Project Report – April 2025

YOUTH, RACE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Executive summary

The Youth, Race and Social Media project was a research study funded by Meta, conducted by a team of researchers at Goldsmiths, University of London. The aim of the project was to explore black and racially minoritised (BRM) young people's experiences of racial content on social media. Data was collected over two years with BRM young people aged 16-24 in the UK. 809 young people took part in an online survey and 110 young people took part in focus groups and interviews.

Almost all of the young people (95%) surveyed said they encounter racial content that is violent or abusive on social media. More than half (56%) of them saw this racist content at least once a week. For 16% of young people, it was a daily occurrence.

For many of them, this was targeted abuse. 30% of young people received targeted abuse in the form of racist private messages and 13% through people leaving racist comments on their posts. This potentially reflects a high level of backlash given that only 5% of young people indicated that they frequently create their own posts on the topic of race.

More widely, 73% encountered racist comments on other' people's posts. On their feeds, overall, four fifths (79%) of young people reported that they encounter racially abusive written posts with three quarters (75%) encountering violent images and videos.

While young people's experiences were overwhelmingly negative, 89% had encountered positive activism around issues of racial justice on social media. However, most young people in focus groups and interviews said that they rarely created content around race on social media and were disengaging from such content where they encountered it because of the negative consequences and sense of overwhelm. They reported a polarisation of debate around race, racist backlash where they did engage with it, and over-scrutiny of them as BRM people online. Young women faced particular forms of gendered and racist scrutiny including hyper-sexualisation and insults relating to their physical appearance. The young people recognised that responding to racist content only led to it being spread further and to an increase of such content on their own feeds. This led to a sense of helplessness and futility.

Around four fifths (79%) of young people in the survey had reported racist abuse to social media platforms and had either received no answer or were dissatisfied with the response. By contrast, only 6% had reported it to platforms and been satisfied with the outcome. Over half (53%) of young people wanted more opportunity for communication with platforms and 80% wanted more effective responses to reports of racism online. Most young people (90%) had not attempted to report online racism to police and only 1% had reported it to police and received a satisfactory response.

Young BRM people's experiences on social media have a substantial impact on their offline lives. 58% of young people in the survey said their experience of racial content on social media makes them feel unsafe in their wider lives. 52% said it negatively impacts their relationships with authority figures and 42% said it harms their mental health. In focus groups and interviews, young people explained how the prolific sharing of videos and images of racist violence such as the murder of George Floyd by police, the violent body-searching of 'child Q' in school in Hackney, London and other examples of brutality all contributed to their sense of being unsafe more widely and their negative relationships with police and teachers.

Some young people said that what they see on social media has helped them to understand the extent and nature of racism. The most positive way in which young people do engage with race on social media is with others who are also from racially minoritised backgrounds and there are friendships and solidarity developed online in this way. This was particularly important for young people living in non-diverse communities where they don't experience such solidarity offline.

Overall, young BRM people experience social media as a place where racism thrives unchecked and even well-intentioned sharing of racial content, such as police brutality and Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests, contributes to overwhelm, racist backlash and other potentially traumatising effects. The factors that led to Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) to declare she was 'no longer talking to white people about race' are experienced sharply by young people in their engagement with social media where echo chambers, polarisation, gratuitous sharing of violence and anonymous trolling all make their experiences of talking about race or challenging racism on social media at best, futile and at worst, unsafe and a major risk to their wellbeing.

The research has clear implications for social media platforms and for policy more broadly. The main recommendation for social media platforms is for them to find new ways to engage and communicate with young people about their experiences and how they might develop more effective responses. The development of youth stakeholder groups for specific consultation with young people using their platforms is key here. Platforms also need to respond to young people's desire for more user-control over what content they are exposed to and frustration with how algorithms work to spread content based on engagement, even when negative. The main recommendation for policy more widely is for the UK Government's Online Safety Act 2025, to ensure that its implementation takes specific account of the experiences of young people from racialised backgrounds and encompasses specific and effective methods to combat racism on social media and provide supportive interventions to those affected by it. Again, this requires direct consultation with youth stakeholders about their experiences.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This report outlines the findings from the Youth, Race and Social Media project, funded by Meta. The purpose of the research was to explore young black and racially minoritised (BRM) people's experiences of racial content on social media. The research focused on young people aged 16-24 and living in the UK. The project involved a survey to gather quantitative data with over 800 BRM young people as well as qualitative focus groups and interviews with over 100 young people across the UK.

There is a dearth of UK-specific research on race and social media, highlighting the need for this study and its contribution to understanding young BRM experiences in particular. International research highlights the trauma of repeated exposure to racial violence online and the impact of this on mental health (Tynes et al. 2019), the use of social media for activism (Ince et al. 2017), and that graphic video content in particular has become a voyeuristic spectacle rather than a prompt to action (Mowatt 2018). Heard-Garris et al. (2021) argue online activism can provide an important coping mechanism for adolescents exposed to racism – but that this activism can lead to either massive exposure to vicarious racist content or direct targeting and harassment. Miller et al. (2021) highlight that social media is a site of both oppression and expression, demonstrating complexities in how issues of race and racism emerge online.

Almost all young people we surveyed had encountered abusive or violent racial content and more than half encountered it regularly. This included videos and images of violence, racism towards others and racism targeted at them directly. Young people in focus groups and interviews said any attempt to engage with racist content led to substantial further abuse as well as a proliferation of such content appearing on their feeds, due to how the algorithms work. Most young people said they rarely created their own content relating to race and were disengaging from it where they encountered it because of the overwhelm and other negative consequences. Young people were largely dissatisfied with responses where they had reported racist content to social media platforms, police and other authority figures.

Some young people said that what they see on social media has helped them to understand the extent and nature of racism. The most positive way in which young people did engage with race on social media was with others who are also from racially minoritised backgrounds where they developed friendships and solidarity. Young people's experiences of racism on social media impacted their wider lives in various ways. Around three fifths of young people said their encounters with racial content on social media make them feel unsafe in their wider lives. Further, over half said these online experiences negatively impact their relationships with authority and over two fifths said it harms their mental health. Overall, young BRM people experience social media as a place where racism thrives unchecked and even well-intentioned sharing of racial content often contributes to harmful and traumatising effects.

This report, first, outlines some of the background literature that is relevant to young BRM experiences on social media. Following this, it outlines the project research methods before presenting the findings from the research and outlining the implications and conclusions of the study.

Background

The emergence of the internet, formalized in the 1990s, has offered radically new forms of connectivity (Castells 1996). Social media provides numerous possibilities for interaction that blur the distinction between information, communication and action (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Unlike earlier theories of media that viewed engagement as a passive process, where audiences absorb information uniformly, social media facilitates a more interactive and decentralized form of communication (Jenkins 2006). This flexibility allows users to produce and engage with content they find compelling, but it also brings challenges, including new real-time forms of racism that are then repeated and shared widely. This has ramifications beyond online spaces. Indeed, in our increasingly internet-mediated society, distinguishing between offline and online realities has become more challenging. Social media not only reflects offline experiences of racism and inequality but also actively shapes the ways in which race and racism are understood, thus entrenching racial hierarchies present in offline spaces (Ortiz 2019; Wu et al. 2022).

Ortiz (2021) provides a useful theoretical intervention in understanding social media racism, arguing that the 'colour-blind racism' characteristic of the post-civil rights era in America is no longer sufficient. Instead, it ought to be supplemented with the concept of 'entitlement' racism, characterised by explicit displays of racist views and often defended with appeals to free speech. The necessity of such an intervention is fairly evident, given that BRM social media users face a preponderance of explicit racism. Ortiz (2019), for example, demonstrates how racial harassment is a persistent feature in online spaces such as gaming platforms.

These explicit displays of racism and racist ideology in all its forms on social media 'unmasks' the nature and hatred prevalent in society and is argued by Eschmann (2020) as a useful pedagogical tool for examining the systemic nature of racism. While social media can make younger people more aware of how racism manifests, the negative repercussions are significant as outlined in this report. There is extensive literature outlining the profound mental and physical health implications of exposure to racist online content (Heard-Garris et al. 2021; Criss et al. 2021; Shin, Wang, & Song 2023; Volpe et al. 2023). Tynes et al. (2019), for example, show a significant association between race-related traumatic events online and increased levels of PTSD and depressive symptoms among adolescents of colour, which can lead to other indirect issues such as negatively affecting educational achievement (Thomas et al. 2023). Numerous studies have shown that desensitisation is a common mental health outcome for black and racially minoritised social media users (e.g., Ortiz 2019; Cohen et al. 2021). On social media, engagement with content drives its capacity to be reached by a broader audience, irrespective of whether this is positive or negative engagement (Noble 2018). Individuals often hesitate to seek support for their experiences with racism on public social media platforms, fearing privacy violations and negative repercussions (To et al. 2020) and instead tend to either reduce their platform usage or curate their social media feeds to try to regain control over this constant exposure (Criss et al. 2021). In this report we identify how black and racially minoritised young people respond and manage these impacts.

Dan O'Connor (2015) draws on the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) to outline how young people today are living in a 'risk society' where insecurity is the norm and structural inequalities often obscured. Young people's everyday lives are increasingly impacted by global issues, and they negotiate challenges with a focus on their own individual agency. The online world has arguably contributed to this prolific impact of global issues on young people's lives. Some scholars argue that a return is needed to a recognition of how structural factors such as class, gender and race shape young people's lives (Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Furlong and Cartmel 2007). In Canadian research, for example, O'Connor (2015) found differences in the intersections of class, gender and race determine whether young people recognise how far systemic factors shape their lives. This necessitates an understanding of young people's 'everyday experiences of racism' the recurrent, systematic and familiar practices within society that constantly affect black and racially minoritised communities

(Essed, 1991). We have found, as demonstrated in this report, that the issue of gender intersects with, and at times exacerbates, young people's experiences of racism on social media. This reflects Crenshaw's (1989) original articulation of her theory of intersectionality, as demonstrating how racism and sexism are uniquely intertwined. In our study, young people experiencing racism on social media largely recognised the systemic dynamics at play and some felt an individual responsibility to change things. This suggests that, in relation to race and in the world of social media, young people to an extent recognise the systemic issues that work against them in their everyday experiences and interactions. However, the sense of an individual burden of responsibility to combat this is a heavy one that leaves them feeling helpless at times.

