

# Research on teen social media use has a racial bias: Studies of white kids are widely taken to be universal

February 20 2023, by Linda Charmaraman and J. Maya Hernandez

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Most research on teen social media use has been conducted on [white teens and college students](#). As a result, it is unclear to what extent

overlooked populations such as racial and ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities and other vulnerable adolescent populations may be using social media in different ways.

You may have read about research on teen social [media](#) use in newspapers or other [media outlets](#), but you might not be aware of the limitations of that research. Rarely do press reports mention the details of the sample populations studied. Instead, they generalize research that [is often based largely on white teens](#) to all youths.

What is missing, then, especially when it comes to teens of color? We are a [senior research scientist](#) and [doctoral student](#) who study the benefits and challenges of [teen social technology and digital media use](#). We and our colleague [Rachel Hodes](#) recently published a [book chapter](#) on how marginalized and understudied populations use social media.

We found that commonly accepted portrayals of teens online distort or obscure the experiences of teens of color. These teens often have different online experiences, face different harms and [may be using social media to share and present](#) underrepresented aspects of themselves and their experiences.

## Particular harms

On the negative side, teens who are members of racial and ethnic minorities face discrimination online, including racial slurs or jokes, negative stereotyping, body shaming and even threats of harm. The [first study of its kind](#) to investigate the mental health implications of online discrimination for Black and Latino sixth through 12th graders over time found that these groups had increased risk of depression and anxiety.

In our work at the Youth, Media & Wellbeing Research Lab, we demonstrated that Black and Latino fifth through ninth graders [adopt](#)

[social media at a younger age](#) than their white peers, further exposing them to behavioral health difficulties like sleep disruption.

Despite having the [highest reported access](#) to the internet and social media, Asian American youths still remain underrepresented in studies on digital media and well-being. Asian Americans in later adolescence and early adulthood—18- to 24-year-olds—are [more likely to be cyberbullied](#) than their white or Latino counterparts.

They are also the least likely to report negative experiences on social media in order to avoid embarrassment and maintain a positive image to the outside world. The global pandemic [triggered a rapid resurgence](#) of hate toward and racial profiling of Asian American communities, which has driven an increase in [discrimination against Asian Americans, including online](#).

## Community and coping

But there is also a growing body of research on the positive effects on youths of color of [social media that's designed to be inclusive](#). Our lab demonstrated that Black and Latino youths ages 11 to 15 were more likely than white and Asian adolescents to [join online groups that made them feel less lonely and isolated](#). These online communities included group chats on Snapchat, House Party, WhatsApp, Discord, anime fanfiction sites and sports and hobby-related groups.

There were differences between the Black and Latino youths we studied. Black adolescents preferred YouTube video content about relationships or friendships, whereas Latino youths were more likely to seek ways to cope with stress and anxiety. Latino youths were also more likely to use social media to stay in touch with relatives. In general, [having a sense of belonging on social media](#) has profound effects for young people of color.

There is limited research that delves into the opportunities and experiences of Asian American and Indigenous adolescents as they explore racial and ethnic identity, especially during early (ages 10 to 13) and midadolescence (ages 11 to 17), and the role that social media plays in this process.

In a study of older adolescents and young adults (ages 18 to 25), Asian Americans reported using social media to seek social support during difficult times [in more private online channels](#), which could be a way of avoiding the stigma around mental illness that persists in many Asian cultures. Our current [NIH collaboration](#) with Brigham and Women's Hospital is in the early stages of investigating how Chinese American parents and peers discuss racism and discrimination in online and offline contexts.

[Recent research](#) conducted in response to the rise in racism aimed at Asian Americans has found camaraderie and resistance to discrimination in online spaces. This is similar to what has been seen on [Black Twitter](#). While this effect has yet to be documented in adolescents, it is another example of the power of collective racial and ethnic identity in an online community.

## **Recognizing differences**

Across all marginalized populations there are untapped opportunities for research and design of social media. Offline risk factors such as bullying, victimization and behavioral problems spill into online spaces, heightening the risk of negative experiences on social media. We believe that researchers and technology developers can avoid amplifying online risks associated with different racial and ethnic identities.

At the same time, we also believe that researchers can focus on positive minority [youth](#) development on [social media](#). Being a member of a

group that is overlooked or faces discrimination can [galvanize people and give them a sense of purpose](#). They can tackle a mutual goal of community building and authenticity, which, in turn, may promote healthy youth development.

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