

Black in Germany: A TikTok-Based Analysis of Coping with Racism through Learned Helplessness, Hypervigilance, and Resilience

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Abstract

Introduction. The consequences of racism are profound, encompassing psychological, physical, and systematic effects on its recipients. The way someone responds to racism can be influenced by previous encounters with racism and their lasting effects. Earlier experiences of racism may negatively change one's coping, which in turn may increase the risk of developing depression and anxiety symptoms. Interestingly, learned helplessness can be viewed as a symptom of depression (Seligman, 1975) or an antecedent to racism (Madubata et al., 2018). Furthermore, the minority stress theory suggests that hypervigilance and resilience may influence the way members of minority groups cope with marginalisation and minority stress. Indeed, the minority stress theory suggests that racial minorities are exposed to certain societal stressors which in turn negatively impact their mental health conditions (Meyer, 2003). The focus of the current study is exploring the underlying mechanisms that influence coping strategies, which in turn may mitigate or reinforce the effects of racial minority stress on Black individuals. **Methods.** For the purpose of the current study, the mixed-method framework by Andreotta et al. (2019) was employed and adapted into a qualitative research design for the study. Through the adaptation of Andreotta et al.'s framework, a semi-automated data extraction technique grounded in social media scraping was utilised. **Results.** Drawing on existing research and the analysis of the TikTok data, this study identified several patterns rooted in learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience. (1) Learned helplessness may be defined as the psychological state of powerlessness and a perceived inability to change one's situation. (2) Hypervigilance refers to a constant mental and emotional anticipation of racial discrimination and racism followed by a constant adaptation in self-presentation and performance. (3) Resilience is described as a self-affirming response to racial discrimination and structural disadvantages that actively combats the effects of it on one's mental health. **Discussion.** The current findings affirm that coping with racism is influenced by these three mechanisms. These dimensions were not mutually exclusive but rather influenced each other in a complex way, whereby the patterns within each dimension were related to the other dimensions. Given the nature of the study, future research should conduct a comprehensive investigation of the coping mechanisms employed by Black individuals in Germany.

Keywords. Racism, racial discrimination, Germany, Black individuals, mental health, coping, underlying mechanisms, TikTok, learned helplessness, hypervigilance, resilience

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Learned Helplessness Theory	6
Coping with Racism – Learned Helplessness	6
Minority Stress Theory	7
Coping with Racism – Hypervigilance.....	8
Coping with Racism – Resilience	9
The Present Study.....	10
Methodology	11
Design.....	11
Descriptive Data.....	12
Materials	12
Procedure.....	13
<i>Automated Data Extraction</i>	<i>14</i>
<i>Compression and Filter of Dataset.....</i>	<i>14</i>
Data Analysis.....	14
Positionality Statement.....	17
Results	18
Learned Helplessness	21
<i>Normalisation of Racism</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Negative Cognitive and Emotional Consequences</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Systematic and Social Disconnection</i>	<i>26</i>
Hypervigilance	27
<i>Anticipation of Racism.....</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Identity and Performance Management</i>	<i>28</i>
Resilience	28
<i>Self-Preserving Processes</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>Language as a Mediator</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Community-Oriented Processes</i>	<i>31</i>
Discussion	32
Learned Helplessness – A Psychosocial Consequence of Racism	32
Hypervigilance - Anticipation of Harm and Performance Management	33
Resilience: Agency, Community, and Empowerment.....	35
Strengths and Limitations.....	36
Conclusion and Future Research	37
References	40

Appendix A.....	46
Appendix B.....	47

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Introduction

"Racism is an attack on one's identity", that is what an anonymous user stated on Twitter in 2025. This belief is supported by the social identity theory, which highlights how identity is central to fulfilling basic psychological needs, thus underscoring its importance for psychological well-being (Greenaway et al., 2015). The consequences of racism are profound, encompassing psychological, physical, and systemic effects on its recipients. A 2023 large-scale study report conducted in Germany by the National Discrimination and Racism Monitor (NaDiRa) found a positive relationship between experiences of racism and symptoms of anxiety and depression, whereby an increase in racism experiences was directly associated with an increase in anxiety and depressive symptoms (DeZIM, 2023). Similarly, the 2021 Afrozensus report provides a thorough investigation of anti-black racism in Germany and its negative consequences on Afro-Germans, including an increased risk of developing anxiety, panic disorder and depression (Aikins, 2021). Next to that, a consistently reported consequence of everyday racism is the internalisation of negative and racist stereotypes (i.e., internalised racism), which is often associated with negative mental health outcomes (Gale et al., 2020; Molina & James, 2016; Speight, 2006). The experience of chronic psychological stress as a result of regular experiences of racism has been defined as racial stress (Griffin & Armstead, 2020). This in turn is a significant contributor to the development of psychological distress, anxiety and depression experienced by racial minorities (Griffin & Armstead, 2020; Pattyn et al., 2013). Therefore, if racism affects mental health, the next question becomes: how do those affected cope with it?

The way an individual may respond to racism can be influenced by previous experiences of racism and their consequences. Several studies suggest that racialised individuals suffering from symptoms of depression and anxiety may increasingly employ coping strategies that are negatively skewed. These strategies may include avoidance behaviour and isolation. Ultimately, this pattern may reinforce their symptoms (Chae et al., 2021; Griffin & Armstead, 2020). Conversely, research indicates that certain coping strategies may serve as antecedents to depression and anxiety, due to their underlying mechanisms (Holt-Gosselin et al., 2021). In other words, previous experiences of racism may negatively change one's coping, which in turn may increase the risk of developing depression and anxiety symptoms (Griffin & Armstead, 2020).

In regard to the underlying mechanisms of coping with racism, there are three key psychological concepts of interest, namely learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience. In the following, these concepts, and how they may influence coping with racism, will be discussed. Before each concept is explored, their theoretical foundations will be outlined.

Learned Helplessness Theory

The theory of learned helplessness was originally developed by Seligman (1975) as part of an experiment with dogs. In this experiment, two groups of dogs were distinguished: one group received uncontrollable electric shocks before they had the opportunity to learn avoidance strategies, while the other group was not exposed to electric shocks at that time. In a later phase of the experiment, all dogs were given the opportunity to escape the electric shocks by jumping over a barrier. While the dogs that had not previously experienced electric shocks quickly learned to free themselves, two-thirds of the dogs who were already exposed to uncontrollable electric shocks did not attempt to escape. Based on this observation, Seligman developed the concept of learned helplessness. This describes a maladaptive reaction to painful experiences, in which the individual learns that their own behaviour has no influence on the result, which leads to a passive attitude (Peterson & Seligman, 1983; Seligman, 1975).