Research Methods

The Youth, Race and Social Media project was a mixed-methods study into the experiences of young BRM people (aged 16-24 and living in the UK) on social media. The project took place between 2022 and 2024, funded by an independent research grant from Meta. The main research questions the project sought to answer were as follows:

- What are the experiences of BRM young people of encountering racial violence and abuse on social media?
- What other forms of racial content are they exposed to and/or do they engage with on social media, including in positive ways?
- What do they observe about how racial violence and abuse are incited online?
- How do these experiences impact on them (including in their offline lives)?
- What are their experiences of responding to and/or reporting racial violence and abuse on social media?

The main methods for the project included a survey to gather quantitative data as well as in-depth focus groups and interviews with young people across the UK to gather qualitative data. Data was gathered over two years during 2022 and 2023 with analysis of this rich and substantial data conducted in two stages in late 2022/early 2023 and in 2024 for the interim and final project reports.

We initially piloted the survey with a small group of BRM university students in London in order to test and tweak our questions, and ensure categories were relevant and comprehensive, before circulating it more widely via social media. The survey reached 857 people in total, with paid promotion on Instagram being the main method for disseminating this. After deleting responses from people who were either outside of the UK, outside the target age group (16-24) or who identified as white, we had 809 responses in total for the analysis. We stopped collating survey responses when Instagram stopped approving our promotional posts, due to an unstated breach of community standards around advertising. Based on some of the negative comments that our posts received from those outside of the target group, we suspect we may have been reported for being discriminatory for targeting only BRM young people with the survey. Our experience of promoting the survey offered a small window into the kinds of reactions the young people in our study told us they experience when engaging with issues of race on social media.

Of the young people who took part in the survey, 49% identified as Black, 43% as Asian and 8% as from other racially minoritised backgrounds. 68% of participants identified as female, 20% as male, 9% non-binary, while 2% stated 'other' and fewer than 1% preferred not to say. The vast majority (94%) of survey participants were from England. We targeted paid promotions specifically to young men and to young people in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to attempt to redress the balance of participants. This had some impact in relation to gender but little impact in relation to increasing participation from young people in the UK nations outside of England. There is a more in-depth profile of the survey participants in the survey findings section below.

We gathered qualitative data from focus groups and individual interviews with 110 young people across the UK. We used our networks across the UK to arrange the focus groups in community organisations that had projects working with BRM young people and through African and Caribbean Student Societies in universities. The focus groups took place in West Norwood (London), Tottenham (London), Warwick (West Midlands of England), Newcastle (Northern England), Edinburgh (Scotland), Cardiff (Wales) and Belfast (Northern Ireland). This covered a range of both racially diverse locations and those that were relatively less diverse. The groups in Warwick and Newcastle were with university students while the other 5 were in community organisations. The interviewees were recruited via universities, our community networks and via the survey. 85 of the young people who took part in focus groups and interviews came from African or African-Caribbean heritage backgrounds (including mixed heritage) and 22 were from South Asian heritage backgrounds with a

further 3 from South-East Asian heritage backgrounds. 63 were young women and 47 were young men.

Focus groups were designed as interactive workshops with activities to prompt in-depth reflections on the young people's experiences of racial content on social media. The researchers were qualified youth workers with experience of facilitating group work and training with diverse groups of people around sensitive issues including race and racism. This skilled facilitation was important in supporting BRM young people to share and explore their experiences and understandings of racism on social media and its impact on their online and offline lives.

Quantitative data from the survey was analysed to produce contextual information and statistics on young people's experiences of engaging with race and racism on social media. The qualitative data was subject to thematic analysis to provide in-depth accounts of young people's common experiences, responses and impacts.

The project obtained ethical approval via Goldsmiths, University of London. We obtained organisational and individual informed consent for young people's participation in the research. For young people under 18, we worked within the policies, including around parental consent, held by the organisations where we engaged with them. Young people's confidentiality and anonymity have been protected throughout the project.

Findings from the survey

Who took part?

Of the young people who took part in the survey, 49% identified as black, 43% as Asian and 8% as from other racially minoritized backgrounds. The survey received more responses from young people at the lower end of the 16-24 years age range than from young people in their twenties. 19% of respondents were 16 years of age, 12% were 17, 16% were 18, 13% were 19, 12% were 20, 9% were 21, 8% were 22, 5% were 23 and 6% were 24. As such, 60% were aged 16-19 and 40% were aged 20-24.

Whilst we did receive responses from across all four nations of the UK, the vast majority of survey participants were from England, despite paid promotions specifically targeting the other nations. This at least in part reflects the distribution of racial diversity in the UK with London being the most common city where participants resided. It is likely to reflect also the way algorithms distributed information to those in close proximity to the initial followers of our project Instagram account. In total, 94% of survey respondents were from England and 37% of overall respondents were from London specifically. This means that the quantitative findings primarily reflect the experiences of BRM young people living in England.

The survey received significantly more responses from young people who identified as female than other gender identities, despite targeted paid promotions towards males to attempt to rebalance this. 68% of respondents were female, 20% were male, 9% were non-binary, 2% stated 'other' and fewer than 1% preferred not to say.

In regard to religious identity, the highest categories were non-religious (27% of participants), Christian (26% of participants) and Muslim (23% of participants). 10% of participants chose the 'spiritual but not religious' category. This category was added after the survey pilot where some young people fed back that this would be a more accurate description of their identities than simply non-religious, which they felt disregarded the spiritual elements of their identity. Other lower represented religious identities among the survey participants included Hindu (5%), Buddhist (2%), Jewish (1%) and Sikh (1%). 4% of participants chose 'other' and fewer than 1% did not say.

Use of social media

The survey asked participants which social media platforms they used most regularly:

- 97% of participants stated that they use Instagram
- 75% of participants stated that they use YouTube
- 68% of participants stated that they use TikTok
- 63% of participants stated that they use Snapchat
- 63% of participants stated that they use WhatsApp
- 37% of participants stated that they use Pinterest
- 22% of participants stated that they use Reddit
- 20% of participants stated that they use Facebook
- 14% of participants stated that they use LinkedIn
- 9% of participants stated that they use Tumblr
- 4% of participants stated that they use other online social networks

The data here is skewed by the fact that paid promotion of the survey took place via Instagram and this promotion generated the vast majority of survey responses, hence it being the most frequently

chosen platform. However, it does offer some indication of the forms of social media that are popular with the young people represented by the survey. The popularity of video and image-sharing platforms among the young people stands out most prominently.

When asked how often they check any of their social media accounts, participants indicated that their engagement with social media was high:

- 87% of participants said they check their social media accounts several times per day.
- 10% of participants said they check their social media accounts at least once per day.
- 2% of participants said they check their social media accounts a few times per week.
- Fewer than 1% of participants said they check their social media accounts less frequently than the above.

This was affected by the fact that survey respondents were recruited via social media. By comparison, in the qualitative research, some young people indicated that they at times disengage or take breaks from social media due to the negative impacts of some of the content they encounter, as in the example below.

> *Personally, I haven't been on social media as much because I took a break from it ... there are certain things that there's only so much you can take of it. And it's draining. It's physically, emotionally draining.* (West Norwood focus group)

This is discussed in more detail under the 'disengagement and subversion' theme later in this report.

Form and frequency of racial content

Participants were asked what kind of racial content they had observed on social media, and most chose a range of categories:

- 79% of participants had encountered Abusive written posts
- 75% of participants had encountered Violent images/videos
- 89% of participants had encountered Positive activism
- 84% of participants had encountered Fashion and beauty
- 67% of participants had encountered other community activities
- 11% of participants indicated they had encountered other forms of racial content.

The survey asked participants what topics they had engaged with on social media over the last two years. The topics that formed the categories for this particular question were clarified and edited through the survey pilot as the most common topics relating to race. There was a heavy emphasis on forms of racism across these topics, as well as one of the topics having a focus on activism through Black Lives Matter.

- 96% of participants had encountered police brutality
- 96% of participants had encountered posts relating to BLM
- 91% of participants had encountered racism in the news/media
- 86% of participants had encountered racism in the Royal Family
- 80% of participants had encountered racism in sport
- 84% of participants had encountered racism in celebrity culture
- 74% of participants had encountered racism in music
- 23% of participants had encountered other topics
- Fewer than 1% of participants said they had encountered none of the topics.

The responses demonstrate that the young people were encountering a range of topics relating to racism on social media in high proportions, as well as BLM being a very commonly encountered topic, reflecting the prominence of this movement after George Floyd's murder in 2020. Participants

were also asked which one of these topics they had encountered most in the past two years, and this revealed a starker difference.

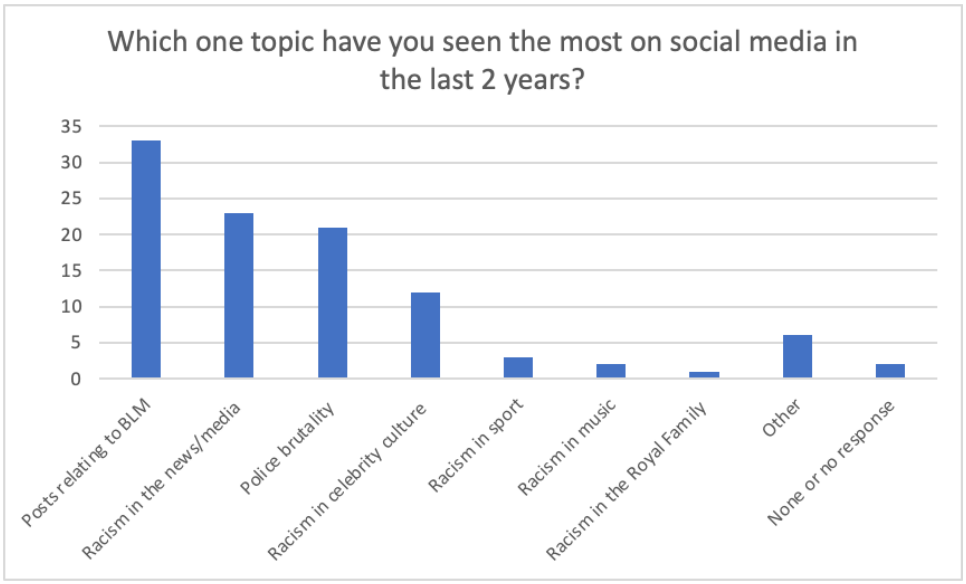

Figure 1 – Topics relating to race that young people encountered on social media

There is a complexity in analysing these questions about the topics encountered because of the emphasis on forms of racism across all of the topics except the one relating to Black Lives Matter - and this potentially exposes a weakness in the question design. Whilst the topic of Black Lives Matter was the most frequently chosen topic, it could be argued that this overlaps with police brutality because of this movement's emphasis on the deaths of George Floyd and others in recent years. However, combining them is arguably not appropriate because of the nuances that may have led young people to choose one of these categories over the other. For example, a voyeuristic sharing of videos of violence may be experienced quite differently by a young person to posts reporting the activism of BLM in response to such violence. If we remove the BLM topic as the only category not specifically focused on observations of racism itself and use the data to reveal what topics relating specifically to expressions of *racism* are most prevalent on social media instead, then racism in the news/media is the most frequently chosen topic (23%) followed closely by police brutality (21%). However, the police brutality topic may have been chosen by more participants if the BLM category had not been part of the question and racism in the media may well overlap with other topics such as how police brutality is reported. In the previous question, where participants chose all the topics they had encountered, rather than the one they had encountered the most, police brutality was chosen by 96% of participants and racism in the news/media by 91% of participants. Regardless of the complexities here, the responses to these questions reveal that these are the most common topics relating to racism that young people encountered online.

