

Black people use Facebook more than anyone, but now they're leaving

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Brandon Keyes, a 37-year-old Army combat veteran from Detroit, has an on-again, off-again relationship with Facebook. These days, it's mostly off.

Keyes says he got tired of Facebook censoring Black users when they call out racism while permitting hateful speech and memes to spread unchecked.

Once his account was suspended for quoting a white Michigan county executive who said he'd rather "join the Klan" than a group of CEOs trying to rebuild Detroit. Keyes tried to explain he was a Black man fighting, not promoting, white supremacy, but his appeal was denied.

Each time he was released from company enforced time-outs during which his posts were removed and he was temporarily locked out of his account, Keyes changed his profile photo to a defiant Tupac Shakur in a Detroit Red Wings jersey spitting in the direction of the camera. But after one too many stays in "Facebook jail," Keyes decided to deactivate his account instead, though he still logs on from time to time.

"For me, for my own mental health and my own consumer power," he said, "I don't participate."

Black people produce and share substantially more content than other groups on Facebook, according to Facebook's internal research. But increasingly they are pulling away from the world's largest social media platform, especially [young people](#).

The number of Black monthly users on Facebook declined 2.7% in a single month to 17.3 million adults, according to a research report, "Industry Update on Racial Justice and Black Users," in February. Black usage peaked in September 2020, in the months following nationwide protests over the killing of George Floyd, the research found.

Legal counsel for Frances Haugen, a former Facebook product manager turned whistleblower, provided redacted versions of the documents to Congress, which were viewed by a consortium of news organizations

including USA TODAY.

Facebook would not say if Black users were deserting the platform over their treatment on it. But a former employee who worked closely on these issues said he's been told it's a significant factor.

"A lot of the downtick in Black usership has been because people are being banned or shadow banned or had their accounts suspended for talking about Black issues, and obviously there was a rise of that during George Floyd," said the former employee, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because his current employer does not permit him to speak about Facebook.

Marc Johnson, a spokesman for Facebook parent company Meta Platforms, said Facebook values Black users and is working to amplify their voices while reducing the hate speech that targets them, though "there is always more work to do."

"We are committed to making Black users' experiences better and increasing equity, safety and dignity for everyone on our apps," Johnson said in a statement.

TikTok routing Facebook with young Black adults

Another reason for the declining number of Black users on Facebook is the rise of TikTok as a top destination for the young and creative.

Internal Facebook research shows that the platform's losses have been TikTok's gains. TikTok reached more than 70% of Black users in the 18-to-24 age group in January while Instagram reached 66% and Facebook just 34%.

On Meta Platforms' quarterly earnings call in October, CEO Mark

Zuckerberg said TikTok is "one of the most effective competitors we have ever faced" and that catering to young adults was now the company's "north star."

A February report shows Facebook's reach with Black 18-to-24-year-olds dropped more than 36% over six months. TikTok gained 19.5% reach with that age group in the same time period, internal research showed.

"I have noticed younger people are definitely trending away from Facebook," said social media influencer Erynn Chambers, who maintains a Facebook account but spends most of her time on TikTok.

Black trendsetters and culture makers are drawn to the short-form video content style that spotlights "the creative, activist spirit," Chambers said.

Facebook researchers suggested addressing pain points in content creation on its platforms as well as creating marketing that shows Black people using creative tools, connecting to real-life friends and expressing themselves—all areas they saw as reasons young Black users are leaving for TikTok.

Researchers also noted that as the younger generation of Black users departs Facebook, older generations may follow.

African Americans are key demographic for Facebook

That could spell trouble for Facebook. African Americans are a chart-topping demographic for social media, shaping online culture, setting trends and creating viral moments on platforms from Snapchat to Twitter.

Black Americans are among the top users of Facebook Stories and also dominate posts in News Feed. Facebook Stories has low usage in the majority of the U.S. but has "clusters of intense production" in places with a high concentration of African Americans such as the arc in the Southeast known as the Black Belt, Facebook research found.

Facebook Stories is also popular on tribal lands in the Southeast and the Northern Plains as well as in areas of Southern Florida and along the Mexico border that are largely Hispanic.

