

# Invoking Agency: Talking About Racial Diversity and Campus Climate on Social Media

## Executive Summary

### PURPOSE

The 2015-2016 Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative (URPI) study explored students' use of social media to engage in discussion of racial/ethnic diversity and campus climate. The purpose of the study was to better understand how students utilize social media to talk about issues of racial/ethnic diversity and campus climate to inform how UCLA might capitalize on social media use to promote a safe, welcoming and empowering campus environment. Eighteen interviews as well as an in-depth content analysis of student Facebook pages were used to explore the following questions:

1. How do students describe their posting behaviors and engagement with issues of racial diversity and campus climate on social media?
2. How frequently do students use social media to discuss issues of racial diversity and campus climate in either positive or negative ways?
3. What does participant posting behavior and engagement with issues of racial diversity and campus climate on social media say about the utility of social media in promoting a positive campus climate?

### FINDINGS

Overall, three major themes emerged from our interview data:

- Students generally agree that social media acts as a **real-time news source** for campus events and occurrences.
- When it comes to race and diversity, social media posts are used to **create awareness**. These attempts to raise awareness can be broken down into three subcategories: **posts to organize, posts to teach, and posts to reflect**.
- Students have **conflicting beliefs about social media's ability to facilitate productive dialogue** about sensitive issues, such as race and diversity.

Alongside these interview themes were three main content analysis findings:

- When students post about UCLA's campus climate, it is more likely specifically to be about the racial climate rather than the campus climate writ large.
- When students post about race/ethnicity, it is most likely to be about a negative experience.
- When students post about race/ethnicity, it is most frequently aimed at teaching and informing peers about issues of racial/ethnic insensitivity.

### IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study suggest that student-led social media pages aimed at teaching and informing the broader UCLA campus about racial diversity can be used as one means of improving campus racial climate. While these particular social media pages would be designed to keep students abreast of pertinent issues of racial discrimination, structural oppression, and inclusivity, alternative student-led pages could additionally be designed to foster dialogue between Bruin internet users and the page administrators. In these latter social media pages, student leaders with extensive experience in intergroup dialogue and social media usage would facilitate moderated conversations with peers that come to the site seeking advice, information, or insight on race-related issues.

## Background

This brief is based on the 2015-2016 Undergraduate Research Partnership Initiative (URPI) study, which explored students' use of social media as an opportunity to engage in discussion of racial/ethnic diversity and campus climate. URPI is an ongoing research collaboration between Student Affairs Information and Research Office (SAIRO) researchers and current UCLA undergraduates. The purpose of URPI is to meaningfully engage UCLA students in the collection of institutional data and produce qualitative research on student experiences that will inform the work of Student Affairs practitioners and other campus stakeholders. The 2015-2016 URPI team consisted of 5 undergraduate researchers and two SAIRO facilitators. The undergraduate researchers represented a range of student demographics, varying by major, class year, and race/ethnicity.

### URPI Student Researchers

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The purpose of the 2015-2016 URPI study was to better understand how students utilize social media to talk about issues of racial/ethnic diversity and campus climate to inform how UCLA might capitalize on social media use to promote a safe, welcoming and empowering campus environment. The guiding research questions for this project were: 1) How do students describe their posting behaviors and engagement with issues of racial diversity and campus climate on social media? 2) How frequently do students use social media to discuss issues of racial diversity and campus climate in either positive or negative ways? 3) What does participant posting behavior and engagement with issues of racial diversity and campus climate on social media say about the utility of social media in promoting a positive campus climate?

## Method

This project employed a mixed-method approach as a means of addressing the research questions. First, semi-structured interviews with 18 participants were conducted at the start of winter quarter. Members of the undergraduate research team conducted interviews after completing a quarter of extensive training designed to enhance their understanding and ability to conduct qualitative research. In acknowledging participants' need for privacy and comfort when discussing sensitive topics such as race and racial diversity, the research team elected to use referrals and purposeful sampling as a means of acquiring a sizeable sample. Having undergraduates conduct interviews potentially allowed participants to express their views about the campus racial environment and social media experiences in ways they might not have expressed to a campus administrator.

In addition to interviewing, the research team also performed a content analysis on the Facebook profile of each participant. In order to maintain a sense of privacy and confidentiality, the profiles of the participants were entrusted to the respective team members who interviewed them, many of whom were already "Facebook friends." Following the interview, the researchers examined the participants' social media profiles from October 2015 to March 2016 and documented any discussions of race, racism, and UCLA campus climate in the form of statuses, photographs, videos, comments or shared posts.