The survey asked participants what the most common way in which they engaged with the topic they had encountered most frequently:

- 52% of participants said they like/comment/share other people's posts
- 22% of participants said they research the issue
- 7% of participants said they see and scroll past
- 6% said they report the posts
- 5% said they create their own posts
- 5% said they sign up to offline events
- 2% said they do not engage

This suggests that the majority of young people are far more likely to engage with posts created by others on topics related to race on social media than to create their own posts. This suggests that most young people from BRM backgrounds are not choosing to create their own content on these topics though around half of our survey participants indicated that they engage with it in some way when they see it. This may reflect that there is a risk associated with creating content on these issues (as reflected under the scrutiny and backlash theme later in this report) and that some young people are potentially beginning to change their engagement or even to disengage at times (see the disengagement and subversion theme later in the report).

Participants were asked how often they see racial content that is violent or abusive. 41% of participants said that they see this content occasionally followed by 38% who said they see it at least once per week. 16% said they see it every day and 4% said never. This means that almost all (95%) of young people encounter such content with 56% seeing it frequently.

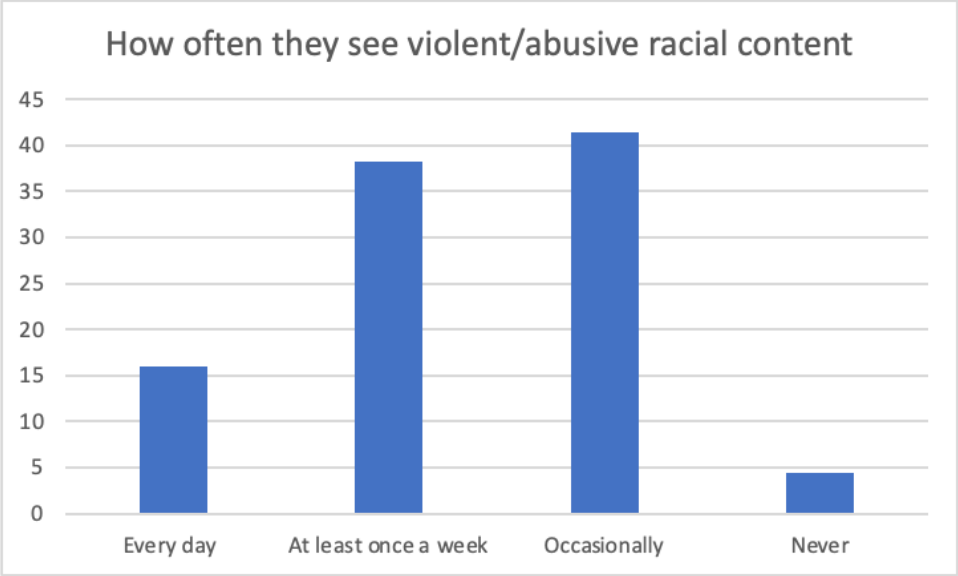

Figure 2 – How often young people see violent or abusive racial content

The most common form that this abusive or violent content took was racist comments on other's posts (73%) perhaps revealing why young people were largely choosing not to create their own posts on the topics discussed above. 62% said this content also took the form of videos and images of racial violence. 30% said it took the form of racist private messages, indicating a relatively high level of targeted abuse on social media, though it is not clear whether these messages come from strangers or people they know offline. 13% said it also took the form of comments on their own posts, which arguably reflects a high level of backlash given that only 5% indicated that they commonly create their own posts on the topic of race. 6% of participants said they had not encountered violent or abusive racial content.

The survey also asked how often participants engaged with racial issues in positive ways on social media. 41% said they did this at least once per week and 22% said they did so every day. This does not mean they were creating their own posts given the data outlined above indicates they are more likely to engage with other's content than create their own. 32% of participants said they engaged with racial content in positive ways only occasionally and 5% said they never did this, suggesting over one third of young people might be wary about the risks of doing so (again, see the scrutiny and backlash theme later in the report). 69% of respondents said that they follow individuals, organisations or groups that promote racial identity / racial justice on social media. Some common examples of these include Black Lives Matter, Dear Asian Youth, Free Palestine, Sisters Uncut, Bella Hadid, Viola Davis and Marcus Rashford.

Reporting

Young people were asked whether they reported violent and abusive racial content when they encountered it. The table below shows how often they reported, if at all, to social media platforms, police and other authority figures (e.g. teachers, parents, managers).

	Have not reported in this way	**Reported and received no response**	**Reported and received an unsatisfactory response**	**Reported and received a satisfactory response**
Social media platform	15%	39%	40%	6%
Police	90%	3%	6%	1%
Other authority figures	56%	10%	28%	6%

Table 1 – Reporting of violent and abusive racial content

It can be observed here that 85% of young people have reported abusive racial content to social media platforms with only 6% of them reporting and receiving a satisfactory response. Very few young people have reported this content to police and only 1% have done so and received a satisfactory response. Over two fifths (44%) have reported to other authority figures but again satisfactory responses are very low. This suggests that young people do not feel that they receive a satisfactory response when reporting abusive racial content they encounter on social media.

The survey asked young people to indicate reasons why they do not (or do not always) report such content to social media platforms. 41% stated that they did not always report such content because they did not believe any action would be taken. 23% indicated that they did not always report it because there was too much to report it all while 5% said they do not report for other reasons. Around one third (32%) of young people stated that they always report such content. This, to some extent, reflects the findings of To et al. (2020) who found that individuals are often wary to seek support for their experiences of racism on social media due to a fear of negative repercussions.

Young people were asked what they thought social media platforms could do differently or better in response to racial content and participants could choose multiple categories from a range of suggestions, with them all scoring relatively highly as follows:

- More effective responses to reports: 80%
- More effective approach to removal of posts: 72%
- More effective use of suspending accounts: 70%
- More effective reporting mechanisms: 70%
- More effective use of fact-checking messages: 63%
- More opportunity for communication with platforms: 53%
- More promotion of positive campaigns: 52%
- Other: 4%

This and the responses to the previous questions on reporting demonstrate that young people do not generally feel that social media platforms are responding appropriately to racism and abuse.

Impact on young people's offline lives

The survey asked participants about the impact of their experiences of racial content on social media on a range of aspects of their lives outside of social media.

	Positive impact	Negative impact	No impact	A balance of positive and negative impacts
Sense of personal identity	15%	17%	13%	55%
Friendships outside of your racial group	24%	18%	25%	33%
Friendships with those who share your racial identity	57%	4%	20%	19%
Confidence/aspirations/achievement in education/work	22%	27%	19%	32%
Feeling safe	4%	58%	14%	24%
Relationships with authority	4%	52%	20%	24%
Family relationships	23%	10%	42%	25%
Mental wellbeing	7%	42%	11%	40%

Table 2 – Impacts on offline lives

'Feeling safe' emerged as the area in which young people experienced the most negative impact on their lives, with 58% of participants stating a negative impact in this area. This is followed by 'relationships with authority (e.g. teachers, police, managers)' where 52% of participants reported a negative impact. This links with the topics of Black Lives Matter and Police Brutality being two of the most common topics, where frequently observing videos and images of violence against racialised groups, including by police, may be leading to a sense of being unsafe in public and a lack of trust in those who should protect them. The lack of satisfactory responses when reporting online racism to authority figures, as outlined in the previous section, is likely to also impact on levels of trust.

A substantial negative impact was also reported in relation to 'mental wellbeing' where 42% of participants reported a negative impact. This reflects wider research on negative impacts on wellbeing, as outlined in the background section (Heard-Garris et al. 2021; Criss et al. 2021; Shin, Wang, & Song, 2023; Tynes et al. 2019; Volpe et al. 2023). There is, however, some nuance and complexity that emerges here in relation to the impact of racial content on social media on mental wellbeing, with 40% of young people in our study reporting that there is 'a mix of positive and negative impacts that balances out overall' in this area (although only 7% report a positive impact). This to some extent reflects research by Heard-Garris et al. (2021) who found that online activism may serve as a coping mechanism in the face of racism as well as such activism leading to further backlash and scrutiny (as also identified by participants in our focus groups and interviews). Another complex area is 'sense of personal identity' where 55% of participants reported a balance of positive and negative impacts. The most common positive impact (by a large proportion) was on 'friendships with those who share your racial identity' where 57% of participants reported a positive impact. These complexities in the impacts reported around identity and wellbeing also link to the social solidarity that young people find online with other people from racialised groups, which is explored as a qualitative theme later in this report.

Findings from the focus groups and interviews

The sections below outline the key themes that emerged from our analysis of the qualitative data from focus groups and interviews. The themes have been divided into three groups; firstly, those relating to experiences and observations of racism on social media, secondly, those relating to the impacts of those experiences on how young people engage with social media and, finally, those relating to the offline impacts.

