Thought Leader or Mediator?:

Exploring Different Leadership Approaches to Addressing Controversial Issues on Social Media

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Abstract

News of controversial events spread quickly through technology and social media. In August 2014, the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white police officer sparked national controversy. Facebook and Twitter users shared most of the event’s updates and critiques. Social media users, especially those with a large following, faced the choice to either speak up and express their opinions, or stay silent. The current study utilizes individual interviews and a focus group to explore college student leaders’ use of social media in response to the Michael Brown controversy. This study focuses on student leaders because they are more likely to be cognizant of the impact of their online postings. In addition, leaders often face social expectations to say something about hot topic issues. Interviews and the focus group revealed the intersectionality of student leaders’ identities, although their online profiles may speak to one more than another. Participants’ usage of social media varied depending on whether their online identity focused more on their race, leadership position, or other personality traits. Overall, findings demonstrate that student leaders’ identities impact their use of social media when addressing controversial issues.
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College students’ social media profiles provide a glimpse into their individual lives, showing one’s friends, preferences, interests, and aspects of personality. These online profiles can make a strong impression on potential employers, romantic partners, and friends, which is why many not only feel the need to create a profile but also take its content seriously. For instance, employers often go to the Facebook profiles of potential hires to learn information that cannot be gained from the job interview or résumé (Berkelaar, 2014). Aside from social media profiles being used to make an impression on potential employers, it can simply be used to portray professional qualities of a person. If an individual strongly identifies with their leadership position, then this may also be an aspect that is shared through their social media sites. An example of this can be seen with politicians or activists who use social media to showcase their respective organizations or causes for which they are advocates (Ross, Fountaine, & Comrie, 2015). However, in addition to serving as a medium to showcase one’s life, users continue to return to these social networking sites on a daily basis for other reasons.

Aside from Facebook’s obvious functions of connecting people, sharing updates about one’s life, posting photos, etc., it can also be a place to learn about and discuss hot topics in local and national news. According to the Pew Research Center (2014), 30% of U.S. adults use Facebook to get their news. Facebook has even acknowledged its status as a news source by adding a news-related “trending” section to the side of the home page. An example that showcases Facebook as a news medium can be seen in how the site was used surrounding Michael Brown’s shooting on August, 9, 2014.
Darren Wilson, a white police officer, shot Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man in Ferguson, Missouri and sparked a national discussion on race relations. When a controversial topic like race relations occurs in the United States, many, particularly leaders, feel the need to speak up. Protests and riots erupted across the nation from New York City to Los Angeles after the shooting (Yan & Almasy, 2014). The passionate responses to the event also expanded onto social media sites. Many used the hashtag #blacklivesmatter to open up discussion on how black lives are viewed in the United States. Some used the Facebook Events feature to organize protests on college campuses across the nation, while others blacked out their profile pictures to demonstrate solidarity. Individuals and leaders hoped their actions on Facebook would raise awareness among their friends and followers. Facebook became a platform to discuss race in America and people began to regularly check the website to keep up-to-date on the opinions of peers, co-workers, and family and friends.

On college campuses, students were quick to engage in responses to the Ferguson case, especially black and minority students (Jaschik, 2014). Many members of co-cultural groups on predominantly white campuses felt they needed to address this issue because the campuses could so easily overlook it. During the time of the Michael Brown case, it was very easy to identify a person’s standpoint on the issue merely by looking at their Facebook profiles. Student leaders, in particular, may have been looked up to for an opinion on such a popular, controversial topic. This paper will explore college student leaders’ use of Facebook during a national controversy.

**Social Networking Site Usage**

Facebook is a popular social networking site amongst college students. Pew Research Center (2014), found that 77% of adults online between the ages of 18 and 29 years old used Facebook. In this same age demographic, 53% used Instagram, 37% used Twitter, and 23% used
LinkedIn. As the most popular site, people often use Facebook as a “home base” to share their posts from Instagram and Twitter. Also, people on other social media sites, such as Instagram and Twitter, are most likely to also have a Facebook account. However, of those who have a Facebook, there is a smaller likelihood that they will also have an account on another social media site. These statistics demonstrate the strength and popularity of Facebook.