Coping with Racism – Learned Helplessness

Learned helplessness, as understood by the learned helplessness theory, may serve as an antecedent to depression. In the context of coping with racism, learned helplessness describes an acquired psychological state as a consequence of repeated exposure to racism (Griffin & Armstead, 2020; Madubata et al., 2018). Moreover, learned helplessness is demonstrated as a learning experience in which the individual learns that a change in behaviour may not change the outcome of a situation. This, in turn, may lead to a failure to act to decrease suffering, as the individual believes that certain life events, such as racist incidents, are unchangeable and unavoidable (Madubata et al., 2018). The theory of learned helplessness has often been associated with characteristic behaviours of depression. In fact, Madubata et al. (2018) suggest that symptoms of depression, such as helplessness, may be a consequence of repeated racial discrimination experiences. Similarly, Hammack (2003) suggests that chronic helplessness may be caused by repeated experiences of racism, which influences coping patterns as well as mental health outcomes. Interestingly, while Seligman (1975) suggests learned helplessness as a symptom of depression, Madubata et al. (2018) and

Hammack (2003) describe learned helplessness as an antecedent to depression. Specifically, the latter is relevant in the analysis of coping patterns in response to racism.

Minority Stress Theory

Next, the minority stress theory, which serves as the theoretical foundation of hypervigilance and resilience, is discussed. The minority stress theory by Brooks (1981) explains the mental health inequalities sexual minorities are confronted with based on a social, psychological, systematic and structural level. According to the minority stress theory, members of sexual minorities are exposed to certain societal stressors, which in turn negatively impact their (mental) health conditions, creating health disparities between members of sexual minorities and non-members. These stigmatisation and marginalisation processes are not only institutionally evident but are often internalised as well. Meyer (2003) distinguishes between two types of stress processes, namely distal and proximal stressors. Whereas distal stressors describe the process of institutional and structural discrimination of sexual minorities, proximal stressors refer to the internalisation of these discriminatory practices. Distal stressors range from policies and laws aimed at marginalising sexual minorities to microaggressions, which are described as everyday encounters with stigma, discrimination and marginalisation, such as derogatory comments. Proximal stressors, describing the internalisation of rejection and stigma, range from the expectancy of stigmatisation and rejection, i.e., *expected rejection*, to concealing their sexual orientation to avoid discrimination and rejection, i.e., *identity concealment*. According to Meyer (2003), these stressors significantly increase the risk of developing chronic (mental) health conditions, given the additional stressors experienced by these minorities. In fact, Haight et al. (2023) not only found the detrimental effects of regular stressors on health but also suggested these effects are even worse for individuals who experience high levels of stress across various areas of their lives over a long period of time. Thus, the probability of developing chronic (mental) health problems is significantly higher for sexual minorities who are regularly stigmatised and marginalised.

Resilient coping mechanisms, however, can mitigate the effect of minority stress on the individual. Frost and Meyer (2023) suggest that in response to these stressors, both individual- and group-level coping strategies can diminish the negative effects of minority stress. According to the minority stress theory, (mental) health outcomes are a result of the negative impact of minority stress on the individual and the protective effect of resilient coping mechanisms (Frost & Meyer, 2023).

Although the minority stress theory was developed with a focus on sexual minorities, its concepts have been extended and applied to the experiences of racial minorities. According to Slavin et al. (1991), the probability of experiencing stressors substantially increases for members of marginalised groups, regardless of the cause of marginalisation or social exclusion. This implies a general baseline of stressful events experienced by individuals belonging to a marginalised group. Thus, the challenges identified as minority stressors (e.g., the expectancy of rejection) by Meyer (2003), may also be extended to racial minority groups. Indeed, Meyer (2003) argues that stigma, social expectations, and the imposition of dominant cultural norms create ongoing stressors for individuals belonging to minority groups. A minority status generally describes a deviation from societal norms constituted by majority groups. Consequently, there may exist an increased risk of discrimination for members of minority groups, including racial minority groups. This risk may subsequently cause heightened psychological distress, such as internalised stigma and hyper-awareness of societal biases.

When extending the minority stress theory to include racial minorities, the idea of distal and proximal stressors is still valid (Valdez et al., 2022). Distal stressors may be caused by racism and racialisation processes, as they are originally described as stemming from structural and institutional discriminatory practices. In fact, as racism and racialisation describe the structural and hierarchical process of racial categorisation, the experience therewith is often identified as a cause of stressors for racialised individuals (Griffin & Armstead, 2020). In like manner, as proximal stressors originate from more personal encounters with discrimination and the internalisation and expectation thereof, it may stem from racial discrimination. Therefore, the identified stressors experienced by minority groups can be distinctly specified and adopted as racism and racial discrimination (Valdez et al., 2022). Grounded within this theoretical framework, the two key concepts of hypervigilance and resilience are discussed.

Coping with Racism – Hypervigilance

In the context of racism and racial discrimination, hypervigilance refers to the scanning of one's environment, due to a constant expectation of racial discrimination. Subsequently, this expectation may be accompanied by modifications to behaviour in order to conform to societal expectations (Aikins, 2021). To illustrate, in the Afrozensus report, participants described how they expect future encounters with racism and, in an attempt to prevent these incidents, they adapt their behaviour and appearance. The proximal stressors described in the

minority stress theory, specifically expected rejection, describe the components of hypervigilance (Meyer, 2003). However, identity concealment, as described as a proximal stressor in the original minority stress theory, is not applicable to Black individuals, given that anti-Black racism refers to the marginalisation and discrimination of Black individuals due to their skin colour (Aikins, 2021). Instead, the idea of identity concealment, i.e., avoiding discrimination and rejection by concealing one's sexual orientation, is conveyed by the act of cross-racial code switching. Code switching is defined as a form of perception management, in which Black individuals adjust their behaviour, appearance, facial expressions, language and speech style etc., to conform to the given circumstance. Thus, the behavioural and identity adaptations characteristic of hypervigilance are manifestations of code switching.

Coping with Racism – Resilience

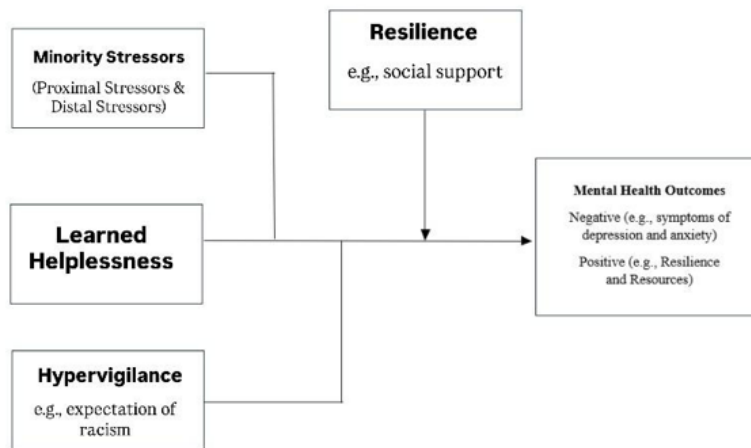
In contrast to learned helplessness and hypervigilance, some individuals display resilience as a response to racism. According to the minority stress theory, resilience factors can mediate the effect of minority stress on mental health by restoring mental wellbeing. Indeed, research has found that several resilience factors play a key role in mitigating the probability of developing depression and anxiety symptoms. According to Nandi et al. (2016), these factors are both community-level, such as social support, and individual-level factors, e.g., a strong racial identity. Furthermore, according to Seligman (1991), one's attribution to challenging events may play a key role in mental wellbeing. Seligman (1991) discovered that individuals who attribute the causes of negative events externally are more resilient to adversities. On the other hand, pessimists internalise and personalise negative events, which ultimately increases the risk of developing symptoms of depression. Similarly, in the Afrozensus report they found that Black Germans that recognise racism as a structural and systematic failure, reported higher levels of empowerment and resilience (Aikins, 2021). Thus, several factors, identified as resilience factors, reduce psychological distress experienced after a racist attack and simultaneously enhance overall well-being.