Within young people's experiences and observations of racism on social media, the themes that emerged from our analysis are:

- Cultural appropriation
- Performative activism and voyeurism
- Polarisation of online debate
- Scrutiny and backlash
- Scrutiny of BRM women

In relation to the impacts of racial content on how young people engage with social media, the themes are:

- Overwhelm vs. desensitisation
- Disengagement and subversion
- Enforced representation
- Positive engagement – activism, solidarity and friendship

The themes relating to the impacts on young people's offline and wider lives are as follows:

- Mental health and wellbeing
- Feeling unsafe
- Relationships with authority

The sections below explore these themes, illustrating the ways in which they emerged in the focus groups and interviews. Many of the themes reflect the survey findings and add explanation to some of the patterns found in young people's experiences and engagement with racial content on social media. Frustration with the prevalence of racist content and the overwhelm caused by it, as well as with how algorithms work to spread such content and with platforms failing to respond to reports, emerged strongly in the focus groups and interviews with young people. Attempts to subvert algorithms and gain more control over content emerged - as well as a strong inclination among young people to disengage from any debate around issues of race online due to the backlash and futility they had experienced. There was a clear sense of a need to protect themselves from the harm caused by such engagement. The offline impacts reflect the same issues of mental health, feelings of safety and relationships with authority as highlighted by the survey. The young people made links between the prolific sharing of images and videos of brutality towards BRM people on social media and their feeling unsafe and hostile relationships with authority figures, particularly police, in their wider lives. Complexities reside in whether such content simply raises awareness of the nature and extent of racism and leads to justified caution or whether it is feeding the problems and harming young people. It appears to do both with young people's overall wellbeing affected negatively by the sense of hopelessness caused by what they encounter on social media in relation to race.

Experiences and observations of racism

This first section of the qualitative findings explores young people's experiences and observations of race and racism on social media. It includes particular themes relating to cultural appropriation, performative activism and voyeurism, polarisation of online debate, scrutiny and backlash, and scrutiny of BRM women. This section, first, highlights some of the common examples of forms of explicit racism on social media shared by young people before exploring each of the themes and the particular nuances present within young people's experiences of racism on social media.

Participants recognised that they were exposed extensively to explicit racism on social media, more than they were consciously aware of in their wider, offline lives. They were able to cite numerous examples of racism both in the way stories were presented and the comments that followed.

> *We get exposed to much more of what race and racism is than we would from our individual subject position through social media. We're kind of just overwhelmed with all this different content whether it's arguments, debates about immigration, pictures of this, that, news, videos, etc.* (Edinburgh focus group)

> *So, we just experience more of race than we would otherwise as individuals, so just being exposed to traumatic, violent, dehumanising content all the time. But that also, the aspects of resisting that as well, so there's just a lot basically, a lot of feelings. It's hard to really encapsulate it within one kind of idea or whatever. It impacts more of my life than not being on [social media].* (Warwick focus group)

The young people felt that there were differential responses to different forms of racial content from social media platforms and were dissatisfied overall with the platforms' responses to racism.

> *You find that a lot of things to do with protests or race or Black Lives Matter does tend to get reported or seen, like, flagged and removed. But racist comments or things like opposing it doesn't seem to get the same attention.* (Belfast focus group)

There was a recognition that the worst racism was often in the comments on posts and videos, with the posts themselves being the trigger for substantial vitriol. Young people often said they could not bear to fully engage with the comments on such posts as they were often more upsetting than the original posts.

The proliferation of video content in particular was a substantial theme in the examples of racism that young people observed on social media as in the example below.

> *One time I saw it on a video on Instagram and it was in some American school, and there were a bunch of white boys throwing coins at some black boys sitting down… the black boys then started to cry.* (West Norwood focus group)

The young person sharing this example described how he felt embarrassed and upset for the black boys. He could not understand why this would be posted other than to incite people to laugh at racism and black people. He questioned why it had not been removed.

There were also frequent references to celebrities and high-profile figures, such as Meghan Markle and the racism she received on social media platforms, within the focus groups - as well as the ways in which the abuse against her was legitimised by those engaging with it.

> *Meghan being married to Harry has caused a lot of uproar. It came out that even members of the Royal Family had said they would have questions over their babies would be dark ... As a country, we're pretty racist, so things are being said about her. It was an issue that she was divorced… so she's received a lot of backlash about her background and her colour ... And she's been called a gold digger because she was an actress, they called this an opportunist moment for her. The abuse on social media on her has been epic. And this kind of scrutiny*

> *never happened to Kate Middleton so it, it's literally just because she's not white.* (West Norwood focus group)

Young people recognised how racism was identified in people's differential framings of white and BRM people on social media. Contrasting narratives between the commentary on white and BRM people was highlighted. One participant, for example, referred to observing people expressing sympathy for the white supremacist young person who killed ten black people in a supermarket in Buffalo USA in 2022.

> *Something I was thinking of was the Buffalo shooter, when why people do mass shootings they're always like, "Aww, he was such a troubled person with such a beautiful family." But then every time a black person gets murdered, they're looking for reasons why they were dangerous and a threat, etc.* (Belfast focus group)

Young people in the focus groups discussed how the denial of racism was a consistent feature of posts and how there was a lack of recognition of the institutional nature of racism.

> *So many comments when you read threads are all in denial, they do not see that racism is apparent and make excuses and start hurling personal abuse for saying it is racism.* (Warwick focus group)

> *There is so much racism disguised as not racism. I think paradoxically you find people, like liberal and activists more upsetting than some people who are either blatantly ignorant or just far right, because it kind of perpetuates this idea that it's not an institution problem, it's just like some isolated episode. There are some people somewhere who are killing black people but it's not happening every day, or there's not a whole bureaucratic system that is built on racism.* (Warwick focus group)

> *It's interesting to see the varying degrees from little, microaggressions to actual physical abuse [in video posts] or words being said. And it's funny because when the Black Lives Matter movement was happening, we had white British people saying racism isn't in England*. (Tottenham focus group)

The young people expressed that they often felt angry about the explicit online racism that they frequently observed alongside such denial of racism. The examples below demonstrate how young people experienced anger at witnessing racism online, the racist treatment of black people trying to leave Ukraine in the first example and racism against football players after the England national football team lost the Euro 2020 final in 2021 in the second.

> *Oh, my God, Ukraine, wow! No! What's his name? Putin shouldn't be doing what he's doing, but at the moment we're hearing black people, and there was a girl who was constantly just Tweeting through her journey leaving Ukraine, and for a lot of people, it was just traumatising. I just didn't want to read it because it's a lot. But when I read some of it, I was like, Yeah, f*ck this country, and seeing some of the videos, women not being allowed on the train, and being kicked off, you know.* (Individual interview, Belfast)

> *I feel angry all the time when I'm on Instagram looking at the racism, the football players missing penalties affected me for days after I read what was on insta.* (Belfast focus group)

As well as explicit examples of racism like these being observed on social media, the young people identified a range of other specific ways in which issues of race and racism are experienced on social media. The sections below explore some specific themes from their experiences and observations of race and racism on social media.

Cultural appropriation

In the focus groups, young people spoke about how aspects of their culture or history were being exploited by white people, particularly celebrities, and promoted without acknowledgment of their cultural origins. Some of these participants shared thoughts on the trends they observed of white women altering their bodies to take on traits of minoritised groups.

> *BBL [Brazilian Bum Lift] is talking about, do you know as in the black community or in the black and Asian minority community, a lot of our women are a lot more curvier and they have more eccentric body types. But now it seemed to be a trend where everyone wants to get BBLs and get basically liposuction and get it removed to their arse and then it gets bigger so they're much more curvier. I think it's because a lot more curvy women are seen attractive, and in the black community we were never seen as attractive it was quite the opposite. And because we have a lot more curvier black artists and a lot more curvier black people coming out of their comfort zones, it's seen more now and that they're being tokenistic kind of approach, and we're being more eccentric with it and we're showing it off as much as we can.* (West Norwood focus group)

> *If a white person, does it it's like oh, yes, OK, fine, even though it could be a BBL [Brazilian Bum Lift] as well, it's seen as OK, fine. But if a black woman, does it, it's she's seeking attention*. (Tottenham focus group)

These young people clearly identified how white people having cosmetic procedures to take on physical traits of black and racially minoritised women, and the promotion of this on social media, felt problematic. Following the same theme, several young people also referenced Jesy Nelson (from the band, Little Mix) whose image, often promoted and discussed on social media, was seen to have become deliberately racially ambiguous to increase her appeal in the music industry.

> *Jesy Nelson, how do you say, is it blackfisher? But she was using black features on herself and that she was taking on being a black woman and also what made it even worse that someone from our own community was standing by her.* (Belfast focus group)

> *…the whole song, the vibe, the music video, you know, she wants a bad boy, and all the bad boys were black... And you could tell it was like an obvious plea to get a hit, you get a hot female black artist to be in the music video, it's your whole new look... It didn't work because it was so obvious that you were blackfishing for sort of approval from us, because I feel like when black people say something's it, it becomes it. Everyone jumps on it. And it was so obvious, even the example she used, Bad Boys, like, it's a culture... you know? It's to sort of to trick us into feeling nostalgic about the song*. (Tottenham focus group)

A content creator and self-defined influencer identified the difference in treatment on social media between BRM and white creators and how credit is taken from the BRM communities.

> *We see a lot of Blackfishing and again that ties in with what I'm saying about how it harms Black creators. Black creators get their content removed, but white people cosplaying as Black people, their content is still there. So, it really shifts the perspective of what is acceptable, like what Black people look like authentically and where the origins of certain things come from. So, you find I think a lot of credit is taken from the Black community and placed elsewhere for that reason. Yes, it definitely perpetuates a lot of harm*. (Interview with Influencer, London)

One participant shared an example of a white person using African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to enter a social media online safe group of black people who mainly shared racialised experiences of racism.

> *I have become apprehensive and a bit wary of someone trying to use a language or use a tone or use whatever to try and make their way into a space… Yeah, they'd start using the*

> *language and everything like that. And I saw a guy on Twitter was doing that at one point, and I think he was even using the 'N' word in some of his posts, and then someone got a picture of him, and was like, "This is the guy. He's not black. He's just putting it on".* (Individual interview, London)

Another way in which activity on social media by white people was sometimes seen as performative or tokenistic was the way in which they used social media as a medium for apathetic activism or even voyeuristic entertainment about issues of race and racism.

Performative activism and voyeurism

Engaging in 'slacktivism' through sharing and posting about racism online without any real action was judged by the young people to have minimal effect and being a mere act of performativity. The most common example of this discussed was through the sharing and reposting of videos and images of racist violence. Young people felt the trauma of seeing BRM people suffering was becoming overwhelming - and that the constant sharing of this suffering, even when well-intentioned, was increasing levels of abuse.

> *The constant images of us suffering is too much, we are creating more trauma for ourselves, being reminded of what we experience all the time, it's overwhelming and gets us nowhere and just adds to the right-wing rhetoric we see more and more of.* (Warwick focus group)

Young people also saw what had become the BLM brand as increasingly being used and absorbed by corporate organisations to present themselves positively to BRM communities, sell their products and demonstrate diverse representation within their companies. One participant shared:

> *In the wake of those protests the co-option of BLM and its integration into a sort of NGO approach to activism and the corporate nature of the movement. It's so easy to say that Black Lives Matter and it's kind of appealing to the state or corporations to recognise us as mattering. In that way society, OK, now politicians and corporations saying Black Lives Matter, posting black squares, where people are posting black squares and stuff. And I was like, OK, so people are buying now from these corporations and now we're posting black squares, it's not adding up.* (Warwick focus group)

The perceived increase in the numbers of black and minoritised influencers being sponsored by companies was seen as being an approach to visibly addressing representation, without significant change in these companies' overall practices.