According to Facebook (2016), “People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them” (para. 1). Though the statistics show the popularity of the social networking site (SNS) and the company focuses on how it connects people to others, there are myriad other uses beyond mere connection, especially when it comes to the reasons why college students use Facebook. Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert (2009) examined the popularity of Facebook amongst college students. They looked at how much, why, and how students use Facebook by having them record their daily use and experiences on the site. The researchers found that the students in their study use Facebook about 30 minutes each day, spread throughout the day. When looking at the reason why students used Facebook, the top reasons were to communicate with friends, to look at/post photos, for entertainment, and to find out information about events. They found that most of the time spent on Facebook was observing and not directly communicating with people.

Facebook allows users to connect with their social circles by posting statuses and photos, sharing information such as articles, and posting to each other’s walls. Additional features include messaging, commenting, and liking that allow users to directly communicate with their Facebook friends. Because of the numerous ways to use Facebook, individuals can easily use these features to portray themselves in a particular way. Therefore, Facebook has become a way to manage one’s self-impression and identity.
Social Networking Sites and Impression Management

The numerous features present on Facebook and other SNS allows users to craft the image they present through these media. They can choose the most flattering photos, spend time putting together perfectly worded posts, share articles on news topics to make them look “in-the-know”, etc. All of these acts are a part of the performance a person puts on while interacting with others. Goffman (1959) argued that people are constantly putting on and watching performances during interactions. Therefore, people are simultaneously the actor in their own performance as they sit in the audience of another’s performance. These performances help control how others view an individual. If we want people to see us in a certain way, then we will act in a certain way on the “front stage,” or the aspect of our performance that is public, while the “back stage,” or aspect of our performance that is private, involves actions that may not match the impression one is trying to maintain in public.

Although Goffman wrote his ideas about performances long before SNS or the internet were established, we can see that people use social media to perform in a sense because what they choose to share on social media will impact how others view them. Therefore, Goffman’s ideas have an obvious application to SNS (Hogan, 2010). In a real life performance, if a person wants to come across as a professional, they will dress up in a suit, walk with authority and confidence, and speak properly. However, with social media, people can keep up this image long after face-to-face interaction because of the permanent nature of posting content to the Internet. One can use a professional headshot of him or herself wearing a suit as their profile picture, post statuses voicing their opinion on current hot topics in their career field, and share pictures of him or herself receiving awards at a ceremony at their workplace. All of these actions help the person manage the impression they have on others when an individual views his or her online profile.
Therefore, a Facebook profile is a more permanent front-stage performance that frees a person from interacting face-to-face in order to create an impression.

The concept of performances and people as actors introduces an aspect of intentionality behind people’s behaviors. We can now begin to look at how others act and instead of just thinking that it is just a part of who they are. We can start to see how they may be intentionally behaving in order to get others to view them in a certain way. For instance, students who lead on-campus organizations may intentionally maintain a social media profile that highlights their identity as a leader.

Leaders in general are more often in the spotlight and therefore have to be more careful about how they present themselves. They can have a larger audience than regular members and therefore, more critics. Many good leaders calculate their actions, to a certain degree, so they can keep up the image that caused them to be selected as a leader in the first place. Because college student leaders balance their classification as a student with that of being a leader of an organization, it is important to use social media in a way that showcases the aspects of their college experience that are most impressive or essential to them because that is what people are looking for when they search for them online.

Many student leaders are in their positions because it will look good on their resume and help them get a good job after graduation. Therefore, before assuming that all leaders are only considering those they lead when they post to Facebook, we need to consider that they are also posting for future employers. For instance, employers may use Facebook posts to screen applicants during the hiring process and that information is useful even though it is considered a violation of privacy (Kluemper, Rosen & Mossholder, 2012; Slovensky & Ross, 2012). In fact,
some companies make it an official part of the hiring process (Cross-Tab, 2010). According to a study done commissioned by Microsoft, “Of U.S. recruiters and HR professionals surveyed, 70% say they have rejected candidates based on information they found online” and “85% say that positive online reputation influences their hiring decisions at least to some extent” (Cross-Tab, 2010). Social media posts that negatively impacted a person’s chances included evidence of applicants doing things such as drinking or doing drugs, exhibiting poor communication skills, or just posting inappropriate or provocative photos. College student leaders have more areas of their life to consider when posting to Facebook. They have their friends, the members of the organization, family, future employers, etc. When posting to Facebook they may only have one or all of these groups in mind.

