

Exposure to Social Media Racial Discrimination and Mental Health among Adolescents of Color



JUST SIX
QUESTIONS
RESEARCH
SUMMARY

“Exposure to individual and vicarious social media racial discrimination placed youth of color at higher risks of depressive symptoms or illicit drug use...” (p. 41).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This article examines the impact of social media on adolescents, focusing on mental health, substance use, and experiences of racial discrimination. Researchers explored the connection between social media use and issues such as depression, anxiety, and substance use, including alcohol and illicit drug use. The study also highlights the prevalence of racial discrimination on social media, particularly how Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous youth experience and witness racism online. The article emphasizes the importance of understanding these issues in order to better support adolescents in navigating social media in healthy ways. This study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, a period marked by a significant increase in social media use and a heightened focus on racial issues in online discussions.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research took place online in various geographical regions across the United States.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research focuses on 407 adolescents aged 15- to 18-years-old, from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous youth.

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The research was conducted using an online survey. The study recruited participants through Qualtrics XM, a platform that facilitates data collection about user experiences and connects researchers with survey websites. Through this platform, the researchers posted ads on these sites and emailed adolescents who had already signed up to participate

in paid surveys. Participants were offered \$6 in compensation, converted into the platform's point system. Those who met eligibility requirements and provided consent were given a unique ID number and directed to the main survey.

To ensure data quality, a speed check was used to exclude participants who completed the survey too quickly. Additionally, manual checks were done to remove duplicate or fraudulent responses by comparing age and birth date, city and zip code, and matching IP addresses.

Researchers used a variety of **measures** to assess participant demographics and COVID-19 impacts, as well as:

- social media use
- interactions with people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds on social media
- engagement in racial justice activities using social media
- experiences with racial discrimination on social media
- mental health
- substance use

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Researchers determined three main findings:

i) Social media use impacts youth mental health and substance use.

The study found that adolescents in the sample had higher rates of depression, anxiety, alcohol use disorder, and illicit drug use compared to the general population. For example, 25.8% showed signs of clinical depression, higher than the 15.7% reported in 2019 national data. Similarly, 25.3% had severe anxiety, compared to 10.5% nationally. Alcohol use disorder was also more common, with 7.6% meeting the researchers' criteria, far exceeding the 1.7% national rate. Additionally, 29.5% had used illicit drugs in the past month, compared to 17.2% nationally, and about 35% of those who used drugs reported related health or legal issues.

Social media use was strongly linked to these mental health and substance use concerns. Adolescents who spent more time on social media experienced higher levels of depression

and anxiety. Engagement in racial justice activities online also played a role. Witnessing racism on social media (referred to as **vicarious racial discrimination**) was associated with increased depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorder. Additionally, youth who coordinated racial justice activities had higher rates of illicit drug use. This suggests that **while social media can be a platform for activism, it may also contribute to mental health struggles and substance use.**

ii) Racial discrimination on social media is common.

The study found that adolescents spent an average of 57.93 hours per week on social media. Racial discrimination was a common experience, with nearly 80% of participants personally experiencing it, and over 94% witnessing it happening to others. Black youth were more likely than Latinx youth to witness racial discrimination online, highlighting differences in exposure among racial groups. The study also found that more social media use and racial justice activity coordination were linked to higher experiences of individual racial discrimination, but not to witnessing racism (vicarious discrimination). However, posting about racial justice was associated with more vicarious racial discrimination, suggesting that **the type of social media activity matters — posting about racial justice seems to expose youth to more discrimination from others.**

iii) Racial/ethnic groups experience racial discrimination online differently.

The study found that Indigenous youth were at higher risk for depression, anxiety, and alcohol use disorder compared to Black and Asian youth. They also reported higher rates of illicit drug use than Asian and Latinx youth. Additionally, Black youth experienced more vicarious racial discrimination (seeing racism online) than Latinx youth, showing that some racial groups may be more affected by online racism. These differences suggest that **race and ethnicity influence how youth respond to social media and how it affects their mental health.**

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

This research is crucial for youth work as it highlights the impact of social media on adolescents' mental health, substance use, and exposure to racial discrimination. The study shows a link between social media use and increased rates of depression, anxiety, and substance use, which can inform targeted support for these issues. It also reveals high levels of racial discrimination on social media, particularly for Black youth, stressing the importance of **supporting youth experiencing marginalization in navigating online spaces and discussing racial justice.** Additionally, the research highlights the **risks of social media activism**, which can expose youth to discrimination. These findings can be used to develop programs that address these challenges and **promote mental wellbeing** while supporting increased consciousness-raising and healthy online engagement.

Q Tao, X., & Fisher, C. B. (2022). [Exposure to social media racial discrimination and mental health among adolescents of color.](#) *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 51(1), 30–44.