
RICH BRIAN'S RESISTANCE AGAINST RACISM IN INSTAGRAM

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Abstract

Racism can trigger the development of an individual's resistance due to the inequality between ethnic minority and majority groups. This study aimed to discover the forms of resistance shown by Rich Brian through his Instagram account. The method used in this research is descriptive qualitative method by applying the resistance theory by Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg (2022). The data source used in this research comes from Rich Brian's Instagram account with the username @brianimanuel (<https://www.instagram.com/brianimanuel/>). The data used in this study are verbal and visual components of Rich Brian's Instagram posts. The results of the analysis show that the emergence of Rich Brian's resistance against racism occur after he experiences various forms of racism while being part of an ethnic minority in the United States. Rich Brian's Instagram account only displays four of the five resistance forms identified in Ellefsen et al.'s framework: ignoring, confronting, protesting, and sharing experiences.

Keyword: racism, resistance, ethnic, instagram, social media**INTRODUCTION**

Racism is a term that refers to racial attitudes or negative perceptions that aim to exclude certain racial groups. According to John W. Frazier (2010: 12) in a book entitled "Multicultural Geographies: The Changing Racial/Ethnic Patterns of the United States", anti-Asian sentiment emerged following the arrival of Chinese immigrants to America in the 19th century. This sentiment gave rise to the moniker "yellow peril," which was intended primarily for Chinese people since their presence in America and Europe were seen as a threat to the white community. This fear culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1886, which banned Chinese immigration to the United States. The Act further worsened discrimination and racial injustices against the Chinese community, leading to racial violence, social segregation, and immigration discrimination in the 19 and 20 century (Sabharwal, Becerra, & Oh, 2022).

The Chinese community has often been subject to racial stereotyping that extends to other Asian groups, particularly East and some Southeast Asians, due to perceived physical similarities (Li & Nicholson, 2021: 2). This stereotyping intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in Wuhan, China, in early 2020, as Asian ethnic groups were increasingly perceived as carriers of the virus. Former U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated use of terms like "Chinese virus" and "China virus" in media statements—both personally and as a political figure—exacerbated this association (Chiu, 2020; Fallows, 2020). According to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), such language has fueled a rise in hate crimes against Asian communities, as some white supremacist groups have used the pandemic to justify violence against Asian-Americans (Mallin & Margolin, 2020). Consequently, Asian communities in the United States have experienced a marked increase in discrimination and hate-based violence. Since mid-March 2020, shortly after



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the New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced a state of emergency due to Covid -19, there were more than 1,500 reports of anti-Asian hate incidents received by the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council and its partners (Campbell & Ellerbeck, 2020). The rise was also recorded by FBI from 158 anti-Asia hate crimes in 2019 to 746 in 2021, which involved harassment, bullying, shunning and other discrimination incidents (Ruiz, Im, & Tian, 2023).

Resistance against racism could be carried out through social media. Social media has a positive influence on organizing social movements and political activities because it allows people to connect and communicate with each other so that information can be disseminated on a massive scale (Chusna, 2021: 125-129). Many public figures use social media as a platform to engage with their fans as well as to promote their social/political activism., such as Ashton Kutcher, Virgil Abloh, and Lizzo. This research investigates how Rich Brian uses his Instagram account to voice his Asian identity as a form of resistance against racism in the United States. Rich Brian (Brian Imanuel) is an Indonesian Hip Hop artist who pursues his career in the US. Rich Brian's Instagram feeds are used in the form of visual and text as the research data. This research employs Ellefsen's theory of resistance (2022) to find out how Rich Brian shows his resistance through his Instagram account as his method in dealing with racism in the US.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The occurrence of racism directed to Asian ethnic groups in the United States has become increasingly concerning as it is difficult to reduce, especially since the COVID-19 outbreak spread to various parts of the world. The study centers on Rich Brian's Instagram account, specifically examining multiple posts that signify each forms of resistance against racism in the United States according to Ellefsen et. al's theory.