When choosing what actions to take on Facebook, people often have an imagined audience in mind. An imagined audience is “a person’s mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 330). The people one believes she or he is posting to directly impacts what a person posts and how they post it. Think of how before you go to a party and you imagine how things might go—the music, the people there, the atmosphere, how people dress, etc.—these things play a role in how you go to the event or prepare for it. In the same way, before we post on social media, we imagine who might be looking at our post—their relationship to us, their personality, their agreeableness, etc.—and that affects the content of what we post and how we post it. The problem comes when, while posting, an important actual audience member is not considered. College student leaders may have several audiences that correspond to different aspects of their identity including friends, family, or members of their organization. As a result of the varying social roles one might have, there could potentially be tension when choosing which imagined audience to post to on a social
networking site (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This tension can be brought about when a national controversy comes along, especially one related to one’s race or other co-culture, and users need to decide which audience should be the target of their online communication.

**Co-Cultures and Communication**

Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) explores how people in co-cultures communicate with dominant groups. A co-culture is defined as a group within a larger culture that has its own beliefs, practices, traditions, language, etc. Orbe (1998) lists six influential factors individuals use in order to choose a communication practice: (1) preferred outcome, the individuals desired effect; (2) field of experience, an individual’s own life experiences; (3) abilities, an individual’s ability to enact a certain behavior; (4) situational context, the practices deemed most acceptable for a situation; (5) perceived costs and rewards, how harmful or beneficial a communication practice will be; and (6) communication approach, the level of assertiveness or aggression for a behavior.

One of the stronger influences is preferred outcome which is when “co-cultural group members typically (consciously or unconsciously) give some thought as to how their communicative behavior affects their immediate and ultimate relationship with dominant group members” (Orbe, 1998, p. 89). A person’s preferred outcome leads to she or he engaging in assimilation, accommodation, or separation. Assimilation “involves attempts to eliminate cultural differences, and the loss of any distinctive characteristics, to fit in with the dominant society” (Orbe, 1998, p. 89). Co-cultural group members who prefer accommodation are accepting of the differences between groups and want to work with people of other cultures. Orbe (1998) states that the “essence of accommodation is the development of appreciation, interdependence, and communicative skills to effectively work with persons from other
cultures.” (p. 91). Those who practice separation, which is on the opposite end of the spectrum from assimilation, want to “maintain separate group identities outside or in dominant structures” (p. 92).

Another influential factor is communication approach, or whether the person chooses to be nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive with their communication practice. Individuals who practice nonassertive behaviors appear to be non-confrontational and to preference the needs of others over their own. Assertive individuals, on the other hand, will consider both personal needs and the needs of others when approaching communication with the dominant group. Aggressive communication practices involve “activities perceived as hurtfully expressive, self-promoting, and assuming control over the choices of others” (Orbe, 1998, p. 105).

Bringing together the factors of preferred outcome and approach, Orbe (1998) composes a grid in which 26 communication practices are organized. For example, a nonassertive separation communication practice is avoiding, which is when a co-cultural group member may avoid a certain person, conversation, or topics. Another form of this is averting controversy which involves a co-cultural group member avoiding controversial topics. An example could show a black person would avoid discussing race-related controversial issues with colleagues in order to not introduce any new tension or disagreement to the workplace.

Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998) explores the communicative practices of co-cultural group members. However, in today’s society, where social media, cell phones, and other forms of electronically-mediated communication have become increasingly popular, there are new forums to apply co-cultural theory. With these new applications, it is important to examine cultural and co-cultural differences in how groups use Facebook. For example, the phenomenon of “Black Twitter” has become a way for people within the black co-culture to discuss topics
relevant to their group. The creation of this online community is an assertive separation approach that involves practicing “communicating self”, “intragroup networking”, and “embracing stereotypes” (Orbe, 1998). This particular use of a SNS is specific to that co-culture and cannot easily be used in the same way by members of different co-cultures.

DeAndrea, Shaw, & Levine (2010) researched how culture impacts communication online. Their study is based on the premise that a person’s culture affects how one sees her or himself and therefore, affects how she or he communicates. This particular article focuses on members of American culture, but looks at the differences between whites, blacks, and ethnic Asians living in the United States. The study tested many hypotheses and found that, overall, African Americans differed in their social networking site usage from whites and ethnic Asians. This shows that black people have a strong culture that influences how they act online. In connection to co-cultural theory, people in different co-cultures will form varying imagined audiences based on their different communities. A college student might be black, but attend a predominantly white institution. Whether they view their audience as other black students at the school or as the majority white students will affect which communicative practice the student uses while posting online.