Interviews were transcribed and both interview transcripts and content analysis data were coded based on a coding schema developed by the team. Researchers made a concerted effort to interview a diverse group of students, both in terms of academic major, year in school, race/ethnicity and gender. All demographic information was self-reported. Table 1 displays participant demographics.

**Table 1. Participant Demographics (n=18)**

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| Race/Ethnicity | Asian/ Asian American (2)<br>Black/African American (2)<br>Latino/Hispanic (9)<br>Native American (1)<br>White/European American (4)   |
| Gender         | Female (13) Male (5)   |
| Academic Major | Political Science (5)<br>Communications (3)<br>Anthropology (1)<br>Astrophysics (1)<br>Biological Sciences (1)<br>Chicano Studies (1)<br>Cognitive Science (1)<br>History (1)<br>Sociology (1)<br>Psychology (1)<br>Psychobiology (1)<br>Unknown (1) |

## Findings

In order to determine the frequency at which UCLA undergraduates post about racial diversity and campus climate, the study team analyzed two quarters worth of content analysis data from participants' Facebook pages. Broadly, these data suggest that undergraduates at UCLA post about race and racial diversity more frequently than they post about UCLA campus climate alone. Stated differently, students post about race, both broadly and as it relates to UCLA campus climate, more prevalently than they do about UCLA culture in a general sense. Figure 1 shows the frequency of Facebook post types.

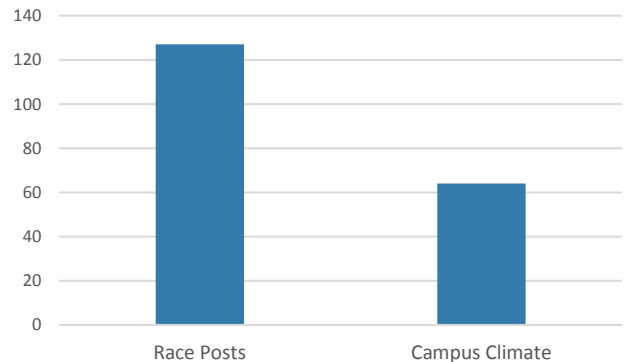
In addition to calculating quantitative frequencies, content analysis data was simultaneously operationalized to determine not only the type of post that were most prevalent, but also the nature (i.e., negative, neutral, or positive) and purpose or function of such posts. Thematically, two major findings arose from this secondary analysis: 1) When students do post about race, it is most often about a negative encounter with race or racial diversity; and 2) When students do post about race, their purpose is most frequently to teach and inform their peers about race. Figure 2 displays the breakdown of posts in terms of positive, negative, or neutral orientation, while Figure 3 illustrates the purpose or function of these posts.

In addition to content analysis data, interview data was leveraged to provide more in-depth insight into UCLA students' use and perception of social media as a platform to adequately address issues of race and campus climate. Overall, three major themes emerged from the interview data: 1) Social media acts as a **real-time news source** for campus events and occurrences; 2) Social media posts are used to **create awareness** about racial diversity; 3) Students have conflicting beliefs about social media's ability to facilitate **productive dialogue** about racial diversity.

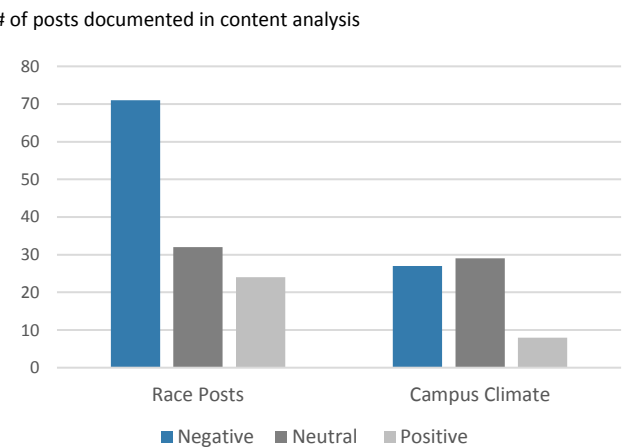
### Real Time News Source

When asked to discuss their perceptions of social media and its most prevalent usage amongst undergraduates, participants generally agreed that social networking sites such as Facebook serve as a real time news source for finding out about local, national and global occurrences. Facebook's multifaceted user interface seemed to make the site seem more accessible to students looking for immediate coverage of news events, both at home and abroad, than other sites such as Instagram, Twitter or Snapchat. The difference between these sites, as explicated by students, lies in the fact that most social media sites maintain relatively simple interfaces that focus on one type of media, such as Snapchat videos or Instagram pictures. Since Facebook users can upload pictures, share articles, stream live videos, write statuses, comment on other users' pages and link nearly every other social media site to a single Facebook account, this particular social

