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Behind the Screens: Russian Emotional Manipulation Strategies against Black Americans on Social Media

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Abstract:
Recent studies have highlighted the targeted operations of the Russia-linked Internet Research Agency (IRA) against various communities in the United States, including Black Americans. Using content analysis on two open-source databases, the study focuses on the strategies deployed by the IRA to emotionally engage the Black community through various platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and personal domains. Findings suggest Russian operations sought to manipulate specific emotions, including love, fear, and anger, which were associated with specific emotional beliefs tied to attachment, vulnerability, and militancy. It further reveals how targeting those emotions could have assisted the advancement of the influence operation. The study's findings reveal the broader societal implications of these operations, including the potential to provoke offline activities and exacerbate socio-political tensions while underscoring the importance of incorporating the emotional dimension in future studies of influence operations.

Keywords: Emotions, Disinformation, Influence, Russia, United States

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Introduction

In 2017, significant revelations came to light about Russian-linked social media accounts operating under fabricated American identities, which saw a surge in activity during the prior year's presidential elections. Notably, a Facebook account operating under the pseudonym 'Blacktivist' garnered 360,000 followers, surpassing its authentic counterpart, the Black Lives Matter social media account, by 59,000 followers (O'Sullivan & Byers 2017). The 'Blacktivist' account was subsequently identified as part of a sophisticated operation that former CIA Director Michael Hayden characterized as the "most successful covert influence campaign in recorded history" (Gioe 2018).

The reactions in the Black community to the revelations of Russian social media (dis)information campaigns, from accounts like Blacktivist and others, would range from astonishment to dismay[1]. Activists and politicians were surprised at how convincingly Internet Research Agency (IRA) operatives masqueraded as genuine Black Americans within online communities. Simultaneously, they felt deeply betrayed by the strategic manipulation by this Russian entity of long-standing internal dialogues unique to the Black community (Bond 2020).

The U.S. government disclosure of the extent of Russian interference in 2018 prompted a significant response from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), which initiated a one-day Facebook boycott in protest of the platform's role in

[1] According to Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués (2022, p. 22), (dis)information refers to a range of information typologies and is a concept that "spans everything from correct and factual information, to propagandistic and negatively biased, all the way to outright false and deceptive information. The more sophisticated (dis)informers employ a mix of these at any given time".

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disseminating distorted representations of the African-American community (Perez 2018). This reaction highlighted the profound impact of the revelations on community sentiment and underscored how society and government were unprepared for this type of sophisticated, targeted influence operation.

These events highlighted that at the heart of an escalating international discourse on digital (dis)information lies a nuanced, often overlooked facet: the emotional aspect of influence operations. Against this backdrop, this article delves into the stratagems adopted by the IRA as it employed social media platforms in its attempts to emotionally manipulate a specific demography within the United States – the Black community[2]. Understanding the emotional dimension of influence operations is crucial because it provides deeper insights into how certain tactics engage specific communities' grievances, reshape narratives, and potentially spur real-world actions.[3]

Despite the abundance of news reports and investigations (Aldhous 2018; Allbright 2017; Poulsen et al. 2017; Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2018) that have demonstrated Russia's dual objective of disinformation and influence, current scholarship has thus far predominantly focused on the informational component of influence operations. While vital, this

[2] It is worth noting that Russian (dis)information and influence operations are not solely responsible for the socio-political tensions in the United States, including those relating to the Black community. These are phenomena in which a multitude of both domestic and foreign actors participate.

[3] The emotional dimension refers to the combination of emotions and emotional beliefs. For the complete definition, as understood in this study, please refer to the subsequent sections.

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concentration on the informational dimension risks overshadowing another subtle, yet potentially more significant, aspect of the operations — the significant effort placed on crafting emotionally manipulative content that undergirds these campaigns.

In the age of digitization, the power and availability of social media technologies have revolutionized the techniques of influence campaigns and amplified their reach and impact on domestic audiences. Foreign influence campaigns are not a novel phenomenon; however, the pace of their evolution and strategic deployment of innovative methods across distinct platforms demands more scholarly attention. As such, this article endeavors to answer the following two research questions: (1) what strategies did the Russian government, via the IRA, deploy to emotionally engage the Black community?, and, (2) how could the engagement of specific emotions and emotional beliefs have assisted the advancement of Russia's influence operations? In a novel, cross-platform approach, this article focuses on IRA-produced subject matter across several social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as personal domains to investigate the content, narratives, and targeting employed by the IRA's operatives. The structure of this article is as follows: we first provide the background, review the relevant literature and introduce our conceptual framework. Next, we present case studies of Russian influence operations targeting Black Americans. This is followed by an analysis and concluding remarks that synthesize our findings and implications.

Background: Russian (dis)information and emotions

Early Soviet disinformation initially focused on undermining anti-Bolshevik 'Tsarists', as exemplified by the 1921 Operation Trest (Rid 2020). These efforts laid the groundwork for the more extensive and sophisticated (dis)information campaigns which began after World War II.

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During the Cold War, the Soviet Union invested heavily in the use of (dis)information, propagated by the so-called Active Measures Department of the Russian foreign intelligence service (KGB), which created up to four hundred new operations annually (Kux 1985). This department sought to create and exacerbate cleavages based on foreign countries' historical, political, and social tensions. In some cases, the influence operations aimed not only to deceive but also to produce hostility and mobilize people against each other in Western societies. One of the earliest examples is a 1959 campaign that aimed to expose and amplify latent anti-Jewish sentiments by targeting Western states' history of resentment against Jews. This effort included paying individuals to deface public properties and cemeteries with anti-Semitic messages. This, in some cases, provoked intense anti-Semitism and eventually led to an outbreak of hundreds of hateful acts worldwide against Jewish people and politicians alike. It included hate-mail campaigns, desecration of cemeteries and synagogues, and direct threats against specific people (Rid 2020).

