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An Exploratory Study of Anti-Black Racism in Social Media Behavior Intentions:
Effects of Political Orientation and Motivation to Control Prejudice

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Abstract

Considering the widespread prevalence of racist content and opinions on social media, there is a pressing need to understand how users react to such content in ways that might lead them to be drawn into echo chambers of racism, hate speech, and potentially even violence. We conducted an online study to investigate how two individual differences—political orientation and motivation to control prejudice (MCP)—may predispose people to accept anti-Black racism expressed in social media messages. Non-Black participants viewed racist and egalitarian mock social media posts and reported how likely they would be to respond favorably and/or engage in supportive social media behaviors. People who identified as conservative and those who reported having low internal MCP were equally accepting of racist and egalitarian posts, whereas people who identified as liberal and those who reported having high internal MCP were less accepting of the racist versus egalitarian post. External MCP did not affect judgments. We consider how these effects might contribute to racism, hate, and violence.

Keywords: race, racism, social media, political orientation, motivation to control prejudice

Public significance statement: Social media has played a critical role in sparking action toward racial justice in recent years, but it is also a source of rampant misinformation and racial bias. This research sought to understand which characteristics could influence people’s endorsement of racist content online and contribute to echo chambers of hate speech. Our findings suggest that politically conservative individuals and those who demonstrate low motivation to control prejudice are more likely to consume and distribute racist social media posts as compared to liberal and more highly motivated individuals. This work emphasizes the importance of efforts aimed at ensuring accurate information is shared across political divides, motivating people to control racial prejudice, and deconstructing echo chambers through education and technology.
An Exploratory Study of Anti-Black Racism in Social Media Behavior Intentions:
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The United States has a long history of racial injustice, which demands investigations into how racism is developed and sustained. One concern is that over the past three decades, the rise of social media—internet-based technology that is used to create and communicate content—has potentially contributed to the risk of bias transmission and negative societal outcomes (e.g., Wachs et al., 2019). Consider, for example, that 36% of adolescents studied in the U.S. reported having encountered hate speech online in the past year, and the more frequently they observed online hate speech, the more often they themselves perpetrated online hate speech (Wachs et al., 2019). This is especially concerning in light of evidence that social media has been used to provoke violence against people who belong to racial and ethnic minority groups and those engaged in Black Lives Matter protests (Mezzofiore & Polglase, 2020), such as the campaign to mobilize White supremacists and hate groups for the 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, where a White nationalist drove a car into a group of counterprotesters, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 19 others (VICE News Tonight, 2017). In light of the prevalence of racist content online (Klein, 2012), especially on social networking sites (Tynes et al., 2008), we need to understand whether certain social media users might be predisposed to interacting with content in ways that create echo chambers of racism, hate speech (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernández, 2016), and potentially violence. To begin unpacking this question, we used an online experimental study to examine two individual differences that may determine people's receptivity to anti-Black racism expressed in social media messages: political orientation and motivation to control prejudice (MCP). We conceptualize racist messages as those that devalue or derogate Black people or otherwise dismiss, ignore, or deny their concerns
about unequal treatment, rights, or opportunities. In contrast, we consider egalitarian messages to be those that assert or promote the ideals that all people should be valued and treated equally and rights and access to opportunity should be structured equitably. Next, we outline our rationale for the study, review prior theory and research, and detail our research questions and hypotheses.

Social Media, Confirmation Bias, and Race-Based Echo Chambers

Social media is a relatively new method of communication and we do not yet fully understand how its use shapes people’s beliefs, attitudes, or behavior, particularly in light of differences between social media and traditional media. One important difference is that social media users can interact with the information to which they are exposed and actively engage with the producers of content, typically in real time (Rafaeli & Sudweeks, 1997). In comparison, traditional media is consumed relatively passively. Also, because people may personally know the source of messages they encounter on social media, they may be more influenced by it than by messages from unknown sources in traditional media (e.g., Mattke et al., 2020). These kinds of differences could contribute to different effects than expected based on previous studies of traditional media. Research is vital for understanding various impacts of social media use.

