

Race and Social Media research project - interim findings report

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Introduction

The purpose of this interim report is to outline the emerging findings from our analysis of the research data we have collated for the Race and Social Media project, funded by Meta. The purpose of the research was to explore young people's experiences of racial content on social media. The research focused on young people aged 16-24, from black and other racially minoritised (BRM) backgrounds and living in the UK.

The main methods for project included a survey to gather quantitative data as well as focus groups and interviews with young people across the UK. The survey reached 857 young people with paid promotion on Instagram being the main method for disseminating this (we stopped collating responses when Instagram stopped approving the promotional posts due to an unstated breach of rules around advertising). After deleting responses from young people outside of the target age group or who identified as white, we had 809 responses in total for the analysis. We have engaged with another 95 young people thus far in focus groups and interviews in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We are still to conduct focus groups in Wales, with these scheduled for April 2023. Our previous arrangement with a youth organisation in Wales was cancelled due to train strikes.

This interim report, first, outlines some of the key quantitative data from the survey about young people's experiences of racial content on social media and, second, identifies some of the key themes emerging from the qualitative data from the focus groups in London, Warwick, Belfast and Edinburgh as well as some of the individual interviews. At the time of writing, analysis of the wealth of rich data we have collated is ongoing, and a final report will be completed after the analysis is complete. The final report will also include a review of the relevant literature.

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 target age groups 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 reflects the distribution of racial diversity in the UK with London being the most common city where participants resided.

The survey received significantly more responses from young people who identified as female than from 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% did not say.

In regards 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
- 63% of participants stated that they use Snapchat
- 20% of participants stated that they use Facebook
- 68% of participants stated that they use TikTok
- 75% of participants stated that they use YouTube
- 14% of participants stated that they use LinkedIn
- 63% of participants stated that they use WhatsApp
- 37% of participants stated that they use Pinterest
- 22% of participants stated that they use Reddit
- 9% of participants stated that they use Tumblr
- 4% of participants stated that they use Other

The data here is skewed by the fact that the majority of 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 young people. 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 likely to have been skewed by the fact that survey respondents were recruited via social media and social media engagement was potentially not as high among focus group and interview participants. In the qualitative research, some young people indicated that they were disengaging from social media due to the negative impacts of some of the content they encountered, 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

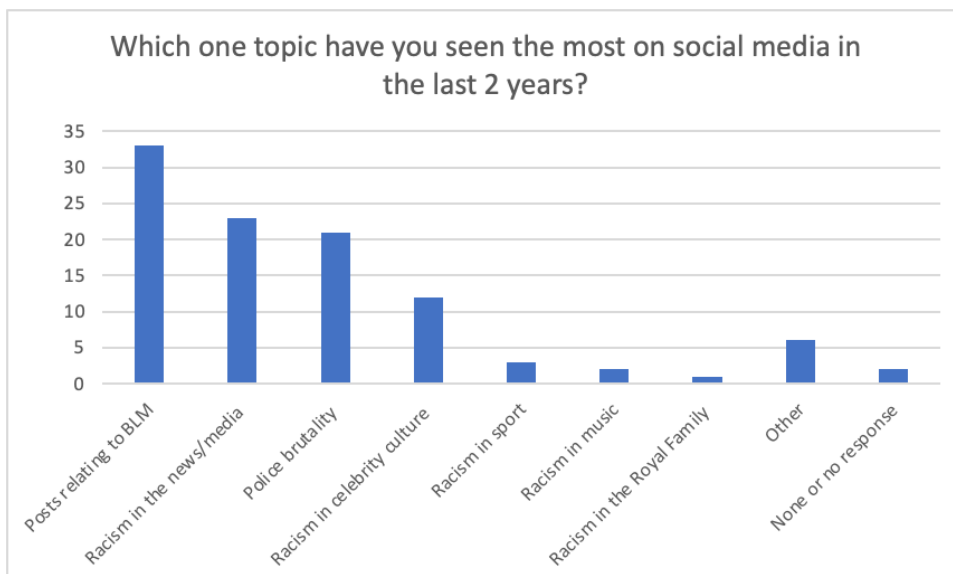
Participants were asked what kind of racial content they had observed on social media and most chose a range of categories:

- 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 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
- 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
- 91% of participants had encountered racism in the news/media
- 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.



