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## Examining vicarious racial trauma in college students

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**Examining Vicarious Racial Trauma in College Students**

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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### **Abstract**

Racism-related stress models argue that racism can illicit psychological and physiological stress responses in Black and African American people. These stress responses can negatively influence the overall wellbeing of individuals who experience racism. Like other stressors and traumatizing events, racism can be experienced directly or vicariously. There are many studies that observe the various impacts of direct racist experiences on Black and African American people but less is known about the possible effects of indirect experiences of racism. The present study examined the nature and negative effect of vicarious racial trauma in Black and African American college students through different mediums of transmission. A sample of 27 Black and African American students primarily attending the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga completed a survey assessing Black identity, racial traumatic stress, coping strategies for racial discrimination, and knowledge of racially violent events. The findings suggest that Black and African American college students' racial identity influences their perceptions of racist events and the number of coping strategies they use. Furthermore, those who learned of racially discriminatory events, like the George Floyd murder in 2020, through social media experienced more racial traumatic stress. Implications for the relationship between personal racial identification and perceptions of racially discriminatory events, as well as the possible impact of chronic exposure of racial trauma through social media are discussed.

## **Introduction**

### ***Background***

Racism is a growingly well-documented experience that often permeates multiple spheres of its victim's daily experiences. There are multiple approaches to defining racism but a more comprehensive definition is, a system of beliefs, practices, and policies that operates to discriminate against individuals based on race and or ethnic group affiliation and benefit those with historical power (Clark et al., 1999; Haney et al., 2021). This can be experienced either overtly (e.g., behaviors in social settings) or covertly (e.g., institutional practices or laws). It is warranted to assume that racism shapes multiple domains of a group's experiences.

Among being considered a determinant of physical health (Douglas, 2005), racism has also been studied as a predictor for family dynamics, socioeconomic status, and domains of child development (Dumornay et al., 2023). Notably, social science and biological stress literature has increasingly pointed to racism as a stressor for a range of historically oppressed groups. Perceived racism, the subjective perception of both overt and covert prejudice attitudes and discriminatory behaviors, is believed to be a source of acute and chronic stress in ethnic minorities because it can elicit psychological and/or physiological stress responses (Clark, 2004; Harrell, 2000). For example, Clark and colleagues (1999) studied the impact of perceived racism on health outcomes using a biopsychosocial model in African Americans, a group that experiences disproportionate instances of environmental racial stressors. The model illustrates how environmental stressors perceived as racist can illicit psychological and physiological coping responses which, if repeatedly experienced, can negatively impact African American's

mental and physical health outcomes. Racism, like other stressors, can be experienced directly or indirectly through outside observations.

### *Vicarious Trauma*

Vicarious trauma is a psychological and sometimes physiological reaction to a traumatic event experienced by someone else, where recounts of these events may cause disruptions to the observer's mental health, concept of self-identity, cognitive schema, and memory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Characteristics or symptoms of vicarious trauma include intrusive images, feeling unsafe, and negative emotional reactions (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Vicarious trauma has been considered a type of acute stress although not explicitly named in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Most research on this topic has focused on healthcare workers and settings where providers have direct contact with people who have experienced trauma (Hennein et al., 2022). It has also been considered a type of countertransference because professionals who interact with traumatic material may have trouble containing their own discomfort about their clients' disclosure of traumatic experiences (Trippany et al., 2004). However, vicarious trauma differs from countertransference because it is a direct reaction to someone else's trauma.

Symptoms of vicarious trauma are similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms such as altered emotions after learning of a firsthand traumatic experience (i.e., grief, sadness, loss of hope, fear of safety, anger, and agitation). Other PTSD-like symptoms include intrusive memories of the traumatic event, repeated imagery of the event, and avoidance of situations or people related to the event (Lerias & Byrne, 2003). Very little is known about the

prevalence of vicarious traumatization in non-professional, general populations. Vicarious trauma is seen as a normal occurrence in therapists (Jimenez et al., 2021), social workers (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012), and nurses (Raunick et al., 2015). Subsequently, in recent years researchers have looked to other settings where traumatic events can be experienced secondhand.

### ***Vicarious Racism***

There are a myriad of ways racism can be experienced, one being vicariously or through second-hand experience. Harrell (2000) defines vicarious, or secondhand, racism as the indirect exposure through observation and/or report of prejudice and discrimination from members of the same racial group. Vicariously experienced racism can be through family, friends, and strangers (e.g., in the news or from word of mouth). Vicarious racism is considered to fall under the umbrella of psychological stressors due to its sub-categorical nature of vicarious trauma and secondary traumatic stress (Jenkins & Baird, 2002).

A large body of literature has found associations between direct racist encounters and mental and physical health outcomes (e.g., hypertension and lowered self-esteem), as mentioned previously (Douglas, 2005; Fischer & Shaw, 1999). However, indirect racial trauma and its links with mental health outcomes is less understood. The limited amount of the vicarious racism literature has focused on parent-child relationships or healthcare related professions (e.g., first-responders, nurses, physicians, social workers). In families, the close nature of a parent-child relationship leaves the child particularly vulnerable to the detrimental effects of secondhand racism during critical stages of development (Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Holloway & Varner,

2023). However, little is known about the associations of vicarious racism-related stress and mental health outcomes in other groups (i.e. college students).