Today, the Russian government uses active measures — now known as influence operations — in combination with other techniques against countries perceived as geopolitical adversaries, such as the United States and Western European countries (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués 2022). The emphasis on new domains of confrontation, including the digital and information realms, is supported by the last three National Security Strategies (2009, 2015, 2021) of the Russian Federation. These documents assert that information security is an essential element to counter threats both domestically and externally and demonstrate how the combined digital-information arenas have become an arena of both defensive and offensive practices (President of the Russian Federation 2009, 2015, 2021). Today, Russia disseminates (dis)information using a combination of official state outlets (e.g., R.T. and Sputnik) (Bradshaw et al. 2022) in combination

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with state-affiliated actors who are tasked with advancing influence efforts in the digital domain (Nocetti 2018; Tsygankov 2019).

In 2013, Russian authorities established the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which marked a significant transition to and investment in influence operations on social media platforms. The strategy utilized by the IRA involved identifying past and present-day events, beliefs, and tendencies that could be used to aggravate pre-existing societal cleavages among various groups and erode trust between them, as well as with their respective governments (Kondratov & Johansson-Nogués 2022; Wigell 2019).

In 2014, the IRA created the "translator project" that specifically focused on the United States and was tasked with content production in English (Rid 2020). That same year, the earliest evidence of its activities appeared. Comments emerged on major US news sites, including *Fox News, Politico and the Huffington Post* which focused on manipulating the public discourse concerning the Obama administration's condemnation of Russia's annexation of Crimea (Seddon 2014). Vasily Gatov, the former head of Russia's state newswire's media analytics laboratory, remarked that these activities were indicative of the Russian government's plans to oversaturate the digital public domain with Kremlin-friendly discourse while drowning out information and opinions critical of its policies (*ibid.*).

By 2015, the IRA had shifted its interference strategy in the US primarily toward social media operations. The extent of the interference became evident following several government investigations, including an inquiry by the US Senate Intelligence Committee (2018). The Committee requested data about the influence operations from the affected social media companies, including *Twitter*, *Facebook* (and its subsidiary *Instagram*), and *Alphabet Inc*. (its subsidiaries include *YouTube*, *Google Plus*, and *Gmail*, among others). The retrieved data showed

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the extent of the IRA's efforts, which included 10.4 million tweets (approximately six million were original) across 3,841 Twitter accounts; 1,100 YouTube videos across 17 channels; 116,000 Instagram posts across 133 accounts; and 61,500 individual Facebook posts across 81 pages.[4] An essential element to understanding the IRA's campaign is the number of possible people engaged in some manner with the content. In this regard, there were 77 million engagements on Facebook, 187 million on Instagram, and 73 million on Twitter (DiResta et al. 2018).[5] For context and comparison, when examining the figures for leading US brands on Facebook for the year 2020, the brand in tenth place had 116 million engagements (Statista 2020).

The IRA's efforts were focused on engaging with people based on political orientation and identity, such as the LGBT community, Latinos, feminists, progressives, and conservatives. Among these groups, the Black community was the most heavily targeted with (dis)information across all major social media platforms (Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2018)[6]. A

[4] In this context, 'original' denotes a unique piece of content, contrasting with content that is shared or retweeted—either by a human or automated software (bot)—which was not originally authored by the sharer.

[5] It is not possible to definitively verify the identities of those who independently engaged (e.g., liked or shared) with the content. However, Facebook estimated that the IRA's Facebook content reached 126 million people and that its Instagram content reached twenty million affected users (DiResta et al. 2018).

[6] As per the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (2018) report, "no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African-Americans." This conclusion was

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plausible explanation for this concentrated focus on the Black community stems from race being an easily identifiable characteristic, making it conducive for micro-targeting and (dis)information dissemination. Moreover, the Black community in the United States has faced challenging conditions historically, including slavery and racial segregation. Currently, issues of systemic racism and discrimination have been brought to light, including in the community's interactions with local police departments across the country. These past and present injustices provide an opportunity to be exploited – to heighten the tension between the Black community, the US government, and society at large. In this light, it could be argued that rather than creating tensions, Russian (dis)information and influence operations may augment pre-existing ones.

Literature Review

Various scholars have explored the methods and practices of the IRA's deployment of (dis)information and influence operations against specific communities. As part of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence investigation, DiResta et al. (2018) provided the first detailed investigation of the IRA's cross-platform activity around the time of the 2016 US presidential elections. Subsequent studies, such as that by Linvill and Warren (2020), analyzed the IRA's use of Twitter and identified five categories of IRA-produced profiles used to target users. Freelon and Lokot (2020) similarly analyzed the IRA's use of Twitter and found that operatives constructed racial and political identities to target users across the ideological spectrum. Golovchenko et al. (2020) examined the IRA's use of news media and YouTube videos to sow discord between

drawn based on the frequency of use of identity-related keywords (such as race, ethnicity, orientation, etc.) in the IRA's advertising, targeting practices, and produced content.

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liberals and conservatives. Ross, Vaccari and Chadwick (2022) found that the IRA's interference in the 2016 election indirectly affected key attitudes about electoral integrity and democracy.

