

A Sociological Analysis of Social Media

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Introduction

The advent of social media has had an indelible impact on American society and the world. The ability to share thoughts and desires (via “likes” on Facebook and “hearts” on Instagram) has created an international platform that has shaped popular culture (Levinson 2017). Social media is also now synonymous with college culture; student engagement is largely communicated via the Internet (Kim et al. 2016). However, this international social forum does not always convey “likes” and “hearts.” Some social media posts are overtly discriminatory and offensive. Racist posts, coined “cyber racism,” have emerged as a pattern in a variety of social media outlets (Jakubowicz 2017). Given the popularity of social media, coupled with this troubling racist trend, my goal as a professor was to capitalize on my students’ engagement with social media by giving them a sociological lens through which to consume (and participate in) social media. Other scholars have also argued that social media can be used as a pedagogical tool to show students how to analyze racism in an effort to ultimately, resist it (Nakagawa and Arzubiaga 2014).

- My research objective was to measure my students’ ability to sociologically analyze an Instagram post.
- By sociologically analyze, I mean being able to do at least one of the following:
- Explicitly identify **sociological concepts** (i.e. racism or racial inequality).
 - Explicitly connect seemingly isolated events to **historical patterns** (i.e. lynching or racial violence).
 - Explicitly explain how the post relates to social institutions (i.e. the state).
 - Explicitly identify the complexity of a post (i.e. multiple messages can be communicated simultaneously).

Note: For this presentation, I focus on the first two bullet points.

