

Teens and Mean Screens: A Qualitative Exploration of Youth Media Use, Exposure to Vicarious Racism and Perceptions of Health

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Background: Racism has a strong influence on physical, mental, and emotional health; however, this relationship is rarely examined with respect to racism depicted within news sources. Given the ubiquity and relatively easy access of news, news stories may be a key source of racism exposure for youth. As teens' experiences with this secondhand or vicarious racism become more prevalent, it is increasingly important to determine its effects on health. The interplay between news and social media stands to put teens at further increased risk, as it may expose them to both racist news stories and racist interpersonal interactions. Better understanding adolescents' experiences with media depictions of racism and perceptions of their health will expand our understanding of how racism gets under the skin, and may inform future pediatric practice and social policy.

Objective: We sought to (1) characterize teens' experiences with news and social media, focusing particularly on news stories depicting racism, (2) describe how these experiences are perceived to affect health and well-being and (3) understand how teens cope with and respond to racism that they encounter in the media. We hypothesized that teens rely primarily on social media to access and share news stories, and that vicarious exposure to racism via news may be related to negative perceptions of health.

Design/Methods: Teens (13-19 yrs, n=18) were recruited from the greater Chicago area to participate in three focus group-based semi-structured interviews. Participants self-identified as Black (African-American or African), White/Caucasian, or Hispanic/Latinx. Focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded using qualitative methods to produce central themes.

Results: Youth spend a significant part of each day online, and social media applications represent an important proportion of this use. Older teens, more than young teens, access news stories through social media platforms. Despite this, several reported mistrust in online news sources and concerns surrounding "fake" news. Participants were able to identify news stories depicting racism that they have encountered or shared through social media. For many youth, personal proximity or similarity to those involved in news events made them more likely to be affected by this exposure. Some participants described desensitization to racism in the news and a sense of helplessness in responding to these stories, though few related changes in health behaviors. For many, discussion with peers or trusted adults provides a means of coping with vicarious racism in the news.

Conclusions: This study provides insight into the way that teens access and share information through social media, including news events involving racism. Their vicarious experiences of racism in the news may be impacted by personal experiences and, often, desensitization to negative news events. Peer support may represent an important protective factor in coping with these exposures. Teens' experiences of media-based vicarious racism may present a critical opportunity for pediatricians to address racism within their practices.