Proposed mechanisms of vicarious racism are mainly understood through social frameworks such as the concept of “linked lives,” where events that affect one person have indirect effects on that person’s social network or share the same ethnoracial identity (Gee et al., 2012; Monk, 2020). These experiences can alter the way the target of racism operates in their social network and therefore perpetuate the negative impacts of racism-related stress in the lives of other individuals in their social network (e.g. romantic relationships, parent-child). In addition to the impact of negative behaviors as a result of racially traumatic experiences, learning of a racially traumatic event with someone who shares some social connection has been associated with poorer mental and physical health. A recent study from the University of Texas at Austin found that mothers of Black children (ages 11-18) reported lower self-rated health scores and high levels of depressive symptoms after they learned of their children’s racially discriminatory experiences (Holloway & Varner, 2023).

Vicarious racism not only operates through families, but also through close friends or other members of the same racial group. Hearing about discriminatory events from a friend is associated with greater personal feelings of anger, anxiety, and stress (Louie & Upenieks, 2022). Witnessing racial discrimination through different means of communication like news outlets and social media may have similar effects, especially due to their frequency of presentation. Constant displays of racism and race-based violence may create the same effects as other chronic

stressors (Harrell, 2000) resulting in the potential to cause mental and physiological harm to Black individuals who are subjected to bear witness to those events.

### ***Vicarious Racism in Higher Education***

School climate is the character and quality of school life and reflects perceptions of safety, institutional structure, interpersonal relationships, teaching practices, and social norms. In educational psychology literature, school climate has been attributed to shaping the trajectory of students' academic success, self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Cohen et al., 2009; Coelho et al., 2020). One unfortunate contributor to school climate in higher education specifically is racism. A body of literature that has named colleges campuses as a source of racial discrimination at institutional and personal levels (Moore & Bell, 2017; Solorzano, et al., 2000). Persistent instances of discrimination on college campuses has been associated with low minority faculty retention, high dropout rates in students of color, and experiences of anxiety, depression, and apathy for racial minority students (Williams, 2019).

Williams (2019) illustrated some of the ways racism is practiced in educational institutions. Things such as an emphasis of Eurocentric bias in curricula, bias in faculty hiring, overt racial harassment and insults, experiences of microaggressions, and poor advisement for students of color due to cultural incongruency have been considered harmful practices of racism. All of which can make students feel alienated, marginalized, and hopeless especially when there are no resources to combat these practices on campus. Just as individuals of color can experience racism directly, they can also experience it indirectly through vicarious racism. The concept of linked lives and social identity theories (e.g., Cross's Nigrescence theory) provides a foundation



for understanding individuals' susceptibility to the same harmful experiences (e.g., microaggression), that they have witnessed. A growing body of research has begun to study Black and other minority university students' experiences with vicarious racism (Alvarez et al., 2006; Truong, et al., 2015; Mason et al., 2017).

### ***Current Study***

The goals of this study were to: 1) examine the nature and effect of vicarious racial trauma in Black and African American college students' mental health and 2) understand the methods these individuals use to cope with vicarious racially traumatic experiences. Research on this topic primarily studies vicarious trauma in caregiver-child relationships or in healthcare settings but there is a paucity of work concerning vicarious racism in Black students in higher education. Prior studies have measured how vicarious racism is experienced with different scales and survey questions (e.g., through oral transmission from family or friends); however there is still a limited understanding of how different mediums of vicarious racism can moderate the impact on psychological well-being.

Social media has increasingly become of interest when studying the perceptions of racism specifically in the youth since many young people use social media as their dominant source of information (Cohen et al., 2021). Furthermore, Black and African American people perceive disproportionate amounts of racism compared to other racial groups, and report more frequent instances of vicarious racism (Hennein et al., 2022; Moody, 2022). Therefore, an investigation on the strength of impact of different mediums of information transmission related to racially traumatic events is warranted.

For this study I hypothesized that:

- Black and African American college students who had a stronger sense of pride or closely aligned with black racial identity would be positively correlated with higher racial trauma scores.

The reasoning for this hypothesis is that racial identity is an important, well-studied component of psychological outcomes in Black and African Americans such as self-esteem (Vandiver et al., 2002), body dissatisfaction (Awad et al., 2020), maladaptive perfectionism and educational success (Elion et al., 2012), and psychological distress (Cokley & Helm, 2007).

Therefore, it is reasonable to assume racial identity will influence perceptions and psychological impacts of racism.

- Black and African American college students who report less positive Black attitudes will report fewer coping mechanisms.

There have been found intragroup differences in perceptions of racism, so it is reasonable to assume that there will be differences in coping mechanisms (if any) utilized (Carter et al., 2015; Clark et al., 1999). Those who do not hold many positive Black attitudes will not perceive as many events as racist as some who do have more positive Black attitudes. Therefore, the need to cope with racist and/or discriminatory incidents will not be as strong in those with negative Black attitudes. Based on this research, I also hypothesized:

- The impact of vicarious racially discriminatory events will be moderated by the mode of transmission. Black and African American college students who report vicarious racism

through social media will have higher racial trauma scores compared to those who report vicarious racism through live or non-live TV or radio, live streaming, and word of mouth.