> *Our BRM influencers have been 'sucked in' by corporate brands, increased use of BRM people and this is certainly not about black representation meaning anything as these same companies are treating migrants and refugees poorly in their employment - they are only interested in selling their products.* (Edinburgh focus group)

> *I think there's a huge cognitive dissonance when it comes to influencers of colour, and particularly when I think about like Hijabi influencers or South Asian influencers who do brand deals with Pretty Little Thing or Boohoo or L'Oréal, etc. When one of the plazas collapsed in 2013 and when people are still working in sweatshops and being paid basically nothing. But with the claim that these brands are furthering minority representation, because it's not representation if you're just continuing to treat workers badly, with terrible conditions and everything.* (Warwick focus group)

Young people were critical of public figures and celebrities' role as commentators on race and racism, whilst being aware they were responding to wider audiences. This was a particular theme of the discussions in the Warwick and West Norwood focus groups.

You do have a person of colour who's a public figure having to change or dilute their opinions to make them more palatable to the white audience and to the general public. (West Norwood focus group)

With performative activism we spoke about celebrities releasing statements, stuff like that, and companies as well, and you could see that they were just doing it to make themselves look good. Like, they don't actually care about it all of the time. (Warwick focus group)

Even when you watch football matches, all the players go on one knee, I don't know, it's like this doesn't seem to – it's like what you're talking about with BLM, how it actually went from genuine action to people posting black squares. Yes, I just find that a bit disappointing. (West Norwood focus group)

While the young people seemed to be searching for more authentic and grassroots engagement, they also recognised that portrayal of race issues on social media was increasingly the realm of influencers and celebrities as young people more widely disengaged from the risks of such engagement.

Polarisation of online debate

Young people shared that their experiences of either creating their own posts or responding to others' posts, commenting on race and racism, led to a multitude of responses that reflect polarised beliefs and opinions. People with fixed positions would quickly emerge that were not willing to engage in reflection or debate. The futility of continuing to engage was recognised by young people from across the focus groups.

I think for a while I used to go around certain popular sites and just look at a lot of people who claimed to be normal in a way, but then they start talking about racism in a very hateful way... And they get so deep into it that they start, their reality kind of becomes distorted and there's not really any helping them. So, I just think there's no point trying to interact with them. (Warwick focus group)

There's no point in engaging anymore as there are so many right-wing geeks who constantly search out discussions and attack and stir up further hatred. (Edinburgh focus group)

A common theme from all the focus groups was of learning to just 'scroll past' when seeing posts on race issues, drawn from their previous experience of engaging.

I think I normally get a moment or feeling either sad or angry about it, but then I just move on. (West Norwood focus group)

If it's someone reporting on something that happened that's led to racism, I might like and save it but not necessarily comment on it. But if it's something graphic, I don't share it. (Tottenham focus group)

Young people were choosing not to engage fully with the racism based on their experience that the comments had become an opportunity for individuals to 'cheer on' each other in the racism they wanted to express. They recognised that 'freedom of speech' was often used as a defence for racist views, reflecting the findings of Ortiz (2021) who also found that racist views are often defended with appeals to free speech.

I think social media companies really need to think about the concept of freedom of speech and how it's been used. Particularly just to perpetuate culture wars which basically are just fascist, Islamophobic, homophobic, racist, sort of tropes that are spewed under the guise of freedom of speech… like who is freedom of speech affecting? Freedom of speech isn't universal, and that's replicated on social media as well as in real life. Yes, social media

definitely gives the illusion that there is freedom of speech, but it's not there. And if it is, it's not universal. (Warwick focus group)

The young people recognised the contradiction inherent in such defences in that right-wing and racist commentators on social media would often cite their own right to freedom of speech whilst shutting down any views that conflicted with their own. These threads of commentary and discussions had the effect of leaving participants feeling helpless and disinclined to engage. There was a sense that debate on social media had become so polarised that social media lacked any potential as a space for meaningful debate around issues of race and racism.

Scrutiny and backlash

Many young people reported that they avoided posting about race and racism, particularly since the Covid lockdowns and murder of George Floyd, due to an increased level and perniciousness of the backlash when doing so. For those that said they did post content relating to race, they received a torrent of abuse, and they identified that right-wing accounts would always respond. They also experienced the spread and sharing of racist ideas in response to the increased messaging on the injustice of racism since the murder of George Floyd and the online racism towards black Euro 2020 football players.

I did not respond or get involved in the Saka monkey baiting as I had already heard of a lot of abuse my friends were getting and even if you do respond nothing going to happen so there's no point, it's like in school nothing ever happened to deal with it. (West Norwood focus group)

For a lot of the time, a lot of the people who probably would before this or would have a different view, they didn't do anything....is it because they didn't have any thought of influence them. It was just that oh wow, oh, George Floyd is a criminal, oh, he has drugged his children... Everyone's going with it. And even if you tried to defend him, it always came back to the point like oh, he's a criminal, he was going to die one way or another, this was just a form of justice in a way. (Warwick focus group)

There was an understanding that black influencers and those people from community organisations were under increased scrutiny for what they shared.

I have seen the torrent of abuse that some influencers and community groups get when they share their opinion and when I have shared something it's been horrendous the stuff that I got back, I stopped posting after that... One comment I read said; Floyd was a drug addict-criminal-deserved it- going to die anyway. (West Norwood focus group)

Young people identified the increase in scrutiny and attention for perspectives and views being expressed by those specifically from a BRM background.

In general, just the scrutiny that people face for having some views like we said earlier, like somebody who'll make the same comment as someone else and get dogpiled and accused of having these kinds of attentions and posting this kind of flag or meaning this and that because they're a racialised person. But why do certain people just have more freedom to air their views? (Edinburgh focus group)

Young people across the focus groups experienced that BRM views were more negatively scrutinised and more often censored than those of their white counterparts. Overall, social media was experienced as a public space in which levels of scrutiny of BRM people were high.

Scrutiny of black and racially minoritised women

This theme emphasises the intersectional experiences for the young women in our study, reflecting Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory which outlines how racism and sexism intertwine for black women. These experiences included gender-specific criticism and harassment, hyper-sexualisation and comments on physical appearance. This builds on the experiences in the theme of 'cultural appropriation' earlier in this report where the examples shared clearly demonstrate that women felt particularly exploited as well as them feeling they faced more scrutiny for their physical appearance on social media than white women who appropriated some of their physical attributes. It also links to the 'scrutiny and backlash' theme, highlighting how young women may experience scrutiny most sharply, particularly in relation to their appearance.

Criticism and comments relating physical appearance were prevalent as well as gender-specific insults.

> *People try to be as offensive as possible. I think they use a lot of descriptors for that. So, where it might be, "You fat ugly Black b*tch," for example, I think that for me seems gender focussed. It's just not something you would say to a man… But the majority of hate online is targeted towards women.* (Warwick focus group)

As well as targeted directly at the young people themselves, the young women in the study recounted examples of the impacts of such scrutiny towards celebrities - for example, a discussion in Tottenham focused on the reality TV show, Love Island.

> *In relation to Love Island, 'India', I've seen a lot of TikTok videos trying to prove that she's good looking because it seems like if a black woman takes a picture and there's maybe one imperfection that makes her ugly, completely, no matter what… so I feel like that just encourages a need for us to be perfect, in a sense.* (Tottenham focus group)

This prompted a discussion in the focus group on how comments on physical appearance were often linked to the hyper-sexualisation of BRM women. They identified the consequences for mental and physical health, including the impact on the development of a healthy sexual self-image, especially for younger BRM girls watching the programme who identify with similar physical appearance traits as 'India', implying a person's value comes only from her sexual appeal or sexual behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics. The group were concerned about how young girls appropriate and interpret the hyper-sexualised messages transmitted on social media platforms about the show and female black contestants and how this might impact how young BRM female viewers see themselves and are seen by others.

One young person in the same focus group shared the backlash she received when posting photos of herself in her Mass/Carnival Costume which she wears as part of celebrating the country she was born, Antigua.

> *People do hypersexualise when they see you in your mass costumes on social media, they feel like they can sexualise you through the image because I guess kind of it was a form of emancipation. But they feel like they can belittle you, not only racial slurs but like you're a prostitute and stuff like that, based on something that you're culturally connected to.* (Tottenham focus group)

The body shape of black women and photos they posted on social media were routinely sexualised. This caused black women to overthink what to post to avoid backlash. This contrasted with the responses they observed to white women posting similar photos.

> *Yes, we've got the big boobs, the big batty [bum], the big lips, the big nose, and I guess people think that, say I post a picture in a sundress and I turn in a slight way, it's something like "she's trying to show us her arse – she's trying to show us her bum", sexualising us. Then, certain pictures, do I post this or do I not post it, because if I post it I don't want people to be*

> *on "she's posting it to get my attention", it's not my fault if I have a big batty... social media has a way of making you question everything you believe and everything you know that is right... for black women though because... if it's a white person it's like oh, yes, OK, fine.* (Tottenham focus group)

As such, the body shaming imposed on black women impacted what young BRM women shared on social media.

Within the focus groups, BRM women drew attention to the increased scrutiny and abuse they felt they were subject to for being both women and from BRM communities, beyond simply their physical appearance.

> *So, when you're looking at racial hate as well, obviously when you're a Black woman you're just – you're undoubtedly going to get more. Before I was an influencer, still obviously not as much, but I still had an insane amount of sexist or racist hate online, which is quite odd. But again, I put that down to the fact that I'm a woman that exists online that isn't white. I don't get racial slurs as much per se, but it might be a comment here and there and someone calling me a monkey or telling me to f*ck off back to Africa on a banana boat.* (Interview with Influencer, London)

The young women felt they experienced more abuse on social media platforms, when they had an active presence or posted regularly, than they observed white women experiencing. The interacting effect of racism and sexism led to augmented forms of inequality.

The young women also discussed how when engaging in discussions or debate on social media, or responding to issues of race, they were often silenced or exposed to the 'angry black woman' stereotype.

