Vicarious racism is linked to negative emotions and poor mental health in U.S. adults: A scoping review

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Background

- **Vicarious racism (VR)** is secondhand or indirect exposure to another's experience of racism [1]
- VR is very common and linked to poor mental health in witnesses[2]
- However, VR is often excluded from racism research, possibly limiting the knowledge about how racism is linked to mental health[2,3]
- Inconsistencies among papers make it challenging to understand the scope of the current literature[2,3]
- A **scoping review** is a type of systematic review that synthesizes a burgeoning area of research and identifies gaps in the literature and directions for future work[4]

Aims

1. Conduct a scoping review of the current literature focused **VR and mental health in U.S. adults**
2. Focus the scoping review on identifying **key areas lacking clarity or cohesion** in the current literature:
   a. Definitions of VR
   b. Contexts in which VR occurred (e.g., online)
   c. Instruments used to measure VR
   d. Racial/ethnic compositions of witnesses in general AND in relation to racism targets
   e. Study designs
   f. Correlates to negative emotion(s) and/or mental health outcomes
   g. Recommendations for future research

Methods

- Possibly relevant papers were identified on April 24, 2024
- A five-person team screened all papers for relevance and eligibility and completed extraction on included papers. Relevant data from Aim 2 were extracted
- Papers were screened and extracted independently by two team members to ensure thoroughness and accuracy. Consensus was reached for all disagreements
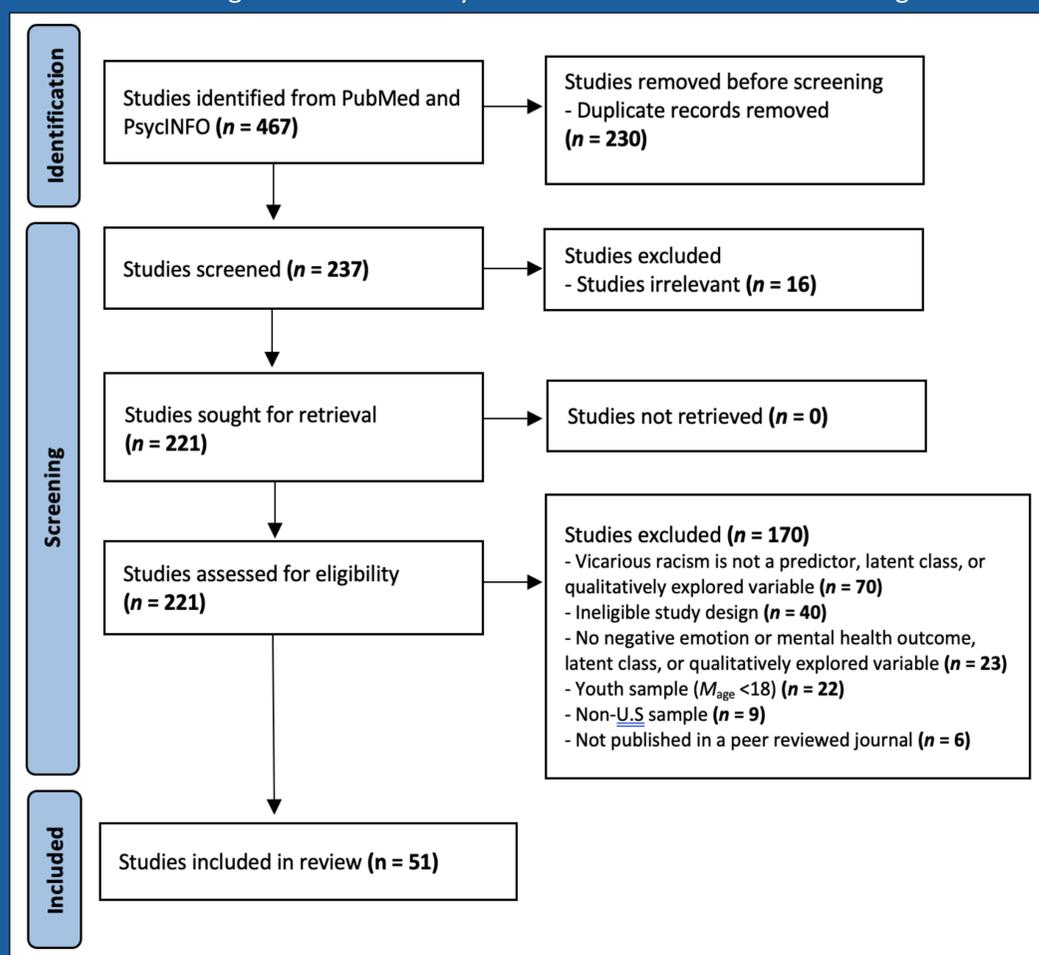
Identification