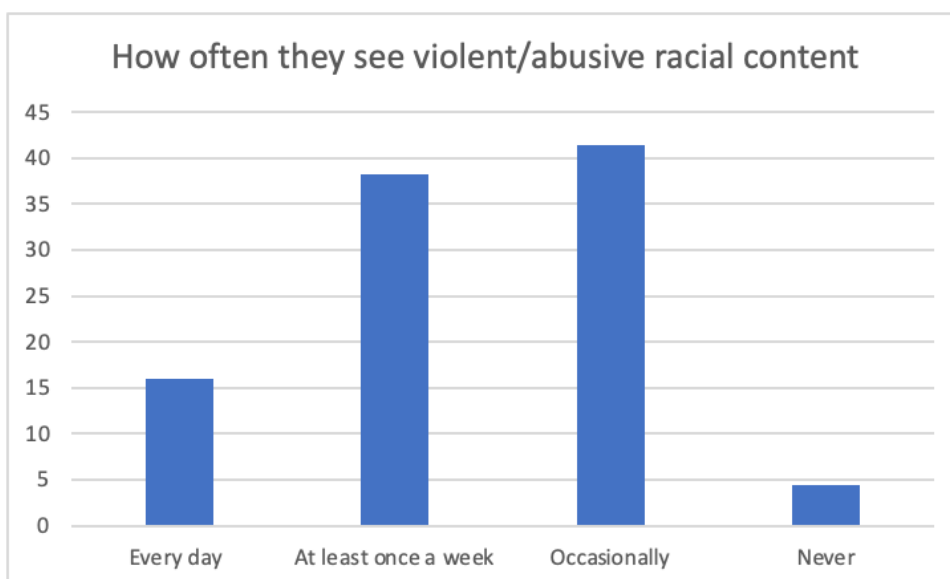
There is a complexity in analysing these questions about the topics encountered because of the emphasis on racism across all of the topics except the one relating to Black Lives Matter - and this potentially exposes a weakness in the question design. Whilst the topic of Black Lives Matter was the most 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 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. 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 in online content.

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 black and racially minoritised backgrounds are not choosing to create 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 disengage (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 at least once per week. 16% said they see it every day and 4% said never.



The most common form that this abusive or violent content takes 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. 35% said it also took the form of posts on their own feeds. 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 and 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 nearly two thirds 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%

It can be observed here that 85% of young people have reported abusive racial content to social media platforms with only 6% reporting and receiving a satisfactory response. Very few young people have reported this content to police and only 1% have reported and received a satisfactory response. Over two thirds (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.

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

‘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 examples of violence against racialised groups online may be leading to a sense of being unsafe in public.

A substantial negative impact was also reported in relation to ‘mental wellbeing’ where 42% of participants reported a negative impact. There is some nuance and complexity that emerges here in relation to the impact of racial content on social media on mental wellbeing, with 40% 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). 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. This positive impact and the complexities impacts reported around identity and wellbeing may well 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.

Focus groups and interviews – emerging themes

The sections below outline the key themes that are emerging from our analysis of the qualitative data from 7 focus groups and 6 individual interviews with 95 young people. 75 of these young people came from African or African-Caribbean heritage and 17 from South Asian heritage with 3 from South-East Asian heritage. 54 were young women and 41 were young men.