One thing we have known for over half a century, however, is that people pursue media that are favorable to their preexisting beliefs (Sears & Freedman, 1967). This is an important consideration because the power that people have to tailor their social media accounts is a core feature underlying its appeal. Users can “follow” or “like” posts or users that please them, and hide or block those that do not. Users’ ability to choose the ideas to which they are exposed can be problematic, however, due to confirmation bias—people tend to seek information that is consistent with their beliefs while simultaneously discounting contradictory information (Nickerson, 1998). Recent studies show this confirmation bias also occurs with social media
(Bakshy et al., 2015; Quattrociocchi et al., 2016) and may be reinforced by algorithms built into the applications which analyze users' behavior to determine what content subsequently appears and is prioritized in their feed (Bakshy et al., 2015). These processes limit network diversity, reduce the amount of attitude-challenging content to which users are exposed, and deepen ideological divides (Bakshy et al., 2015; Sunstein, 2017). Thus, echo chambers emerge: people become embedded within online environments that reinforce their beliefs through repeated selective exposure to information and interactions with people with similar beliefs (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Yet there is a dearth of published experimental research aimed at understanding how users engage with social media in ways that may give rise to racist echo chambers. In a rare study, Rauch and Shanz (2013) found that participants reported more negative attitudes toward mock Facebook messages that discussed White supremacy or reverse discrimination versus those that acknowledged the existence of racial discrimination. Participants also reported less favorable behavioral responses to the racist versus egalitarian messages, stating they would be less likely to share the racist message with others. More recently, Williams et al. (2016) found that, overall, participants rated racial-themed internet memes as more offensive than non-racial control memes. These results paint an optimistic picture of social media users rejecting racist messages. However, Williams et al. found that White people perceived racial-themed memes as less offensive than did people of color, and Rauch and Schanz found that participants who reported using Facebook more often and whose use was less motivated by the desire to seek and share information were more accepting than others of racist messages. These findings highlight the importance of identifying characteristics that moderate users' likelihood of embracing and distributing racist content online.
Political Orientation and Motivation to Control Prejudice

Given the potential role political ideologies may play in the creation of echo chambers (Cinelli et al., 2021) and the sociopolitical construction of race in the U.S. (Haslanger, 2019), we evaluated whether political and racial attitudes might be individual difference variables that impact users’ acceptance of racist social media messages. To begin, politically conservative, right-leaning individuals, on average, express more racial prejudice than their liberal, left-leaning counterparts (e.g., Sidanius et al., 1996) on measures of both conscious, explicit prejudice (Davis, 2008) and nonconscious, implicit prejudice (Nosek et al., 2007). We considered how politically driven differences in racial attitudes might relate to reactions to racist social media messages in light of theory and research conceptualizing conservatism as a form of motivated social cognition. Based on their meta-analytic findings, Jost et al. (2003) posited that mental rigidity, closed-mindedness, fear, and social system instability motivate conservative people to justify the status quo. This system justification process may explain why conservative people, consciously or not, selectively seek and interpret media in ways that are consistent with the existing social order, favoring traditionally advantaged groups and derogating traditionally disadvantaged groups (de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Stroud, 2008). Therefore, we predicted a two-way interaction between social media post type (racist versus egalitarian) and political orientation. Specifically, we hypothesized that conservative people would respond more favorably and be more likely to endorse racist social media posts rather than egalitarian posts that call for racial equity. In contrast, we expected liberal people to respond less favorably and be less likely to endorse racist than egalitarian posts.

Conservative and liberal people differ not only in racist beliefs in service of system justification but also in the extent to which they elect to suppress those beliefs when at risk of
social conflict or embarrassment (Webster et al., 2014). As such, we also explored whether acceptance of racist social media messages differs as a function of motivation to control prejudice (MCP). Dunton and Fazio (1997) proposed that individuals can prevent automatic negative feelings toward Black people from influencing their reactions and behavior when they are motivated and have cognitive resources available to do so. Such motivation may stem from *internal* or *external* sources (see also Plant & Devine, 1998). Internal MCP relates to an individual’s desire to behave in ways that are consistent with their personal belief that prejudice is undesirable. External MCP derives from an individual’s desire to avoid appearing prejudiced to others because prejudice is perceived as inconsistent with egalitarian social norms. Of importance, internal and external MCP predict different behaviors (Plant & Devine, 1998). In our study, we expected attitudes and responses to social media to be the product of a three-way interaction between social media post type, internal MCP, and external MCP. Specifically, we predicted that individuals who have high internal MCP would respond less favorably and be less likely to endorse racist than egalitarian social media posts, regardless of their level of external MCP. Among individuals who have low internal MCP, we anticipated that those who were high in external MCP would modify their online behavior to respond less favorably and be less likely to endorse racist than egalitarian posts. In contrast, however, we hypothesized that individuals low in both internal and external MCP would demonstrate more favorable attitudes toward the racist post and more willingness to endorse it relative to the egalitarian post.