In this study, the co-cultural communicative practices of black students and student leaders will be analyzed in the context of the case of Michael Brown’s shooting. Also, the possible strategies behind each participant’s move on social media within that context will be discussed with the hopes of finding a connection between impression management and their used communicative practice. First, I asked what co-cultural communication patterns were observed in participants’ use of Facebook when discussing the Michael Brown shooting. Second, I asked how co-cultural communication was related to self-presentation on Facebook as participants
addressed or failed to address the Michael Brown shooting. Finally, I asked how a student’s identity as a leader and as a member of their respective race had different influences on how they used Facebook when posting or interacting with content about the Michael Brown case.

**Methods**

The study is a qualitative analysis of college student leaders’ responses to individual interviews and one focus group. The aim of the interview was to discuss participants’ experiences with social media during the time of the Ferguson case. The aim of the focus group was to discuss how college leaders, particularly residential advisors, use social media generally during times of national controversies. This section details the procedures, participants, and instruments used in the current study.

**Participants**

A total of 19 student leaders from a large southeastern university participated in the current study. Eleven student leaders participated in individual, semi-structured, interviews and 10 participated in a focus group. There were two participants who completed an interview and participated in the focus group. Participants (N=19) ranged in age from 19 to 21 years old, entering into either their third or fourth year in college. The sample included 53% (n=10) female participants, and 47% (n=9) male participants. Racial/ethnic characteristics included 42% (n=8) Black/African American, 37% (n=7), Caucasian American, 11% (n=2), Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% (n=1) American Indian, and 5% (n=1) Hispanic/Latino participants. All participants in the studied identified as leaders, either through holding a leadership position on campus, or by being viewed as a leader by others. Interview participants included 5 resident advisors, 2 leaders of minority and/or social justice organizations, 1 leader in Housing and Residential life-related organizations, 1 president of a campus ministry, 1 president of a student activities board, and 1
co-founder of a student organization. Focus group participants included 10 resident advisors from a housing community at the university.

**Procedures and Instruments**

I held one focus group for a group of 10 resident advisors in an on-campus housing community, for which I worked. Focus group participants were recruited via email to participate in the study. The community director for the community in which we worked forwarded information about the focus group to the staff and those who were interested in participating attended. The focus group lasted 1 hour, and was held in the conference room in the community. Focus groups questions discussed social media usage, leadership role, impression management on social media, and controversial issues discussed on social media. The responses from the focus group were used to shape the questions used for the one-on-one interviews.

I also conducted interviews with 11 college student leaders during the summer, 2 of whom were participants in the original focus group. I recruited participants through snowball sampling; the original participants contacted were resident advisors who participated in the focus group. Since I conducted this study during the summer, it was hard to determine which leaders would still be on campus. Therefore, by first reaching out to a few leaders known to be on campus, the remaining participants were recommended to be a part of the study by the initial participants. Participants completed a one-on-one interview. Interviews were held in study lounges and offices around campus. The interviews were recorded on an audio recorder, iPhone voice memo application, and Evernote. All interviews were later transcribed to be used for analysis.

The original interview script employed 18 questions used in a semi-structured format. The survey questions were developed after completing the above-mentioned focus group with
resident advisors. The questions were organized into four categories: Leadership Role & Social Media, Social Media & Impression Management, Social Media & Michael Brown Case, and Discussion of Posted Social Media Content. The interviews lasted, on average, an hour.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis proceeded using an iterative process of searching for themes within focus group and interview transcripts. First, I conducted an initial reading of the data to get a sense of early themes that might emerge (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002). After the initial read of the data several fledgling themes emerged, and I began an *in vivo coding* phase (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002) where I re-read the data with the fledgling coding theme in mind to find specific examples of the themes. Finally, in my *axial coding* phase, (Lindolf & Taylor, 2002) I related categories to each other using a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

In the following section, I present results of my data analysis.