This research identified types of resistance conducted by Rich Brian via his instagram account. In a research entitled "Resisting Racism in Everyday Life: From Ignoring to Confrontation and Protest" (2022: 441-451), Ellefsen Banafsheh, and Sandberg examined the strategies used by members of racialized groups to fight back racism in day-to-day interactions and identified five forms of resistance to racism: (1) Ignoring; (2) Confronting; (3) Sharing Experiences; (4) Reporting; (5) Protesting.

Ignoring racism indicates that many individuals prefer to ignore the existing racism in their environment. Also, they use humor to cope with hostile comments or incidents, in that way minimizing their emotional impact. The second startegy, confronting racism involves directly addressing the perpetrator or educating others about the impact of their words and actions. Such strategy helps avow their presence and challenge the normalization of racism. The next is sharing experiences of racism with others. The purpose of the strategy is to foster a sense of community and support. It also serves to raise awareness about the prevalence and impact of racism. The fourth strategy is reporting incidents. Some individuals take formal steps to report incidents of racism to authorities or organizations. This can include filing complaints or seeking legal recourse, which helps to hold perpetrators accountable. The las is protesting. Engaging and participating in protests and demonstrations, such as in the Black Lives Matter movement, can empower individuals and encourage collective action against racial injustice.

METHODS

This research belonged to the cultural studies by using Rich Brian's Instagram Post as the object of analysis. In developing this study, qualitative research was employed because this type of research construct researcher's arguments and observations. There are two data sources obtained which are primary and secondary data. Rich Brian's Instagram posts from 2015 to 2024 served as the primary data source, while the secondary data used several reference sources such as books, articles, and journals to build a structured analysis from various points of view in researching the resistance of Rich Brian against

racism in the US.

There were several stages in collecting data after the data source has been determined: 1) Collecting several Rich Brian's Instagram posts which relevant to Rich Brian's ethnic identity as an Asian by screen capturing each post; 2) Classifying data to each category of resistance form; 3) Reviewing books, articles, journals, and online research that are related to the issue to strengthen the analysis. The research data uses text in the form of visuals and captions on each post. Ellefsen et al.'s resistance theory is employed to find out types of resistance conducted by Rich Brian through his Instagram post.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Instagram is one of the social media that plays a role in providing a platform for the activists to coordinate various forms of resistance to form a massive and structured movement through the features provided. Public figures like Rich Brian can optimize the use of social media to strengthen the spread of anti-racist messages because their posts can reach millions of users and encourage their followers to take action.

Rich Brian's Instagram posts represented four distinct forms of resistance, namely: ignoring, confronting, protesting, and sharing experiences of racism. The explanation regarding the analysis and discussion is divided based on these four types of resistance.

Ignoring Racism

One of the way to lessen the negative impacts faced by minority groups in ignoring racism is by downplaying them using humor. This form of resistance becomes a common response from the victims to face racism in order to deny their significance so that the probability of a conflict rising between them and the perpetrators of racism can be decreased. Humor is a type of "soft resistance" because it can be used to express anti-racist sentiment in a number of constructive ways, such as to strengthen interactions between minority and dominant group by shaping hegemonic representations and discourse in order to erase stereotypes (Ellefsen, Banfsheh, & Sandberg, 2022: 445). Rich Brian has done this through his Instagram post in response to the cases of race-based violence committed by the police officer in the US against several minority groups, including Asian ethnic groups.