In examining the broader scope of Russian influence operations, works by Bradshaw et al., (2021), Wagnsson (2022), Peisakhin & Rozenas (2018), and Hoyle et al. (2023) underscore the strategic use of identity grievances through more traditional methods (including television broadcasting) and geopolitically diverse contexts. These studies spotlight the Russian government's attempts at exploiting societal divisions and undermining governability. Additionally, the work of Bail et al. (2020) and Eady et al. (2023) contribute valuable insights into the impact of the Russian IRA's activities on politically-engaged Twitter users. Nonetheless, these two studies are inherently limited by their focus solely on Twitter. This restricts the comprehensiveness of their findings, as it does not account for the IRA's extensive cross-platform interference campaigns spanning numerous other social media outlets. Furthermore, these studies assess direct interactions and voting behavior, potentially overlooking the subtler emotional influence these campaigns may have on individuals.

In addition, several studies provide insight into the IRA's messaging toward the Black community. Bastos and Farkas (2019) found that the IRA-operated Twitter accounts claiming to be African-American tweeted predominantly about racial inequality. Arif et al. (2018) studied how IRA-operated Twitter accounts participating in online discourses about Black Lives Matter attempted to sow discord between supporters and opponents of this movement. Freelon et al. (2020) examined IRA-operated Twitter accounts and found that racial presentation, particularly pretending to be a Black activist, effectively predicted users' engagement with the produced disinformation.

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This study builds upon these latter studies by expanding beyond the (dis)information dimension of research on this topic and doing so beyond Twitter. In a novel, cross-platform approach, this study examines IRA-produced subject matter across several social media platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, as well as personal domains. This approach enables the uncovering of a broader range of content, coordinated cross-platform narratives, and diverse audience targeting strategies employed by the operatives. In addition, it seeks to understand the emotional dimension of the IRA's influence campaigns on social media platforms. More specifically, it examines how the IRA interpreted specific cultural narratives and grievances of the Black community and consequently reproduced, deployed, and exploited these narratives via the platforms to target specific emotions and emotional beliefs.

Conceptual Framework

Emotions may be understood as a "socially and culturally produced practice that is a consciously experienced feeling of bodily change" (Tuomola & Wahl-Jorgensen 2022). This bodily change, known as affect, is physically experienced, while emotions mediate between us and the objects and societal contexts within which we interact (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018). As such, to provide a few examples, emotions may be heightened or diminished through interactions with culturally and historically meaningful images, social movements, and online communities (Hutchison & Bleiker 2014). Thus, emotions occupy a central, determining role in our personal lives and, by extension, our public and political lives (Valentino et al. 2011).

The architecture of emotion is complex and challenging to separate from cognitive processes, as the two "appear linked at all stages of stimulus processing" (Johansson-Nogués and Șimanschi 2023; Phelps 2005). Emotion and cognition co-produce beliefs, thus placing emotion as central to experience (Mercer 2010). An emotional belief may be defined as "one where emotion

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constitutes and strengthens a belief, and which makes possible a generalization about an actor that involves certainty beyond evidence" (*ibid.*). Using this definition, credibility, attachment, vulnerability, disillusionment, defiance, and security may be considered examples of emotional beliefs (Damasio 1994; Mercer 2010). Vulnerability, for instance, involves a subjective risk assessment, which could be understood as an emotion that integrates with externally produced information, such as content found on social media. When combined, the dual process of evaluating vulnerability through cognition and emotion allows it to be classified as an emotional belief. In this instance, vulnerability may be understood as the subjective belief (existing without factual certainty or possibly even evidence) that one may be exposed to harm. Thus, emotions, along with their products and emotional beliefs, serve an important role – their intensification serves as a guide for individuals seeking societal changes, including the amelioration of issues they prioritize.

Emotions have become an integral part of the public sphere (Maldonado 2016), a phenomenon that has led Slaby and Von Scheve (2019) to assess that affect and emotion dominate the discourse on social and political life. This is most evident today in the rise of political parties and news media coverage whose popularity is based on their deployment of emotionally-based discourse in a highly intensified manner (Rosas & Serrano-Puche 2018; Serrano-Puche 2021). The manipulation of individuals' emotions by such "emotional entrepreneurs," whether they are domestic or foreign entities (Maor & Gross 2015), provides them with an entry point from which they could then influence a range of political attitudes and behaviors (Brader & Marcus 2013). Exposing users to such emotional appeals, whether negative or positive, undermines their rational decision-making (Marmor-Lavie & Weimann 2006).

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An interrelated process that has accompanied the ascendancy of emotion in public discourse has been the digitization of content, which has intensified and accelerated emotional transmissions within public conversations (Serrano-Puche 2021), one which has been harnessed and exploited by social media platforms (Benkler et al. 2018). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram may be defined as internet-based platforms that permit users to interact and self-present with audiences who may derive value from the content and the perception of interaction with other users (Carr & Hayes 2015). Users need not even directly engage with content – simply observing others responding in an expressive way to content is sufficient to stimulate emotions through a process known as emotional contagion (Goldenberg & Gross 2020; Kramer et al. 2014).