**Results**

Three main themes emerged from data analysis about student leaders’ likelihood for posting social media commentary on the Michael Brown shooting. First, factors such as personality and personal experiences at the time of the incident affected participants’ social media activity. Second, leadership role impacted what participants considered to be appropriate use of social media when addressing the controversial issue. Third, participants’ race also played a role in their social media use, because the shooting of Michael Brown sparked national discussion about race relations. In this section, I present findings from transcriptions of the participant’s recorded interviews. All names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of each individual. Any mention of leadership roles remains vague as well. Demographic information used to contextualize the quote used will be provided in parentheses.
Characteristics and Context

Many of the participants referenced their personality, communication characteristics, or personal preference when explaining why they may or may not have posted to social media during the time of the Michael Brown case. Therefore, they did not connect their behavior to the event, but instead to their individual preference for social media use. For example, Tom, a resident advisor said, “I would see what people were posting and commenting and I refrained from commenting mostly because me personally, I’m not one to really post something or say something if I’m not 100% sure.” Here, Tom’s inaction on social media did not reflect his feelings on the situation; rather, he attributed his inaction to his hesitancy, in general, to posting on social media. Other participants noted their own communication characteristics, such as avoiding conflict or outspokenness. These personal preferences are reflective of Orbe’s (1998) communication approach factor which categorizes behaviors as being nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive. These characteristics provided a base for whether or not they were likely to post on social media in general, and in response to Michael Brown’s case. In Tom’s case, his nonassertive nature directly impacted his social media use during the time of the Michael Brown controversy. In another interview, Lon shared his preferred method of interacting on Facebook; he said, “I do more of the liking thing now, so I’ll like statuses. If there is an event that’s going on or an organization is hosting something, I’ll share those. I kind of stopped posting stuff for a while due to personal preference.” Lon provided another example of how a person may have not shared much online in regards to the Michael Brown case that was not reflective of his actual opinions on the case.

Another factor that may have impacted participant’s likelihood to post is what other events were going on in their lives around the time of Michael Brown’s shooting. As college
student leaders, the participants had a busier schedule than many, and sometimes this led to them not using social media at all for different reasons. For instance, when asked why she did not post from her personal account about the Michael Brown case, Chrissy, a Latina resident advisor, said “I honestly don’t remember. In November, I was getting ready for study abroad. I was getting my life together.” Also, Mark, a student leader in a social justice organization, said,

I had an internship, so when I was following it, there wasn’t really this space to speak about it myself because I did not know much about it at that time and we were working on so many other projects, so there were in times in my life where I felt like I didn’t do enough or I wasn’t made aware of some things and I felt like I came short of a lot of things because exams, school, work, internships…

Both Chrissy and Mark were just too busy to have much of a presence on social media surrounding the Michael Brown case. For Mark, this was particularly shocking because he was the most highly recommended participant through snowball sampling and was often sought out to post his opinions on social justice issues on social media sites. He is known on campus as being an opinion leader, so for him to be too busy does more to highlight the busyness that student leaders can face in college. The many tasks and responsibilities that Mark had to handle overshadowed his normally assertive (sometimes aggressive) communication approach to educating those in the dominant culture about various social justice issues. In all of the examples discussed so far, participants’ personalities, communication characteristics, or busy contexts deterred them from posting much about the Michael Brown shooting. However, leadership role also affected participants’ social media use; some leaders were compelled to speak out about Michael Brown, while others were compelled to remain silent.

Leadership Role
Another key factor impacting student leaders’ social media use during this time was type of leadership role or approach to leadership. Participants’ connection to their leadership role often affected management of their social media presence. Many chose to manage social media use to portray themselves either as a neutral, unbiased party or to portray themselves as an opinionated thought leader. Therefore, I characterized many of the participants as either having a “neutral” or an “opinionated” approach to presenting themselves as a leader online. Although the foci of much current leadership research centers on how to use social media to a team or improve an organization’s performance (Kasian-Lew, 2014; Lee, 2015), in the current context, leadership approach focuses on how leadership roles impacts the need to be seen a certain way by others in order to be considered an effective leader for their specific role. For participants who belonged to a co-cultural group, the preferred outcome played a large role in which leadership approach they used. They had to consider “how their communicative behavior affects their immediate and ultimate relationship with dominant group members” (Orbe, 1998, p. 89). For many the preferred outcome was determined by the perceived costs and benefits: would it do more good or harm with those in their organization if they chose to speak up or stay silent?