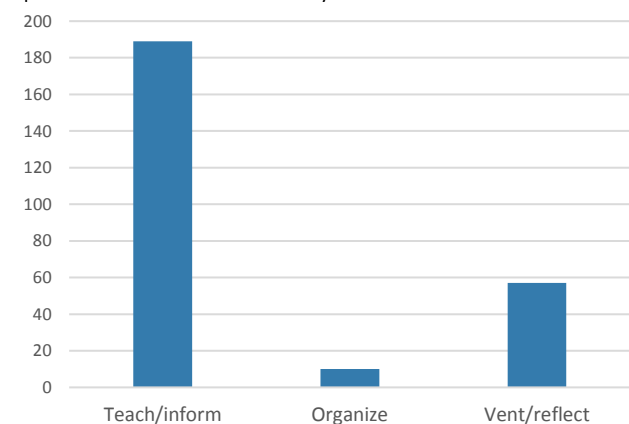
**Figure 1: Students More Likely to Post About Race**  
# of posts documented in content analysis



**Figure 2: Posts are More Likely to be About Negative Events**  
# of posts documented in content analysis



**Figure 3: Posts Most Frequently Used to Inform or Teach**  
# of posts documented in content analysis



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media site stood out to undergraduate participants as a centralized site that contains the most holistic view of campus life, events and occurrences. A second-year Latina student noted, “Facebook is kind of center of all social medias. You see stuff that you see on Snapchat, on Instagram, on Twitter, all on one central platform.”

While Facebook’s trending topic feature keeps students abreast of national and international news stories, its ability to stream live video, share location tags, host pictures and display its users’ posting behaviors in real time makes it particularly useful as digital location for campus-specific social happenings. When asked about his perceptions of social media as it related to the UCLA campus community, one Latino student said, “Every time that I hear about something occurring on campus, I go directly to Facebook to see what’s going on.” Overall, interview data suggested that UCLA students are able to get a relatively accurate and timely view of campus culture and climate from social media sites, such as Facebook, that maintain concentrated user traffic from college age populations.

## Creating Awareness About Racial Insensitivity

Facebook’s unique ability to host a multiplicity of media platforms, including SnapChat, Youtube, Instagram and Twitter, not only bolstered its ability to serve as “center of all social media,” but also made it uniquely equipped to create awareness about prevalent social issues such as racial and ethnic oppression. For instance, one Latino student reported, “There’s also been a lot of people using [social media] to like raise awareness about you know race, culture, and stuff.”

There were a variety of ways students were able to raise awareness about issues of racial diversity on Facebook, one particularly effective method being sharing personal experiences with racial insensitivity on campus. For instance, one student reported,

“One of my friends is a Muslim woman of color, and [preachers on campus] said very derogatory things towards her, and she posted it on Facebook kind of explaining what happened to be like hi, this does happen, even on our campus, where I call my home.”

For many students, the reason for posting about racial diversity was not merely to raise awareness about the prevalence of racial oppression in the midst of “colorblind” and “post racial” rhetoric about UCLA campus culture, but also to voice their personal pain and frustration about marginalization. In fact, sharing firsthand experiences with racism and racial discrimination served as a way for these students to validate their experiences, resist institutional silencing, and resist the dominant narrative that racism is no longer a prevalent concern for undergraduate students of color. Reflecting back on posts she witnessed following the racially-themed “Kayne Western” costume party, one participant noted, “The Afrikan Student Union was laughed at when they asked [frats/sororities] to stop, but the fact that they posted about it made a difference. It validates how these students felt.”

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**“The more people show that [issues of campus climate] affect them personally, the more others pay attention to it.”**

**–Interview participant**

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Students also reported that these personalized posts had a significant impact on social media users because of their affective quality. In fact, a student noted, “The more people show that [issues of campus climate] affects them personally, the more others pay attention to it.”

In addition to creating awareness through affective reflection and personal experience, undergraduate social media users also used Facebook to teach their peers about racial diversity issues at home and abroad. Posts aimed at educating fellow social media browsers often took the form of sharing informative articles, videos, and pictures. Since many students were already using Facebook to raise awareness about a social issue, they were also using Facebook to organize. As one student put it, “[students] were able to unify, set up a time, spread the word, and it was a big turn out on the campus. And I think social media definitely allowed for this to occur.”

