber of false information, noting that some child-focused Web sites produced by hate groups are created as phony information clearinghouses about historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Barack Obama or historical events such as the Holocaust. The Web sites encourage children to propagate historical canards in their research papers. The published information found on such sites, however, is typically neither factual nor accurate, Tynes said.

As part of their recruiting efforts, hate-mongers will not only congregate in Web sites and discussion forums related to their own ethnic groups, but they will also lurk in forums created for a specific ethnic group of color and "troll" (Internet lingo for deliberately posting a taunting,

usually invective-laden message for the sole intention of causing chaos) those message boards, Tynes said.

"I saw many examples of trolls going to sites devoted to a specific ethnic group of color and then posting a negative message filled with racial epithets solely to provoke and inflame members of that community," she said.

Despite all the dangers that lurk online, Tynes still thinks it's important for adolescents to spend time on the Internet.

"When you're not participating in the sites that the kids at your school are participating in," she said, "you can run the risk of feeling isolated from your peers. In a lot of ways, the Internet is sort of an informal classroom for teens."

"For all of its shortcomings, it's a good bridge to help kids become more sophisticated in their understanding of race," she said.

Tynes is not a proponent of strict parental monitoring or restricting teens from exploring the Internet.

"It would be impossible to monitor every Web site that's out there," she said. "I am a proponent of more conversations about race, more study of people's culture, and keeping an open line of communication with our teens about the fact that these things might happen. That's why we need more discussion, so that when teens experience race-related victimization online, it can serve as a buffer to help them to feel a sense of racial pride and a positive racial identity."

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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