Neutral approach. In the context of this study, neutrality in the leadership position involves leaders not showing any sort of bias or preference to hot topic issues for which people they lead might differ in opinions. Though student leaders may appear neutral in their position, this is not necessarily reflective of their actual stance on certain events, like the Michael Brown situation. Sheila articulates this sentiment from the perspective of resident advisors. She said,

A strategic role for someone like an RA would be to be a little bit more neutral because your resident has to be open to you. Or you don’t want to compromise that, I get it. You can still be more radical but at the same time, let your residents know that there’s a
difference between like your radical views and how you feel about them and maybe deal with some of the issues that might come up with that.

Resident advisors mainly practiced the neutral approach because of the nature of their position. The institution where data were collected expects resident advisors to help create an “inclusive on-campus environment” (Department of Housing and Residential Education, 2016, para. 1). Therefore, it is important that residents feel comfortable in their living environment, no matter what their specific beliefs may be. Because of this, many resident advisors might be wary of posting strongly opinionated posts onto social media for fear that it might create a barrier between them and those residents who may have differing beliefs or opinions.

The majority of resident advisors interviewed noted the fact that their position may call for them to be more neutral. In addition, students who led diverse groups of people also shared this approach. For example, Hailey, a president of a campus ministry said,

It’s a really diverse ministry, so I don’t know where other people stand in that ministry.

So if I wasn’t a leader, I think I would’ve posted a lot more. So it’s like in the back of your mind even though I was a lower leadership position, it’s like I have all these friends that are in the ministry and they’re all really diverse and they probably have different opinions that I do and I don’t want to hurt anybody through social media.

Hailey, however, was also very passionate about the issue, so it was hard for her to avoid posting on the subject matter completely. One risk of the neutral approach is that some followers might interpret their leader’s inaction on SNS as a form of apathy, ignorance, or even assimilation. One way that Hailey was able to maintain a partially neutral approach without appearing unaware of the event was by sharing a post by a Christian rapper who wrote about the subject. By doing this she was able to still maintain her identity as a Christian leader without using her own words
which minimized the chance of offending those in her ministry. However, for student leaders who were willing to take more of a risk, and felt obligated to share, could use their role to educate those who may not understand their perspective, or reach out to those within their co-cultural group. Both were actions I observed in those who had an opinionated approach to leadership.

**Opinionated Approach.** The opinionated approach describes those who used their social media site to express their own opinions on the Michael Brown shooting. Student leaders used this approach if they were cognizant of their following and chose to use social media as a platform for their opinions on hot topics. In the following quote, Bret, a leader of a student activities board, described his thought process behind his decision to post about the Michael Brown case. He said,

> I don’t think I would’ve posted if I didn’t identify as a leader…If I wasn’t a leader, I personally would feel like what business would I have posting. Like who is listening to me if I’m not a leader? If I wasn’t a leader, what’s the purpose of sharing my opinion or sharing my thoughts? Leaders are in a role where they have the power to share and be heard.

Student leaders in this category are more likely to use their standing as a leader to be a role model for others and to educate those that may be in their organization. Bret, a black student, had a large following on social media and, therefore, saw his position as an opportunity to be more of a thought leader outside of his official leadership role. Those who are aware of their impact and the power that their position can have tend to use this approach. It makes sense for leaders who hold the highest position and who are the “face” of an organization to use this approach because
they strongly identify with the fact that they are a leader. Consequently, this could lead to them to being more aware of their influence and using it to communicate messages to their audience.

While engaging in accommodation and educating others outside of the co-culture was an important and common way for leaders to use social media when addressing the Michael Brown case, SNS could also be used to engage in separation. When engaging in separation, the goal is not to find a common bond with the dominant culture but to maintain a separate group identity (Orbe, 1998). Some of the participants noted that some of the posts by the black community were used to provide support or a space to share personal thoughts about the Michael Brown case. By using social media in this way, opinionated leaders also were able to highlight how this event particularly affected the black community and made it a conversation about race relations.

**The Right to Speak about Race**

Participants’ identification with their respective races and ethnicities was also a key factor in how they chose to respond to the Michael Brown case on social media sites. Black participants communicated differently about Michael Brown than non-black participants. Race appeared to have encouraged or discouraged participants from posting or interacting with social media posts about the Michael Brown case. Some participants felt empowered to speak because of their race, while others felt disinclined to speak because they did not feel their race gave them a right to be heard. Therefore, identification with a race and what that meant to a participant impacted how they engaged in co-cultural communication practices.