**Study Overview**

Considering the widespread prevalence of racist content and opinions on social media, there is a pressing need to understand how users react to such content in ways that might lead them to be drawn into echo chambers of racism, hate speech, and potentially even violence. We
conducted an online study to investigate how two individual differences—political orientation and motivation to control prejudice (MCP)—may predispose people to accept racism expressed in social media messages. We focused the study on anti-Black racism due to its unique role in United States history and culture and in light of the integral role that social media has played in recent years in Black activism (e.g., the Black Lives Matter movement) as well as corresponding White supremacist backlash (e.g., the “Unite the Right” rally). To assess anti-Black racism, we recruited a sample of non-Black participants, consistent with prior research focused primarily on assessing the attitudes of the White, racialized majority based on the expectation that Black individuals are not likely to express anti-Black bias (e.g., Bonam et al., 2016; Goff et al., 2008). We also limited our sample to adults as the majority of adults aged 18 to 64 report using at least one social media site, and use has increased in recent years even among adults over age 65 (Pew Research Center, 2021). Participants viewed racist and egalitarian mock social media posts, reported how likely they would be to respond favorably and/or engage in supportive social media behaviors, and responded to measures assessing their political orientation and motivation to control prejudice. Our hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1a: Conservative participants will respond more favorably and be more likely to endorse racist social media posts rather than egalitarian posts that call for racial equity.

Hypothesis 1b: Liberal participants will respond less favorably and be less likely to endorse racist than egalitarian posts.

Hypotheses 2a: Participants who report low internal and/or external motivation to control prejudice will be less likely to respond favorably or endorse the racist rather than egalitarian post.
Hypothesis 2b: Participants with little internal and external motivation to control prejudice will be more likely to respond favorably to the racist post.

**Methods**

**Participants**

We recruited 125 United States adult citizens through MTurk. After excluding 17 participants (one outlier on completion time, six who failed attention checks, and 10 who identified as Black), the sample included 108 non-Black participants. This exceeded the 90 participants needed to detect medium-sized interaction effects in a mixed ANOVA with six separate groups and two repeated measures with power = .90 (Faul et al., 2007). The sample was diverse in age ($M = 35$ years old, $SD = 11$) and education (21% had completed high school, 26% had completed some college, 10% had earned an associate’s degree, 38% had received a bachelor’s degree, and 5% had obtained a master’s degree). However, the majority of participants were men (57%, with 43% identifying as women and 1% as other gender) and non-Hispanic White (79%, with 10% identifying as Asian, 7% multiracial, 4% Hispanic, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native). All but one participant (1%) reported using some form of social media.

**Procedure**

The study was launched on MTurk on March 8, 2016. Participants were screened for

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1 Analyses controlling for race and ethnicity yielded a pattern of means and effects that were identical to those reported herein. Analyses including only White participants also produced the same results with only one exception: the significant multivariate main effect of political orientation on message attitude and behavioral intentions became nonsignificant, $\Lambda = .97$, $F(2, 77) = 1.24$, $p = .297$. This change may have been an artifact of reduced power due to the smaller sample size. Yet the univariate effects of political orientation were not significant even when all participants were included, so ultimately the main effect of political orientation on message attitude and response favorability did not change depending on whether analyses included all participants in this sample or only White participants.

2 Analyses excluding the single participant who did not report using social media produced the same pattern of means and effects reported herein.
eligibility and then accessed the survey via Qualtrics. They provided informed consent, completed an unrelated study task, and then began the experiment. Participants were instructed that they would view images that were posted on social media, which was defined as “any digital platform that facilitates information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.).” Racist and egalitarian social media posts were presented in random order. Participants were instructed to “Imagine that you just saw this post on social media,” and were asked, “How much do you disagree or agree with each of the following statements about the post?” Manipulation check items and items from the social media message attitude and behavioral intentions subscales were then displayed in a randomly intermixed order. (Social media-relevant instructions, stimuli, and measures are available via OSF at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/EUVB7.) Participants completed all items for both posts and then responded to the MCP scales and the background items, which included the political orientation item. This ensured responses to the posts were not affected by completion of the individual difference measures. Finally, participants were debriefed, thanked, and compensated with $3.00. On average, participants took 16 minutes to complete all materials. All procedures adhered to the university's Institutional Review Board guidelines.

**Materials and Measures**

**Social media posts.** Participants viewed two mock social media posts derived from the internet, each consisting of an image with a superimposed text caption. These images were selected to align with our previously described conceptualization of racist and egalitarian messages by the third author in consultation with the first author. The racist post depicted a group of White individuals pointing toward the perceiver with a caption stating, "So You Mean To Tell Us If We Say White Lives Matter We Are Racist?" The egalitarian post showed a group
of White and Black individuals with a sign stating, “You don’t have to be Black to be outraged.”

**Manipulation check items.** Two items assessed whether the posts were perceived as intended. After viewing each post, participants reported how much they agreed that “This post is discriminatory against Whites” and “This post is discriminatory against Blacks.” Responses were given on 7-point scales ranging from -3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*).