Thus, there are three key processes, grounded in theoretical frameworks, that may guide coping with racism. Figure 1 shows a model that integrates the minority stress theory and learned helplessness theory to illustrate how coping with racism and racial discrimination may be shaped.

Figure 1

Integration of Learned Helplessness Theory and Minority Stress Theory

BLACK INDIVIDUALS COPING WITH RACISM IN GERMANY



Note. This model is a combination of the model by Meyer (2003), Frost and Meyer (2023), Valdez et al. (2022) and Velez et al. (2017), while integrating the current concepts (learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience).

The Present Study

There are several large-scale reports that investigate the experiences of racialised individuals and how they deal with racism in-depth, such as the 2021 Afrozensus report (Aikins, 2021). The Afrozensus report identified a significant gap in research, namely the underrepresentation of Black Germans in psychological research. The experiences of Black Germans are frequently overlooked and disregarded in research despite evidence of continuous marginalisation in German society, reports of rising racial discrimination, and its psychological effects (DeZIM, 2023). An extensive and diverse variety of perspectives and situations were examined through the in-depth and comprehensive mixed-method analysis of the Black German experience by the Afrozensus. In particular, the Afrozensus report has given Black Germans the scientific attention they require and deserve with respect to navigating racism experiences through resilience and empowerment (Aikins, 2021).

Nevertheless, even in the Afrozensus report, a lacking element is the investigation of the experience with racism and its related coping mechanisms as discussed in online environments. This gap is addressed in the current study, which builds upon existing theoretical frameworks, i.e., learned helplessness theory and minority stress theory. While both theoretical frameworks have been widely applied in diverse contexts, especially in the United States, their application to the lived experiences of Black individuals in Germany remains scarce.

For that reason, the focus of the current study is exploring the underlying mechanisms that influence the coping strategies employed by Black individuals in Germany as a response to racism. This is done through the assumption that coping with racism may be influenced by learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience.

Social media platforms, such as TikTok, provide novel and unique advantages to the research of racism experiences and coping patterns. Indeed, social media may provide a rich, diverse and comprehensive source of data (Matamoros-Fernández & Farkas, 2021). Moreover, geographical barriers are not relevant on social media platforms, which eases the interaction between individuals with similar racial backgrounds, thus increasing the possibility of sharing experiences and finding validation and support beyond local and regional limitations. The present research attempts to gain an understanding of the psychological processes underlying and shaping coping responses to racism. This study provides a nuanced perspective to current research, adding a contemporary research approach and exploring learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience as psychological processes that shape coping responses to racism, thus contributing to the development of practical and culturally sensitive mental health interventions. For this purpose, the following research question was formulated: “What underlying mechanisms shape the coping strategies of Black individuals in Germany in response to racism, as reflected through social media discourse on TikTok?”

Methodology

Design

The present study aims to explore the underlying mechanisms present within the coping strategies employed by Black individuals living in Germany as displayed on TikTok¹. For that reason, the mixed-method framework by Andreotta et al. (2019) was employed and adapted into a qualitative research design for the study. Through the adaptation of Andreotta et al.'s framework, a semi-automated data extraction technique grounded in social media scraping was utilised.

Due to the fact that the current analysis process is guided by existing theoretical frameworks (i.e., minority stress theory and learned helplessness theory), a hybrid approach to

¹ TikTok was selected as the primary data source due to its growing relevance as a digital space in which Black individuals publicly share personal experiences and actively engage in discourse surrounding coping with racism and racial discrimination in Germany.

data analysis was employed. In this approach a theory-driven data analysis (i.e., deductive) and data-driven analysis (i.e., inductive) are combined. This combination may complement the minority stress theory, especially regarding its adaptation to racial minorities (i.e., Black individuals), with new insights from the present data. This approach aims to create a preliminary but comprehensive understanding of the coping strategies employed by Black individuals in Germany in response to racism and as seen through TikTok discourse.

Descriptive Data

The present dataset consists of a collection of TikTok videos, and a selection of their respective comments created by young Black adults residing in Germany. The average length of the TikTok videos was 40 seconds. In total, 75% of the video creators were female, while 25% were male. Additionally, 68.75% of the creators identified as Afro-German, and 31.25% as Black expats. Regarding the nature of the comments, the majority were related to personal experiences, how one deals with racism, and whether they agree or disagree with the creator. Demographic data of the commenters could not be comprehensively retrieved due to TikTok's privacy settings and platform limitations (see Appendix B for an overview of the videos, their descriptions, comments and respective contexts).

Materials

To conduct the present research study, several materials were used. Firstly, as TikTok (Version 39.2.0) served as the primary source of data extraction, it was downloaded from the Apple App Store. Secondly, to track the activity of hashtags and keywords and to extract posts in which these hashtags and keywords are utilised, Exolyt² was used. Exolyt is a tool that specializes in analytics, tracking and monitoring and is specifically designed for TikTok. Next, TikTok comments were extracted from the TikTok posts using ExportComments³. ExportComments is an extraction tool that allows the extraction of comments from multiple social media platforms by inputting the post's URL. The extracted comments were exported to an Excel file, which was subsequently converted into a Microsoft Word document. Next, Microsoft Word (Version 2.95.2) was used to transcribe the TikTok video posts. Finally, the transcribed posts and comments were imported to ATLAS.ti for the coding process. ATLAS.ti is a qualitative data analysis program in which a large amount of textual data can be analysed and coded.