Many interviewees who identified as black felt a stronger connection to the case because they shared the same racial identity as Michael Brown. It seemed that students had an understanding on the campus that this was an issue for black people to speak out about because it
involved someone from the greater black community. Interestingly, many participants saw this as permission or approval for them to speak out about Michael Brown on social media. As black people, these participants were a type of expert on the subject and they were able to see the event from a different perspective than their white counterparts. Hailey, a black student, saw the Michael Brown case as

An opening where I feel like more of a space to speak as an African American woman than other people. Whereas other times, I feel like my voice is not, a lot of times I feel like I am not included in conversations unless something like this happens.

Hailey suggested that in a public forum, like Facebook, there are unspoken rules on who should or should not say something depending on the type of situation. For instance, black people should talk about black issues. For Hailey, she often felt muted during public conversations; however, when the conversation was about race, Hailey felt empowered to speak because she was black. It is interesting that Hailey mentioned feelings of being muted for muted group theory is one of the theories that influence co-cultural theory. According to Orbe (1998), “muted group theory suggests that a language reflects a worldview,” specifically a dominant worldview that does not always reflect the experiences of co-cultural groups. Hailey felt that with the Michael Brown case, the event could be approached by her co-culture. Lon, another resident advisor, also said that when he posted on Facebook it was “more so [to] the black community than anything else because I don’t believe in engaging ignorance, so it was more so to how do we bring the black community together at this time.” Therefore, if people in the black community use social media as a way to bond with each other during a time of grief, then people outside of this group may not feel like they have the right to join them or interfere. This is a form of separation that
acknowledged the fact that the black community did have a special connection to the Michael Brown case that other co-cultures and the dominant group did not have.

Other participants suggested that white people felt unable to speak out about Michael Brown because of their race. Tom, a black resident advisor, explicitly expressed the same sentiment, when he said, “I feel like white people, the ones who supported the black community...didn’t share a lot because it wasn’t really their place to share necessarily. It wasn’t really their battle to fight.” He acknowledged that anyone could support the black community during this time, but during social media interactions, white people did not say much because it was not really their space to do so. Rick, a white student leader who worked with housing, discussed how race served as a way to determine validity about who had the right to speak. Rick said, “I mean I can have an opinion on what happened, but for someone who could really put themselves in his shoes, my opinions and my stances maybe weren’t as valid.” Rick also shared in his interview that there were times when he thought about sharing something on social media but chose not to in order to avoid any arguments or debates that may result. For many black participants, race granted them the legitimacy to publically speak out about the Michael Brown case. However, for many non-black participants, race ensured their silence.

**Discussion**

The interviews revealed three broad themes when answering the question of how student leaders address controversial issues, specifically the Michael Brown shooting. Each of the themes seen through the lens of co-cultural theory give rise to implications about leadership and race, and how identification with both influence their behavior on social media when addressing a controversial issue.
Participants’ attribution of their silence about Michael Brown on Facebook to personality characteristics and busy lives offers important implications for our understandings of student leaders and online self-presentation. As participants discussed which communication orientation or practice to use, participants attributed it mainly to their personality. Therefore, if they viewed themselves as shy, then they attributed their shyness to a lack of posting, rather than, perhaps, a lack of desire to say something. While this makes sense, there are other factors to consider. For Orbe (1998), communicators consider myriad factors, such as preferred outcome, perceived costs and rewards, and life experience when selecting communication practices (Orbe, 1998). The participants lack of awareness of the factors that influenced their behavior is interesting. It is possible that if student leaders were to look at these other factors, then they will expose some unconscious factors that impact how they use social media. In doing so, student leaders may be able to use communication more effectively and strategically on social media. For example, having leaders think more about the preferred outcome before they post may influence how they choose to present themselves as a leader on social media. They could then proceed to strengthen their online presence and use it to help their leadership approach.