Some studies have found learning of racially traumatic events from individuals in one's immediate social network had stronger associations with negative mental health outcomes, such as depressive symptoms, than from individuals that are a part of a larger social network (i.e. racial group; Hollaway & Varner, 2023). Conversely, recent literature observing youth media consumption has highlighted the prevalence of social media use as another mode to observe racially based discriminatory or violent events – which may have a particularly stronger effect on their mental health (Cohen et al., 2021). Furthermore, I hypothesized that:

- There will be a negative correlation between the number of total coping mechanisms for racial discrimination used and total racial trauma scores. Those who report more coping mechanisms will report less racial stress.

Previous literature has found a positive relationship between the number of coping mechanisms and positive adjustments (Heffer & Willoughby, 2017). Therefore, it can be assumed that those who have a wider variety of coping strategies for racial traumatic experiences will have reduced racial stress.

## Methods

### Participants

To qualify for the study participants had to identify as Black or African American, be at least 18 years old, and be a full- or part-time college student. Responses included roughly 100 (and counting) undergraduate and graduate students. Participants were excluded if they did not list at least one of their racial groups as Black or African American. After filtering out those who did not identify as Black or African American and answered all questions, the final sample consisted of 27 people. The participants were primarily recruited through the psychology department's research system (SONA), biweekly Research Opportunities Digest campus-wide emails, emails with faculty to share with their classes, as well as with flyers posted around the campus of the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Students who accessed the study through SONA received course credit for participating in the study and all respondents, including those who decided not to participate, had the option to enter a raffle for three \$10 Amazon gift cards. For a summary of the sample's demographic information, see **Table 1**.

### Procedure

Participants completed an informed consent form before taking the survey through Qualtrics. The survey consisted of self-report demographic questions, the Cross Racial Identity Scale, the Coping with Discrimination – Abbreviated Scale, a Vicarious Racial Trauma scale, and Racial Trauma Scale-Short Form Research Version (see appendix). Participants were asked about their age, race, ethnicity, gender, status of enrollment, type of institution, experiences of

mental health issues, and marital status. The survey lasted about 30 minutes and individuals were prompted to enter their email address for the raffle at the end.

## Measures

***Racial Identity.*** The Cross Racial Identity Scale (CRIS) or Social Attitude Scale is a 40-item measure consisting of six subscales – pre-encounter assimilation, miseducation, and self-hatred, immersion-emersion anti-White, internalization Afrocentricity, and multiculturalist inclusive (Vandiver et al., 2000). All items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1= *strongly disagree*, 7= *strongly agree*).

Each of the subscales reflect the stages of racial identity attitudes outlined in Cross's 1991 expanded Nigrescence (Black identity development) model. The model consists of three identity domains or stages – Pre-encounter, Immersion-Emersion, and Internalization. The pre-encounter stage is characterized by the absorption of the dominant culture through glorification of White culture, race, and worldview while belittling a Black identity (Vandiver et al., 2001). It has three clusters, assimilation (low race importance and inclination to be considered as just American), miseducation (adoption of negative Black stereotypes), and self-hate (anti-Blackness; Vandiver et al., 2001). The immersion-emersion domain is described as a psychological transformation of Black identity development where individuals begin to refute the ideologies of the dominant culture and seek to surround themselves with those of the same racial group (Vandiver et al., 2001). This domain consists of one cluster, anti-White, a result of immersing oneself in Blackness and Black culture. The internalization domain is characterized by Black acceptance and pride. Clusters included in this domain are Afrocentricity (pro-Black attitude)

and multiculturalist inclusive (considers and embraces other cultures while accepting their own Black identity) (Vandiver et al., 2001).

Sample questions for each subscale are as follows: pre-encounter assimilation (PA): *“I think of myself primarily as an American, and seldom as a member of a racial group.”*, pre-encounter miseducation (PM): *“Many African Americans are too lazy to see opportunities that are right in front of them.”*, pre-encounter self-hatred (PSH): *“When I look in the mirror at my Black image, sometimes I do not feel good about what I see.”*, immersion-emersion anti-White (IEAW): *“My negative feelings toward White people are very intense.”*, internalization Afrocentricity (IA): *“I believe that only those Black people who accept an Afrocentric perspective can truly solve the race problem in America.”*, and internalization multiculturalist inclusive (IMCI): *“I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, which is inclusive of everyone.”*

The six racial attitudes are measured with five questions randomly distributed across the 40 questions (30 CRIS items, 10 filler questions). Subscale scores are calculated by summing the scores from each of the five items and then dividing it by five. There is no global CRIS score, rather a total CRIS score can be obtained by summing all of the subscale scores. The total subscale scores range from one to seven and the overall score ranges from six to forty-two (Worrell et al., 2004a; Worrell et al., 2004b). Higher subscale scores indicate stronger support of the subscale attitudes explained above. The pre-encounter subscales were combined into one variable for analyses.

***Vicarious Racism.*** Indirect exposure to racially traumatic events were assessed using self-reports of participants' familiarity with ten racially motivated or focused violent events that have occurred within the last ten years. Examples of some of the event options were the murders George Floyd and Trayvon Martin. Participants were presented with names and short descriptions of the events and asked to rate their familiarity on a scale from very familiar to not familiar. If somewhat or very familiar, the participants were prompted with follow up questions asking about how they initially heard of the event (i.e., through live television or radio coverage, social media, word of mouth, non-live television or radio coverage, or through live online streaming).