² Through the following link Exolyt can be accessed: <https://exolyt.com/>

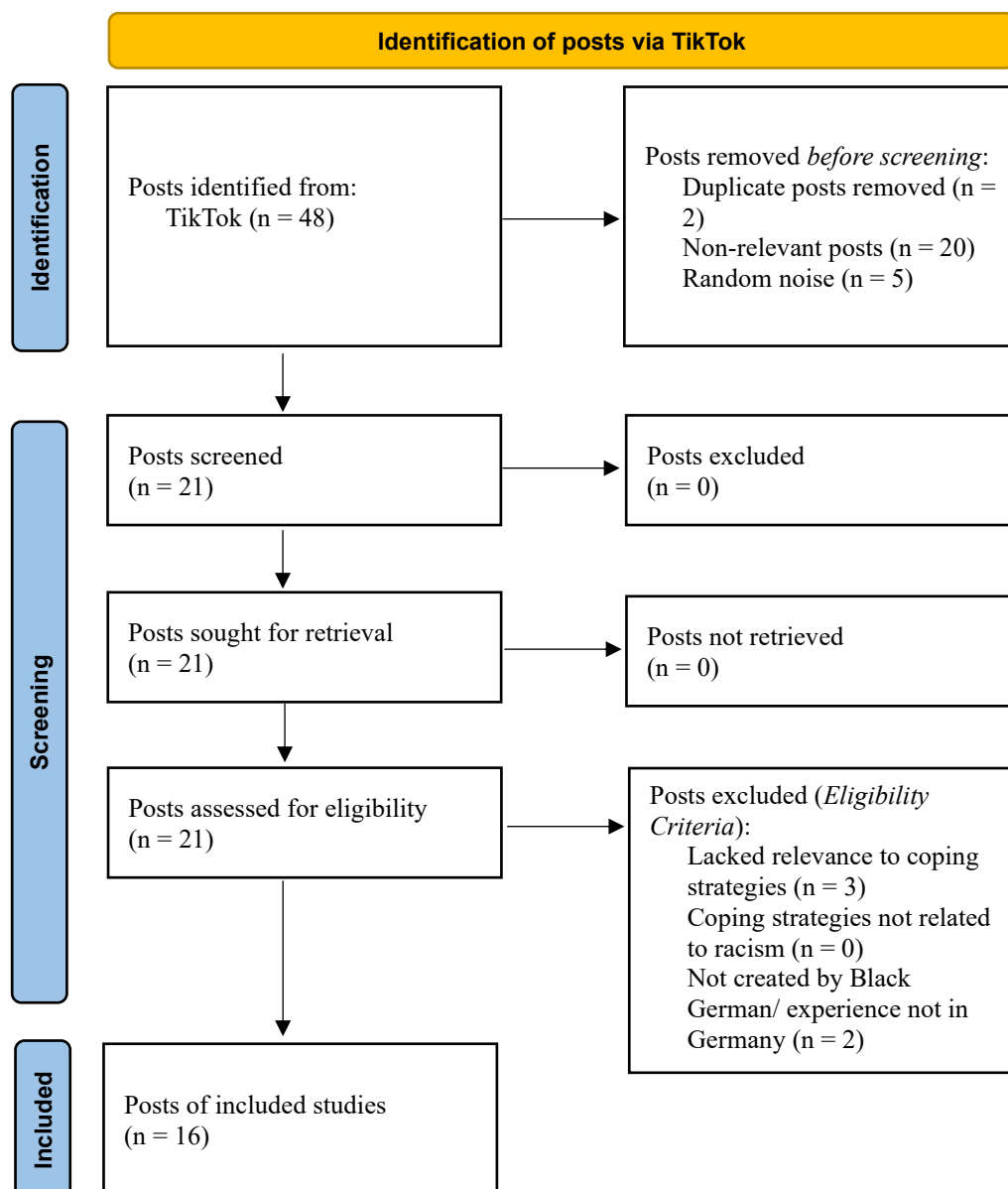
³ Through the following link ExportComments can be accessed: <https://exportcomments.com/>

Procedure

Before starting with data extraction, ethical approval from the ethics committee of the Behavioural Management and Social Sciences (BMS) Faculty of the University of Twente was obtained (Application Nr. 250143). The data extraction and analysis process followed the four phases of Andreotta et al.'s (2019) framework, which was adjusted to the current study. A result of the following adjustments was the removal of phase three, namely the compression of the dataset, as the TikTok posts and comments were semi-manually selected. Figure 2 illustrates the process of identifying, screening and selecting the TikTok posts through a PRISMA Chart.

Figure 2

PRISMA Chart – Data Selection



Automated Data Extraction

The first phase of the framework was the automatically generated data extraction with which a corpus from TikTok was assembled. This phase was adapted to the current research study by implementing a semi-automated data extraction method. This process began with a pilot study to identify TikTok posts most relevant to the research topic. For that purpose, the search term *Umgang mit Rassismus* (i.e., Coping with Racism) was entered into Exolyt. This step generated a list of relevant hashtags and keywords used frequently on TikTok when discussing the experiences of racism and coping with it. These keywords and hashtags were each individually put into the search bar and the outcoming posts were manually selected given the adherence to the current research objective. To identify additional posts, the snowball technique (i.e., applying hashtags and keywords used in extracted posts) was applied five times, resulting in a total of 74 hashtags and keywords. This process ensured that each hashtag and keyword was specifically related to coping strategies employed by Black individuals in Germany in response to racism. In total, 45 posts were collected and transcribed. For each post, the comments were exported to an Excel file using ExportComments.

Compression and Filter of Dataset

In the second phase, the corpus was filtered to remove random noise and to identify the posts and comments that may not adhere to the eligibility criteria and/or that are less relevant to the research question. Here, the manual filtering process followed an iterative screening procedure, whereby each video and associated comments were assessed individually based on the eligibility criteria. During this process, random noise e.g., emojis, duplicated videos/comments, and non-relevant data were removed from the dataset. This led to a final of 16 videos and 150 comments. Finally, during this process, the data was organised into preliminary subsamples according to the overarching themes of learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience.

Data Analysis

The last phase is the analysis of the corpus. For this, the guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) were applied (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). RTA is a qualitative data analysis method that allows for systematic and reflexive analysis and identifications of patterns and themes within a dataset. This method aims to explore the subjective experiences of individuals while accounting for the researcher's influence and personal perspective on the analysis process, specifically regarding theme generation and interpretation.

This approach is divided into six steps, which allow for the systematic analysis of the data. The first step is the familiarisation of the data. Within this step, the transcribed data was carefully and thoroughly read, to get a detailed understanding of the content of the data. Next, step two involved a preliminary coding process, in which meaningful data points were coded. The objective here was to concisely capture the meaningful content of the data, in which different coping mechanisms are sufficiently portrayed, ultimately creating a structured framework and foundation for the generation of themes. In the third step, similar codes were identified, refined and grouped to create themes and subthemes. In other words, themes were created based on conceptual similarities within the codes, identifying patterns of coping with racism and essentially providing meaningful insights into the research objective. In the fourth step, the themes and subthemes were reviewed and examined. Here, the content of the thematic structure, i.e., the codes, was examined to validate whether they are accurately represented and supported by the themes and subthemes. Additionally, the themes and subthemes were also reviewed in relation to the whole dataset, ensuring internal coherence. Inconsistencies within the thematic map were revised by either changing the grouping of the codes or merging themes and/or subthemes together. During the fifth step, the themes were defined and named. Each theme received a description and definition and a clear label. This step also included the final classification into the overarching themes of learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience. The definitions of the overarching themes integrated their respective conceptualisations based on the theoretical frameworks and their descriptions arising from the current data. The definitions of the (sub)themes, however, were exclusively based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, in order to situate the current findings within the broader body of research. Next, the thematic framework was reviewed by another researcher⁴, to ensure the validity of the themes. Finally, during the sixth step, the findings were documented and meaningful extracts for the description and analysis of the themes were identified and reported. The data extracts⁵ were selected based on the extent to which they reflect the central notion of the respective themes and subthemes. Furthermore, quotes that depicted the complexity and nuances of the overarching themes, thus offering different perspectives and contexts, were selected. The aim of the data extracts was to illustrate patterns within the data and portray the complexity and diversity within the themes and subthemes.