Experiences and observations of racism

Participants recognised that they were open to extensive exposure to racism being on social media, more than they would ordinarily consciously experience in their day to day lives. There was a sense that it was a space in which racism becomes amplified and thrives unchecked. They felt that there were differential responses from social media platforms to posts that were removed or flagged. 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)

Young people shared the following comments and examples from their experience of social media platforms responding 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)

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)

On TikTok and there was this video, it was like a short movie, and it was of this little black girl and her dad died, and then her mum ended up marrying this rich white guy. And he used to basically treat the little girl like shit. He wouldn't buy things for her; he wouldn't look after her at all. But then he'd spoil his wife. It didn't make sense. He used to make her scrub the floors and everything, it was basically like a black version of Cinderella, it's the best way to describe it. Why has this not been removed? (West Norwood focus group)

The participant who shared the last example above said they could not bear to look at the comments properly, but noticed how most comments referred to this as funny and were not aware of it being problematic. The participant was upset by this. A similar example was shared by another participant.

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 participant then described how he felt embarrassed and upset for the black boys. He could not understand why this would be posted other than the intent to laugh at racism and black people. He went on to question why this had not been removed.

There were references to 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 allowed to continue without it being checked.

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, but wasn't divorced as well? Her being divorced was in the media negatively, but Kate Middleton kind of got washed under the carpet, 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 differential responses to white and BRM people on social media.

Something I was thinking of was 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)

One focus group discussed how the denial of racism was a consistent feature of posts and 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 student 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 student focus group)

It's interesting to see the varying degrees from little, micro aggressions 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 effects of observing or experiencing racism on young people was that it created strong feelings that affected them in various ways. The examples below demonstrate how two participants expressed their anger in the focus groups 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, you guys, 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, fuck this country, and seeing some of the videos, women not being allowed on the train, and being kicked off, you know. (Individual interview)

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 shared and/or observed on social media, the young people identified a range of other ways in which issues of race and racism are experienced on social media. The sections below explore some of these as sub-themes of this wider theme of experiences and observations of race and racism on social media.

Cultural appropriation

In each of the focus groups, young people spoke about how aspects of their culture or history were being taken by white people, particularly celebrities, and promoted without acknowledgment of their cultural origins. Some of these participants shared thoughts on the trend 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-Butt-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 sample 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)

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 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)

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 BRM people suffering was becoming both overwhelming and leading to more abuse - and that the constant sharing of this suffering, even when well-intentioned, was increasing this.

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 students 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 student focus group)

The perceived increase in the numbers of black and minoritised influencers being sponsored by companies was seen as being an approach to 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.

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 student group)

Even when you watch football matches, before, 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)

The young people also recognised that portrayal of race issues on social media was increasingly the realm of influencers and celebrities. Many young people reported that they now avoided posting about race and racism, particularly since the Covid lockdowns and George Floyd murder, due to an increased level and perniciousness of the backlash when doing so. This reflects the quantitative findings from the survey reported earlier.

Scrutiny and backlash

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 George Floyd's death.

There was a point in BLM protests where, before then, George Floyd was a black man who had been killed just because he was black. But then it came up he had a criminal record and right-wing people loved this and just seeing that terrified me, not just because – a lot of these were getting a lot of likes, over 100k likes. It was being shared everywhere, but also there was not really any defence. (Warwick student 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, you're an addict. 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 student focus group)

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)

There was an understanding that black influencers and commentators 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)

One participant spoke about the development of #blacktwitter and the scrutiny and response to this.

Where black people have been pushed into a category, and then they've now accepted it. And now because they've accepted it, it's now a problem, so it's very contradictory, that's like the segregation that has come because of non-white people looking at things and

making their own assumptions. And then now that we've taken on these to make them positive... and then it's like oh, but you guys want to be equal but then you're leaving us out. It's like make up your mind in that sense. (Tottenham focus group)

Several young people identified the difference in scrutiny and attention for specific perspectives and views being expressed when someone is from a BRM background.

I think with that I sort of meant when 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. That's censorship.... Maybe an example is Palestine, how you just can't talk about it on social media without being censored. I think it's Bella Hadid who, because obviously she posts a lot about Palestine, and she says her story on Instagram gets over a million less views when she posts about Palestine. (Warwick student focus group)

In general, just the scrutiny that people face for having some views like 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)

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, for example, when people misrepresent their views are cut in half, 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 student focus group)

The young people recognised 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. 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.