(Dis)information, as part of influence operations, may serve as a critical mediator in producing digital emotional contagion through the strategic manipulation of both positive and negative emotions. Negative emotions, particularly anger, have been shown to lead to stronger emotional contagion due to a phenomenon known as negativity bias, which posits that users pay more attention to negative stimuli (Cacioppo et al. 1997; Soroka et al. 2019). Conversely, on a conscious basis, studies have shown that social media users believe positive emotions such as pride are the most appropriate interactions to express on the platforms (Waterloo et al. 2018). Aside from generating emotions such as anger and pride, there is a strong justification for covert actors' production of anxiety and fear. In particular, increased anxiety strongly affects heuristic processing (the cognitive reliance on shortcuts) and weakens individuals' reliance on their own convictions when making decisions while simultaneously increasing withdrawal and passivity (Wagner & Morisi 2019). In short, the production and amplification of varying emotions each serve specific purposes.

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Methodology

The empirical data for this research are derived from two open-source databases: the first, compiled by Josh Russell (UsHadrons 2018), documents content published by the IRA on social media platforms, while the second, IRAds by the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (2020), specifically catalogs advertisements. In instances where an IRA post was linked to an advertisement, cross-referencing between the UsHadrons and IRAds databases was systematically conducted to verify accuracy and better contextualize the information. Crucially, these databases are likely the only remaining records of the IRA's activities during this timeframe on these platforms, as all the original posts have been purged due to violations of the platforms' terms of service.

Employing a qualitative methodology, this study utilizes content analysis (Krippendorf 2018)—a research technique for interpreting textual and visual data to detect specific themes, words, or concepts—to detect the emotional undertones in the IRA's content. Guided by Paul Ekman's (1992) taxonomy of basic emotions, the coding process consisted of two stages: initially identifying the apparent emotional content of each post, followed by categorizing these emotions according to Ekman's classification system. This structured, dual-stage approach facilitated the identification of three distinct emotional subsets within the IRA's content, serving as a foundation for the analysis. The process involved repeated cycles of data examination, where each cycle entailed a detailed review of the content for consistency in emotional categorization, followed by adjustments and refinements of the categories based on emerging patterns and insights. This process was employed to ensure a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions within the IRA's strategies and tactics. From this analytical process, it became apparent that specific social network groups, pages, or users were strategically used to invoke

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certain emotional responses. The data presented in the case studies have been carefully selected to exemplify the most relevant and representative content from each of the identified categories and relevant groups.

Case Study: IRA Influence Operations Targeting Black Americans

This section is organized according to the targeted emotions and emotional beliefs, which in this case will include (1) emotions related to love and pride to establish rapport and reinforce self and community identities, (2) enhance feelings related to vulnerability and disillusionment to manipulate emotional beliefs fomenting social tension with out-group actors (especially the police) and, (3) emotions tied to strengthening militancy, to manipulate the Black community into taking actions to defend themselves against those perceived as threats or outsiders. Since the posts were culturally specific, this section will provide additional context to aid comprehension of the material.

(1) Emotions of attachment (love, pride)

Emotions of attachment were one of the most critical targets of the IRA. This part of the operation took advantage of attempts by Black activist organizations (such as Black Lives Matter) to unify and evoke pride in the Black community. As an example, Sincerely_Black was an IRA-affiliated Twitter account that focused on promoting pride by associating the accomplishments of past and present-day Black celebrities, artists, athletes, scholars, and ordinary people with their skin color as well as other physical features, while at times deriding the physical features of people of other races, in particular Caucasian features. Some content was created directly by the account, while other content was retweeted from other IRA-affiliated accounts and authentic Black-interest Twitter pages. Many posts were accompanied by hashtags that explicitly associated the content with skin color and Black protests. They included the following: “melanin, blackbeauty [sic],

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panafricanism [sic], blackpride [sic], blacklivesmatter [sic].” In another example, content posted of the Black Liberian fashion model Deddeh Howard’s campaign to raise awareness about a lack of diversity in the modeling industry. In the post, she is pictured next to a White model in the same pose. Another is a photo of an unnamed Black model with the caption, “Dipped in chocolate, bronzed in elegance.” While most posts focused on Black women, some also included photos of men. In one photo, a Black male model is portrayed with the following caption: “...what kind of perfection is this? Thick lips, beautiful smile, healthy beard, chocolate skin, full hairline.” (UsHadrons 2017a).

Another IRA-affiliated account was Nefertiti_Community, an Instagram account named after the ancient Egyptian queen, Nefertiti. In addition to posts promoting black pride similar to those of “Sincerely_Black_,” it also included an additional theme of evoking appreciation or love of Black history by posting illustrations and photographs of ancient African royalty and historic sites. One post showed a Black woman embracing the bust of the Great Sphynx of Giza with the caption “Embrace your heritage,” and the following false comment below it: “Ancient Egypt was not a mixed society…[it] was PITCHED [sic] BLACK until the 7th century A.D., when Indo-Aryans called Arabs invaded from Central Asia. For 99 percent of Egyptian history, Egypt was as BLACK as Nigeria, as BLACK as Congo, and as BLACK as Senegal.” There is significant evidence that some IRA-produced content did not correspond to actual historical facts. For example, another post showed a misleading illustration with the caption, “Did u [sic] know that the state of California was named after the African Queen Calafia?” (UsHadrons 2017h).[7]

[7] Although some sources posit that this is the origin of the state’s name, the post is misleading in that “Queen Calafia” was a fictional character in a 16th century romance novel (Petersen 2015).

