Vicarious Racism from Social Networks and Media predicts Psychological Distress among Undergraduates

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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 ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .80$).
- URM students ($n = 143$, $M = 1.99$, $SD = 0.92$) reporting significantly higher instances of vicarious racism than white students (n = 75, M = 1.59, SD = 0.90), t(216) = -3.02, p < .001.
- For example: 78.3% of URM students reported hearing instances of racism from their family or friends as compared to only 52% of white students.

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)
Screentime	-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.

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