**Social media message attitude and behavioral intentions subscales.** After each post, participants completed two subscales derived from Rauch and Schanz (2013). The message attitude subscale included five items that measured favorable attitudes toward the post (e.g., “I agree with the message conveyed by this post,” “This post is accurate,” “The person who posted this is knowledgeable”). The behavioral intentions subscale was composed of eight items that assessed promotive actions participants might take after viewing the posts (e.g., “I would 'like' this post,” “I would share this post,” “I would argue against this post with a comment” [reverse-scored]). Responses were given on 7-point scales that ranged from -3 (*strongly disagree*) to +3 (*strongly agree*). The message attitude subscale was reliable for both the racist ($\alpha = .95, M$ inter-item correlation $=.80; M = -.53, SD = 1.62$) and egalitarian post ($\alpha = .92, M$ inter-item correlation $=.69; M = .70, SD = 1.33$), and the behavioral intentions subscale was reliable for the racist ($\alpha = .88, M$ inter-item correlation $=.47; M = -.42, SD = 1.25$) and egalitarian post ($\alpha = .83, M$ inter-item correlation $=.37; M = .35, SD = 1.13$).

**MCP scales.** Plant and Devine’s (1998) MCP scales assessed participants’ internal (e.g., “Because of my personal values, I believe that using stereotypes about Black people is wrong,” “Being nonprejudiced toward Black people is important to my self-concept”) and external (e.g., “Because of today’s politically correct standards I try to appear nonprejudiced towards Black people,” “I try to act nonprejudiced against Black people because of pressure from others”)
motivations for responding in nonprejudiced ways toward Black people. Each scale includes five items with 7-point response scales ranging from -3 (totally disagree) to +3 (totally agree). The internal ($\alpha = .91$, $M$ inter-item correlation = .67) and external MCP scales ($\alpha = .91$, $M$ inter-item correlation = .66) were internally consistent, so responses were averaged to create each scale (internal: $M = 1.41$, $SD = 1.30$ and external: $M = -.54$, $SD = 1.55$). Given the “high” versus “low” categorization that is typically used to discuss and analyze MCP (Plant & Devine, 1998, 2009), we used a median split to designate participants as low or high in internal ($n = 60$ low versus $n = 48$ high) and external MCP ($n = 57$ low versus $n = 51$ high).

**Background questions.** Participants reported their U.S. citizenship status, age, gender, race, ethnicity, and the highest level of education they had attained. Following Skitka et al. (2006), one item assessed participants’ political orientation (i.e., “To what extent do you consider yourself politically liberal or conservative?”) using a 6-point response scale ranging from -3 (Extremely Liberal) to +3 (Extremely Conservative). Participants who selected a negative number were coded as liberal ($n = 68; M = -1.82$, $SD = .77$) and those who selected a positive number were coded as conservative ($n = 40; M = 1.75$, $SD = .74$). Finally, participants reported whether they used the following social media networks: Facebook (86%), Twitter (67%), Instagram (32%), Google+ (25%), Myspace (1%), Pinterest (35%), YouTube (79%), Tumblr (10%), and/or Reddit (57%).

**Attention check items.** Three items directed participants to select a particular response to assess whether participants attended to the materials. One was placed within the unrelated study task, one at the end of the MCP scales, and one at the end of the background questions. Finally, how much attention participants paid to the study was assessed on a 5-point response scale ranging from 1 (almost no attention) to 5 (complete attention). Participants were retained if
they reported paying at least “some” attention (i.e., scored 3 or higher).

**Results**

**Manipulation Checks**

As expected, analyses of responses to the manipulation check items revealed that the egalitarian post was perceived as egalitarian. Participants disagreed that the egalitarian post was discriminatory against either White ($M = -1.86, SD = 1.31$) or Black people ($M = -1.88, SD = 1.37$). A one-way within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) further revealed that these ratings did not significantly differ from each other, $F(1, 107) = .03, p = .86$, partial $R^2 = .00$, 95% CI [.00, .01]. In contrast, a one-way within-subjects ANOVA showed that participants were significantly more likely to agree that the racist post was discriminatory against Black people ($M = - .54, SD = 1.85$) than against White people ($M = -1.91, SD = 1.28$), $F(1, 107) = 43.65, p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .29$, 95% CI [.15, .41]. Also, the egalitarian and racist post were perceived as similarly nondiscriminatory against White people, $F(1, 107) = .13, p = .72$, partial $R^2 = .00$, 95% CI [.00, .04], but the racist post was perceived as significantly more discriminatory against Black people as compared to the egalitarian post, $F(1, 107) = 36.02, p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .25$, 95% CI [.12, .38]. These results provide confidence that the posts were perceived as intended.