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"Black4Black," another IRA-affiliated account, had a presence on Twitter, Instagram, and its own website (UsHadrons 2017d). This account, along with others such as "_Black_Business," promoted themes of black entrepreneurship and financial security (the activity of setting up a business, in which the Black community has historically been proportionally underrepresented), by posting photos with captions, often without additional context or specifics which would allow the content consumer to gain more information. While other accounts mentioned in this category focused more on relating Black physical aspects with successes, this one focused on providing short fragments of often decontextualized (dis)information. One example included a post with a purely-fabricated caption: "Did you know that Crest toothpaste, Folgers coffee, Bounce fabric softener, and Safeguard soap were all created by Dr. Herbert Smitherman?" Below the caption, a photo of the Black entrepreneur appeared alongside a list of biographical details (UsHadrons 2017c). Another post by the same account depicted and captioned a false statement: "Tristan Walker, age 31, Stanford MBA, turns down a half billion dollar [sic] buyout offer from Schick, Gillette, and Procter & Gamble to keep his Black men's skincare and grooming line, Bevel, Black owned" (UsHadrons 2017c)[8].

(2) Emotional beliefs tied to vulnerability (fear, anxiety, disillusionment)

Another set of IRA-operated accounts was manipulating emotional beliefs tied to perceived threats involving emotions such as fear, distress, and anger, often concerning the police or the US government. These accounts exploited the long-standing tension between the Black community

[8] While Walker did attend Stanford, he explicitly stated in an interview with the Los Angeles Times (Dexter 2016) that it was not true that he turned down an offer to buy his company. In fact, in 2018, his company was acquired by Procter & Gamble for an undisclosed amount (Gelles 2018).

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and police in the United States. According to the Pew Research Center (2020), a 2019 survey revealed that 84% of Black adults said that in dealing with police, Black people are treated less fairly than White people. One such account, "DoNotShoot.US," had an online presence on all major platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. While this IRA-linked account was also focused on publicizing cases of police brutality against Americans, it also created and published a database of these incidents through a website it developed.

In some cases, there would be no photo or name, just an "unidentified victim" with vague captions such as "police are under investigation." The webpage maintained a database with hundreds of cases, featuring videos of recorded encounters and providing space for users to submit personal links to the social media profiles (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn) of the police officers involved (UsHadrons 2017b). In addition, the webpage had collected over a dozen petitions, allegedly with hundreds of signatures each and hundreds of reports of police misconduct.[9] The information in this database was user-submitted and often did not include citations to any verifiable sources (UsHadrons 2017b). In addition, this account's YouTube channel served as a repository of various interviews, news reports, and, at times, poorly censored bodycam footage of police encounters with members of the public. These videos often appeared without background information and included inflammatory titles to raise emotions of distress, fear, and anger while showing viewers scenes of graphic violence. Examples of video titles on their YouTube page included the following: "Baltimore Police Officer Shot Mentally Ill Homeless Man," "Luis

[9] There is no evidence that the petitions created on the website were ever delivered to any relevant authorities charged with investigating police misconduct (Holliday & Barry 2018).

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Rodriguez Killed by 5 Cops in Front of his Wife," "Seattle Office Punches a Handcuffed Woman," and "Police Shooting Black Teens," among at least dozens of videos with similar titles (*ibid.*).

Another IRA account that aimed to evoke fear and anxiety was entitled "Watch.the.Police" and used Instagram to disseminate its content. The hybrid approach in this account and others mixed factual information with misleading, decontextualized, or outright false information. One post by the account referenced the case of police officer Chris McCoy whom the FBI charged with forcing an arrestee to perform a sexual act (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2017). The caption posted by the account provided a detailed summary of the accusations and included hashtags such as "policebrutality [sic]," "policereform [sic]," and "policeviolence [sic]." In addition, content by this account often provided caricatures and disinformation to intensify emotions. In one post, a photograph showed a man sitting atop another man swinging his fist, ready to punch him, with the caption, "Aggravated Assault." Below it was the same photo, doctored to show the man wearing a mock police uniform, with the caption "Resisting Arrest." The post was meant to create the impression that police officers may commit aggravated assault against others, but since they are officers of the law, the person they are assaulting will, in those cases, be charged with resisting arrest. Below these two photographs, a post caption appeared with the text "…double standards" (UsHadrons 2017e). In another post, an allegation or charge against a group of police officers was posted as fact. A screen grab from a video appeared with the caption, "Cops who tasered handcuffed teen on his testicles until he died cannot be charged. The Department kept the video of its cops killing a teen with a taser secret long enough to surpass the statute of limitations – 3 months" (UsHadrons 2017e). This post also contained several pieces of disinformation. It referenced the case of Graham Dyer, who died while in police custody in 2013, albeit from different causes than what was portrayed by the IRA video (Dexheimer 2017).

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(3) Emotional beliefs tied to strengthening militancy (defiance, anger)

A final group of accounts targeted their content toward themes of defiance, militancy, anger, and ensuring safety and security. In some cases, they took advantage of existing activism, such as that of NFL player Colin Kaepernick, who gained widespread publicity for protesting during the playing of the U.S. National Anthem before the start of a football match in 2016 (Boren 2020). Of the various IRA operations described thus far, the account that seemingly had the most widespread distribution and dissemination capacity was "Black Matters US." The account's activities were consistent with that of other IRA-operated accounts – there was a considerable degree of cross-posting (i.e., the Twitter account of this operation posted content from its Facebook page and vice-versa). This account (which changed its name to "B.M." after Facebook initially removed it) may have been intended to exploit emotions and narratives generated by the authentic U.S. domestic Black Lives Matter movement, which was involved in protests and rallies demanding social justice and institutional change, including police reform. Compared to other IRA accounts, the B.M. account posted more intensely political content, possibly to motivate feelings of defiance and militancy toward the U.S. political system, as was being promoted by the domestic group.