> *Coming back to gender just quickly, being a black woman on social media how anything you say is really nit-picked at, so you can't post certain things without seeming angry. Or you can't post certain words or terms. So, if you speak up on something, you speak about being a black woman and going through a struggle, it's like it's just not a black woman thing, it's a woman thing. So, your opinion gets pushed to the side pretty much when you add race into it. So, you can speak about being a woman, but you can't speak about being a black woman.* (Tottenham focus group)

BRM women felt limited as to where they could openly and safely discuss these issues on social media platforms and therefore refrained from posting or sharing such matters, for fear of the scrutiny that occurs. Based on such experiences, a self-identified influencer shared that when it came to discussing explicit issues of race, she would 'now only share this with my friends offline, its safer'. This issue of feeling unsafe in the public space of social media was prevalent - and the disengagement from public debate around issues of race on social media was a wider theme across the interview data, not just for the women.

Impacts of experiences of racism

The themes explored above in relation to young people's experiences of race and racism on social media begin to also indicate how young people are responding to these issues – largely through a disengagement from debate about issues of race due to a sense of helplessness and futility and to protect themselves from scrutiny and backlash. This disengagement from debating the issues is the key theme that emerged from our analysis around how BRM young people responded to racial content they encounter on social media.

This section explores some of the impacts on young people's engagement with social media in more detail including overwhelm, disengagement and subversion, a sense of enforced representation and positive engagements including activism.

Overwhelm vs. desensitisation

As already explored, oversaturation of violence and specifically of BRM communities' ongoing suffering, through the persistent sharing of violent images and videos as well as examples of racial inequality, created an intensity and feeling of being overwhelmed. Young people's experience of observing abusive events repeatedly created a burden of reliving and witnessing violence that became a catalyst to their own experiences, trauma and pain.

> *I think George Floyd was murdered, there was a lot of incidents of racism being posted on social media, and we were all, a lot of people got together and started, we were sharing comments and stuff but what it then became was that every time you would sign on to Instagram it was just negativity and negative views about black people. I think that can take a toll on the individual mentally because if you're just constantly seeing our people suffering, then it's like no joy and nothing's changing. Racism has never stopped so its constant racism left, right and centre.* (Warwick focus group)

> *In terms of the content that came about with BLM after George Floyd, there was lots of content of police brutality during those protests. It was rough, and it was just constantly every day there was a new story and new injustice by other people, and you share it because you want somebody to see it and do something about it. But then it's just a constant sea of injustice against black people, so then eventually it's just negativ*e. (West Norwood focus group)

Young people also shared concerns about the impact of this persistent negativity on white people.

> *You know how the algorithm feeds through what you get a lot of? And think about it, if these white people are only getting negative stuff of black people, always getting the people like-minded on their timeline or feed, they're never going to be exposed to different.* (Warwick focus group)

For some young people, these negative portrayals were becoming a 'normalised' experience of their time spent on social media platforms. Some participants described that they had become desensitised by the hateful racism they experienced and saw on social media. They disengaged from the posts and saw no point in interacting with them. They would only interact with a friend who they cared about to challenge their opinions - however, even then there was recognition at some point they would cut off.

> *I had this really good white friend and at first it seemed they wanted to chat on snapchat about racism and music lyrics and then I shared some thoughts and they got offended and became hostile to me and said I was making more of it than I should.* (Individual interview, London)

Young people at times associated desensitisation with a sense of hopelessness about any response to racism online leading to meaningful change, as in the example below.

> *I think I am desensitised as well, but then I question quite a lot whether interacting, how useful it is. I know within I have people who I know, we interact with it together like something meaningful might come out of it. But it can just feel quite hopeless and pointless.* (Warwick focus group)

Whilst the word 'desensitised' was often shared by young people as one of the impacts of such experiences, further exploration brought forth the overwhelming and upsetting impacts. This left us

without concrete examples of such desensitisation, suggesting the opposite was in fact often the case. This suggests that what our participants described as desensitisation in response to their sense of overwhelm may be more complex than the desensitisation found in other studies such as Ortiz (2019) and Cohen et al. (2021) The examples above suggest that desensitisation was referred to when justifying a disengagement due to such overwhelm. This perhaps reflects the burden and futility experienced by young people when trying to take individual responsibility to combat issues of systemic racism.

Disengagement and subversion

Across the focus groups, participants spoke of disengaging from social media altogether at certain points due to the overwhelming impact racism had on their health and wellbeing. Many had taken breaks from social media not long after the George Floyd murder and prominence of BLM posts around this, due to the overwhelm and backlash such posts created. Young people shared how they and their friends disengaged from racist posts or began using social media differently.

> *I do sometimes lurk but it's kind of overwhelming when you see how racist stuff is. Yes, when you go to comments section, the just age-old racist tropes being thrown in. Then on the other hand as well, I do also I guess try and draw attention to things on social media. It's not about ways to draw attention, sometimes I just want to rant about it and mostly I just disengage.* (Edinburgh focus group)

> *Once I saw a video, an immigration officer in Japan forcefully removing a Japanese Brazilian person from their house because they refused to leave because they were being evicted for wrong purposes. When I was trying to engage with it and see what people's thoughts were on it, the reception was overwhelmingly in favour of the immigration officers as opposed to the person who was being taken away. And that made me feel incredibly troubled. Yes, I was really thinking about it for a couple of days afterwards. It made me not want to engage in as much when there's only disavowal and refusal*. (Warwick focus group)

Young people shared how they felt the algorithms on social media sites often worked against them and sensed there was a lack of user control over what they saw on social media.

> *It comes out of nowhere, and it's like I don't associate myself with people like this. I don't like things like this. I don't interest myself in things like this, but somehow, it's on my feed, so how can I avoid it? Then when you put "Not interested" you'll still show me it again. So, you need to do better, and social media platforms need to do better in actually making the algorithm make sense*. (Tottenham focus group)

Other young people shared how they actively avoid discussions of race and racism on social media, through subverting the algorithms by deliberately engaging with more mundane content. One young person explained how she kept clicking on adverts for holidays in Devon despite having no interest in going on holiday there, just to subvert the algorithm. Such subversion enabled them to avoid the 'doom spiral' they felt they could get lost in previously. This was discussed in depth in the Warwick focus group in particular.

> *Since George Floyd I now I use it quite casually, but I also don't read posts. I think I maybe just use it to stay in touch with friends, also especially with Instagram I do a regular detox with stuff I'm following. So, most of the time I might get to be quite ... To give you an example, I have followed a few accounts that are just like cottages in the countryside, and I think it's nice sometimes to just use it as something really light-hearted and positive and just see something nice. So, every few months or every month I go through, because I think online racism does affect you a lot more than you think it does. And I definitely notice that when I*

changed what my feed was, when I would look at Instagram afterwards, I would get a sense of ah, that was nice. (Warwick focus group)

Both the disengagement and subversion attempts that young people shared reflect wider research from Criss et al. (2021) who found that, in response to experiences of racism on social media, people tend to either reduce their platform usage or curate their social media feeds to try to regain control over the constant exposure to racist content.

Young people, however, recognised that subverting their own algorithms would do little to actually respond to the overwhelming amount of content that would continue to thrive on social media. There was a sense that algorithms needed to be better designed to filter and balance out such problematic content more broadly.

So, finding a way to change the algorithm on social media where yes, you want to tailor your content to what you like, but also tailor your content that if you are posting bad things or negative things that you get the positive. You get the information that you need to counteract that. For example, if I'm posting "all black people are monkeys", the post under that post should be like "things that you shouldn't say that are racist". Something like that to counteract the stupidity that you just put up. (Tottenham focus group)

I think they should actually have a better filtering system… I think that the same way you know what I like, why are you showing me somebody who is there calling black people monkeys? (Belfast Focus group)

In Edinburgh, one young person spoke of how Reddit allowed more control over what they and others see on their feed, through 'uplikes' and 'downlikes', whereas the algorithms on other sites meant that any engagement, positive or negative, caused a post to be spread more widely. Engagement with content drives its capacity to be reached by a broader audience, irrespective of whether this is positive or negative engagement (Noble 2018). This issue with algorithms not being responsive to what young people want to see was key to the disengagement and subversive responses.

Another issue that contributed to feelings of hopelessness and the response to attempt to subvert the algorithms or disengage altogether was the sense that social media platforms were not doing enough to effectively respond to racism on social media.

Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, something needs to be done in the way people are able to make profiles, and it needs to be regulated because I think only one or two people were charged with any sort of repercussion for the comments they made on Rashford and Saka's page. (Tottenham focus group)

There needs to be a better, a more stringent way for identifying and calling out these accounts because there's no accountability, they can just get away with it. So, if there are word blockers, so certain racial terms can't even be used online, and those accounts being blocked straight away would be good. Or furthermore, if somebody actually reports an account for racism, it should just get removed. There shouldn't be this ambiguity of whether it was meant in a racist way. If they've used a word or a phrase or something, their account should just be removed. (West Norwood group)

This sense of the platforms not taking responsibility or doing enough to effectively respond to racism on social media reflects the findings of the survey discussed earlier in this report. It emphasises the importance of platforms engaging with youth stakeholders about their experiences so they can ensure that their reporting and response mechanisms are experienced as effective and not contributing to a sense of helplessness and overwhelm. Such engagement would also respond to young people's desire to feel more control over how content is disseminated and reproduced on social media platforms.

Enforced representation

Young people expressed in various ways their concerns about the way the BRM communities were represented through social media. The nuance and diversity of their communities was not portrayed, but a generating and strengthening of stereotypes and fixed images and perceptions of the communities. There was an understanding of the pressure to represent your whole racial community whilst online.

> *Being a black person, we are affected by what other black people do. What one black person does, it makes non-black people think that all black people or most black people are the same way.* (Warwick focus group)

Young people felt a sense of futility about how to challenge negative stereotypes online. They expressed how language used by black people was distorted, by those deliberately misrepresenting and twisting the meanings.

> *Black terms get taken out of context. When certain black people use certain terms from an outsider's perspective, they take it in a different way and basically twist the meaning of the terms that black people are using. This is often done on purpose with the intent of dissing us as people.* (Tottenham focus group)

As explored earlier, there was an understanding that black influencers and women in particular were under increased scrutiny for what they shared. The young people shared that they felt this pressure even when sharing rather than creating content.

> *I get self-conscious about retweeting and shouldn't be, I should feel confident to retweet something I like or post a picture about it... I'm thinking about how this is going to make me look as a black person, I'm just looking like oh, here we go, another angry black woman posting stuff.* (Individual interview, London)

This sense of being a representative for other black people and wariness of playing into stereotypes was part of what was leading to disengagement. This again reflects the burden of attempting to take individual responsibility to combat systemic racism and led some young people to only engage with issues of race in safer, more private spaces online. Disengagement from the more public and open spaces led many young people to create smaller groups of friends and family members where they could comfortably share their thoughts online in private message groups.