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## (Un)Productive Two-Way Dialogue

While many students felt that Facebook was a beneficial platform to create awareness about racial diversity through one-directional article shares or posts, they were less likely to view it as a place to have productive, two-way dialogue about issues of diversity. More specifically, study participants felt that discussions of racial diversity that manifested in user comments, wall posts, and statuses tended to be hostile and argumentative. In fact, one student said,

“I feel that people tend to argue more and express their ideas more on social media rather than in person because they do not face like a physical threat...they would rather just hide behind a screen and say what they have to say.”

Content analysis data pulled from participants’ pages during the study timeframe supported students’ claim that Facebook does not always foster safe and productive dialogue about race. After a long, emotional debate about race, racism and the 2016 presidential election, one Facebook user commented, “this discussion has been hurtful to many people and I really don’t think it’s productive or worthy of so much stress.”

Importantly, there seemed to be a difference in students’ perceptions of what “productive” dialogue meant. Thorough analysis of interview data suggest that students have conflicting definitions of productive dialogue, with some defining it as simply as sharing a personal opinion or standpoint with peers on social media, some as changing other people’s opinions to match their own and still others believing it to mean coming to a peaceful resolution at the end of the digital debate. These differences in perception made it difficult for the study team to determine whether or not students believed Facebook, as it currently stands, is the most beneficial platform for promoting safe and productive student dialogue about race and racism.

Finally, findings from this study suggest that UCLA undergraduates feel more comfortable discussing issues of racial oppression in cyber spaces that are student-created and student-led. In fact, Facebook groups that were affiliated with the University (i.e. Ashe Center, Student Leadership, etc.) had significantly less student posts about race and campus climate than those that were student-generated and student-moderated (i.e. UCLA secrets, UCLA Republicans, Black Bruins, etc.). It would appear that students feel more comfortable expressing their honest beliefs about the state of UCLA’s racial climate at UCLA in spaces that are not moderated by UCLA administration, perhaps because the fear of institutional repercussions is minimal in these spaces.

In terms of site modifications, participants suggested having student-led pages that have messaging options that would allow students who have questions about racial/ethnic diversity or simply want to share their experiences about UCLA racial campus climate to engage in safe, supportive, and informative conversations with peers that have been trained in facilitating intergroup dialogue. These chats could take place in one-on-one messages or within moderated chat rooms that would allow multiple users to discuss a single issue simultaneously. Specialized chat rooms could be designed around a specific topic of pertinent interest to the campus community and take place at a regular time each week, month, or quarter. Participants also suggested that the University take strides to increase the frequency at which UCLA affiliated pages share information about racial insensitivity on campus.

## Conclusion and Implications

Overall, this study found that social media is a popular locale for undergraduate discussions of race, racism and campus climate. Findings from this study expand upon previous research in higher education and social media that suggests social media serves as a digital reflection of offline campus racial climate. Consequently, improvements to the virtual UCLA campus racial climate via the creation of student-led intergroup dialogue pages, sharing more informational posts about racial diversity on UCLA affiliated pages and regularly polling students on the UCLA campus racial climate could have a ripple effect on the physical campus climate here at UCLA.

Comprehensive analysis of the data suggests that social media could indeed be leveraged as a means of addressing and remediating issues of racial insensitivity on campus. However, the operationalization of such a

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social networking platform would need to incorporate thoughtful accommodations and modifications that ensure user safety when discussing sensitive issues such as racial and ethnic discrimination. Given that students seem to feel more comfortable expressing their beliefs about the state of UCLA's racial climate in spaces that are not moderated by staff, faculty or administration, the University could support the creation of student-led pages dedicated to moderating safe, intergroup dialogue conversations about racial diversity, discrimination and insensitivity. In addition to supporting the creation of intergroup dialogue social media pages, UCLA could work to provide greater institutional support for student-led social media pages that are already attempting to inform the Bruin community about campus climate issues.

Although findings from the study suggest that both UCLA student groups and individual students themselves are sharing information in hopes to alter campus racial climate, such informative messages were not as prevalent on UCLA affiliated pages. In order to increase the prevalence of information and resources, University-affiliated pages could circulate news articles, share information about crisis counseling or social justice events on campus, provide information about ethnic studies courses, and even facilitate monthly polls on campus racial climate. The latter might provide the UCLA campus community with more timely, user-friendly information on campus racial climate than more traditional paper or email surveys do. Also, by hosting a single-question poll on a social media page, the university could increase the likelihood of student participation, both because of its quick-and-easy design and its prime location in a space that attracts heavy student traffic.