It seems that the IRA-linked B.M. page sought to become the central online hub for all Black-identity-related event organizing. A post from the page in August 2016 stated the following: "A new BlackMattersUS tool gathers all the Black meetups in one place. Now you can keep track of and organize ALL the Black meetups in one place! We are glad to be the first and only platform that provides this opportunity. For those who want to make real Changes [sic], we offer a convenient search of the upcoming and past events" (Datasette 2018). It appears that this page strategically set up specific events to coincide and appear after authentic events. In one example,

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a local group, the Coalition for community Control over the Police, organized an event to commemorate the second anniversary of the death of Ezell Ford and demand justice from the Los Angeles Police Department. The anniversary and event occurred on August 12, 2016 (Keyanna 2016). The IRA created its own event two weeks afterward, on August 26, 2020, using a description similar to that of the original post (Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities 2020).

Militancy was a vital theme of this page. An example of one such post from the "Black Matters US" account was an illustration of a raised black fist alongside the traditional symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties (the donkey and the elephant) with a red strike through them. The caption stated, "It's time for an independent black political party," signifying that the two main political parties do not represent the interests of the Black community. Historically, the raised black fist was associated with Black militant 1960s civil rights movements that fought for social change. In modern times, its meaning relates to solidarity (in particular with social causes) and has been adopted by the modern-day BLM movement (UsHadrons 2017f). Another image exemplifying militancy on the same page showed a Black man staring straight ahead with the caption, "They know – when we wake-up… IT'S OVER!". This referenced the idea that Black groups were raising the awareness of people who were "asleep," when they gained consciousness or were "awakened," they would prove to be a formidable challenge. This image had hashtags such as "blackpower [sic]" and "problack [sic]" (*ibid.*).

Another key theme was defiance. One such post representative of this theme across these pages included a photograph of Black people embracing each other with the text "We Will Survive." Below it, a caption included, "Black people survived Columbus, slavery, Jim Crow, Nixon, Reagan, and two George Bush's. We have thrived in the midst of poverty, the crack [sic]

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era, the AIDS epidemic, police brutality, and the neo-slavery of mass incarceration. We gone [sic] be alright." The caption referenced various political and historical events in the United States to create and amplify a narrative of victimization, plight, and defiance against the odds. A similar post of defiance from the same Blacktivist page included a photograph of a man bathing two children, in the ruins of an apartment complex, with the text, "You can destroy a country, but you can't destroy a parent willing to keep their kids happy." Although the photograph was allegedly of a Syrian family, the IRA account accompanied it with hashtags such as "blacklivesmatter [sic]" and "blackpride [sic]" to conflate the tragedy of Syrians and Black people in the United States. In another post on the page, a historic photo of a tribe of Indigenous people from North America was captioned "Fighting Terrorism since 1492". This was in reference to the year of the arrival of the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus to the so-called East Indies. While marked by many Americans as a cause for celebration, this date is seen as a tragedy by Indigenous groups who commemorate it as the date they began to lose their land and experienced genocide. This post sought to conflate the tragedy of Indigenous people with that of Black people in the United States by adding hashtags such as "blackandproud [sic]" and "blackunity [sic]" while expressing a sentiment of defiance (UsHadrons 2017f).

In addition, there is evidence that "B.M." and affiliated accounts such as "Woke Blacks" used various platforms to promote offline events to further their emotional persuasion and conflate their activities with those of legitimate domestic Black activist organizations. These groups organized most activities; there is little evidence to suggest they were aware that the IRA was using its platforms to invite people to their events. A review of the available screenshots shows that the webpage "BlackMatters" promoted invitations that could be divided along the following categories and examples: (1) cultural and empowerment events (Black restaurant weeks in New Orleans and

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Washington), (2) parades and celebrations (the 24th Annual MLK Grande Parade in Houston, the Martin Luther King Rally in Atlanta, a New Year's Eve Black Professionals event in Nashville), a Black Business Women Rock Conference and Expo in California), and (3) protests and commemorations for those killed in confrontations with police: Remember Tamir Rice (Ohio, Cleveland), National Day of Protest (Staten Island, NY), Justice for Alton Sterling, Black DNC Resistance March against Police Terrorism & State Repression, Justice for Philando Castille, India Cummings – Say Her Name, and the Freddie Gray Anniversary March (IRAds 2022). The IRA promoted these events with keywords that reflected their targeting of Black interests as well as historical figures known for defiance, with examples including: "African-American civil rights movement," "Martin Luther King Jr." and "Malcolm X" (UsHadrons 2017f).

The effort to manipulate emotional beliefs was complemented by the IRA profile "Blackfist" (which also went by the name "_Pro_Blackfist"), where the IRA had demonstrable success in mobilizing its propaganda from the digital domain into the physical world. The IRA appeared to be exploiting and amplifying the Black community's insecurity related to police encounters and the narratives surrounding the epidemic of violence experienced within this community. This strategy exploited the Black community's intensified calls for justice, more police accountability, and institutional reforms, among other demands (Gray & Parker 2020; Lett et al. 2021; Lipscomb et al. 2019). One specific incident of online mobilization involved two IRA accounts that solicited the support of Black fitness instructors to organize self-defense courses in sports studios and public parks throughout major American cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, Orlando, and Atlanta.