Polarisation of online debate

Young people shared that their experience from either creating their own posts or responding to others' posts, commenting on race and racism, led to responses that reflect polarised beliefs and opinions. Fixed positions would quickly emerge without reflection or debate. The futility of continuing to engage was recognised by young people from across the focus groups.

I think it adds a huge weight of, I don't know if I'd describe it as grief, sort of like just knowing that there's knowing you can say or do, and because it's so vastly beyond any of our control as individuals. And particularly for me, whenever Shamima Begum comes up anywhere, if I see it come up on any app I will exit the app immediately now because I can't ... Seeing the story and knowing what's happened, etc., is a huge grief in and of itself. But then seeing people's opinions on it or people who have good intentions actually just parroting like Islamophobic tropes, etc. I have enough to worry about, I don't also want to continue thinking about it. (Warwick student 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)

I don't engage either, but sometimes if there's something hateful like a negative article, I might just scroll through the comments and see if there's one that's ... positive or supportive, most of the time I just scroll past but sometimes I'll just look at the comments. (Warwick students 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 because - I think it's important to see it - but when you see it too much, well... (Tottenham focus group)

Participants were choosing not to engage fully with the racism based on their experience and insight that the comments had become an opportunity for individuals to 'cheer on' each other in the racism they wanted to express. These threads of commentary and discussions had the effect of desensitising and leaving participants feeling disinclined to engage.

Impacts of experiences of racism – disengagement from debate

The theme and sub-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 due to a sense of futility. This disengagement from debating the issues is the key theme emerging from our analysis around how BRM young people are responding to racial content they encounter on social media. The following sub-themes explore some of the impacts on young people's engagement with social media in more detail including overwhelm, disengagement, subversion, and a sense of enforced representation.

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 and examples of racial inequality and racism, 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 negatively 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 student 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 negative. (West Norwood focus group)

One participant shared a concern 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 students focus group)

For some participants, these negative portrayals were becoming a 'normalised' experience of their time spent on social media platforms. Some participants described how they had become desensitised by the hateful racism they experienced and saw on social media. They disengaged with the comments 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)

Young people sometimes stated that they had become desensitised to racism online and this was also cited as a reason for their disengagement.

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. I've kind of become desensitised ... 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 student focus group)

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 student focus group)

However, whilst the word 'desensitised' was often shared by young people as one of the impacts of such experiences, further exploration often brought forth the overwhelming and upsetting impacts, as in the hopelessness described in the comment above. This left us without concrete examples of such desensitisation, suggesting the opposite was in fact more often the case.

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 identified taking this break not long after the George Floyd murder and the prominence of BLM posts around

this, due to the overwhelm and backlash such posts created. Young people shared how they and their friends disengaged 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 student 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)

If people had the choice, I don't think they would want to deal with racial relations on social media, but you can't escape it. They don't want to deal with that. Like, we need an escape at some point, but we can't find one. (Tottenham focus group)

Other young people shared how they actively avoid discussions of race and racism on social media by subverting the algorithm by finding alternatives that included sharing photos, news articles they agree with, or nature pictures. One young person in Newcastle 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.

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 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 student focus group)

I very much resonate with that since Floyd it got too much. It's more light-hearted and to keep in touch with friends. I removed tons of people from accounts because I don't care, and I don't want you to know what's happening in my life. I use an app called BeReal as well literally to just check up with friends and saw what they're doing. That's mostly what social

media is to me. I like cooking accounts, things like that. It's all very light-hearted. (Warwick student focus group)

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)

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. This sense of algorithms not being responsive to what young people want to see was key to their 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.

If you are going to have discussions on racism they need to be monitored and looked after if they are going to be useful as they just spiral into being cruel and abusive, I think it's a good idea that somehow, they are moderated by someone, but I am not sure how that happens. (Warwick student focus group)

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.