This post was uploaded on August 10 2017, long before the Covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the world (Figure 1). In this post, Brian printed a photo of himself with an American police officer whose face blurred on the t-shirt he is wearing. Selfies



Figure 1. Rich Brian's Instagram Post on August 10, 2017

are a way for individuals to participate and engage in society (Orekh & Bogomiagkova, 2017: 1238-1243). In this case, Rich Brian takes selfies as his strategy to contribute to social movements by criticizing government institutions. Brian wrote the caption "I Love Cops But Only The Nice Ones That Aren't Dickheads", which implies that police officers are dickheads. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, this term is a vulgar slang, which means an unpleasant or stupid person. This mockery contains humor, which is also used by Brian as a criticism of the American police officers because of their negligence in handling race-based violence that continue to occur in the US. Brian highlighted this institution because of their involvement as perpetrators in various violence cases that occur in society, including violence based on race and ethnicity. As part of the minority group in the US, Brian's act of criticizing police institutions can be considered a social movement against institutional racism because Brian speaks from the victim's perspective.

Carmichael and Hamilton first introduced the term 'institutional racism' in 1967 through their book entitled "Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America" (Phillips, 2011). Institutional racism refers to the practices, policies, and procedures, intentionally or unintentionally, which result in the unequal treatment of individuals based on their race or ethnicity. It operates on individual, organizational, and even broader societal level and gives cumulative effects to individuals by institutional practices. Thus, institutional racism is complex and pervasive, operating through various mechanisms and affecting the life chances and opportunities of individuals based on their racial or ethnic background.

This photo uploaded by Brian received more than 130 thousand likes and attracted more than a thousand comments. Following Brian's action in this post, various responses come from many Instagram users, such as approving his insulting description of police officers as "dickhead". This indicates that Brian succeeded in highlighting the crisis of public trust in police institution, which was caused by public's negative perception of the institution's competence, morality and concern.

Although this action is a fascinating move to attract the attention of wider community, neither the picture nor the caption in this post can clearly emphasize the discourse of institutional racism because there is no argument of why Brian called this institution a "dickhead". As a result, many viewers of this post take Brian's mockery of the police institution as a joke rather than as a critique or a form of resistance against racism. Therefore, ignoring racism becomes a form of resistance that does not have a long-term impact in handling racism because it is relatively a self-oriented response.

Confronting Racism

Confrontation is a form of resistance that Rich Brian also uses in response to racism in the United States. On March 18, 2021, Rich Brian posted a screen capture of his tweet on Twitter/X about the shooting spree case that occurred in Atlanta, Georgia. The post is stated below:

This shooting was targeted against Asian women, he was fucking ARMED. They arrested him alive and well & they said that it was a "bad day for him". This shit sickens me. Please donate here:

anti-asianviolencesources.carrd.co

advancingjustice-atlanta.org/donate

linktr.ee/redcanarysong (Imanuel, 2021).

Rich Brian, who belongs to the ethnic group that was targeted in this case, tweeted about the shooting spree and posted a screenshot of the tweet on Instagram (Figure 2). He first announced this via Twitter, a brief and instantaneous microblogging platform that enables users to include links in their tweets, so that he can direct the audiences of his post to reliable news sources. Brian reposted the statement on Instagram as he has a larger audience on this platform. His action shows Brian's strong concern for all cases of race-based violence so that his statement can show Brian's position against the perpetrators of racism.

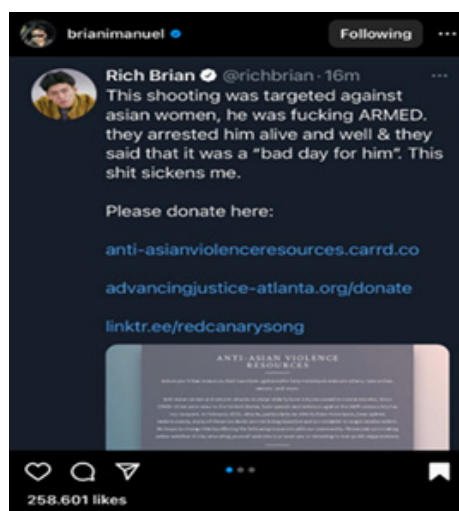


Figure 2. Rich Brian's Instagram Post on March 18, 2021

Because Brian's tweet contained a provocative narrative intended to influence the opinions and behaviors of a larger community, his response to this case was perceived as a form of confrontation. Brian used strong words and a compelling argument to condense the chronology of this shooting case into a single paragraph, sparking a lively debate on the platform. In the first slide of this post, the sentence "he was fucking ARMED" uses uppercase to write the word "armed" to highlight that this shooting case was a planned murder case because the perpetrator was equipped with a firearm. Some harsh phrases such as "fucking armed" and "this shit" also signify that this expression is a confrontation thrown by Brian as a form of deep anger towards the shooting incident.