The IRA paid for the courses and asked these instructors to submit photos and videos of the lessons to the IRA-run social media page to be used for further promotion. Advertisements for

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these training sessions were supported by text such as, "Our aim is simple. We want our people to feel united and safe. Collective physical activities and discipline which appears during such training is the best way to make Black people feel safe." The keywords used to target the Facebook advertisements for this page included phrases such as: "fight for your life," "black unity," "black pride," "black power," "fight back," "stay safe," and "Be your own weapon" (UsHadrons 2018).

Analysis: Manipulating Emotions and Emotional Beliefs on Social Media Platforms

The preceding cases sought to demonstrate how Russian influence operations used various media channels as an essential component of their interference strategy within the United States. The features of social media allowed the IRA to reach a larger, more specific audience than would have been possible if it had used traditional media channels, such as television and print media. The IRA's content evoked, distorted, amplified, and fabricated details of some of the Black community's most emotionally charged narratives and grievances. Indeed, discerning the extent to which the IRA specifically sought to emotionally manipulate, rather than merely echo or amplify pre-existing sentiments within the Black community is a complex endeavor. However, our analysis suggests that the IRA's strategy was not simply replicating pre-existing Black activist content and narratives, and thereby, the IRA, we argue showed clear "emotional entrepreneurship."

The intensity, frequency, and pattern of emotionally charged themes across the IRA's content point towards a calculated effort to heighten emotional resonance, thereby indicating a manipulative intent. While some of these narratives may have inherently aligned with legitimate Black activist sentiments, the IRA's approach was characterized by intensifying such themes, a strategy arguably distinct from how authentic accounts touching on the same issues generally engaged their audiences. Regardless of the Black community's awareness of who was behind such

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efforts, the impact of such amplified emotional manipulation within the community may have been significant, thereby rendering the IRA's activities consequential.

The IRA's efforts demonstrated an ability to craft and disseminate content in a digital ecosystem that permitted the viral growth of often misleading and inflammatory content designed to manipulate the targeted group emotionally. Engagement likely occurred precisely because the IRA used social media platforms – this medium was indispensable for conveying the content. In these cases, manipulating emotions and emotional beliefs was a vehicle to influence various outcomes, including views, decisions, and behaviors. The operations sought to involve the Black community in a carefully controlled experience that aimed to advance the operatives' agenda of regulating and generating responses to the produced content.

For the IRA, emotional manipulation using social media platforms may have provided a pathway to affect opinions and behavior. The operatives cultivated a demonstrably large following through symbols, images, phrases, and other objects linked to emotions and emotional beliefs. The increasing community recognition that followed the publication of content that resonated with the targeted users generated a snowball effect. Users liked, shared, and commented on the IRA-generated content, which permitted some of the accounts, groups, and pages to grow in popularity. The IRA took advantage of a social media phenomenon known as emotional contagion. As followers of IRA-managed profiles and groups engaged with emotionally charged content, their contacts, such as friends and family, may have also become influenced to join and participate in the page's content. Such a tendency may have permitted the IRA to continue gaining supporters for their influence operation.

The IRA's strategy focused on manipulating the target audience by attempting to undermine their rational decision-making abilities through carefully cultivated content. Such

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content was designed to evoke emotions in three categories: attachment, vulnerability, and militancy. While the three categories seemingly worked toward different ends and involved the production and amplification of emotions on varying ends of the spectrum, each one had a strategic purpose linked with manipulating a distinct feature of the targeted audience's motivations, beliefs, attitudes, and interests[10].

The first category, attachment (evidenced through efforts by Sincerely_Black, Nefertiti_Community, and Black4Black), had content designed to evoke emotions related to love and pride, which may have had several purposes. For one, it could have boosted engagement as social media platforms' incentive structures are designed to promote such content. This is in line with the dual role of social media platforms – while they provide content from one user to another, they also share content from companies whose marketing is geared towards positive engagement and increasing connection with their brands. Thus, liking and sharing a piece of content signals to the platforms' algorithms that the content should be shared more widely with others. Consequently, when the attachment was cultivated, it would have provided a pathway for the IRA to build relationships with the followers of its administered accounts. Evoking attachment would have also facilitated sharing and commenting between the various members of the online communities.

On a group level, seeing positive content and sharing may have played a role in consolidating a feeling of unity and advancing group loyalty in two ways – to the Black community

[10] Our study is careful not to imply that members of the Black community, or any other group, are easily manipulated or inherently susceptible to disinformation campaigns. The focus of our research lies primarily on the calculated strategies of the IRA, and not on the direct outcomes of these strategies or the inherent qualities of the target group.

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and to the page's IRA administrator, who was possibly covertly testing and disseminating a variety of themes to examine which ones would more likely emotionally resonate with members of the community. Equally, by producing content that linked pride with elements such as physical characteristics, the IRA sought to cultivate and exploit individuals' desire for belonging and, more importantly, collective identity. The cultivation of an attachment to Black identity was arguably the most critical element because of its central position in how users would relate to each other, the conversations that would take place, as well as the extent to which users would be willing to share and be open to having shared with them.

In the second category, Watch.the.Police and Do.Not.Shoot were presented as examples of profiles evoking emotions tied to vulnerability, including fear, anxiety, and disillusionment. The IRA may have utilized this emotional belief and corresponding emotions because of their heavy influence on decision-making. Fear, a powerful emotion marked by high physical arousal and known to influence decision-making heavily, can be profoundly intensified on social media platforms due to its capacity to exaggerate perceived susceptibility and threat severity, both of which may be distorted and intensified by the (dis)informer. When the IRA disseminated content that provided a narrow and distorted view of the Black community's relationship with the police, this would have likely influenced not only the physical sense of fear but also triggered disillusionment about the individuals' experiences with society and figures of authority.