> *I am completely fed up with the comments and racism on many posts I am connected to so I decided to withdraw and me and my friends set our own groups up where we can share freely without attracting hostile and racist comments -I feel completely different as its empowering rather than draining on my emotions.* (Warwick focus group)

This suggests that there is complexity in young people's engagement with race on social media and that some young people were able to identify some positive ways to engage, despite the prevalence of negative experiences.

Positive engagement – activism, solidarity and friendship

Whilst the themes explored so far focus heavily on young people's negative experiences of race and racism on social media, there were some positive experiences shared. These included experiences where they were following individuals, groups or pages that were from or created by others from racially minoritised backgrounds.

Young people identified significant value and inspiration from specific sites, clips, black influencers and posts. There was a sense of pride at seeing BRM influencers where they were seen as authentic and providing positive representation or solidarity.

> *A friend of mine, she runs this Instagram page, it's called the Black Teachers Connect, and she basically started it so black educators would have a place where they can come and share their experiences within working in schools. She's been doing a lot of work and getting called to speak at certain institutions, so I think that's really positive because, one, there's a lack of black teachers and black educators and, two, to see that this platform is there, going and making an impact in and amongst the UK, and it was quite positive*. (West Norwood focus group)

> *I follow a lot of black influencers. Once I connected onto their TikTok I was like wow. It was quite inspirational to see two, like a black couple show the reality of being married. Even though there's a lot of happy moments or there's times where they joke around and stuff, but they also showed a realness of what a black relationship is, and it shows how black love is. And we don't see that enough in reality, especially being at home when you are a single parent, especially in our generations. We don't see black love, how it's portrayed. We're always known to have single parents, but seeing two couples married, even at such a young age for such a long time, having that representation just makes me feel happy that there is some still hope for our people.* (Edinburgh focus group)

> *The first one, influencers. On TikTok, the first ever person to make the most money was a black influencer, and we have been actually keeping TikTok alive, the black community has kept TikTok alive and what we've done. So, I'm saying that our influencers have been successful in the way that they have portrayed themself and gained the money.* (Tottenham focus group)

As a result of being overwhelmed with negative stories of BRM people and their plight, some participants described how they would get involved with different issues affecting BRM people. For some young people, rather than disengaging from the issues, it was about turning them into positive action. They largely found this to be most possible where they could control who they were engaging with, in a specific group or forum or just with their own specific friends or followers such as in the example below of social media providing a space to 'be outraged together'.

> *I stopped trying to post negative things people say and then switch to posting positive things black people are doing or trying to raise awareness, the example of that Child Q, that story that's all over the news now, the young girl who ... Well, you know the story. Her identity is obviously concealed because she's a child but trying to raise awareness about that situation is necessary because of the Met Police and schools' actions, I think it's good for people to share it, to be outraged together because what happened was disgusting*. (West Norwood focus group)

This reflected a change in approach for some young people as identified earlier, where they had reduced the numbers of 'friends' or 'followers' they engaged with, made their profiles more private, or took their responses and activism to what they saw on social media into offline spaces.

Some young people spoke of becoming involved in political struggle and action due to being exhausted by the hostile, aggressive and hateful content, motivating them to explore different possibilities in terms of action both online and offline.

> *I think one key thing that happened after that BLM movement, we were knocked down. I had a series of good times during, and one particular thing was I did a video on Instagram about Black Lives Matter, the agreement and stuff. And I spoke about us not just speaking about the negative but speaking about the positive. And even the decolonising the education system, I'd been highly pointed on to it that we should decolonise the education system. I've*

been to a number of talks. I went to a talk with a lot of teachers about it and I was speaking to them about what we should do as young people to help try and stop that to get back our schools. (Warwick focus group)

I think with a lot of – if I see a tweet or something that has happened and its racial content, I try to find what is the actual point of view I can agree, see if there's seems to be something I can agree with. I probably would post thoughts on it, and it depends on how large scale it is, I might start getting a little more active and just trying to find what I can. (Tottenham focus group)

Some young people did continue to actively use social media platforms for activism. Several had been active in educating friends and peers after the BLM explosion on social media, and in some cases also felt they had made a difference with those not known to them.

Impacts on young people's offline lives

The examples above suggest the more positive experiences on social media sometimes led to offline activism and action. There were also significant offline impacts of the more negative experiences, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing, feeling safe and relationships with authority. These themes that emerged in the focus groups reflect the most common offline impacts also identified by the survey.

Mental health and wellbeing

Concerns over mental health and wellbeing featured across the focus groups and are prevalent across the examples already highlighted in this report of young people's experiences. Young people described feeling angry and sad at the comments they saw and coped with it by ignoring it, 'scrolling past' and moving on, despite truly 'moving on' being often difficult for many to manage. They spoke of grief, feeling detached and hopeless in the face of the enduring images and commentary on the injustices facing BRM people.

Young people shared their thoughts on how they had managed their wellbeing, through avoidance of or interactions with racial content on social media.

My interactions with posts about race and racism on social media have become defined through those events that have taken place, which have obviously massively impacted my mental health. So, I don't actually interact with material anymore, the most I'll do is I'll send it to someone I know so that we can discuss it, and that's really it. (West Norwood focus group)

The support of friends and family online was important to young people and was reflected in such examples where they would share and discuss things privately rather than publicly. They also shared how their experiences online sometimes impacted negatively on their offline relationships.

Inasmuch as the person is not doing it in your face, you're looking at your phone and that's in your face, and it feels like it's being directed straight at you because that's all you're seeing. And if you don't have a strong household, this is where it breaks you down, and it breaks you, and then it comes back into your physical wellbeing and your physical life, and you take it out on people who are not meant to even be the people that you take it on with. (Tottenham focus group)

Young people recognised that the impacts on mental health were mixed, at times positive but often negative. The negative impacts outweighed the positive for many young people overall, as in the example below.

> *So, you being on social media and saying the things you're saying, it's all well and good, but I know for me, for myself, it's just a way to just protect myself. I don't want to deal with racial abuse, I don't want to deal with just any – like, social media is good and bad, but for me, the bad outweighs the good, whether it's race and just feeling shit, or just mentally speaking, it's just not a healthy place.* (Individual interview, London)

This reflects the nuance also uncovered in the survey as to whether the impact on mental health is positive or negative, overall. This young person stated that 'social media is good and bad' but that 'the bad outweighs the good'. In the survey 42% of young people said that social media had a negative impact on mental wellbeing overall while only 7% said the overall impact on mental wellbeing was positive. However, reflecting the complexity, 40% of survey participants stated it had both positive and negative impacts that balanced out, overall. The example above also illustrates young people often felt the need to protect themselves from harm online.

Feeling unsafe

There was a feeling amongst some young people that the encouragement of escalating violence and hatred online towards BRM individuals and communities resulted in feeling insecure or unsafe in offline environments. This was particularly pertinent in the Cardiff focus group where the young people discussed being a visible minority in their local area.

> *You see a lot of racism, mostly towards your skin colour, black people. Bullying, you can be bullied for anything, maybe people don't like your weight because of your skin colour, they don't like your hair because of your skin colour -they make you feel like you're not one of them and you feel suicidal. You feel alone and isolated when you're out in certain places you get reminded of all this hate, walking home late at night or in places where there is no black community.* (Cardiff focus group)

A young black Muslim woman in the same focus group shared how what she experienced online led to a feeling of being hated and cautious in wider contexts.

> *I take with me everywhere the feeling that I am hated, and it makes me sad, hurt and shameful and I am fearful because it's not the societal norm to be black and a Muslim being everything that society dislikes. How do you move around freely when you feel like this?* (Cardiff focus group)

The continual experience of seeing racist abuse online was clearly linked to feeling targeted and unsafe in wider contexts for many young people. For many young people, this was linked to seeing a proliferation of videos and images of abuse against others or seeing others targeted with racist abuse online.

For some young people, being directly targeted for online abuse impacted their sense of safety more widely. The young woman interviewed in London who was a social media influencer was particularly conscious of her own safety and had taken measures to protect herself.

> *I don't post where I am in real time. I don't ever post places that I go frequently. Nothing is up to date with my social media. People know that I'm studying, but they don't know where I'm studying... I suppose that level of cautiousness does come from being online and using online platforms. I think the hate that I receive online, if there was the possibility that people could do that in person, maybe they would. It's not a risk I'm willing to take.* (Interview with Influencer, London)

Despite these measures, she shared the ongoing anxiety and vigilance she felt in day-to-day life. The impact of racist online abuse, particularly by anonymous trolls, was also felt in a similar way by young people who did not define themselves as influencers.

> *It makes me feel unsafe in real life. I think I get recognised in public a fair amount, or people will stare at me and there's always, "Why are you looking at me? So, yes, there's definitely that impact. Of course, people know who I am, but I don't know who they are, especially when it's a fake account. I don't know who this is. It could be absolutely anyone, so that's obviously a difficulty... I think when you're receiving a lot of online abuse, your first point of call is, "OK, well, it must be someone like this because they want to cause harm." When you're receiving, I guess, racist abuse online your first point of call is obviously to tie those in together. It's the same way, if anyone for whatever reason threw a brick in my window or my car or any of those things, I would – my first point of call would be like, "OK, it's someone that's messaging me abuse online."* (Interview with Influencer, London)

> *There is an element of reduced psychological safety I think when you're being targeted online, and you don't know the identity. You're not going to know if that's someone in your personal life, if that someone knows you, knows where you live, the spots that you frequent. So, there is that anxiety I think that comes with any kind of online abuse, but especially racial abuse. You just have to look at discourse in the media of where that goes. We're seeing a lot of black women that go missing, they get attacked.* (Warwick focus group)

The murder of George Floyd caused young people to reflect on their sense of safety and security with people in authority. In the Cardiff focus group, young people discussed this in relation to relationships with both their teachers and the police.

> *I'm not sure, like, how it's turned into this, but personally I wouldn't feel safe handling my issues with the police. I feel like it's really biased nowadays, as in like they don't pay attention to what I'm trying to say unless something big has happened. It's like the George Floyd thing, no one paid attention until like loads of other people from all around the world had to jump in. That's only when justice was, kind of, given.* (Cardiff focus group)

> *So, I think feeling safe with like teachers or police or stuff like that, it really needs to be improved because it's not the best right now.* (Cardiff focus group)

This demonstrates how feeling unsafe and relationships with authority are linked, both of which were also significant offline impacts for young people in the survey.