News Feed posts show the same pattern of heavier usage in non-white areas, Facebook research found.

Rather than collect data about users' demographics for the research, Facebook used ZIP code data as a proxy to study how people from different backgrounds use its products.

From New York City to the San Francisco Bay Area, "there are almost no white zip codes that produce as much as the average Black zip code," the report found.

That trend is even more pronounced among teens. "There is very little production in heavily white areas," the report found.

As for Black teens, "we do literally an order of magnitude better with Black teens than white ones."

Civil rights groups blame racial bias

Rashad Robinson, president of the racial justice organization Color of Change, says he's not surprised that African Americans are such heavy users of Facebook. He's also not surprised they are leaving Facebook.

For years, Robinson and other civil rights leaders have accused the platform of racial bias against users from historically and systemically marginalized groups. Despite promises, Facebook has made little progress in protecting the Black community from hate speech and threats that can lead to violence, they say.

Those grievances only intensified with the flood of hateful content on Facebook's platforms after Floyd's death. Last summer, civil rights groups joined with major advertisers to lead a boycott of the company.

"We live in this hostile real world where Black people are punished more harshly for the same things that white people do and then we go into this virtual world and it's the same thing," Robinson said. "We can't opt out of the real world. But some of us can opt out of the virtual world or find new avenues."

Robinson, who helped lead the advertiser boycott, said Zuckerberg told him that the harms Robinson claimed Black people were experiencing were not reflected in the company's internal data.

Yet, a two-year Facebook research project found that "the worst of the worst" content on the platform targets Black people, Muslims, the LGBTQ community, Jews and people of more than one race, according to Facebook research documents viewed by USA TODAY.

The project also found that Facebook's algorithms were more aggressively policing insults against white people and men—"white people are stupid" or "men are pigs"—than attacks on any other group.

"They believe at Facebook that, as long as they are spurring some sort of social connection, it doesn't matter how many people are hurt and harmed, especially if those people are not white," Robinson said.

Facebook still considers derogatory statements about men and white people to be in violation of its hate speech policy, but the company's algorithms no longer automatically flag and delete them.

Meta's Johnson said Facebook has taken other steps, such as expanding its hate speech policies to prohibit veiled and implicit threats and attacks on concepts, ideas, practices, beliefs and institutions of protected groups when those attacks pose an imminent risk of harm and to shield people from organized harassment campaigns.

Facebook warned it was alienating Black users

Criticism was not just coming from people outside the company. Time and again, Facebook employees sent up internal flares that the platform was alienating Black users.

In 2017, Black leaders at Facebook launched a study called Project Vibe to understand the experience of Black users on the platform. Project Vibe found that African Americans were among the top users of the platform, over-indexing on all core engagement metrics. Yet, they were often missing from the guest list of Facebook-sponsored industry events and among creators and influencers whose profiles are promoted and whose identity is verified on the platform.

Black users also reported seeing hate speech more frequently than any other group and complained that their posts were disproportionately taken down and that they were penalized for defending themselves against racism.

Another effort, Project Aperture, built on the findings of Project Vibe, studying how African Americans "over proportionately" share Facebook Stories. "Learning more and building empathy for this community is imperative to Stories' success," Facebook researchers said.

Many of the recommendations from Project Vibe and Project Aperture—increasing investments in Black small businesses, forging Black media partnerships, supporting original Black content—were only implemented after Floyd was killed.

Part of the problem, auditors said, is the lack of diversity inside Facebook. In 2019, a group of Facebook employees publicly complained about racism at the company.

Although Black Americans account for 11.2% of the U.S. workforce, they held only 4.2% of all jobs at Meta Platforms and 4.4% of executive and leadership positions in 2020. Three-quarters of the company's employees are classified as professionals but Black people hold 4.1% of those jobs.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is conducting a systemic probe into Facebook's hiring practices.

Johnson said Meta Platforms is making sure Facebook is inclusive by addressing hate more effectively and building equity into the company's products and policies. "Among other things, that means hiring diverse talent," he said.

Facebook to investigate treatment of Black users

In June 2020, a Facebook researcher urged the platform to get serious about collecting data on the experience of Black users, saying it would be "very difficult" to make progress on social justice issues without it.