***Racial Traumatic Stress.*** Raced-based trauma was measured using the Racial Trauma Scale-Short Form Research Version (RTS-S) (Williams et al., 2022). The RTS-S is a 9-item scale that assesses the level of intrusiveness of race-based trauma symptoms. Participants were asked to rate how much they have felt bothered by a reaction to racial discrimination from 1 = *not at all*, 2 = *slightly*, 3 = *very much*, and 4 = *extremely*. Sample options included, "Reacting angrily." and "Worrying about my safety." Scores are obtained by summing all item responses and higher scores indicate more racial traumatic stress. Scores range from 9-36 and subscale questions are as follows: (a) Lack of Safety: 3, 5, 9; (b) Negative Cognitions: 2, 6, 7; (c) Difficulty Coping: 1, 4, 8. Subscale scores range from 3 to 12. Higher scores on the lack of safety subscale indicate more feelings of unsafety after a racially discriminatory event. Higher scores on the negative cognitions subscale indicate more negative thoughts about the world and self. Higher scores on the difficulty coping subscale indicate more prevalent behaviors of reckless behavior, anger, and problems with concentration.

***Coping Strategies.*** Coping with Discrimination – NSAL Study (Abbreviated) is an adapted version of the Major Experiences of Discrimination scale (Williams, 2016). Participants were prompted with this measure after the Racial Trauma Scale. They were asked to choose from 10 coping strategies, if they had used any, in response to any past racially discriminatory experiences. Participants were allowed to choose multiple strategies. Examples of some of the options were, “Tried to do something about it” and “Prayed about the situation.” A higher total number of coping strategies reported is understood to reflect a reduction of psychological stress (Heffer & Willoughby, 2017).

### **Analytic Strategy**

**Demographic and hypotheses analyses.** To obtain demographic characteristics, descriptive statistics were used for the sample’s data. Pearson’s  $r$  correlations were used to observe any associations between demographic variables before doing hypothesis testing. Subsequently, Pearson’s  $r$  correlations were conducted for three out of the four primary hypotheses: the relationship between Black identity and racial trauma scores, the relationship between Black identity and coping mechanisms used, and coping mechanisms used and total racial trauma scores. To assess the possible moderating effect of Black identity on the relationship between learning of racially violent events through social media and racial trauma scores, a One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used.



## Results

### Sample Characteristic Analyses

We first ran a Pearson's  $r$  correlation test between the sample's demographic information and the main variables of the study (racial traumatic stress, vicarious racism, racial identity, and coping with discrimination mechanisms). Some notable relationships include a positive correlation between reported experiences of PTSD and racial traumatic events learned of through word of mouth ( $r = .516, p = .006$ ) and reported experiences of anxiety and the number of coping strategies used ( $r = .513, p = .006$ ). Another relationship included a negative correlation between the number of coping strategies reported and a positive correlation with the number of events discovered through streaming ( $r = .49, p = .009$ ). A full summary of measure correlations can be found below in **Table 2**.

**Table 1**

<i>Sample Characteristics (N = 27)</i>	<i>Mean (SD) or Frequency (Percentage)</i>
Age	23.6 (9.8)
Gender	
Cis-Gender Woman	25 (92.6%)
Gender Fluid	1 (3.7%)
Transgender	1 (3.7%)
Hispanic/Latin/Spanish Origin	
No	24 (88.9%)
Yes	3 (11.1%)
Year in School	2.7 (1.3)
Type of University	
4-year college or university	25 (92.6%)
2-year college or vocational training	2 (7.4%)
Enrollment Status	
Full-time	25 (92.6%)
Part-time	2 (7.4%)
Marital status	
Single	23 (88.9%)
Committed relationship	2 (7.4%)
Married	2 (7.4%)
Depression	11 (40.7%)
Anxiety	20 (74.1%)
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	3 (11.1%)
Personality Disorder(s)	3 (11.1%)
Other Psych Conditions	3 (11.1%)
Number of events seen on live TV or radio	3.5 (3.2)
Number of events seen on social media	3.78 (2.9)
Number of events discovered by word of mouth	0.7 (1.1)
Number of events seen through non-live TV or radio	0.48 (1.5)
Number of events seen through live streaming	0.19 (0.6)
Number of coping strategies used	3.4 (1.3)
Lack of Safety subscale score	9.7 (1.8)
Negative Cognition subscale score	6.9 (2.3)
Difficulty Coping subscale score	6.2 (2.1)
Total Racial trauma score	23.6 (4.9)
CRIS Pre-Encounter score	3.1 (1.0)
CRIS Immerision-Emersion Anti-White score	2 (1.2)
CRIS Internalization Afrocentricity score	3.7 (1.1)

**Table 2**

*Bivariate Pearson's r correlations between measure variables. (N = 27)*

	Number events seen live TV/radio	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Number events seen on social media	-.81***											
2. Number events seen nonlive	-.15	-.21										
3. Number of events word of mouth	-.35	.14	-.19									
4. Number of events seen streaming	.16	-.34	-.10	.08								
5. Post-discrimination lack of safety	.008	-.11	.06	.21	-.02							
6. Post-discrimination negative cognition	.24	-.17	-.23	.13	-.22	.32						
7. Post-discrimination difficulty coping	.14	-.12	.05	-.004	-.09	.30	.48**					
8. Total Racial Trauma Score	.18	-.19	-.09	0.17	-.15	.69***	.79***	.78***				
9. Number of coping strategies used	-.04	.07	-.10	-.11	.49**	.28	.014	0.24	.22			
10. CRIS Pre-encounter attitudes	.001	.15	-.01	.01	-.40*	-.10	.37	0.38*	.30	-.40*		
11. CRIS Immersion Emersion Anti White (IEAW)	.03	-.07	-.05	-.02	.01	.10	.23	.48**	.34	-.02	.27	
12. CRIS Internalization Afrocentricity (IA)	.18	-.08	-.04	-.38	.06	.15	.29	.30	.30	.29	.13	.51**