**Main Analyses**

Correlational analyses showed that social media message attitude and behavioral intentions were significantly positively related for the racist and egalitarian posts (see Table 1). Thus, a mixed multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was employed to examine effects on message attitude and behavioral intentions with post type as a within-subject variable and political orientation, internal MCP, and external MCP as between-subject variables. Although multicollinearity among these independent variables was not an issue (see Table 1), only two
conservative people were high on both internal and external MCP. Thus, the model included all main effects and interactions except for the three-way interaction of political orientation, internal MCP, and external MCP and the four-way interaction of these three variables with social media post type.

Overall, whether a social media post depicted anti-Black racism or egalitarianism had a significant multivariate main effect on participants' reactions, $\Lambda = .86, F(2, 100) = 8.28, p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .14$, 95% CI [.03, .26]. Participants were significantly less accepting of the racist post in terms of message attitude, $F(1, 101) = 16.69, p < .001$, partial $R^2 = .14$, 95% CI [.04, .27], and behavioral intentions, $F(1, 101) = 11.05, p = .001$, partial $R^2 = .10$, 95% CI [.02, .22]. Our primary goal, however, was to examine whether this main effect of post type was moderated by participants' political orientation or internal or external MCP. We explore these effects in the following sections. Table 2 provides all means and standard deviations.

**Main and moderating effects of political orientation.** Political orientation had a significant multivariate main effect on social media message attitude and behavioral intentions, $\Lambda = .94, F(2, 100) = 3.05, p = .05$, partial $R^2 = .06$, 95% CI [.00, .15], but the univariate effect was not reliable for message attitude, $F(1, 101) = 3.42, p = .07$, partial $R^2 = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .12], or behavioral intentions, $F(1, 101) = .05, p = .83$, partial $R^2 = .00$, 95% CI [.00, .02]. As predicted, political orientation significantly moderated the effect of post type on participants' reactions at both the multivariate and univariate levels. (Table 3 presents statistics from the omnibus and simple effects analyses.) We expected conservative people to respond more favorably and be more likely to endorse racist than egalitarian posts. Unexpectedly, however, conservative participants' message attitude and behavioral intentions did not differ significantly for the racist and egalitarian posts. Even so, as predicted, the type of post presented significantly
affected liberal participants’ message attitude and behavioral intentions. Liberal participants reported significantly more negative attitudes toward the racist post and were significantly less likely to anticipate promoting it as compared to the egalitarian post.

**Main and moderating effects of internal and external MCP.** Neither internal MCP, \( \Lambda = .98, F(2, 100) = 1.10, p = .34 \), partial \( R^2 = .02 \), 95% CI [.00, .09], nor external MCP, \( \Lambda = .99, F(2, 100) = .34, p = .72 \), partial \( R^2 = .01 \), 95% CI [.00, .05], had significant multivariate main effects on message attitude or behavioral intentions. There was also no significant internal MCP X external MCP interaction effect on these variables, \( \Lambda = .98, F(2, 100) = .99, p = .38 \), partial \( R^2 = .02 \), 95% CI [.00, .09].

As predicted, however, internal MCP significantly moderated the effect of social media post type on participants’ reactions to the post at the multivariate and univariate levels. (See Table 3 for omnibus and simple effects analyses results.) High internal MCP participants were significantly less accepting of the anti-Black post than the egalitarian post—they reported more negative attitudes toward the racist post and lower intentions to engage in behaviors that would promote it. In contrast, participants who were low in internal MCP did not differ significantly in their levels of message attitudes or behavioral intentions following exposure to the racist and egalitarian posts.

Of note, external MCP did not qualify the social media post type X internal MCP interaction effect, \( \Lambda = .98, F(2, 100) = 1.10, p = .34 \), partial \( R^2 = .02 \), 95% CI [.00, .09]. The differential levels of acceptance for the two social media posts also were not moderated by participants’ levels of external MCP at the multivariate level, \( \Lambda = 1.00, F(2, 100) = .27, p = .77 \), partial \( R^2 = .01 \), 95% CI [.00, .05]. Thus, participants had more negative attitudes and anticipated less promotive behavior in relation to the racist than egalitarian post regardless of whether they...
were high or low in external MCP.

**Nonsignificant interactions between political orientation and MCP.** Although we did not expect political orientation to interact with MCP to influence participants’ responses to the social media posts, we explored this possibility. There were no significant two-way interaction effects between political orientation and internal MCP, $\Lambda = .95, F(2, 100) = 2.63, p = .08$, partial $R^2 = .05$, 95% CI [.00, .14], or external MCP, $\Lambda = .98, F(2, 100) = .97, p = .38$, partial $R^2 = .02$, 95% CI [.00, .09]. The post type X political orientation interaction effect was not further qualified by either internal MCP, $\Lambda = .97, F(2, 100) = 1.47, p = .24$, partial $R^2 = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .11], or external MCP, $\Lambda = .98, F(2, 100) = 1.25, p = .29$, partial $R^2 = .02$, 95% CI [.00, .10].