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 consider how you represent your whole racial community whilst online. This was particularly pertinent in a discussion with students in Warwick.

Recently a lot of black artists have been going to satanic viewpoint, especially on worshipping the devil and presenting their seeds in hell and stuff. And what it does is put a bad representation on the black community. But we're all these sorts of people.... but there's a way that it affects the community, but you live with it, it matters within. 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 student focus group)

It looks like we can't even unite as a community because there'll be the one side agreeing and saying he's not doing a good thing or representing us positively on the other side. Yes, so there's one side that thinks he's a negative role model and then another side that will say no, but as we argue in and amongst ourselves in the comments on these pictures and videos, it just looks like we can't be united. We don't, we can't stand together as a community. (Warwick student focus group)

Young people felt a sense of futility about how to challenge negative stereotypes online. One participant expressed how language used by black people was distorted, misrepresenting and twisting their 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 people from BRM organisations were under increased scrutiny for what they shared. The young people shared that they felt this pressure in their own posts.

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)

... being a black woman on social media ... anything you say is really nit-picked at, so you can't post certain things without seeming angry... you can speak about being a woman, but you can't speak about being a black woman. (Individual interview)

This sense of being a representative for other black people and the wariness of playing into stereotypes was part of what was leading to disengagement.

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 were often 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 even negative posts had motivated and led some young people to become involved in both online and offline activism.

I always see clips being used online for promoting black power and equality and stuff like that, and I feel like it had a really strong effect on me. (Tottenham focus group)

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 himself 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 their communities. For some young people, rather than disengaging from the issues, it was about turning them into positive action. They largely only found this to be 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)

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 student focus group)

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 became so angry and tired with it all I decided I must do something, and I think from the refugee crisis and ways which people were viewing migrants I was outraged by comments I read that was the breaking point, I joined a black political group. (Warwick student 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 of these young people did actively use social media platforms for activism. One of them had experienced the censorship from the university for his activism on Palestine. Several had been active in educating friends and peers in school, college or university after the BLM explosion on social media.

Social media is having an impact on young people's offline lives

The examples above demonstrate how the more positive experiences on social media often led to offline activism and action. There were also offline impacts of the more negative experiences, particularly in relation to mental health and wellbeing in the analysis completed thus far. This one example is explored briefly as a sub-theme below but will be analysed further alongside other offline impacts in the final report.

Mental health and Wellbeing

Concern over individual mental health and their own wellbeing featured in all the focus groups. 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 around the injustices facing BRM people.

These participants shared their thoughts on how they had managed their wellbeing, through avoidance of or interactions with racial content on social media, and the importance of family support.

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)

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 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)

It's not really ingrained in my day-to-day life like that, where I can just look at it from afar and not feel the need to be on there, and not feel the need to use it, because it's just safer, mentally speaking. (Individual interview)

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)

This final quotation reflects the nuance also uncovered in the survey as to whether the impact on mental health is positive or negative, overall. This young person states 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 on their mental wellbeing that balanced out, overall.

Initial conclusions – pending further analysis

Overall, young people 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. A sense of hopelessness and futility often leads them to disengage from certain content/topics or from social media altogether. 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. 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. In the survey, around a third of 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 the cost of posting or engaging with issues of race and racism on social media.

Some young people do 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 do not engage in that way, avoiding the backlash or their representation being misinterpreted or stereotyped in problematic ways. The survey suggests that young BRM

people are more likely to engage with someone else's content 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 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, potentially impacted by the explosion of content relating to police brutality following the murder of George Floyd. There are questions to be explored here about whether these feelings of unsafety and potential 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 thirds 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. The qualitative data from focus groups and interviews also highlights a negative impact on mental wellbeing, with further analysis needed of the other offline impacts from this data.

Young people largely felt that social media platforms were not doing enough to respond to problematic content relating to race and racism. Some shared their own reflections on what could be done differently. The final report will develop and share recommendations for social media platforms as voiced by the young people, and from our overall analysis of the research data.