**Note.** \* p < .05, \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001

### *Hypothesis Tests*

- **Hypothesis 1:** To analyze the association between Black identity attitude and negative affect, a Pearson's correlation with CRIS Internalization- Afrocentricity (IA) scores and overall racial trauma scores was performed. Contrary to the hypothesis, there was no significant correlation between the CRIS IA scores and the overall racial trauma scores ( $r = .30, p = .13$ ).
- **Hypothesis 2:** For the second hypothesis, we wanted to explore the relationship between negative Black attitudes (i.e. CRIS pre-encounter Miseducation [PM] and self-hatred [PSH] scores) and the number of strategies used when coping with discrimination. Pearson's  $r$  correlation test found a statistically significant correlation ( $r = -.48, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.73, -.12], p = .01$ ) between PM scores and the total number of coping strategies used. This suggests that a greater promotion in negative Black stereotypes is associated with fewer strategies used to cope with racism. However, there was no significant correlation ( $r = -.12, p = .56$ ) found between PSH scores and the number of coping strategies used.
- **Hypothesis 3:** The third hypothesis was that social media would moderate the impact of racially traumatic events on racial trauma. Due to the small sample size, we were not able to assess moderation. Instead, mean scores on all three RTS-S subscales, total RTS-S scores, and number of coping mechanisms of those who learn of events through social media were compared using a One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test. The groups were defined as 0 events learned through social media, 1-5 events, and 6 or more events.

As summarized in **Table 3**, a significant mean difference was found between the three groups in the sense of safety after a racially discriminatory event.

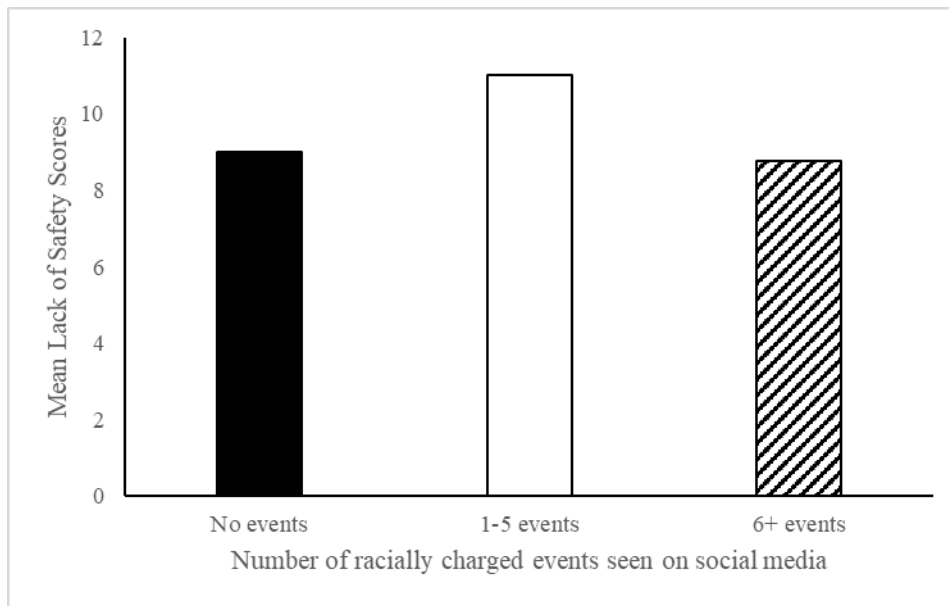
A post-hoc Tukey HSD test was used to find where the difference in means lay. A mean difference of -2.0 (95% CI [-3.84, -0.16],  $p = .032$ ) was found between those who had learned of 0 events and those who learned of 1-5 events on social media. Those who learned of 1-5 events through social media reported higher lack of safety scores than those who had learned of none through social media. A similar difference (2.3) was found between the means of the 1-5 events and 6+ events groups with a 95% confidence interval of [.62,4.05] and a p-value of .006. Those who learned of 1-5 events through social media reported the highest lack of safety scores out of all of the groups. This suggests that those who observed 1-5 racially discriminatory events through social media feel more unsafe than those who have learned of none or 6+ events through social media. **Figure 1** provides a visual depiction of these findings.

**Table 3**

*Means, Standard Deviations, and One-Way analysis of variance results in mental health impact of racially violent events learned of through social media. (N=27)*

Measure	0 Events (N=7)		1-5 Events (N=11)		6+ Events (N=9)		F	Eta-squared
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD		
Lack of safety subscale	9	2.08	11	1.34	8.67	1.22	6.778*	0.361
Negative cognition subscale	7.29	2.93	7.29	1.87	6.56	2.55	0.182	0.015
Difficulty coping subscale	6.14	1.95	6.14	1.95	6.11	2.52	0.039	0.003
Total racial trauma score	23.14	5.9	25.36	3.96	21.89	5.06	1.305	0.098
# Coping Strategies Used	3.29	1.7	3.45	1.21	3.33	1.11	0.04	0

Note. \*  $p < 0.05$



**Figure 1:** A bar graph showing the mean differences in scores for lack of safety after a racially discriminatory event (RTS-S lack of safety subscale) by number of racially charged events seen on social media first.

