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Tweetment Effects on the Tweeted: Experimentally Reducing Racist Harassment

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I conduct an experiment which examines the impact of group norm promotion and social sanctioning on racist online harassment. Racist online harassment de-mobilizes the minorities it targets, and the open, unopposed expression of racism in a public forum can legitimize racist viewpoints and prime ethnocentrism. I employ an intervention designed to reduce the use of anti-black racist slurs by white men on Twitter. I collect a sample of Twitter users who have harassed other users and use accounts I control (“bots”) to sanction the harassers. By varying the identity of the bots between in-group (white man) and out-group (black man) and by varying the number of Twitter followers each bot has, I find that subjects who were sanctioned by a high-follower white male significantly reduced their use of a racist slur. This paper extends findings from lab experiments to a naturalistic setting using an objective, behavioral outcome measure and a continuous 2-month data collection period. This represents an advance in the study of prejudiced behavior.