**Discussion**

One way people are socialized to have negative feelings and beliefs about marginalized racial groups is through what they learn from other people (Waxman, 2021). Given that this socialization can occur online (Wachs et al., 2019), we aimed to assess factors that relate to how racist online content is received. Specifically, we examined whether political orientation and motivation to control prejudice (MCP) relate to propensity to accept and distribute negative messages about race in the novel context of social media. On average, conservative people had positive attitudes toward and anticipated promoting an anti-Black mock post, but the trend for conservative people to respond more favorably to posts that were racist rather than egalitarian was not significant. These results support Jost et al.’s (2003) theory that conservative people are motivated to rationalize and justify the status quo, but conflict with evidence that conservative people selectively attend to system-justifying media to the exclusion of other media (de Zúñiga et al., 2012). In contrast and as expected, liberal people responded less favorably and were less likely to endorse a racist versus egalitarian post. These results provide partial support for our first
hypothesis by suggesting that conservative people may be at risk for appreciating and contributing to the dissemination of racist social media content, whereas liberal people are likely to reject messages that derogate Black people, possibilities that warrant deeper investigation.

Analyses testing our second hypothesis revealed that participants who were highly motivated to control prejudice for internal reasons (e.g., personal values) had less favorable attitudes toward and were less likely to anticipate promoting a racist versus egalitarian post. Also consistent with prior research (Plant & Devine, 1998), low internal MCP participants reported similarly positive attitudes and promotive intentions following exposure to racist and egalitarian posts. Unexpectedly, however, participants had more negative attitudes and anticipated less promotive behavior in relation to the racist than egalitarian post regardless of their level of external MCP. Moreover, external MCP did not interact directly with social media post type to predict participants’ attitudes or intentions related to posts, nor did it qualify reactions to different posts among only low internal MCP participants. These findings contrast with theory (Dunton & Fazio, 1997) and past research (Plant & Devine, 1998), but could be explained by the unique, self-selected public to whom disclosures of racism are made via social media. That is, social media users expect to interact with networks of like-minded individuals (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2015). If individuals perceive that users in their networks share their negative attitudes about race, it is reasonable that external MCP would not inhibit racist behavior in this virtual context. Also, social media cues (e.g., number of users who recommend posts) could lead high external MCP individuals to perceive racist messages as common and acceptable and, in turn, influence content selection (Messing & Westwood, 2014). Future work with large diverse samples should test these possibilities, a point to which we return in the next section.

Limitations
A key limitation of this exploratory research is its use of a small MTurk sample. Although MTurk studies tend to yield findings similar to those using other samples (Casler et al., 2013), MTurk participants tend to be younger, more liberal and educated, and less employed and religious compared to the general population (Paolicci & Chandler, 2014). They also may be more experienced with psychological studies (Chandler et al., 2014) and/or more likely to provide “desirable” responses (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Therefore, our findings should be considered tentative until replicated in future research using larger, more representative samples, particularly considering that we recruited too few participants from minoritized groups to test for different patterns of responses as a function of race or ethnicity. “Non-Black” is not a monolithic identity category, and future studies of anti-Black racism on social media should address this point.

Additionally, we sourced different images from the internet to accommodate our within-subject design in an effort to increase the study’s generalizability. This methodological choice may have come at the cost of experimental control, however, as the two images we selected varied in a number of ways that could possibly be either unrelated to or confounded with racial discrimination. The manipulation checks validated that the social media posts we utilized were perceived as intended (racist vs. egalitarian), but future studies are needed to describe the nature and content of racist posts on social media and determine empirically which aspects of these posts (e.g., emotional content, message content, the race of the people depicted) might influence perceptions of racist content, users’ interactions, and the creation of echo chambers. For instance, the racist post we presented as stimuli may not be widely perceived as racist: Some argue that “White Lives Matter” is merely a statement of fact (see Kil, 2020). However, this position ignores that the phrase refers to a White supremacy movement that emerged in response to the
“Black Lives Matter” movement (Southern Poverty Law Center [SPLC], 2022) and, as Kil (2020, p. 30) described, “prioritizes Whiteness through a race-neutral disguise.” Indeed, conservative participants in the present study rated the racist mock post as significantly less discriminatory toward Black people than liberal participants did \((M = -1.37, SD = 1.41\) versus \(M = -0.04, SD = 1.90\)), \(t(106) = 3.84, p < .001\), Cohen’s \(d = .77\), 95% CI [.36, 1.17]. Even more interesting was that conservative participants rated the egalitarian post as significantly more discriminatory toward White people than liberal participants did \((M = -1.50, SD = 1.38\) v. \(M = -2.07, SD = 1.23\)), \(t(106) = -2.24, p = .014\), Cohen’s \(d = -.45\), 95% CI [-.84, -.05]. These findings are consistent with other research showing that politically conservative White people are biased to perceive racial justice issues as a “zero-sum game” in which gains for Black people come at the cost of losses for White people (Rasmussen et al., 2022). It remains to be seen whether conservative people react differently to racist posts that they accurately recognize as racist. A related point is that our study focused on attitudes and behavioral intentions only as they related to anti-Black racism on social media. It is imperative that future research expand from this work to account for how online racism and hate are perceived by social media users and determine whether the effects we identified generalize when messages target other stigmatized and marginalized communities.