Relationships with authority

Young people reported that traumatic experiences of racism in relation to the police are circulated freely on social media, often reinforcing messages that the police misuse their authority when engaging with BRM communities.

After George Floyd was murdered, the video of this was shared regularly. Young people initially experienced this as a positive thing to raise awareness. However, the impact of seeing it repeatedly impacted on young people's wellbeing, their feelings towards the police, and they experienced people commenting in support of the police officer who murdered Floyd.

> *I thought the police were supposed to protect people and they didn't do that, and this was not being noticed - instead it was posts that I'd see that, "he should have listene". That's not how it was.* (Cardiff focus group)

In the Cardiff focus group, where young people expressed they were a very visible minority, they reported that the frequent viewing of violence online reinforced their lack of confidence and trust in police that originated from their direct experience with police in their local community. The violence they witnessed across social media platforms through the video of the murder of George Floyd and further posts of police brutality concretised negative feelings about the police.

> *We don't have police to look after us. As BLM says, they only look after the white people, we must sort for ourselves and look out for them [police] as well, as they are out to get us.* (Cardiff focus group)

> *Just like seeing people out and like you see people being stopped and if there's police around, they seem to look at people who are in big groups, like assume they're doing something bad, when they're probably just hanging out with their friends. I feel like that happens quite often, like more than you think. Like I saw this video on TikTok recently and there was like police, it was in the UK, and they handcuffed three black people and they said, "They're just causing trouble," when they didn't have proof it was them. People were with them who said it wasn't them, it was like his neighbour, and it was actually the wrong people they'd got. But they handcuffed one of the boys and his hands were like bleeding.* (Cardiff focus group)

The group expressed that what they saw on social media heightened their anxiety about the police and how they could not trust that they would be protected by them. Instead, their experiences on social media reinforced their sense of being stereotyped and seen as a problem because of their racial backgrounds.

> *They're supposed to be protecting people, but they just stereotype us……troublesome, guns and violence and a threat… and so we don't get protected.* (Cardiff focus group)

In other focus groups, young people who had not necessarily had negative experiences with the police directly reported that what they saw on social media made them wary about how far they could trust police to protect them.

> *I think a lot of people have a lot of negative lived experiences with police that have sort of caused anti-vibes... but I think the fact that it's more widespread on social media now means that even if you haven't experienced it yourself, you as a black person might have a negative view of the police which a lot of people do, but a lot of people might disagree. But again, social media shares these videos using these instances of things happening and it causes you to think that you are not being protected by the people that you're supposed to be protected by.* (Newcastle focus group)

Young people also shared how social media also helped with identifying strategies to protect themselves in encounters with police such as recording any interactions with them. Due to what they had observed, such strategies felt essential in any encounters with police.

> *There are videos of policemen stopping black people for driving nice cars, and that is on social media. So, he's like oh, I think we've seen this car somewhere. Like, no, you haven't, it's just because I'm black driving this car. It's become such a thing that people have to physically start recording themselves just so they can feel safe. So, I feel like that's the stage that as black people we need to enforce that we get past because there are certain people who get stopped as black people and they record it. And the moment the police see that they're being recorded, they all of a sudden change their ways. But then if they wasn't being recorded there'll probably be a different situation.* (Tottenham focus group)

Young people identified that racialised treatment from the police occurs with young children as well young adults. Young people had experienced being seen by police for being older than they were. Examples from the UK and beyond of adultification of BRM children by police were also discussed that had been seen and shared widely on social media.

> *...essentially when young Black children are treated more mature than they actually are, an example of that would be seeing the black child who had a toy gun in his hand, the police thought it was a real gun and shot him without even asking any questions.* (Newcastle focus group)

Issues of adultification by authority figures discussed across focus groups, particularly in relation to the Child Q situation, a situation that had been prominent in the news and on social media, where a young black girl in Hackney, London had been body searched by police in school while she was menstruating. Other examples of adultification had emerged following this high-profile incident. Such examples often related to police but also extended to teachers and other authority figures. This increased awareness of adultification appeared to reflect a similar pattern to the prolific sharing of examples of police brutality that had been triggered by the murder of George Floyd.

Young people in Cardiff expressed an increasing lack of trust in their teachers as what they saw on social media had helped them identify some of their offline experiences as being racist. They shared that social media had enabled them to become more aware of the extent and nature of racism.

> *Since I have been looking at all this stuff [racism] on social media, I think some of the teachers can also be racist and this makes it harder for you as a student because these are the people you're supposed to look up to. So, when they're, kind of, like moving you away from everything that's supposed to be right, it's a bit harder.* (Cardiff focus group)

This increasing awareness of systemic racism through their observations on social media emerged particularly in focus groups in both Cardiff and Belfast, where young people reported that they were a very small minority in their schools and communities. For them, social media was experienced as positive in helping them to identify where their personal negative experiences with authority figures were related to racism, rather than a problem with them as individuals, and to help them better understand these experiences. They also reported that social media had enabled them to feel less isolated and more solidarity with other BRM young people.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, our research demonstrates that young people in the UK appear to be experiencing social media as a place where racism thrives unchecked - with explicit racism, cultural appropriation, polarised debates, and backlash all part of their experiences of encountering and engaging with racial content on social media. In the survey, at least a third of BRM young people had received targeted abuse (30% said they received racist private messages and 13% received racist comments on their posts). In the focus groups, young people shared that this targeted abuse was often the cost of posting or engaging with issues of race and racism on social media. A sense of hopelessness and futility often leads them to disengage from engagement with racial content or to take breaks from social media. Alternatively, some choose to make attempts to subvert the algorithms that they feel are working against them, in order to counter the 'doom spiral' they can become drawn into by how algorithms currently work, and to encounter only positive or neutral content instead. This reflects other research that has found people attempt to deal with online racism by either reducing their platform usage or curating their social media feeds to try to regain control (Criss et al. 2021). Young people are attempting to have more agency and user control over what they see, while recognising that any engagement with racial content, whether to support or dispute it, will only spread it further. Some young people did report positive experiences of engaging with issues of race and racism on social media. A small number are creating and posting their own content. However, the majority of young people in our study did not engage in that way, avoiding the backlash or their representation being misinterpreted or stereotyped in problematic ways. The survey suggests that the majority of young BRM people are more likely to engage with someone else's content on race than create their own, whilst the focus groups suggest that many people choose to simply scroll past or avoid altogether. The most positive way in which young people do engage with race is with others who are also from racially minoritised backgrounds and there are friendships and solidarity developed online in this way. Overall, the young people shared that there is more potential for *creating community* with other marginalised groups than for *changing minds* through debate with those who are posting or engaging with problematic content.

Some young people's experiences on social media have inspired them to engage in activism offline and they view this as a positive effect of their engagement. Other offline impacts are not so positive with the survey suggesting that three fifths of young people (58%) feel unsafe in their wider lives as an impact of their experiences of racial content on social media. Over half of young people (52%) reported a negative impact on their relationships with authority. The focus groups identified that this lack of trust in authority is impacted by the explosion of content relating to police brutality following the murder of George Floyd as well as other examples of racist and violent incidents by police and teachers. There are questions to be explored here about whether these feelings of unsafety and mistrust of authority are a justified impact of awareness-raising on social media or a disproportionate impact of the overwhelm of violent content. More than two fifths of young people (42%) reported a negative impact on their mental wellbeing while a similar number (40%) reported a mix of positive and negative impacts that balanced out overall, reflecting a complexity in how social media impacts on mental health. However, only 7% reported an overall positive impact on their mental wellbeing. It is significant, by comparison, that over two fifths of young people experience an overall negative impact. The qualitative data from focus groups and interviews also highlights a negative impact on mental wellbeing that young people deploy a range of strategies to try and manage.

As we found in this research, part of the challenge black and racially minoritised young people face is trying to achieve control of algorithmic processes. On social media, engagement with content drives its capacity to be reached by a broader audience, irrespective of whether this is positive or negative engagement (Noble 2018). The implication of this is that racist material, even if it is not endorsed but challenged, is liable to spread more quickly than less emotionally charged content. Algorithms

are designed to show users content similar to what they have previously interacted with, which means that young people engaging with topics related to race and racism can quickly end up facing a deluge of racist content. Even if users want to challenge racism online and Heard-Garris et al. (2021) argue that such activism can provide an important coping mechanism for adolescents exposed to racism, this activism can lead to either massive exposure to vicarious racist content or direct targeting and harassment. Even well-intentioned sharing of racist content, such as police brutality during the BLM protests, has the potential to have a traumatising effect. One of the key tensions identified in this research surrounding young people's engagement with race and racism on social media, therefore, is that it has both exposed them to prolific racism and abuse and yet provided space for solidarity and community. This reflects Miller et al.'s (2021) finding that social media is a site for both oppression and expression. For young BRM people, however the oppression appears to outweigh the positive factors overall.

The factors that led to Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017) to declare she was 'no longer talking to white people about race' are experienced sharply by young people on social media where echo chambers, polarisation, gratuitous sharing of violence and anonymous trolling all make their experiences of talking about race or challenging racism on social media at best, futile and at worst, unsafe and a major risk to their wellbeing. Many young people in our focus groups and interviews declared that they were no longer engaging on social media around race, and some were re-evaluating their relationships with social media. There were exceptions to the negativity in the small communities of solidarity with each other that they found online, particularly for young people who were living in areas that were not very diverse where they did not so easily have these opportunities offline. The negative impacts, however, spill over into their offline lives and affect their wellbeing, sense of safety and relationships with authority figures.

Young people largely felt that social media platforms were not doing enough to respond to problematic content relating to race and racism. In our survey over half (53%) of young people wanted more opportunity for communication with platforms and 80% wanted more effective responses to reports of racism online. The research has clear implications for social media platforms and for policy more broadly. The main recommendation for social media platforms is for them to find new ways to engage and communicate with young people about their experiences and how they might develop more effective responses. The development of youth stakeholder groups for specific consultation with young people using their platforms is key here. Platforms need to respond to young people's desire for more user-control over what content they are exposed to and frustration with how algorithms work to spread content based on engagement, even when negative. The main recommendation for policy more widely is for the UK Government's Online Safety Act 2025, to ensure that its implementation takes specific account of the experiences of young people from racialised backgrounds and encompasses specific and effective methods to combat racism on social media and provide supportive interventions to those affected by it. Again, this requires direct consultation with youth stakeholders about their experiences.

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