Findings that leaders in the current study either remained neutral or shared strong opinions about Michael Brown offer implications for leaders’ choices for online self-presentation. Both the neutral and opinioned approaches are likely context-specific; depending on the type of organization, nature of the leader, and nature of the followers, one approach might work better or worse. Participants in the current study seemed to believe that neutral leaders kept their followers in a safe environment, free from discussing controversial issues. However, this suggests that participants thought inclusion and differing opinions were mutually exclusive. One implication of this is that these leaders risk missing an opportunity for critical discussion in favor
of a sense of security. Can neutral leaders figure out a way to create a sense of inclusion and foster critical thinking about important cultural issues? Conversely, opinionated leaders risk alienating their followers when they share their, potentially controversial, opinions. Many opinionated leaders in the study felt a moral mandate to foster dialogue about Michael Brown and used their leadership position as a platform. How can leaders share their opinions and ensure that they are creating and fostering open dialogue rather than forcing discursive closure?

These findings about neutral and opinionated leaders also raise important future questions about the benefits and detriments to certain leadership approaches. Identification as a leader had a large impact on how students used social media, so much so that participants viewed posting about controversial issues as either an obligation or an action to avoid. Therefore, I must ask, which approach is right? Should neutral leaders take advantage of their position and post about hot topics on social media? Should opinionated leaders take a step back and not risk alienating anyone who they may lead? Does choosing one approach over the other make a student a “good” leader? Does using the opinionated versus neutral approach vary with context?

While there is much debate over what makes a “good” leader, studying how their behavior on social media could impact their overall impression and relationship with their followers is worth studying. Research on authentic leadership describes the benefits that come when a leader is honest and transparent, but if impression management is valued over authenticity, then student leaders might be missing out on a way to positively impact those they lead (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2014). As different types of leaders use social media, the messages they share and how they communicate can prove essential to their reception by a target audience. While this study focused on the perspective of the student leaders, it is also important to hear the voice of those they lead. Do members of an organization prefer a more opinionated or neutral
leader, or does it depend on the specific organization? Does the alienation that the neutral leaders fear actually take place, or are members able to separate a leader’s online personality from their organizational performance? These questions will all help add to research on leadership and social media and how leaders can benefit from having a strong social media presence.

Findings about race and leadership are important for co-cultural members. As Goffman suggests, people have multiple selves to present to their audience. However, on social media sites, it is hard to present different selves, especially if portraying one identity might hinder the performance of another. When participants, especially black people, faced a controversial issue related to race, they were sometimes forced to choose between their performance as a leader or their performance as a member of their co-cultural group. Having people make this choice can lead to dissonance or feeling silenced because they do not want to jeopardize membership in either group. This is particularly true for people whose leadership roles are connected to a job where an opinionated post on a controversial issue might lead to social or professional consequences at work. Future research should focus on how managing competing identities could prove beneficial or risky.

Findings about race suggested a very interesting implication about who has the “right” to speak on social media about particular issues. The Internet and social media sites are lauded for being places where people can be themselves and speak freely and openly; yet, this study has revealed a set of unspoken rules about who can comfortably speak up within this college community. First, some black participants felt silenced when speaking publically about issues unrelated to race. Orbe (1998) suggests that members of co-cultural groups often feel muted and silenced in society. It seems that Facebook is another platform that can contribute to the silencing of minorities. Future studies should explore how social media sites can actually empower co-
cultural members to speak out about any social issues they would like. Second, participants seemed to believe that only black people had the right to comment publically about the Michael Brown shooting because of their skin color. White participants felt uncomfortable participating in this dialogue. However, this discursive segregation is a potentially dangerous trend because race relations in the U.S. will never improve if only black people feel they can speak about issues of race. Improving race relations must involve a concerted, cooperative effort among members of all races. White privilege will only be confronted when white and black people are able to have open conversations about race and race relations. Future studies should explore ways to encourage opening dialogues about race relations to members of all races.

Finally, the current study has a few implications for resident advisors, as well. Resident advisors are tasked with creating safe, welcoming communities for college students. They have to balance being a student, a community leader, and actually living with their residents. When controversial issues arise, especially ones with which they can strongly identify, it can be hard to navigate how to behave face-to-face and on social media. The resident advisors in this study are an interesting group for which future research should focus. How can resident advisors balance creating a safe community and encouraging critical dialogue? Is it appropriate for resident advisors to introduce controversial issues that could cause disharmony to their residents? Is it possible to create harmony and foster meaningful dialogue about race?
References


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