Rich Brian's response to the Atlanta shooting shows that confrontation can be an effective strategy in responding to racism. Through the post, Brian not only expressed his personal emotions but also highlighted the injustice in the western media's framing of race-based violence. With provocative responses, space for critical and in-depth discussions on racial issues can emerge, helping ethnic minority groups to voice their concerns.

Protesting Racism

Protesting racism can be an important strategy to attract public attention and encourage cultural changes, so protesting becomes one of the many strategies used in social movements. Protests can take many different forms as part of resistance, including online or digital campaigns, boycotts, and demonstrations. In the era of technological development, digital movement is a new innovation in shaping protest actions and cultural mobilization because it has a wider audience distribution and global impact. Digital movements allow individuals to contribute to the dissemination of the movement's message simply by relying on the internet and social media. If done collectively and organized, it can create significant public pressure on the institutions that become the subject of criticism. On the other hand, digital movement risks the escalation and capitalization of information (Chusna, 2021: 125-130). Any social media-generated content will always feature capital owners' adverts, making digital campaigns vulnerable to misuse and profiteering.

In connection with the shooting spree in Atlanta, Brian conducted a digital campaign as a form of protest by posting a message on Instagram with the hashtag #StopAsianHate. This campaign has become a new resistance movement voiced by many social media influencers since the increase in cases of racism against Asian ethnic groups around



Figure 3. Rich Brian's Instagram Post on March 18, 2021

the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Figure 3). Since the outbreak first emerged in Wuhan, China, many unfounded accusations and hate speech have hurled at the Chinese community, affecting the Asian community as a whole. Moreover, the hate speech made by some US politicians seems to justify the xenophobic behavior that is specifically thrown at the Asian-American community. Hate-based violence that is increasingly out of control has led to the emergence of the #StopAsianHate campaign on various social media as a counter and a platform for the victims to voice their concerns. In the case of the Atlanta shooting, the Asian-American community expressed their anger and sadness towards the victims of the shooting through the hashtag #StopAsianHate which reached 400,000 tweets a week after the case occurred (Lee & Jang, 2023: 2879). Not only used to share experiences of being a victim of racism, this hashtag is also frequently used by social media influencers to highlight the urgency of stopping anti-Asian bias and hate crime, which generates heated discussions among Instagram users (Zhang, 2022: 11).

The phenomenon of the hashtag #StopAsianHate played a significant role in shaping the perspective of the wider community on social media. Through this digital movement, policymakers should be able to pay more attention to discrimination and violence directed towards Asian communities and make necessary changes to create an environment that is inclusive of the different backgrounds of its population.

Sharing Experiences of Racism

Hawa, as cited in Ellefsen et al. (2022: 447), stated that there are two main purposes of sharing experiences. The first is to vent and devalue their experience of being a victim of racism to make it easier for them to cope with it. Secondly, the other involves learning lessons how to deal with comparable situations in the future in order to better deal with racism. People who belongs to ethnic minority groups often develop a strong sense of belonging to their cultural group as well as appreciating other cultural groups. This may occur because their sense of empathy develops more after experiencing similar struggles against racism.

Rich Brian has had many connections with famous black people since he moved to the US. This is due to the close connection between Brian's job as a hip-hop musician and also the hip-hop culture that was born from the black ethnic group. In addition, his closeness to black people is also influenced by Brian's integrity in supporting fellow minority groups while living in the US. Brian displays his affinity for black people through several posts; one of these features a picture of him with the rapper August 08 (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Rich Brian's Instagram Post on August 30, 2023

The photo with a hugging pose uploaded on August 30, 2023 shows Brian's closeness with August 08 as a fellow rapper and also part of an ethnic minority group in the US.