⁴ The reviewing researcher was a MSc student, who is working on a thesis related to racism and mental health.

⁵ The data extracts only consisted of comments, to adhere to anonymity and privacy guidelines protecting the creators of the TikTok videos.

While the primary data analysis technique was RTA, elements of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were integrated to deepen the interpretative depth of the subjective experiences of TikTok members. IPA is a qualitative data analysis approach that explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences, while simultaneously documenting the researcher's sense-making (Smith, 1996). This is achieved through investigating participants' narratives using psychological concepts and theories. IPA enabled a more in-depth and interpretative engagement with the data, specifically in regards to theme generation, allowing an exploration of psychological and emotional processes within the TikTok members experiences. This was particularly valuable, as the nature of the data warranted a more interpretive approach, to ensure a nuanced understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Thus, IPA enriches the meaning-making process, whereby the underlying mechanisms can be thoroughly analysed.

As an addition to RTA, the stages of IPA, as presented by Smith et al., 2009 were combined. Due to the similarity of the six stages of IPA and the six stages of RTA, the similar stages were integrated. See Table 1 for the integration of IPA and RTA.

Finally, to illustrate the overarching themes, themes and subthemes, and their cross-theme connections, a Sankey Diagram⁶ was created. The Sankey Diagram aimed to demonstrate that the themes and subthemes, as well as the overarching themes, are not isolated mechanisms but are interconnected, thereby portraying their significance beyond their respective classification. Thus, the complex, dynamic and multi-layered mechanisms underlying coping was illustrated by the Sankey diagram, which subsequently informed and guided the analysis process.

Table 1

IPA and RTA Integration

IPA Stage	RTA Phase	Description of Overlap and Integration
1. Multiple reading	1. Familiarisation with the data	Both methods begin with the familiarisation of the data. For that, the data is read multiple times and notes are made with preliminary reflections to identify potential meanings.

⁶ In this context, a Sankey diagram is a type of flow diagram used to visualise how themes are distributed and to illustrate cross-thematic connections (Schmidt, 2008).

IPA Stage	RTA Phase	Description of Overlap and Integration
2. Initial noting	2. Generating initial codes	In both approaches, the notes are transformed into initial codes to capture meaningful patterns, whereby IPA already assumes a more interpretative depth to initial noting.
3. Developing emergent themes	3. Searching for themes	These initial codes are then grouped into broader patterns, forming initial themes.
4. Seeking relationships and clustering themes	4. Reviewing themes	Both methods refine and review the themes and potential relationships among them. This includes evaluating coherence and distinctiveness and clearly defining the meaning of the themes and clustering them into the overarching themes.
5. Moving to the next case	-	IPA works through a cross-case analysis. Here, comments from different videos, and their respective perspectives were compared.
6. Looking for patterns across cases.	5. Defining and naming themes	In IPA, this is where cross-case patterns are interpreted. In RTA, theme definitions are refined here. Both involve deeper interpretation and theme finalisation.
	6. Producing the report	Technically both methods conclude with a written report, although this is not specifically mentioned in this version of IPA. RTA emphasises a structured report using data extracts while IPA focuses on interpretation and meaning making.

Note. IPA = Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; RTA = Reflexive Thematic Analysis. This table illustrates where stages of IPA and RTA converge in the analytical process.

Positionality Statement

As a Black woman who was born and raised in Germany and has experienced racism and racial discrimination, my personal experiences regarding the subject matter may have influenced my position as a researcher. That means, my experiences and intimate in-group knowledge may have influenced my analysis and interpretation of the data. Nevertheless, I do not view this influence as a limitation but rather embrace it as a tool that may allow deeper understanding of the experiences described in the dataset. In addition to that, my academic background provides extensive knowledge of behaviour and psychological theories which

may have informed my interpretation of the participants' coping strategies, specifically regarding the interpretation of their underlying mechanisms. Therefore, the analytical process of the data was not purely objective, but rather with a critical awareness of how experiences of racism may shape meaning making. Therefore, my position may allow a nuanced interpretation of the subject matter (Berkovic et al., 2020). Ultimately, this provides experiential insight into the data, while simultaneously applying reflexivity throughout this process to carefully and critically distinguish between interpretation and projection (Berkovic et al., 2020; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Greene, 2014).

Results

The current study has three overarching themes, namely Learned Helplessness, Hypervigilance, and Resilience. Each overarching theme has several themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. Table 2 shows each overarching theme, theme, subtheme and code within the current findings. In addition, Figure 3 shows the associations across the themes, as illustrated by the Sankey diagram.

The final structure of the results section was based on the thematic framework, which followed a multi-stage analysis process. Learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience serve as the overarching themes, under which the respective themes and subthemes have been categorised. To ensure a clear conceptual understanding, an attempt was made to structure the themes and subthemes according to psychological processes, and their emotional and behavioural consequences. Within the overarching theme learned helplessness, the subthemes attempt to capture the cognitive, behavioural and emotional manifestations of the psychological state. In the same way, the structure within hypervigilance attempts to demonstrate the behavioural adaptation following anticipatory stress, as suggested by the minority stress theory⁷. Finally, the themes and subthemes categorised within resilience were sorted according to self-preserving, identity and agency affirming processes, followed by community-based and collective processes.

⁷ Note. The identification of anticipatory stress and behavioural adaptation was derived from the data, while the sequential structure was informed by the minority stress theory.

Table 2

Overarching Themes, Themes, Subthemes & Codes

Overarching Theme/Theme	Subtheme	Code
Learned Helplessness		
<i>Normalisation of Racism</i>	Inaction and Silent Endurance.	<i>Ignoring racial discrimination Acceptance of racism Silently enduring microaggressions</i>
	Rationalisation.	<i>Justification of racism Narratives or beliefs that rationalise racism Generalisation of racist behaviour Comparing racism and racial discrimination across countries</i>
<i>Negative Cognitive and Emotional Consequences</i>	Cognitive Consequences and Internalisation.	<i>Negative self-perception Lack of self-worth Self-doubt Self-blame Internalisation of racist beliefs Need to prove one's worth Need for acceptance Displacement of responsibility Alterations to belief system</i>
	Emotional Consequences.	<i>Emotional exhaustion Hopelessness Frustration</i>
<i>Systematic and Social Disconnection</i>	Alienation.	<i>Social alienation Isolation Language Barrier Frustration</i>
	Escape.	<i>Escaping racism</i>
Hypervigilance		
<i>Anticipation of Racism</i>		<i>Constant expectation of racial abuse Lack of trust</i>