- **Hypothesis 4:** To assess the possible relationship between the number of coping mechanisms reported and overall racial trauma scores, a Pearson's  $r$  correlation test was used. The results did not support the hypothesis of a negative relationship between the two variables. There was a nonsignificant positive correlation ( $r= 0.22, p =0.26$ ) found.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature and effect of vicarious racial trauma in Black and African American college students' mental health and discover the coping methods used for vicarious racially traumatic experiences. In the present study one association emerged as

well as group differences in racial trauma dependent on the number events initially observed through social media. First, there was a negative association between stereotypical perceptions of Black people and the reported number of strategies used to cope with discrimination. Also, differences in mean lack of safety feelings between those who learned of no events, one to five events, and 6 or more events on social media.

The correlation test did not support the first hypothesis that those with a stronger sense of Black pride would have higher racial trauma scores. There was no correlation found between total racial trauma scores and CRIS Internalization-Afrocentricity scores. This could be due to the small sample size in the study.

In regard to the second hypothesis, there was a significant negative correlation between the number of reported coping strategies and CRIS pre-encounter miseducation (PM) racial attitude subscale scores. As outlined earlier, the PM racial attitude is characterized as Black and African American individuals who agree with negative Black stereotypes. A possible interpretation of these results is that those who subscribe to negative attitudes of Black and African American people do not align themselves with those stereotypes, explaining why there was a reduced amount of coping used for racially discriminatory events. An assertion made by Sellers et al. (1998) proposed that dimensions of Black identity influence behaviors, such as coping. Therefore, it may be reasonable to assume that those who do not have a high regard towards Black identity would not feel the need to cope with racially discriminatory events. This may be because they may not perceive them as racially charged or identify with other Black people who experience racial discrimination.

We found that Black or African American college students who learned of 1-5 race-focused or racially driven violent events from social media reported higher lack of safety subscale scores from the Racial Trauma Scale compared to others. This occurrence may be explained by a few things. First, the reason that those who were familiar with 6 or more racially driven violent events reported less feelings of a lack of safety may be the result of desensitization to racial violence due to constant social media use. Prior research amid rising concerns of youth perceptions of violence through media and in person have found similar occurrences of desensitization in Black youth towards race violence (Cohen et al., 2021). Secondly, individuals who have seen more than 6 events may be numbed to these displays of race-based/racially motivated violence due to constant displays across a variety of sources (Williams & Clarke, 2019). Or there could be a combination of both factors resulting in desensitization to racial violence depicted on social media, with one factor exasperating the psychological effects of the other. Desensitization may also be a protective measure taken by those who have seen a large amount of racial violence in social media or from other places (Lewis et al., 2013).

When investigating the relationship between the number of coping responses and total racial trauma, there was no correlation found between the two. This may, again, be explained by the small sample size or sample composition.

When looking at the correlations between demographic variables, there was a significant positive association between participants' reports of PTSD and racial traumatic events learned from word of mouth. Meaning that, the students who reported more observations of racially traumatic events from someone else through conversation also reported more experiences of



PTSD. One possible explanation for this relationship is that the racially traumatic event happened to someone relatively close to the participants and possibly the same racial group. Traumatic events, especially racially traumatic experiences, are typically disclosed to proximal members of an individual's social network, such as a close friend and family members (Marriot et al., 2016). This relationship is consistent with similar findings where vicarious trauma was more prevalent when the event happened to a close member of their social network (Holloway & Varner, 2023; Monk, 2020; Smith et al., 2014). Additionally, individuals who learned of a traumatic event of a close family member or friend meets the Diagnostical and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5)'s inclusion criteria for a PTSD diagnosis (American Psychological Association, 2022). This may further explain the relationship between social network members and the strength of impact of vicarious traumatization.

Although not statistically significant, there were some interesting trends found when comparing the means of CRIS racial attitude scores across the groups of social media events. Of the participants who learned of some violent racially discriminatory events through social media, an increase of Afrocentricity scores was seen with an increase of the number of events. This trend could be explained by some Black identity development models' examples of behaviors common of Black pride and Afrocentricity (e.g., activism, education, advocacy – Sellers et al., 1998; Vandiver et al., 2001). Those who consider themselves to be pro-Black or have Black pride may be privier to incidents of racially driven violence (e.g., police brutality or hate-crimes) due to their possible involvement in activism or acts that raise awareness of racism (Mason et al., 2017). A similar pattern was found with the CRIS miseducation attitude and self-hate subscales.

Investigating these trends in larger samples will be important to understand the relationship between racial violence in the media and racial identity.

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The main limitation of this study was the small sample size. With only 27 participant responses, the validity of the results were possibly undermined. The sample size also created difficulties with statistical power when conducting analyses. Future studies should calculate the needed sample size so that the results can be better applicable to the study population. Most of the analyses were correlations, which means that no cause-and-effect conclusions can be drawn from those findings. If the RTS-S and Coping with Discrimination scale questions were adapted to the specific events given to participants, a cause-and-effect relationship with clear directionality could be better investigated. Additionally, the Coping with Discrimination scale could be replaced by participant's own coping mechanisms and then asked their reasoning for those choices to understand the mechanisms employed by Black and African American college students.