Also, various features of social media could moderate the effects we reported herein. Effects could be stronger when racism is propagated via user-personalized content (e.g., rants), or based on the number of users who recommend posts (Messing & Westwood, 2014).

Moreover, it remains unclear whether participants engage with mock posts in research as they

---

3 Conservative and liberal participants did not differ, however, in their judgments about how discriminatory the egalitarian post was toward Black people \((M = -1.80, SD = 1.40\) v. \(M = -1.93, SD = 1.36\)), \(t(106) = -.46, p = .323\), Cohen’s \(d = -.09\), 95% CI [-.48, .05], or how discriminatory the racist post was toward White people \((M = -1.97, SD = 1.25\) v. \(M = -1.87, SD = 1.30\)), \(t(106) = .42, p = .338\), Cohen’s \(d = .08\), 95% CI [-.31, .47].
would with actual social media. One consideration is that this online study offered participants anonymity in their responses. People may avoid engaging with racist posts in less anonymous forums, or they may engage despite or even because of a lack of anonymity considering Walther’s (2022) hypothesis that people engage in racist content online to seek social approval and connection. Further, we did not specify a particular social media platform for participants to imagine using to interact with the post. It may be beneficial to explore how real or perceived differences between platforms (e.g., community norms, user demographics, privacy, availability of social cues, etc.) could impact how people interact with racist content. Even so, we used real online content in our materials, instructed participants that they were viewing images that were posted on social media and asked them to imagine how they would respond if they had just seen the images on social media (similar to methods used in other research on perceptions and decision-making related to social media; e.g., MacFarlane et al., 2021; Beyea et al.’s, 2022), and prior theory and research suggests people are able to accurately predict how they will behave (see Epley & Dunning, 2006; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Weyrich et al., 2020). Therefore, the methods we developed are in line with best current methodological practices for eliciting reactions and attitudes regarding social media content and our findings are likely to hold valid, predictive value for understanding real-world social media behaviors.

**Implications and Future Directions**

Our findings preliminarily suggest that conservative and low internal MCP social media users are less likely to distinguish between racist and egalitarian social media posts than their liberal and high internal MCP counterparts are. Future research will need to follow social media users over time to determine whether this makes conservative and low internal MCP people susceptible to interacting in racist echo chambers. The idea that certain people may be at greater
risk for engaging with racist content on social media is important to acknowledge given what is known about both the reinforcing effects of confirmation bias and selective exposure (Nickerson, 1998) and how people are drawn into echo chambers (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016). If people are inclined to tolerate racist content, their selective exposure tendencies and social media algorithms may lead them to consume more ideologically similar content, potentially making the beliefs and attitudes that instigated their selective exposure stronger and/or more extreme (de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2020; Stroud, 2008; see Sunstein, 2017). Thus, it is critical that future studies explore how relations between political orientation, MCP, racism, and social media behavior unfold, as well as whether individuals who surround themselves with others who share racist attitudes in echo chambers develop further entrenched views over time. This is especially important considering that external MCP did not inhibit racist social media behavior as expected based on extant theory and research. In other words, we cannot assume that established knowledge regarding intergroup and interpersonal relations translates to the distinct domain of online interactions.

Much more work is needed to understand how echo chambers that arise via social media undermine egalitarian social norms and propagate race-based hate speech. In fact, work is needed to understand the pernicious effects of racist online content even for egalitarian-minded individuals, as Arendt et al. (2015) found that exposure to right-wing advertisements increased the strength of implicit “criminal foreigner” stereotypes even among participants who explicitly rejected those stereotypes. Social media may be a vehicle for bias contagion based on other social characteristics (e.g., gender, sexual orientation), as well.