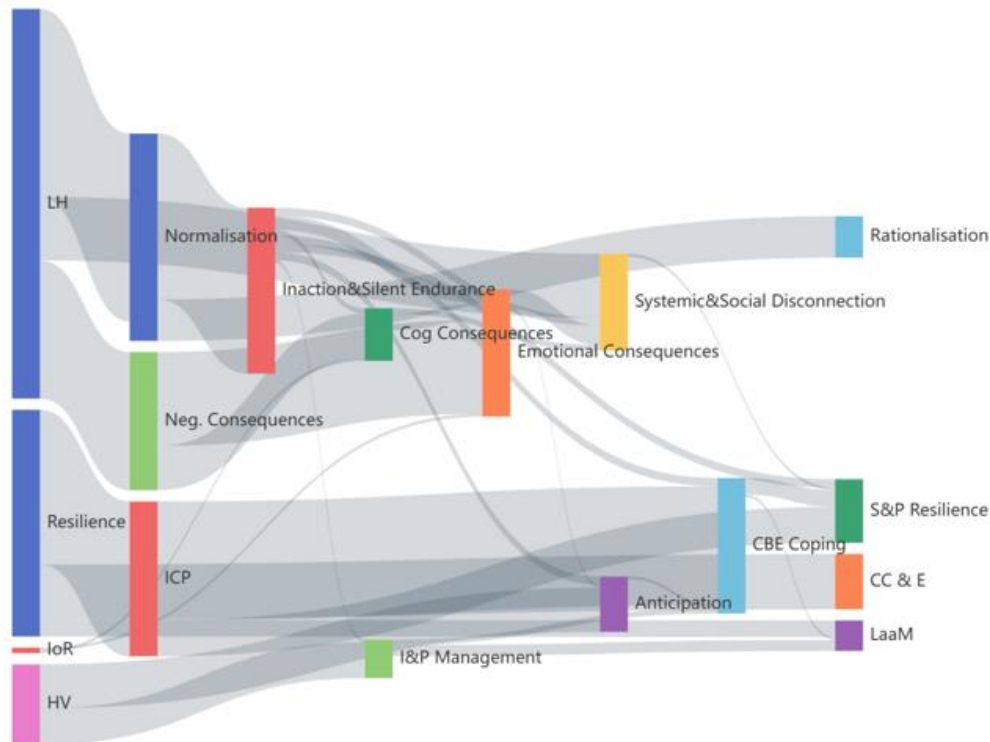
BLACK INDIVIDUALS COPING WITH RACISM IN GERMANY

<i>Identity and Performance Management</i>		<i>Hyper-awareness of structural differences</i> <i>Conforming to societal expectations</i> <i>Resistance to societal expectations</i>
<hr/>		
Resilience		
<i>Self-Preserving Processes</i>	Cognitive, Behavioural and Emotional Processes.	<i>Cognitive reframing</i> <i>Purposefulness and Determination</i> <i>Humour and Sarcasm</i> <i>Awareness of rights</i> <i>Institutional and therapeutic measures</i> <i>Direct confrontation</i> <i>Anxious hope through religion</i> <i>Resilient hope through religion</i> <i>Self-sufficiency</i>
	Spiritual and Psychological Mechanisms.	
<i>Language as a Mediator</i>		<i>Language to manage with everyday racism</i> <i>Language used for expressive retaliation</i>
<i>Community-Oriented Processes</i>		<i>Need for communication, connection and community with similar others</i> <i>Empowerment through connection and exchange</i> <i>Sharing of (un)helpful tips</i> <i>(Social) Media representation</i>

Note. The overarching themes, themes, subthemes, and codes are formatted as they appear in the main text, to facilitate their identification and ensure consistency throughout.

Figure 3

Sankey Diagram – Cross-Theme Associations



Learned Helplessness

To begin with, learned helplessness was identified as an overarching theme. Learned helplessness may be defined as the psychological state of powerlessness and a perceived inability to change one's situation. This psychological state is a consequence of repeated experiences of racial discrimination, where the individual may learn to accept and normalise these incidents. This normalisation process may be accompanied by cognitive and emotional consequences, as well as a systematic and social disconnection from society as a protective measure.

Normalisation of Racism

This theme is characterised by the silent endurance and rationalisation of racism. This means that there is a level of normalisation and acceptance of the reality of racism in Germany and a lack of counteraction in their coping. Furthermore, the rationalisation of racist behaviours may be characterised by the justification and minimisation of racist incidents.

Inaction and Silent Endurance. The normalisation of microaggressions and racial discrimination was commonly demonstrated by inaction and/or silently enduring racism

within the current data. Several TikTok members reported not doing anything against racism (neither in the moment nor afterwards) and to "ignore and move on" (i.e., *ignoring racial discrimination*). In general, silent endurance was a dominant pattern within the data and was often preceded by an *acceptance of racism* in Germany. One member said: "[...] it has been part and parcel of my daily life and life must go on.", while another member reiterated by saying: "violence don't solve problems as a black person your colour is a threat talk less of fighting and just move on bro.". Notably, the *acceptance of racism* was often accompanied by emotional consequences, such as *emotional exhaustion* ("atp [at this point] racism is normal life in Germany I'm so done with it"), as well as *social alienation*, an element in systematic and social disconnection of Black individuals in Germany ("that's normal life in Germany for you as a black person they hate you and make you feel like you're the weirdo"). In the same way, *silently enduring racial discrimination* was often associated with *frustration* and *hopelessness* ("You always have to just swallow it they are never going to change, and you think to yourself: seriously, are you really that dumb or do you just want to be?"). Silent endurance and inaction can thus be understood as a passive response to racism, that is accompanied by emotional fatigue and altered self-perception.

Rationalisation and Minimisation. Next to inaction and silent endurance, the rationalisation of racism was a factor in the process of normalising racism. Rationalisation is described as a process in which individuals try to make sense of racism by justifying and reasoning with it. Indeed, the *justification of racism* and *beliefs to rationalise racism* were evident patterns within the data. One TikTok member wrote that "all this comes from one fear, and it also comes from ignorance. When people are ignorant of the fact that you can be able to Do some things, they build that hatred and of course, that is where racism actually comes from/happens". Yet another member recounted: "they hate you. Because you're different. Because you're not like them.". Furthermore, the rationalisation of racism also took the form of a *generalisation of racist behaviour*, that is, the generalisation of discriminatory acts towards other Black individuals ("Africans aren't better to each other"). Similarly, racism and racial discrimination were *compared across different countries*, either to explain or to minimise the experiences of racism in Germany compared to other countries. For example, one member commented: "I'm American living in Germany and I love it. We deal with more BS in the States. In my opinion, Europeans discriminate against Africans more than Black Americans.". In contrast, another member commented: "I am black from the U.S. and moved to Europe. In the U.S. I was complimented and approached by men. In Europe, I am treated like I am ugly. Europe is a terrible place or black women.". Thus, the *comparison of racism*

across different countries can either positively or negatively contribute to coping with racism. In contrast to these forms of rationalisation, members also justified being racially abused, whereby one member justified the existence and experience of racism by saying: “the feelings its sometimes disturbing, this is their country. We came here willingly.”

