

Social Media and Social Networks: College Student Experiences with Vicarious Racism

Rosa M Bermejo and Dr. Bonita London

Department of Social & Health Psychology, Stony Brook University

Introduction

- Vicarious racism is an indirect form of discrimination that can be experienced through family and friends, and media.
- By hearing shared experiences from social support networks, people of color can externalize their own experiences of racism to societal inequities and engage in racial resistance by forming support groups, committees, and participating in activism (Truong et al., 2016).
- However, people of color who listen to stories of racism can also experience anxiety, stress, and distress which can be heightened by witnessing racist events through social media (Cohen et al., 2021; Howard et al., 2022).
- Vicarious racism literature has focused primarily on indirect racism experienced through family members among children and adolescent populations (Heard-Garris et al., 2018).
- Due to the nature of this existing literature, a population developmentally different from elementary and high school education has been neglected: college students.

Research questions

1. What is the frequency and type of vicarious racism most experienced by college students?
2. How do different types of vicarious racism impact mental health outcomes?

Methods

• **Participants:** N = 224 (65.45% URM, mean age = 19) undergraduate students completed a short survey about their experiences with social media use and indirect discrimination.

• **Self-report measures:** General Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7), Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ), Vicarious Online Racial Discrimination (VORD), the Vicarious Racism Stress Scale (VRSS), the Vicarious Racism Scale (VRS), and the Racial Injustices Scale (RIS).

Results

Online Vicarious Racism:

- Participants reported a low frequency (“rarely”; $M = 1.49, SD = .99$) of witnessing racial cyberbullying and medium frequency (“a few times a year”; $M = 2.15, SD = 1.08$) of witnessing online racial discrimination.

Vicarious Racism (family & friends, news, public):

- Participants on average witnessed vicarious racism once a month to a few times a month ($M = 1.85, SD = .93$), and felt high levels of distress over witnessing racist events ($M = 2.21, SD = .80$).

Daily Vicarious Racism:

- While less than half of the participants learned about racial injustices through social media (41.89%), most thought about racial injustices and mistreatment over the day (60.81%).

Regression models with depression and anxiety as separate dependent variables were conducted:

- Vicarious exposure to online discrimination significantly predicted higher symptoms of *anxiety* ($\beta = 0.09$) but not depression.
- Higher exposure to vicarious racism, such as through politicians, family, and friends, significantly predicted higher symptoms of *depression* ($\beta = 0.11$), but not anxiety.

Table 1. Regression analyses: Predictors of Anxiety and Depression

	Anxiety	Depression
Intercept	1.64 (0.48)***	0.52 (0.38)
Age	-0.03 (0.02)	0.01 (.02)
Gender	0.22 (0.11)	-0.06 (.09)
Screen time	-0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
URM	-0.23 (0.08)**	0.10 (0.07)
PHQ	0.87 (0.07)***	---
GAD	---	0.55 (0.04)***
VORD	0.09 (0.04)*	-0.01 (0.04)
VERCA	0.04 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)
VRSS	-0.03 (0.05)	0.06 (0.04)
VRS	-0.05 (0.05)	0.11 (0.04)**
R-Squared	0.55***	0.56***

Discussion

- Vicarious online discrimination, such as witnessing people being rude or making jokes about racial/ethnic groups, differentially predicted higher symptoms of anxiety among undergraduate students.
- Experiencing a higher frequency of vicarious racist events, such as hearing about these events in the news, in public, through family and friends, or politicians, predicted higher symptoms of depression.
- Future steps include exploring the pathways between online racism and anxiety, and vicarious racism via social networks and depression.
- Experiencing vicarious racism online may lead to higher symptoms of anxiety due to less control of events in online spaces, while witnessing racism from more personal social networks may lead to increased hopelessness due to the event.

References

- Brondolo, E., Brady ver Halen, N., Pencille, M., Beatty, D., & Contrada, R. J. (2009). Coping with racism: a selective review of the literature and a theoretical and methodological critique. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 32(1), 64–88. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-008-9193-0>
- Cohen, A., Ekwueme, P. O., Sacotte, K. A., Bajwa, L., Gilpin, S., & Heard-Garris, N. (2021). “Melaninoholy”: A qualitative exploration of youth media use, vicarious racism, and perceptions of health. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 69(2), 288–293. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.12.128>
- Elder, G. H. (1998). The life course as developmental theory. *Child Development*, 69(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1132065>
- Harrell, S. P. (2000). A multidimensional conceptualization of racism-related stress: Implications for the well-being of people of color. *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70(1), 42–57. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0087722>
- Heard-Garris, N. J., Cale, M., Camaj, L., Hamati, M. C., & Dominguez, T. P. (2018). Transmitting Trauma: A systematic review of vicarious racism and child health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 199, 230–240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.04.018>
- Louie, P., & Upenieks, L. (2022). Vicarious discrimination, psychosocial resources, and mental health among Black Americans. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 85(2), 187–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01902725221079279>
- Macaranas, A.R., ElTohamy, A., Hyun, S., Chae, D. H., Stevens, C., Chen, J. A., & Liu, C. H. (2023). COVID-19-related direct and vicarious racial discrimination: Associations with psychological distress among U.S. college students. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 325, 747–754. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2023.01.009>
- Martz, C. D., Allen, A. M., Fuller-Rowell, T. E., Spears, E. C., Lim, S. S., Drenkard, C., Chung, K., Hunter, E. A., & Chae, D. H. (2019). Vicarious racism stress and disease activity: The Black women’s experiences living with lupus (BeWELL) Study. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, 6(5), 1044–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-019-00606-8>
- Museus, S. D., & Park, J. J. (2015). The continuing significance of racism in the lives of Asian American college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 56(6), 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2015.0059>
- Museus, S. D., & McGuire, K. M. (2016). Vicarious racism: A qualitative analysis of experiences with secondhand racism in graduate education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 29(2), 224–247. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2015.1023234>

Acknowledgment

This material is based upon work supported by NSF under Grant NRT-HDR 2125295. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.