In addition, by producing social media content that generated emotions such as fear and anxiety, the IRA may have been presenting their targets with ideas that generated feelings of low agency – the idea that the Black community had little control over their external environment and could be randomly targeted by police or treated unjustly by the government. Anxiety is closely linked to fear – while fear triggers feelings of threat, anxiety presents cognitive obstacles for

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individuals who are seeking to eliminate what could be perceived as threats to themselves or their community. In addition, when considered within the framework of the three emotional belief categories, the exploitation of anxiety becomes an even more powerful tool. This is because anxiety involves an inefficiency in processing information, thus by cross-posting and exposing users to contradictory information – in one group demonstrating pride and resilience, and in the other two vulnerability and militancy, this would have likely further intensified anxious feelings caused by such conflicting information.

In its content production, the IRA introduced and sought to amplify negative emotions towards political institutions and the police, an apparent strategy that may have sought to influence targets' evaluations of and emotional beliefs about authority figures. The production of fear and anxiety may have generated disillusionment, significantly influencing the targets' willingness to participate politically. In the context of the US presidential election, this suggests a possible intent to demobilize elements of the Black community, potentially impacting the political party that a significant portion of the community ordinarily supports, namely the Democratic Party.

By generating and amplifying feelings of vulnerability, the IRA was better positioned to offer a solution they conjured up and controlled. This involved the third group of emotions, related to anger– which targeted the emotional belief tied to defiance and militancy (as evidenced by Black Matters US, Woke Blacks, and Blackfist). The combination of pride in the in-group, stimulating emotions linked to vulnerability, and the third group's invoking of anger provided a potentially potent mix. Anger as an emotion is considered a critical motive for collective action. In addition, anger is valuable because it impacts decision-making and may also be directed toward other groups. In this case, evoking themes of injustices would have likely caused anger toward government officials, the police, and society at large. Amplifying anger through the content would

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have also complemented the emotions invoked by the first category, which focused on themes such as pride and group loyalty. The feelings evoked by this last category would have likely also provided a strong impetus for sharing and engagement within the corresponding digital communities.

In addition, by tapping into increasing frustration of the injustices suffered by the Black community, the IRA positioned itself to offer solutions on its own terms, which was intended to capture the curiosity and attention of the targeted Black community. This was designed to further foster a willingness to engage with IRA-affiliated projects in the digital realm and through some associated events in the real world. This may have been an attempt to offer an outlet to the emotions generated through the various profiles and groups and was a dangerous step toward real-world mobilization.

The IRA may have been able to test various types of content, which, over time, increased their ability to learn the context and circumstances of the targeted community. By increasing their understanding and cultural sophistication, the operations' content was received and consumed as a legitimate source for understanding the narratives of the Black community, as evidenced by the number of followers gained and the instances of successful mobilization. The cases highlight a crucial evolution in influence operations -- one that involves the ability of foreign, covert actors to generate emotions remotely.

Conclusion

This article has explored how the IRA, acting on behalf of Russia, targeted the Black community in the United States using the conveniences provided by major social media platforms. Through the analysis of the posted content and the methodologies employed, the study contributes to understanding the construction and dissemination of manipulative content while simultaneously

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unveiling the strategies for emotional manipulation and how evoking specific emotions may assist the progression of influence operations.

Our investigation reveals the intricate fabric of IRA-linked content transcending the emotional spectrum. It showcases a pronounced pattern of emotional evocation, employing emotions associated with love for Black history and physical attributes while concurrently nurturing emotions of anger, fear, and defiance against the socio-political conditions faced by the Black community. This emotionally-induced content was carefully constructed against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with political systems, perceived discrimination by the police and the justice system, and a broader sense of discontent with the Black community's circumstances.

The findings offer an alternative viewpoint on IRA-linked influence operations, which are often presumed to focus largely on disinformation. It reveals how the IRA crafted emotional appeals in attempts to modify the emotional beliefs of ordinary American citizens identified with one distinct attribute on social media – race. To achieve this, the IRA selectively chose information or wholly fabricated it when necessary. The spectrum of (dis)information was utilized in its totality. This long-term effort aimed to construct an online community and a dedicated following through a consistent delivery of emotionally loaded content.

By closely examining the IRA's operations, this study sheds light on a crucial aspect of influence campaigns: the virtual can translate into tangible impact in the real world. State-sponsored social media accounts have the potential to reach a broad audience and ignite actions, demonstrating the ability of virtually coordinated influence operations to orchestrate events in territories distant from the operatives. The findings derived from this study are not limited to this particular context, but may have broader implications. They could potentially be extrapolated to

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other socio-political contexts where influence operations might exploit pre-existing societal fissures, cultural narratives, or group identities. The manipulation of emotional beliefs and narratives could be utilized in diverse cultural contexts, from polarized political environments to societies with deep-rooted ethnic or religious divisions.

In conclusion, this research contributes to understanding how foreign influence operations manipulate emotional beliefs to further their agendas. The study lays the groundwork for further exploration and robust countermeasures by unveiling these strategies. The vulnerabilities exposed through this article prompt us to approach the digital age with enhanced vigilance, armed with the knowledge that what transpires on our screens can, with enough effort, impact our physical world and potentially even the fabric of our democracies. As such, this research provides a crucial starting point for a whole-of-society approach to addressing the challenges these influence operations pose. It calls upon us all – governments, civil society, and individual citizens – to actively safeguard the integrity of our information consumption in the digital age.

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