The justification and rationalisation of racism are strongly related to the subtheme cognitive consequences (see Figure 3). However, whereby the rationalisation of racism focuses on finding reason and making sense of the consistent occurrence of racism, the subtheme cognitive consequences focuses on the perceptions and thinking patterns towards the self, others and the world. Nevertheless, the interplay of rationalisation and cognitive consequence was evident, as the negative thinking patterns may be caused by previous rationalisation of racism, and the other way around (“all this comes from one fear and it also comes from ignorance. They think we are all the same, they build that hatred and of course that is where racism actually comes from. Still, after some time you start to believe what they think too”).

Therefore, the data shows the presence of narratives and beliefs that aim to rationalise racism. Inaction and silent endurance were observed to be a consequence of the rationalisation of racism, thus, rationalisation of racism may be viewed as the active and cognitive component of the normalisation of racism, leading to the behavioural component of inaction and silent endurance.

Negative Cognitive and Emotional Consequences

The theme Negative Emotional and Cognitive Consequences discusses the perceived negative outcomes of racism experiences and how these are reflected in the coping patterns. This theme is divided into two subthemes, namely cognitive consequences and emotional consequences of racism, whereby both subthemes describe the consequences of racism experiences. On the one hand, cognitive consequences refer to the changes in thinking patterns and belief systems. On the other hand, emotional consequences describe the emotional impact of racism and how that may influence coping with it. Together, these subthemes represent two levels of the psychological consequences of racism. Given the general interplay between cognitions and emotions, these two subthemes overlap and are interrelated. However, the differentiation between these two levels is valuable, as it may portray the multi-level alterations in coping caused by racism.

Cognitive Consequences and Internalisation. Cognitive consequences of racism refer to the alterations to thinking patterns, specifically regarding the self (e.g., self-concept),

others (i.e., non-racialised individuals) and the world (i.e., society as a whole). TikTok members reported a *negative self-perception* and a *lack of self-worth* ("In Germany I have experienced racism at work like never before and that breaks you hard. You will lose confidence."). These two factors were associated with the internalisation of racism, specifically *self-doubt* and *self-blame* (see Figure 3). To illustrate, a *negative self-perception* was often reported in combination with *self-doubt* ("Over time that does something to you, it starts affecting how you see yourself. It affects your sense of sense of worth. [...] and you start self-doubting those things just happen inevitably."), as well as *self-blame* ("I went to Berlin but I never got compliments from people, I felt very invisible there and I am black too. Man, I must be ugly or something.").

In general, most cognitive consequences were influenced by the *internalisation of racist beliefs*. *Internalisation of racist beliefs* describes the process of internalising perceived and/or actual racial hierarchies and beliefs. This internalisation process may lead to a *need to prove oneself* towards non-racialised individuals. One TikTok member said: "The only thing is we just need to have a different mindset and move towards the point whereby people can now accept us and realise that it is not because of what we used to think", while another TikTok member offered a comparable perspective: "one of the reasons why I started being an advocate was that I wanted to show to the world. That it's not just only the people that sit down under a tree smoking and relaxing, but also there are people that are intellectual". Interestingly, there are two different elements included in this account, namely the *need to prove one's worth* based on pre-existing racial hierarchies and differences, in addition to the *need for acceptance*, an element within the subtheme normalisation of racism (see Figure 3). These two factors are thus intertwined, whereby the *need to prove one's worth* may stem from the *need for acceptance*.

Furthermore, the internalisation of racist beliefs was displayed through the *displacement of responsibility* for racism experiences. Here, the cause of experiencing racism is displaced to personal factors, rather than the offender's prejudice and/or systematic and structural failures in Germany. To illustrate, one TikTok member stated: "We need peace in Africa. Fight against tyrant rulers. And we will be alright. Peace to all Africans and we will not suffer racism anymore.".

In addition to that, TikTok members addressed an *alteration in belief systems* that may have originated from previous experiences of racism and is also influenced by an *internalisation of racist beliefs*. This change in their belief system represents the change in

thinking patterns on three levels, namely beliefs about the self which is equivalent to *negative self-perception* (“It affects what you believe you can do or cannot do”), beliefs about others (“They are right. Germany people they hate behind their smile. Inside they don’t like that we even exist.”) and the world (“We Africans are hated everywhere to be honest”), with a specific focus of Germany and its society (“Germany is a racist society.”).

Together, these changes in thinking patterns reflect a psychological outcome of racism in which personal sense-making is intertwined with internalised stigma and stereotypes, which ultimately alters how one views the self, others and the world.

Emotional Consequences. The second subtheme in Negative Cognitive and Emotional Consequences is Emotional Consequences. Here, TikTok members recounted several negative emotions that often followed an experience of racism. As a consequence, TikTok members reported feeling emotionally exhausted. *Emotional exhaustion* was the most frequent code within the dataset and describes feeling emotionally fatigued and overwhelmed due to repeated experiences of racism. One member reported that they “its just too much, everyday I go through it I cant do it anymore.”. Similarly, another member reported: “its always the same, they will always hate us even when we don’t do anything, I’m just so exhausted of it, I wanna go back home”. Interestingly, these data extracts demonstrate how *emotional exhaustion* overlapped with several elements in different subthemes (see Figure 3). For example, systematic and social disconnection, such as the desire or actual act of *escaping racism* in Germany, was often a result of *emotional exhaustion* (“I experience it for years at work and in daily life, I couldn’t cope was in deep depression, I live somewhere else now since 2 years and feel much better mentally.”).

Next to that, *hopelessness* was identified as an emotional consequence, especially regarding one’s ability to cope with racial abuse (“I can’t take the pain [caused by racism] anymore. People are avoiding me.”) and the hope to believe that the experiences of racism may decrease (“No matter how well one speaks the language the underlying prejudice and sometimes racism never ends. It is like a virus that is passed on from one generation to the other.”). Evidently, *hopelessness* and *emotional exhaustion* are interplayed, whereby *emotional exhaustion* fuels *hopelessness*, while *hopelessness* simultaneously increases *emotional exhaustion*. Finally, *frustration* was identified as an emotional consequence of racism (“They always bring you down to where they want you to be. That’s their happiness. But its indeed frustrating. Am going out soon.”). Together, these elements describe the emotional consequences of racism and how it may alter coping patterns.

Systematic and Social Disconnection

Within the data, TikTok members reported their coping with racism being increasingly influenced by a general lack of systematic and social belonging in Germany. There was a specific focus on perceived and actual social alienation and isolation, an increased level of frustration due to language barriers and escaping the discriminatory reality in Germany.