"In practice, our machine learning systems almost certainly are able to implicitly guess the race of many users. It's virtually guaranteed that our major systems do show systemic biases based on the race of the affected user (though what form that bias takes I do not know)," the researcher

wrote.

While avoiding capturing information about race and ethnicity is "mostly well-intentioned," according to the document viewed by USA TODAY, "a more cynical take is that part of why we avoid measuring race is because we don't want to know what our platform is actually doing."

"Particularly at Facebook," the researcher wrote, "if you can't measure, you can't act."

Last month, Facebook announced its civil rights team and an artificial intelligence team would gather data to determine if it treats users differently based on race. The effort is led by Roy Austin Jr., vice president of civil rights at Meta Platforms, a veteran civil rights lawyer who worked at the Justice Department during the Obama administration.

His position was created following a pressure campaign by civil rights groups and at the urging of civil rights auditors.

Austin told USA TODAY that the project will track the race of its users through ZIP codes, last names and surveys where people identify their race and ethnicity, using methods that protect people's privacy.

"So much of people's experience with the platforms is anecdotal," he said. "There isn't a group that I'm aware of that does not claim—I am not saying this just based on race, I am saying it is based on pretty much everything—that doesn't claim they are treated differently on Facebook and Instagram, and I want to get to the bottom of that."

Austin said he does not know how long the project will take or if its findings will be made public. But, he said, "a piece of civil rights work is being transparent and being transparent with the community."

Wade Henderson, interim president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, said Meta must confront its role "in perpetuating social harms and to assess how they are addressing critical concerns."

"Being transparent about civil rights challenges is critical, as is pro-active due diligence and adequate follow-through on commitments," he said.

Why Black users don't delete Facebook

Despite the known problems with Facebook, Black users are often reluctant to cut the cord. Facebook provides connection to others with similar experiences and a way to amplify voices that have been largely ignored in other media spaces.

"There is a historic distrust that Black Americans have in traditional and legacy media," said Sherri Williams, assistant professor at American University who studies social media and representation of African Americans in media.

Social media created "needed spaces to tell their stories," said Tia C.M. Tyree, communications professor at Howard University.

"It becomes the lesser of two evils. Do I take this platform with its flaws and use it to my advantage or do I get off of it?" Tyree said.

Leaving the platform would mean losing the ability to capitalize, to protest, to have conversations and be connected to like-minded people.

"Each user has to then ask 'Am I using this site or am I being used by the site, and am I comfortable with that?'" Tyree said.

Now that people are so invested in Facebook, it becomes difficult to

divest, said Kishonna Gray, associate professor of writing, rhetoric and digital studies at the University of Kentucky.

"They've taken ownership in that space," she said. "And where are they gonna go? All platforms are not user friendly."

Even Detroit's Keyes, who has largely given up Facebook, says there's a downside.

"I feel by exercising my consumer power, I am being silenced and other people like me are being silenced," Keyes said.

And that's why Facebook's moment of reckoning with Black users hasn't happened yet, Tyree said.

She pointed to the moment when Black TikTok users stopped producing choreographed videos on the platform because their original content was being hijacked by white users without credit.

"That's a good example of Black users saying we've had enough," Tyree said. "The question becomes, have we done that on Facebook? And the answer is I don't think we've done that."

Take Erinn Rochelle. She says she's been suspended from Facebook 18 times in the past couple of years, once just for quoting a white woman who screamed a racial slur at a Black family celebrating Easter.

"It's almost like a love-hate relationship with the master who beats you," she said.

A registered independent who works for a financial institution by day and moonlights on political campaigns, Rochelle relies on Facebook to connect with elected officials, political candidates, community leaders

and business executives. She says landing in Facebook jail hurts her campaign work and disconnects her from family and friends.

Yet, as frustrated as she gets, Rochelle, a Black woman from Charlotte, North Carolina, can't bring herself to quit. But that doesn't mean she's happy about it.

"Facebook has done a great job of making us need them. It has provided a platform that in any other world, Black people would never have had access to," she said. "It is one of the reasons why I haven't let go of the platform. Because, if I could have by now, I would have told Facebook they can kiss my ass."

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