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Examining the way necropolitical online discourse has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 saw aspects of traditional human reality subsumed by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) or Covid-19 pandemic. As the coronavirus spread across the world, nations made decisions as to how they would deal with the unknown in order to ensure societal, economic and political survival. The varying levels of severity of these decisions brought to light various necropolitical actualities. The politics of who was allowed to live and thus who was allowed to die was at the forefront of every newspaper, talk show, family dinner discussion and social media interaction. What was seen as a unifying global experience, quickly became one of exacerbated inequality where race, age, gender and socio-economic status determined expendability. Amid this, George Floyd was killed in the United States, and the #blacklivesmatter movement erupted into a wave of global protests.

This study explores social media discourse construction during the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent anti-racism protests, in order to examine if rhetoric around race-related inequality changed during this particular period in modern history. Using Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics as a theoretical framework, the study did both a thematic analysis and a discourse analysis based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe on @nowhitesaviors, an anti-racism and activist Instagram account based in Kampala, Uganda.

The study found that while global human psychology was primed for a collective moment of engagement and protest due to conditions created by the Covid-19 pandemic, discourse created around revolution did not manage to achieve hegemony. This is in part due to a lack of discursive community inclusion, and in part because the examined social media conversations were imagined discourses occurring in online echo chambers.

Keywords: Achille Mbembe, necropolitics, social media, Covid-19, Instagram, @nowhitesaviors, activism, #blacklivesmatter