

Investigating Affirmative Action Discussions on Social Media

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Abstract

In June 2023, the U.S. Supreme Court banned race-based affirmative action (AA) in college admissions, reshaping college access for underrepresented students. AA is historically controversial, and social media platforms enable discussions of AA that traverse physical and social barriers. My dissertation explores these social media discussions of AA, taking a qualitative, cross-platform approach to investigate how socio-technical properties of platforms shape social media-based AA discussions and their impacts, especially for underrepresented college applicants. I aim to make empirical, theoretical, and design contributions to promote informed, mindful, and deliberative discussions of contentious, identity-related topics on social media.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

Keywords

social media, higher education, affirmative action, political communication, computer-mediated communication

ACM Reference Format:

Cassidy Pyle. 2025. Investigating Affirmative Action Discussions on Social Media. In *The 2025 ACM International Conference on Supporting Group Work (GROUP Companion '25)*, January 12–15, 2025, Hilton Head, SC, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3688828.3699650>

1 Introduction

College access is crucial for social mobility and social capital accrual [3, 6, 13] and is formally conferred in the college admissions process [14]. U.S. college admissions processes are controversial, in part due to a highly publicized bribery scandal [12] and the adoption of test-optional admissions policies [1]. 2023 Supreme Court rulings regarding “affirmative action” (AA) [12] forbade race-conscious admissions, reigniting debates about college admissions, identity, and fairness.

Discussions of college admissions policy increasingly occur on social media and speak to broader discourses around identity, equity, and opportunity. Social media platforms lower constraints to engaging in political talk [17] and possess unique features, affordances

[8, 10], and algorithmic systems that shape political discussion dynamics [17]. Yet, no work has systematically explored social media discussions about AA or how these discussions impact underrepresented students. My dissertation explores these discussions and their impacts across social media platforms.

2 Research Questions and Methods

- **RQ1:** *What framings and rhetorical strategies are used in social media discussions about AA?*
- **RQ2:** *How do students-of-color, first-generation, and low-income students perceive and experience social media discussions about AA?*

2.1 Methods Rationale

I use qualitative content analysis (QCA) to investigate RQ1 and semi-structured interviews to explore RQ2. Since no existing work has systematically investigated social media discussions about AA, QCA [15] is an appropriate method to investigate the arguments and rhetorical strategies animating these social media-based discussions (RQ1). Additionally, no work has specifically investigated how minoritized college applicants who stand to benefit from AA perceive and experience AA discussions on social media. I attend to this gap by focusing on the dual impacts of these discussions on applicants’ well-being (e.g., self-esteem) and academics (e.g., sense of belonging at a university), following recent work [9] that highlights their mutually constitutive nature. Qualitative exploratory interviews are appropriate to investigate RQ2, which centers minoritized applicants’ perceptions and experiences, aligned with the goals of qualitative and interpretive interview-based research [7].

3 Work in Progress

I have completed data collection and preliminary analysis for Study 1 and research design, IRB approval, and partial data collection for Study 2. I passed my dissertation proposal in August 2024 and will defend the dissertation in May 2025.

3.1 Study 1: Qualitative Content Analysis: AA Arguments & Rhetorical Strategies

I have collected data from Reddit, Twitter/X, and TikTok¹ that was posted between the week before and the week after the 2023 Supreme Court AA decision and contained either the keyword “affirmative action” or hashtag #AffirmativeAction. Due to Reddit’s organization into topical subreddits, I scoped my search to the keyword “affirmative action” across 5 subreddits (r/News, r/AskReddit, r/Politics, r/ChangeMyView, and r/College) representing education,

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GROUP Companion '25, January 12–15, 2025, Hilton Head, SC, USA
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ACM ISBN 979-8-4007-1187-9/25/01
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3688828.3699650>

¹Reddit data comprised 86 posts and over 30,000 comments. Twitter/X data comprised over 200 threads. TikTok data comprised over 400 videos and 4,000 comments.

politics, and current-events topics. I used thematic analysis [4] techniques, first open-coding the dataset using a combination of inductive and deductive coding approaches. Deductively, I drew from existing work on AA framings in mass media (e.g., [5]) while inductively remaining open to emerging codes.

