Encountering ethnic bias online heightens depression risk in young men

By Carrie Wood

Even passing exposure to discriminatory social media posts, a growing problem online, is enough to adversely impact mental health in young men, while women were not as severely affected, a recent study of Hispanic adults found.

The study, recently published in the Journal of Clinical Psychology, was what researchers said was “likely the first” to examine discrimination on social media and mental health among emerging adults, highlighting risks in this distinct developmental period. Researchers surveyed 200 young Hispanic adults from Miami-Dade County in Florida and Maricopa County in Arizona and discovered that seeing discriminatory content on social media, even when it was not directed at the individuals in particular, led to higher levels of depression and anxiety among the men.

Miguel Ángel Cano, the lead author and principal investigator of the study and an associate professor in the department of epidemiology at Florida International University, noted that while the women surveyed
reported higher symptoms of depression and anxiety in general, consistent with national epidemiological research, the symptoms manifested “as a function of exposure to social media discrimination among men, but not women.”

While the men and women in the study had the same level of exposure to discriminatory posts on social media platforms, the men surveyed were more severely impacted by that exposure than the women and accordingly reported higher levels of adverse mental health symptoms. The researchers also stressed that even if the discriminatory content was not specifically directed at an individual, simply witnessing it was enough to impact one’s mental state.

Cano said that the research did not include a qualitative analysis, so it did not determine which social media platform contained the highest amount of discriminatory content, but he stressed that online ethnic discrimination across social media at large is “getting progressively worse.” “We are now seeing more social media profiles and new social media platforms that are more inclined to cater to discriminatory content,” he said.

The study noted that nationally members of the Hispanic community tend to use Facebook more often than any other kind of social media, though survey questions included queries about Twitter, Instagram and other social media sites.

Though many major social media platforms do offer some degree of a safeguard against such content, such as the
ability to report it in an effort to have it removed, Cano noted that removing the content can often be difficult due to how, “It is presented in the form of a ‘joke’ that does not intend to cause harm, but may spread microaggressions.”

Cano said that greater awareness needs to be focused on the simple existence of such content on social media sites and its effects.

“Once we create this awareness, people may be more motivated to scroll or click away to something else, and not engage with the content,” Cano said. “One strategy to increase this awareness is to create social media campaigns against social media racism/discrimination.”

While this specific research was focused on the Hispanic community, Cano said that the impact of ethnic discrimination through social media can be seen in other minority communities, and that research into the topic must continue.

“There is a need to expand this line of research with other racial/ethnic groups and age groups while using better measures of online discrimination,” Cano said. “More importantly, we need to begin identifying coping resources that mitigate the effects of social media discrimination on mental health.”

*The study, “Exposure to ethnic discrimination in social media and symptoms of anxiety and depression among Hispanic emerging adults: Examining the moderating role*
of gender,” was published on Sept. 1 in the Journal of Clinical Psychology. It was authored by Miguel Ángel Cano, Florida International University; Seth J. Schwartz, University of Miami; David P. MacKinnon, Arizona State University; Brian T. H. Keum, University of California, Los Angeles; Guillermo Prado, University of Miami; Flavio F. Marsiglia, Arizona State University; Christopher P. Salas-Wright, Boston College; Cory L. Cobb, University of Texas at Austin; Luz M. Garcini, University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio; Mario De La Rosa, Florida International University; Mariana Sánchez, Florida International University, Abir Rahman, Florida International University, Laura M. Acosta, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Angelica M. Roncancio, University of Houston-Downtown, Marcel A. de Dios, University of Houston.