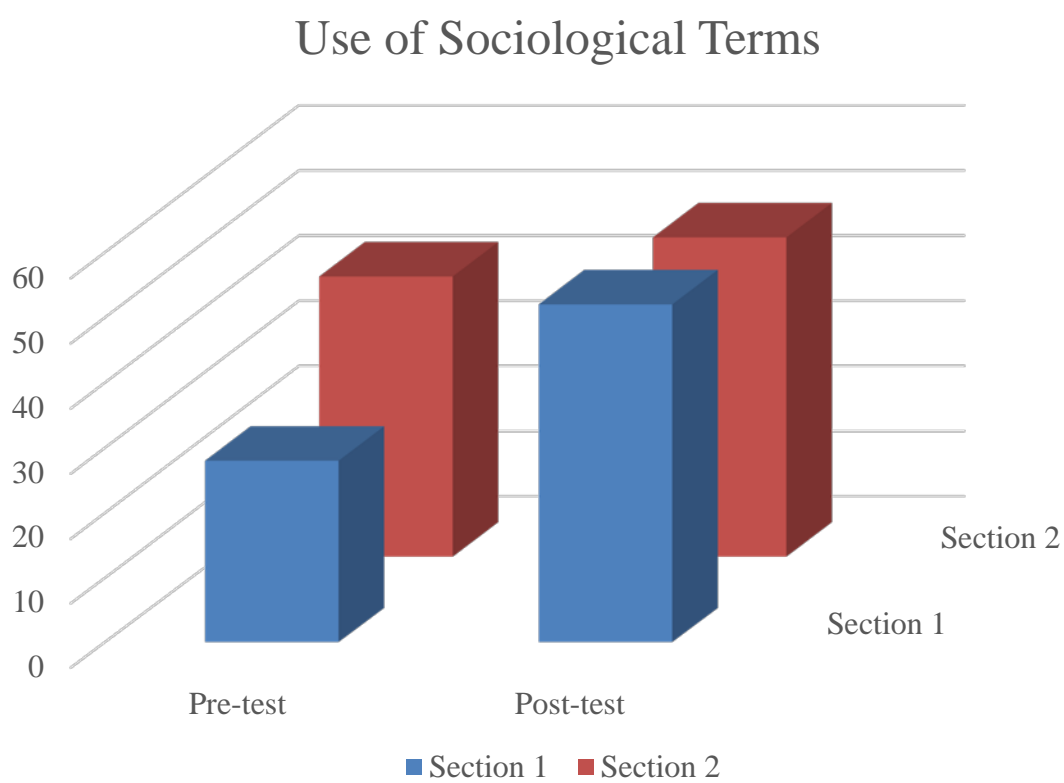
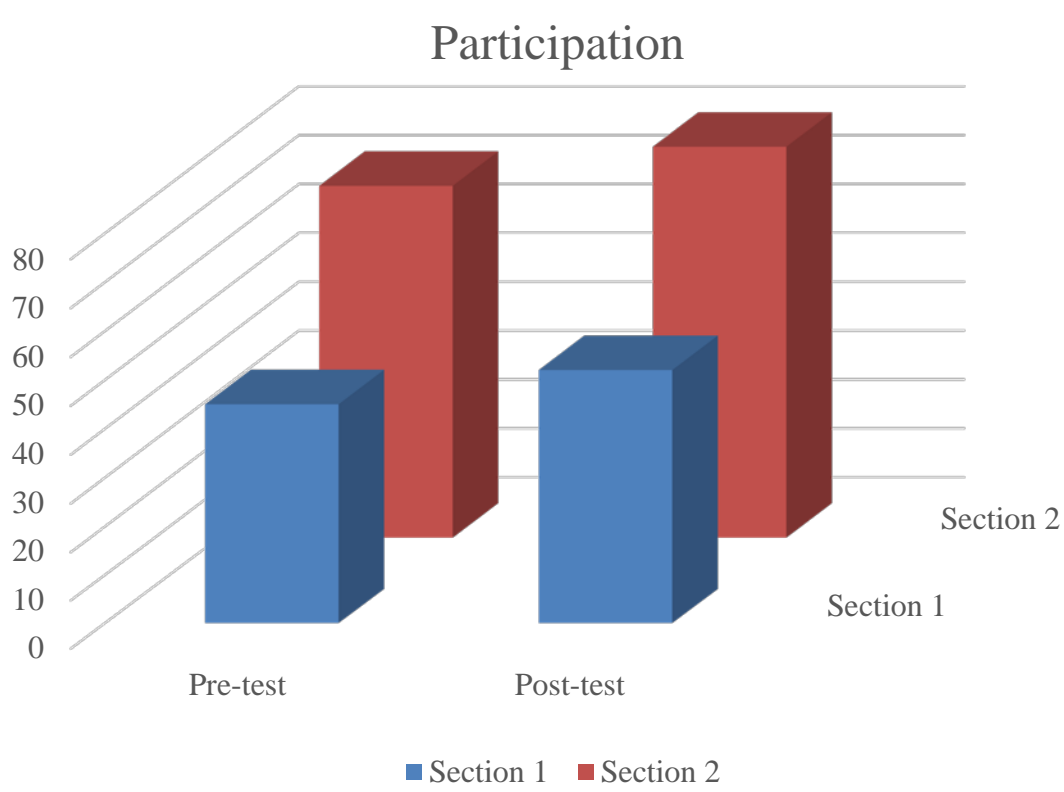
- Pre-test and post-test of an Instagram picture
- Interventions: race unit/chapter and social media analysis assignment

- Two sections of my *Principles of Sociology* course (40 students in each section) hand-wrote and submitted their answers to the following questions:
- What do you see in this Instagram post?
 - What is your initial reaction?
 - What do you think is happening?
 - What messages do you think are being conveyed or communicated?

Participation was completely voluntary.

Findings

This Instagram post is from **October 2016** at the UW-Madison vs. Nebraska football game in Madison, Wisconsin.



Analysis Assignment and Conclusion

- Analysis Assignment:**
- Directly quote the social media post if it is from Facebook or Twitter
 - Describe the picture or video and any captions if the post is from SnapChat or Instagram
 - Explain if the post was re-tweeted/widely shared and/or was covered in the news media
 - Identify which social construction(s) was/were referenced
 - Explain if the post challenged or perpetuated (or both) ideologies about race, gender or sexual orientation?
- How did their analyses evolve?**
- In both sections, there was an **increase in the use of sociological terms** like “racism,” “racial inequality” and “racial violence.”
 - The increase in students’ use of more racially literate language suggests an improvement in their ability to analyze social media with an understanding of how racial messages relate to institutions and patterns, both currently and historically.

- Important notes:**
- I did not offer extra credit for participating because I did not want students to feel penalized if they chose not to participate.
 - The increase in participation in the study may indicate an increase in interest in the topic.
- What will I do with my data?**
- I plan to publish my findings in *Teaching Sociology*.
 - I will continue to assign this social media analysis.

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References

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