Ray Davon Jacobs, better known by his stage name August 08, is a hip-hop musician under 88rising with Rich Brian since 2018. August 08 has had a huge influence on the hip-hop music industry in the US collaborating with various renowned musicians such as Duckwrth and Kyle. He also co-wrote DJ Khaled's No. 1 Billboard Hot 100 hit "I'm the One" featuring Justin Bieber, Quavo, Chance the Rapper, and Lil Wayne (Lamarre, 2023).

As a musician from a black ethnic background, August 08 played a role in introducing hip-hop culture to Rich Brian in a deeper way and helped him quickly adapt to the American music industry when Brian first started his career in this field. Both Asian and Black people often face stereotypes in the music industry because they are perceived to have limited access to resources needed to thrive in the American music industry, such as access to professional networks, funding, music labels, etc., making it difficult to compete with musicians from dominant ethnic groups. As an Asian, Rich Brian also faces stereotypes about the type of music that "suit most" with his ethnic background. Asian hip-hop genre was not yet widely recognized in the US and Western countries few years ago because it was still very much associated with black culture. This challenge makes Asian hip-hop musicians need to explore more about hip-hop as a music genre and a lifestyle. Therefore, Brian is surrounded by many musicians from the black community and gets a lot of support from fellow ethnic minority groups.

Brian expressed his condolences in this post regarding the passing of August 08 through the caption. The caption Brian wrote on the post was not only intended to show his condolences, but also to share their experiences as part of an ethnic minority group in the US. Until now, there are many musicians from Asian ethnic groups have difficulty to start their careers in western countries, including in the US. One of the issues that hinder their career development is that Asian musicians are deliberately discouraged from being marketed to the American public. Many artists are told by record labels that they will only be signed if they are not Asian, so they are unable to break into the music industry (Noriega, 2020: 16). In the caption, Brian wrote "i got to be around u during all those sessions & it pushed me to be better cuz i didn't know anybody could be That good" which implicitly shows that to enter the American music industry is not an easy thing for him.

Through the statement "u inspired me and many others more than you could think," Brian showed that August 08 became a figure he could rely on in many ways, including playing a big role in his experience exploring the American music industry.

When linked back to Ellefsen's resistance theory, this post has two purposes in dealing with racism that occurs in Asian & Black groups. First, this post was made as an expression of condolences as well as showing Brian's support for black people as a fellow part of an ethnic minority group in the US. Secondly, this post was made to educate people about how integrity and solidarity with fellow minority groups can help them deal with cases of racism more easily. In conclusion, resistance to racism through sharing experiences rests on the importance of building solidarity with fellow minority groups by showing support to victims and fostering public empathy to reduce the impact of racism occurring more widely.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study show that there are four forms of resistance to racism conveyed by Rich Brian through his Instagram account: ignoring, confronting, protesting, and sharing experiences. In the first form of resistance, Brian ignores racism by disregarding the significance of police institutional racism aimed at Asian groups and constructing the caption using humor. The second form of resistance shown by Rich Brian is confronting racism by exposing the Atlanta shooting spree case. Brian uses provocative sentences and also openly criticizes the western media as a form of siding with the victims. Rich Brian also took action by using the hashtag #StopAsianHate to show his anger over the shooting case in Atlanta. This hashtag is used by Asian ethnic groups around the world to reduce the increase in cases of racism directed at their ethnic groups due to the Covid-19 outbreak. This action is categorized as protesting racism because it is intended to gather support collectively and publicly. The last form of resistance shown by Rich Brian is sharing experiences as part of a minority group that often faces racism in the US. Rich Brian shows his integrity by sharing stories about supporting fellow minority groups while living in the US and experiencing many difficulties in adapting to a new culture.

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