

Editorial: Moving Towards Intersectional, Vicarious, and Strengths-Based Conceptualizations of Online Racial Discrimination

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These findings underscore the mental health repercussions of online racial discrimination, the role of these exposures in driving racial inequities, and the need for additional research, as well as improved policy and clinical practice, to address these issues. In this paper, we highlight 3 key considerations for further advancing research on online racial discrimination: (1) implementation of an intersectional framework; (2) examination of vicarious experiences of online racial discrimination; and (3) identification of protective factors (eg, racial socialization).

Racial discrimination—unfair or differential treatment based on one's race—is a prevalent stressor that has a severe impact on Black youths' psychological, behavioral, and academic outcomes.¹ Although extant research has predominantly focused on Black youths' experiences of in-person racial discrimination, there is growing recognition that Black youths also face discrimination in online settings, including on social media and direct messaging platforms.² Thus, to more holistically understand Black youths' experiences of racial discrimination, it is important that we understand how online racial discrimination may impact Black youths' mental health outcomes. However, few studies have assessed the mental health impact of online racial discrimination on Black youths, and none have examined these associations longitudinally. Del Toro and Wang¹ advance this literature by using an ecological momentary assessment approach to examine the longitudinal effects of online racial discrimination on the mental health of 12- to-18-year-old Black youths ($n = 351$). Findings showed that Black youths reported greater stress, depressive symptoms, and anxiety symptoms on the day of and the day after an incident of online racial discrimination compared to when no racial discrimination was experienced online.

APPLYING AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF ONLINE RACISM

Intersectional considerations of online racial discrimination remain a point of inquiry in the literature. An intersectional framework recognizes that Black youths' experiences and perceptions of online racial discrimination may be affected by the intersections of other identities, such as social class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and many others.^{3,4} Although Del Toro and Wang controlled for biological sex (girl or boy), grade, and enrollment in free or reduced-price lunch (a proxy of socioeconomic status), they did not consider how the frequency, nature, and impact of online racial discrimination among Black youths may differ based on other social identities, such as sexual orientation and gender-diverse identities.

Recent theoretical⁴ and empirical research⁵ have drawn on attention to the need for an intersectional approach to understanding racism exposure and coping among Black youths. For instance, although Black boys and girls in the United States are both more likely to experience lethal and excessive force from law enforcement compared to White youths, Black girls also disproportionately experience police-perpetrated sexual violence, underscoring the need to attend to intersecting racialized and gendered vulnerabilities.⁴ Similarly, in a large sample of adolescent youths, those with multiple stigmatized identities experienced identity-based bullying (IBB) at higher rates than youths who experienced IBB based on a single marginalized identity; the highest rates of IBB were reported by Black and Hispanic youths with gender-diverse identities (eg, transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary).⁵ These findings suggest that exclusively focusing on a single identity may obscure nuances in the frequency and types of discrimination experienced by youths with multiple stigmatized identities.

Despite emerging research applying an intersectional lens to the study of racial discrimination broadly, to our

knowledge, no studies have specifically used this framework to assess online racial discrimination, highlighting an important priority for future research. Implementing an intersectional framework for the study of online racial discrimination may provide a more comprehensive understanding of these experiences and lead to improved mental health intervention and prevention programs that better meet the diverse needs of Black youths.

EXAMINING VICARIOUS EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

Although findings from Del Toro and Wang¹ underscore the mental health consequences of exposure to online racial discrimination, it is important to note that their assessment of online racism was based on a single item that focused on individual exposure (“Over the past 24 hours, did anyone say or post mean or rude things about you because of your race or ethnic group online?”). Other forms of online racism, such as vicarious exposures, were not considered. Vicarious online racism refers to viewing discrimination, harassment, or violence directed at one’s racial group in online settings, such as social media platforms.² Examples include repeated and prolonged exposure to viral images or videos of police killings of unarmed citizens and other forms of violence inflicted against people of color.⁶ Research shows that 71% of African American adolescents report at least one experience of vicarious racial discrimination online,⁷ and these experiences have been linked with worse mental health outcomes.⁸ Thus, overlooking vicarious exposures may lead to underestimation of the severity and mental health impact of online racial discrimination on Black youths. Greater attention to vicarious racism in online settings is needed, particularly research capitalizing on the benefits of intensive longitudinal methods such as ecological momentary assessment. Considering the multiple forms of online racism that youths may experience (individual, vicarious, and others) will enable us to develop more robust intervention approaches to addressing these toxic stressors.

UNDERSTANDING RACIAL SOCIALIZATION IN ONLINE EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION

As the field begins to better understand the growing problem of online racial discrimination, it is pivotal that researchers also aim to identify empirically supported strategies for protecting Black youths from the detrimental effects of these experiences. Racial socialization (RS), or the process by which caregivers convey implicit and explicit

messages about race and how to cope with experiences of racial discrimination,⁹ is an integral factor to measure as a potential buffer of online racial discrimination in Black youths. RS is used by most Black families and has been identified as a protective factor against the deleterious effects of in-person racism.⁹ However, little is known about the RS strategies that parents use to help youths to navigate online experiences of racism. Keum and Ahn⁸ found that parents’ preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust RS messages, reported retrospectively in young adulthood, buffered the impact of online racism on psychological distress. Avoidance of race-related topics, in contrast, exacerbated the link between vicarious online racial discrimination and increased alcohol use.⁹ However, the authors examined parents’ RS strategies broadly; they did not examine the messages that parents provided about online racism specifically. Expanding our conceptualization and measurement of RS to reflect the current digital era is needed. It is possible that because of generational differences, Black parents may feel less confident and skilled and more stressed regarding discussions of online than in-person racism with their children. Therefore, more research is needed to identify effective strategies for teaching parents, particularly those with limited digital literacy, to support their children who may be experiencing online racism and to promote racial pride using digitally relevant approaches.

CONCLUSION

Del Toro and Wang¹ offer a compelling, timely, and important contribution to the literature by assessing the longitudinal mental health impact of online racial discrimination in Black youths. In this paper, we identify three research priorities for building upon this work, including the use of an intersectional approach, consideration of vicarious online racism, and identification of strengths-based approaches to buffering youths from these experiences. As we continue to advance research on this topic, it is critical that we increase our efforts toward the prevention of racism in offline and online contexts. Preparing youths to cope with these experiences is not enough. We must also work to identify and implement effective strategies for tackling individual and structural drivers of online racism, including interventions geared towards bias reduction in White youths and adults.

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