Due to delayed participant recruitment, the sample consisted of mainly UTC students. Outside recruitment from other universities were employed later in the recruitment process, which compromised the sample size as well. With the UTC students' large contribution to demographic characteristics and measure responses, there is some difficulty with generalizing the findings to other Black and African American college students. To expand on this work, future studies should ask participants about their nationality or place of birth to gain insight on the possible impact of differing perceptions of vicarious trauma across the African diaspora.

Additionally, studying the possible advantages of college campuses (e.g., student clubs, free campus counseling, residential on-campus communities) in coping with racially discriminatory direct and indirect experiences could be an interesting future direction.

### *Implications*

Despite these limitations, these results suggest some theoretical and real-world implications. Black and African American college students can experience vicarious racism through different avenues (TV news, word of mouth, etc.) but social media may prove to be a more significant medium of transmitting racial trauma. Researchers should continue to make efforts to understand how vicarious racism can impact the experiences of Black college students and faculty. Vicarious racism may shape the behaviors and experiences in higher education. Knowledge on this topic will be important for university and college administration's efforts to create better school climates for their students. While the current study asked students of their familiarity with broadly circulated violent racially motivated events, students may experience vicarious racism from knowledge of smaller-scale racist incidents. If those experiences are on college campuses, other Black prospective students may be deterred from attending or applying to those institutions.

Scholars should continue to study how Black identity may determine perceptions of racism and consequentially coping mechanisms for racism. Existing literature on Black identity and psychological health suggest that racial identity can influence perceptions and responses to racism (Brondolo et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2015; Clark et al., 199; Sellers et al., 1998).

Therefore, studies focusing on how the relationship between racial identity and vicarious racism

may shape the college experience will be important for future and current students, as well as educational institutions. The findings should also be used to inform university counselors and mental health professionals on how to better understand the experiences of their Black and African American clients and how they shape their thoughts and behaviors. This study contributes to a growing body of work considering the interactions of Black racial identity, vicarious racism, and racial trauma in the experiences of Black and African American college students. We hope that the work and results of this research extends the efforts to understand and improve the existences of Black and African American college students. Ultimately, understanding vicarious racism can further aid in combating the ways racism permeates the experiences of this population.

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**APPENDIX**  
**STUDY MEASURES**

Participant Information

1. What is your age?
2. Gender (check all that apply)
  - Man
  - Woman
  - Non-binary
  - Transgender
  - Prefer not to say
  - Other, please specify:
3. Do you consider yourself to be of Hispanic, Latin, or Spanish origin? (Check all that apply)
  - No, not of Hispanic, Latin, or Spanish origin
  - Yes, Mexican
  - Yes, Puerto Rican
  - Yes, Cuban
  - Yes, Spaniard
  - Yes, another Hispanic or Latin origin (Dominican, Salvadorian, Columbian, Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, etc.)
4. Race (check all that apply)
  - Black/African American
  - White/Caucasian

- Asian
  - Native American, Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian, or Alaska Native
  - Other
5. Were you born in the United States?
- Yes
  - No
6. What type of college or university do you currently attend?
- Public 4-year college or university
  - Private 4-year college or university
  - 2-year college or vocational training
7. What year of school are you currently in?
- First year student
  - Second year student
  - Third year student
  - Fourth year or higher student
  - Graduate student
8. What is your status of enrollment?
- Part-time student  Full-time student
9. Marital status
- Single
  - Separated or Divorced

Widowed

Committed relationship

Married

10. What is your current living situation?

living with roommates off campus

living alone off campus

on-campus housing

living with parents or family

11. Current employment status?

work-study or on-campus employment

employed part-time

employed full-time

unemployed

12. Are you currently experiencing any of the following?

Depression

Anxiety

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or other stress-related disorder(s)

Personality disorder(s)

Other psychiatric or mental health conditions

**CROSS SOCIAL ATTITUDE SCALE**

**Instructions:** Read each item and indicate to what degree it reflects your own thoughts and feelings, using the 7-point scale below. There are no right or wrong answers. Base your responses on your opinion at the present time.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Disagree</b>	<b>Neither Agree nor Disagree</b>	<b>Somewhat Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. As a Black American, life in America is good for me.						
2. I think of myself primarily as an American, and seldom as a member of a racial group.						
3. Too many Black people “glamorize” the drug trade and fail to see opportunities that don’t involve crime.						
4. I go through periods when I am down on myself because I am Black.						
5. I am connected to many groups (e.g. Latinx, Asian-Americans, White Americans, Jewish people, Indigenous people, LGBT+, etc.).						
6. I have a strong feeling of hatred and disdain for all White people.						
7. I see and think about things from an Afrocentric perspective.						
8. When I walk into a room, I always take note of the racial make-up of the people around me.						
9. I am not so much a member of a racial group, as I am an American.						
10. I sometimes struggle with negative feelings about being Black.						
11. My relationship with God plays an important role in my life.						
12. Black people place more emphasis on having a good time than on hard work.						
13. I believe that only those Black people who accept an Afrocentric perspective can truly solve the race problem in America.						
14. I hate the White community and all that it represents.						
15. When I have a chance to make a new friend, issues of race and ethnicity seldom play a role in who that person might be.						