Studies identified from PubMed and PsycINFO (*n* = 467) → Studies removed before screening - Duplicate records removed (*n* = 230)

Screening

Studies screened (*n* = 237) → Studies excluded - Studies irrelevant (*n* = 16)

Studies sought for retrieval (*n* = 221) → Studies not retrieved (*n* = 0)

Studies assessed for eligibility (*n* = 221) → Studies excluded (*n* = 170)
- Vicarious racism is not a predictor, latent class, or qualitatively explored variable (*n* = 70)
- Ineligible study design (*n* = 40)
- No negative emotion or mental health outcome, latent class, or qualitatively explored variable (*n* = 23)
- Youth sample (M_{age} <18) (*n* = 22)
- Non-U.S sample (*n* = 9)
- Not published in a peer reviewed journal (*n* = 6)

Included

Studies included in review (n = 51)

Figure 1: PRISMA flowchart of excluded and included studies

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Results

- Papers were published between 2014-24, with **88%** published since 2020 (i.e., since the COVID-19 pandemic)

Key Areas Identified in Papers	Findings
Definitions of VR	• **52%** of papers that defined VR used the **original definition**[1] • Other papers: stipulated that witnesses and racism targets share a racial identity (**17%** of papers) and deviated in other ways
Contexts in which VR occurred	• **22%** online, **20%** through a widely publicized racism event (e.g., the murder of George Floyd), **11%** in-person, **44%** in multiple settings
Instruments used to measure VR	• **44%** of papers that measured self-reported VR used an **author-developed tool** • **56%** used adapted existing measures (e.g., Williams' Major Discrimination)[5]
Racial compositions of witnesses	• **61% Black or Asian** samples. Only two papers focused on Latine samples[6,7]
Racial compositions of witnesses in relation to racism targets	• **81%** of papers focused on **same-race witnessing** (e.g., Black witnesses experiencing VR directed towards other Black people) • Two papers compared mental health of same vs. different-race witnessing[8,9]
Study designs	• **61%** cross-sectional, **19%** qualitative or mixed methods, **10%** experimental or quasi-experimental, **10%** longitudinal
VR and links to negative emotions	• **59%** measured a **negative emotion** in relation to VR • Anger, worry, loneliness/ isolation, hopelessness, fear, overwhelm, sadness
VR and links to poor mental health	• Elevated **depressive** symptoms were most frequently linked to VR (**37%**) • Other elevated symptoms linked to VR: anxiety (**25%**), trauma-related (**18%**), sleep (**12%**), behavioral (e.g., substance use, **10%**)
Recommendations for future research	• **Increase diversity** of study participants (**29%**) • **Identify pathways** (e.g., moderating/ mediating risk or protective factors) between VR and mental health outcomes (**29%**)

Table 1: Characteristics of papers included in review

Discussion

- **Summary:** Positive associations between VR and negative emotions and/or poor mental health were observed. Only four studies reported null findings
- Lack of clarity about the definition of VR contributes to measurement inconsistencies
- We conclude that VR is a largely understudied experience relative to direct racism and determine that VR is an important correlate to mental health that warrants refinement (e.g., definitional and measurement clarity) and more research focus