From my initial analysis of Reddit data, it appears that Reddit discussions of AA invoke a greater breadth of *arguments* than seen in mass media coverage and legal briefs, which may be partially explained by the broader range of expressive modes afforded by Reddit's sociotechnical properties (e.g., pseudonymity, threads) and the broader pool of discussants on Reddit versus those whose stories are featured in mass media/legal briefs. Notably, many on Reddit express greater *ambivalence* about AA than is typical of mass media/legal documents.

Category of Rhetorical Strategy	Rhetorical Strategy
<i>External Evidence</i>	1. Linking to External Evidence 2. Use of Statistics 3. Graphics/Charts
<i>Self-Disclosure</i>	1. Identity Disclosure 2. Experience Disclosure 3. Personal Anecdote
<i>Incivility</i>	1. Humor 2. Sealioning 3. "AA Babies"
<i>Strategic Comparisons</i>	1. Comparison to Legacy Admissions 2. Comparison to Athletics 3. Comparison Across Universities

Table 1: Overview of Study 1 findings related to AA rhetorical strategies

Reddit discussions also revealed a wider array of *rhetorical strategies* than mass media, facilitated by the sociotechnical properties of social media. For instance, TikTok's Green Screen feature enables the visual display of *graphics and charts*, while Reddit's text-based modality and pseudonymity encourage *self-disclosure*. These rhetorical strategies serve particular argumentative functions. Incorporating external evidence appeals to citational authority and credibility, while self-disclosure enables more emotional appeals, incivility stifles conversation, and strategic comparisons identify perceived hypocrisy and encourage argumentative consistency. Table 1 provides an overview of rhetorical strategies used to bolster AA arguments.

3.2 Study 2: Interviews with Applicants Perceived to be AA Beneficiaries

I am conducting semi-structured interviews with 25 college applicants to explore how they perceive and experience discussions about AA on social media. To be eligible, participants must be 18 years of age or older, live in the U.S., use at least one social media platform once per day, identify as a student of color, first-generation and/or low-income, report having seen AA content on social media in the last year, and applied to an undergraduate program in the 2023 - 2024 application cycle. I shared a link to a Qualtrics screening

survey on various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, TikTok) and recruited via Prolific, using purposive sampling [16] to ensure that participants meet the eligibility criteria and represent diverse identities. The interview guide asks applicants about their experiences using social media while applying to college, their understanding of and opinions toward AA, and their experiences and perceptions of seeing AA content on social media. I conclude by asking how social media might better promote more informed, mindful, and deliberative discussions of AA. I will analyze the data using thematic analysis procedures [4].

4 Preliminary and Expected Contributions

Empirical. Study 1 is the first empirical, large-scale, cross-platform investigation of the arguments and rhetorical strategies used in social media-based AA discussions. These findings can be leveraged in future work exploring AA discourses on social media, relating particular arguments or rhetorical strategies to broader policy attitudes and attitude shifts.

Theoretical. Study 1 advances theoretical understandings of colorblind racism [2], meritocratic beliefs [11], and attitudes related to (in)equality. It can also advance understandings of how socio-technical properties of social media platforms may shape rhetorical strategies. Study 2 will illuminate how AA discourses impact minoritized applicants and may advance understanding of online hate and harassment, stigmatization, and college access.

Design. Study 1's illumination of AA arguments and rhetorical strategies can inform designs of social media-based interventions to curb AA misinformation and promote structural (rather than colorblind) understandings of inequality. Study 2 highlights from minoritized applicants' perspectives how social media can be re-configured to promote informed, mindful, and deliberative AA discussions.

5 Why ACM GROUP 2025?

I hope to gain feedback, mentorship, and community from the Doctoral Consortium at ACM GROUP 2025. I hope to draw from the breadth of expertise at the DC to learn about bodies of literature that I may be less familiar with, but that may help me contextualize my findings and identify and articulate empirical and theoretical contributions. Some of these broad bodies of work may be on political communication on social media, identity-related discourses on social media, or design-related work that focuses on how to promote pro-social dynamics within sensitive conversations online. Additionally, I would be grateful to hear from mentors regarding how to disseminate findings from the dissertation to the public, including through scholarly books, podcasts, social media, and public workshops. I would also be excited to build community with my peers, sharing experiences about pitfalls and triumphs in the dissertation process, both personally and professionally. Finally, networking with peers would allow me to identify opportunities for more long-term connections with junior researchers engaged in research related to social identity and justice.

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