16. I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, which is inclusive of everyone (e.g., Latinx, Asian-Americans, White Americans, Jewish people, Indigenous people, LGBT+.).
17. When I look in the mirror at my Black image, sometimes I do not feel good about what I see.
18. If I had to put a label on my identity, it would be “American,” and not African American.
19. When I read the newspaper or a magazine, I always look for articles and stories that deal with race and ethnic issues.
20. Many Black Americans are too lazy to see opportunities that are right in front of them
21. As far as I am concerned, affirmative action will be needed for a long time
22. Black people cannot truly be free until our daily lives are guided by Afrocentric values and principles.
23. White people should be destroyed.
24. I embrace my own Black identity, but I also respect and celebrate the cultural identities of other groups (e.g. Latinx, Asian-Americans, White Americans, Jewish people, Indigenous people, LGBT+, etc.).
25. Privately, I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black.
26. If I had to put myself into categories, first I would say I am an American, and second I am a member of a racial group.
27. My feelings and thoughts about God are very important to me.
28. Black Americans are too quick to turn to crime to solve their problems.
29. When I have a chance to decorate a room, I tend to select pictures, posters, or works of art that express strong racial-cultural themes.
30. I hate White people.
31. I respect the ideas that other Black people hold, but I believe that the best way to solve our problems is to think Afrocentrically.
32. When I vote in an election, the first thing I think about is the candidate’s record on racial and cultural issues.
33. I believe it is important to have both a Black identity and a multicultural perspective, because this connects me to other groups (e.g., Latinx, Asian-Americans, White Americans, Jewish people, Indigenous people, LGBT+, etc.).
34. I have developed an identity that stresses my experiences as an American more than my experiences as a member of a racial group.
35. During a typical week in my life, I think about racial and cultural issues many, many times.
36. Black people place too much importance on racial protest and not enough on hard work and education.
37. Black people will never be free until we embrace an Afrocentric perspective.

38. My negative feelings toward White people are very intense.
--

39. I sometimes have negative feelings about being Black.
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40. It is important for me to be connected with individuals from all cultural backgrounds (Latinx, Asian-Americans, White Americans, Jewish people, Indigenous people, LGBT+, etc.).
--

### Indirect Exposure to Racially Traumatic Events

Please rate your level of familiarity (Very familiar, Somewhat familiar, Unfamiliar) of the following events/people.

If familiar, recall and select how you first heard about it/them (a) live media (television or radio) coverage, (b) live online streaming, (c) social media, (d) non-live media coverage or, (e) word of mouth.

1. **Sandra Bland** (Died in police custody in a jail cell via asphyxiation in 2015)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Sandra Bland**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

2. **George Floyd** (Fatally suffocated by police officer kneeling on his neck in 2020)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **George Floyd**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming

- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

3. **Breonna Taylor** (fatally shot in apartment by police in 2020)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Breonna Taylor**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

4. **Philando Castile** (fatally shot during traffic stop by police in 2016)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Philando Castile**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage

- Word of mouth

5. **Trayvon Martin** (17-year-old boy fatally shot by neighborhood watch coordinator while walking home from a convenience store in 2012)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Trayvon Martin**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

6. **Tamir Rice** (12-year-old boy fatally shot by police officer while playing with a toy gun in 2014)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Tamir Rice**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

7. **Ahmaud Arbery** (Jogger chased and fatally shot by residents of neighborhood in 2020)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Ahmaud Arbery**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

8. **Botham Jean** (Fatally shot in his apartment by off-duty police officer believing apartment was her own in 2018)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Botham Jean**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

9. **Buffalo, New York Supermarket** shooting (Mass shooting resulting in deaths of 10 African Americans in 2022)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of the 2022 **Buffalo Shooting**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

10. **Charleston, South Carolina Church** shooting (Mass shooting resulting in deaths of 9 African Americans in 2015)

- Unfamiliar
- Somewhat familiar
- Very familiar

Please specify how you **FIRST** heard of **Charleston Church Shooting**.

- Live media (television or radio) coverage
- Live online streaming
- Social media
- Non-live media coverage
- Word of mouth

**The Racial Trauma Scale - Nine-Item Short-Form Research Version**

Instructions: “Think about all the times when you have heard about, seen, or experienced racial discrimination. As a result of this, how bothered have you been by the following.”

Use the following rating scale: 1 = *not at all bothered*, 2 = *slightly bothered*, 3 = *very much bothered*, 4 = *extremely bothered*.

1. Inability to stop moving.
2. Having difficulties connecting with other people.
3. Feeling society is unfair to people like me.
4. Reacting angrily.
5. Avoiding certain situations or speaking to certain people.
6. Feeling like I am not as good as others.
7. Feeling like I cannot succeed.
8. Finding it difficult to cope without food/alcohol/drugs.
9. Worrying about my safety.



**Coping with Discrimination-Abbreviated**

How did you respond to experiences of discrimination(s)? Please indicate if you do each of the following things. Please check all that apply.

- Tried to do something about it.
- Accepted it as a fact of life.
- Worked harder to prove them wrong.
- Realized that you brought it on yourself.
- Talked to someone about how you were feeling.
- Expressed anger or got mad.
- Prayed about the situation.