These issues are important to understand because negative online content undermines the wellbeing of marginalized groups that are targeted and also sets the stage for intergroup hostility.
For example, online exposure to individual and vicarious racial discrimination and trauma is linked to increased depressive symptoms, negative feelings, stress, and substance use among racially marginalized people (Lee-Won et al., 2017; Maxie-Moreman & Tynes, 2022). As if these effects were not sufficiently detrimental, there is also a risk that racist social media and online echo chambers indoctrinate and radicalize users to engage in violence against people from racial minority groups. Inarguably, approving racist online messages and committing hate crimes are quite distinct sets of behaviors. Yet there is increasing reason to suspect the former can be a precursor for the latter, making it critical to understand the psychological processes that link the two. Hankes and Amend (2018) expressed no doubt that social media contributed to the deaths and injuries of the 110 Americans who were attacked by perpetrators linked to the alt-right movement organized around the belief that “white identity’ is under attack” (SPLC, n.d.) between 2014 and 2018, including the Charlottesville victims discussed previously. Empirical evidence also links social media rhetoric to bias-based violence: Facebook posts demonstrating anti-refugee messages appear to translate into actual hate crimes against refugees, especially in communities where individuals use social media more (Müller & Schwarz, 2021). This highlights the need for serious investigation of the role social media plays in fostering crimes against socially marginalized groups.

In conclusion, our results highlight two individual difference factors that may predispose social media users to engage with and disseminate racist content online—there are likely more. Our concern is that certain individuals may be more receptive to racist than egalitarian-focused material, develop racial animus, and, ultimately, act on animus in ways that harm Black people and other people from racial and ethnic minority groups. Our hope is that this cycle can be better understood so interventions can be designed to interrupt it. For instance, Citron and Norton
(2011) recommended that social media platforms develop algorithms to target specific users who engage in hate speech or advocate violence with countermessaging. Our research is a useful start to identifying which users might benefit most from such efforts.
References


Lee-Won, R. J., Lee, J. Y., Song, H., & Borghetti, L. (2017). “To the bottle I go . . . to drain my strain”: Effects of microblogged racist messages on target group members' intention to

https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215607595


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.05.006


Rasmussen, R., Levari, D. E., Akhtar, M., Crittle, C. S., Gately, M., . . . & Urry, H. L. (2022). White (but not Black) Americans continue to see racism as a zero-sum game; White
conservatives (but not moderates or liberals) see themselves as losing. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 17*(6), 1800-1810. https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221082111


Tynes, B. M., Giang, M. T., Williams, D. R., & Thompson, G. N. (2008). Online racial


Table 1

*Correlations among Study Variables (N = 108)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Political orientation</th>
<th>Internal MCP</th>
<th>External MCP</th>
<th>Message attitude</th>
<th>Behavioral intentions</th>
<th>Message attitude</th>
<th>Behavioral intentions</th>
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<td>Political orientation</td>
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<td>.08</td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.33***</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.46***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.29**</td>
<td>.31***</td>
<td>-.42***</td>
<td>-.42***</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>-.18</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message attitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.78***</td>
<td>-.22*</td>
<td>-.28**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioral intentions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.26**</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Racist post</td>
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<td>Message attitude</td>
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<td>.87***</td>
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<td>Behavioral intentions</td>
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</table>

*Note.* *p* < .05, **p* < .01, and ***p* ≤ .001.
Table 2

*Mean and Standard Deviations for Social Media Message Attitude and Behavioral Intentions Subscale Scores as a Function of Political Orientation, Internal MCP, External MCP, and Social Media Post Type*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Egalitarian Post</th>
<th>Racist Post</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Message Attitude</td>
<td>Behavioral Intentions</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>.96 (1.25)</td>
<td>.64 (1.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>.25 (1.34)</td>
<td>-1.13 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Internal MCP</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1.12 (1.32)</td>
<td>.75 (1.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>.36 (1.24)</td>
<td>.04 (.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>External MCP</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>.44 (1.18)</td>
<td>.14 (.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>.92 (1.42)</td>
<td>.54 (1.24)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand</td>
<td>.70 (1.33)</td>
<td>.35 (1.13)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Statistics for Social Media Post Type Interactions with Political Orientation and Internal MCP and Social Media Post Type Simple Effects Analyses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>( \Lambda )</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>( F )</th>
<th>( p )</th>
<th>partial ( R^2 )</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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<td>11.50</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.06, .31</td>
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<td>Univariate Effect: Message Attitude</td>
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<td></td>
<td>22.32</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.06, .31</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal participants</td>
<td>1, 101</td>
<td></td>
<td>68.22</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.26, .52</td>
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<td>Conservative participants</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00, .01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Univariate Effect: Behavioral Intentions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>20.08</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.05, .29</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Liberal participants</td>
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<td>51.77</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.19, .46</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social Media Post Type X Internal MCP Interaction Effects</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Multivariate Effect</td>
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<td>2, 100</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.002, .18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Univariate Effect: Message Attitude</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Internal MCP</td>
<td>1, 101</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.44</td>
<td>&lt; .001</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.03, .24</td>
</tr>
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<td>.11</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00, .11</td>
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<td>Univariate Effect: Behavioral intentions</td>
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<td>.70</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.00, .05</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Statistically reliable effects are presented in bold font.