Alienation. Alienation referred to the reported disconnection from society. There was a specific focus on perceived and actual *social alienation* (“They still single out all the people who look and sound different or the ones who don’t fake like their dumb jokes and crappy small talk.”). Alienation, and the effect thereof, is not only demonstrated by the social alienation by non-racialised individuals but also a form of self-alienation, or *isolation*, whereby members report that previous alienation from others has led them to socially disconnect to avoid being alienated (“I just go to work and then straight home. I don’t give them the opportunity to discriminate me anymore”). A consequence of *social alienation* and *isolation* was *hopelessness* and *emotional exhaustion* (“grew up here, believe me it never ends they will always leave you out and make you feel bad about yourself”), in addition to *cognitive consequences* (“its like wherever I go in Germany I never belong it breaks my confidence”). Next, *language barrier frustration* was identified as a determining factor in reducing contact with non-racialised individuals or withdrawing from society altogether. While one member mentioned how “Exactly, not being able to express oneself is frustrating”, another member said, “100% true. I experienced my first taste of racism in the local church. Unfortunately, it never stops in Germany. No matter how well you speak the language.”.

Escape. In addition to alienation, *escaping racism* was a reoccurring pattern within the data, whereby members felt no other way out of this system than leaving Germany. One member said: “I can’t anymore. I want to go back home where I’m loved and accepted.”, while a different member made a similar statement, namely: “[...] I returned to my country. I could not take the pain anymore. People avoided me.”. This again confirms the state of helplessness and hopelessness, in which the reality of racism in Germany is acknowledged, yet the perceived capability to cope with it is underestimated so that “leaving seems the only way out”.

In sum, the lack of systematic and social belonging may foster isolation, which is accompanied by frustration and hopelessness and may also lead some individuals to preserve their well-being by leaving the country.

Hypervigilance

The second overarching theme is hypervigilance. Hypervigilance refers to a constant mental and emotional anticipation of racial discrimination and racism followed by a constant adaptation in self-presentation and performance. Hypervigilance can be described as a conditioning process, whereby past experiences of racial discrimination and the emotional impact of it have conditioned individuals to remain alert due to the expectation of racial abuse given the environmental cues. In other words, there is a constant anticipation of racial discrimination due to repeated exposure to it. In addition to this, hypervigilance also refers to the adaptation of behaviour and identity due to the assumed social expectations.

Anticipation of Racism

Anticipation of racism describes the *constant expectation of racial discrimination* which leads to a hyper-awareness of one's surroundings. ("It also puts you in a fighting situation all the time. you are vigilant all the time because people will make you feel like you are crazy."). This implies that the expectance of racism may ease dealing with racial discrimination at the moment, rather than being blindsided by it ("there actually are people who are anticipating and every ready to retaliate. Because of past occurrences. I know people like that."). Additionally, the anticipation of racism was often associated with *emotional exhaustion* and an *acceptance of racism* ("That's why I don't go anywhere anymore because am tired. There are certain shops I don't go to because of racism."). This again reflects the interplay between the normalisation of racism, the constant anticipation of it and its emotional consequences (see Figure 3).

Similarly, a *lack of trust* in non-racialised individuals was also observed: "If you are not careful around them they will hurt you. They always pretend to be nice to you and like you but they just want information which they can tell your employer to get you in trouble. You have to be very careful, you cannot trust them". Another TikTok member agreed by saying: "They subliminally hate you. They don't want to show it but they have these jokes. It makes you really feel like they're not showing you that they hate you, but they still hate you". This implies a mistrust in non-racialised individuals stemming from a heightened perception of threat, leading to a constant anticipation of racial discrimination. Finally, this mistrust may be a result of the *alterations in belief system*, as seen in cognitive consequences, given that a *lack of trust* in non-racialised individuals describes negative thinking patterns towards others (see Figure 3).

Identity and Performance Management

Identity and Performance Management refers to a controlled self-presentation, in order to control the probability of experiencing racism. The *persistent awareness of the difference between racialised individuals and non-racialised individuals* may cause the racialised individual to manage their identity and their performance ("You're not allowed to let yourself get triggered, but they can just allow themselves any form of discrimination."). Additionally, this *hyper-awareness of structural differences* between racialised individuals and non-racialised individuals included a pre-emptive adjustment of one's behaviour due to the expectance of racism, either by behaving according to the assumed societal expectation, i.e., *conforming to societal expectations* ("know your rights... and how to behave."), or by actively *resisting societal expectations* ("Don't learn their language, don't give them what they want."; "Or just not support German businesses where possible like I have opted to do."). *Conforming to societal expectations* (e.g., learning the German language) was often identified as a technique to potentially decrease the probability of experiencing racism. Interestingly, TikTok members found that *conforming to societal expectations* meant actively working against stereotypes ("I always takes a receipt when I leave the shop because I feel like at any second someone will stop me and ask whether I stole. I always take my receipt. I don't want them to say I am a thief."). The *resistance to societal expectations*, on the other hand, seems to originate from the hyper-awareness of societal pressure, including stereotypes and portrays a deliberate refusal to conform to these expectations. As a response to a perceived threat (i.e., labelling, stereotypes, microaggressions), this form of resistance originates from a hypervigilant state.

In sum, hypervigilance is demonstrated through the constant expectation of racial discrimination and subsequent identity and performance management. Individuals may feel the need to change their behaviour to avoid labelling and stereotyping, which ultimately suggests that the individual stays emotionally ready and hyper-aware, while monitoring their environment and surroundings, to minimise harm or the probability of it.

Resilience

Finally, resilience was consistently identified as an underlying mechanism within coping patterns. In this context, resilience is described as a self-affirming response to racial discrimination and structural disadvantages that may actively combat the consequences of it on the individual. However, this thematic pattern does not imply an ignorant stance to the reality of racism nor an ambivalence to its consequences, but rather an active decision to

decrease its consequences on the self. Resilience was differentiated between individual and collective processes that maintain one's self-worth and agency. Additionally, strong German language skills were identified as a resource to combat the consequences of racism.

Self-Preserving Processes

This theme encompasses adaptive coping processes to counteract the otherwise negative consequences of racial discrimination. These may include processes based on cognitions, behaviour and emotions, as well as spiritual and psychological mechanisms. Some elements in this theme may not be immediately perceived as resilient coping mechanisms, yet the idea behind these processes is that they alleviate the negative consequences of racism and racial discrimination and serve as a psychological buffer. This theme thus focuses on adaptive factors employed by the individual to handle living in a racially discriminative environment.

Cognitive, Behavioural and Emotional Processes. Key factors within the self-preserving processes were cognitive, behavioural and emotional processes. Indeed, the TikTok members demonstrated a several mechanisms in response to racism that seem to regulate the immediate emotional impact of racial discrimination but also affirm their agency. One strategy that was consistently mentioned was *cognitive reframing* as emotional regulation. In other words, shifting the perspective to protect one's emotional well-being. One member shared: "It does not affect how I see myself it affects how I see the people who engage in such behaviour.". Another member shared a similar sentiment, namely: "When racism happens or racist encounters happen, in my case what I do is I look at the person, some people, they are just miserable people. And even without racism, they will still have disrespected you. Such people don't waste your time.". Therefore, this perspective not only protects from the negative emotional consequences of racial discrimination but strategically positions racist acts as reflections of the perpetrator's character rather than personal shortcomings.

The cognitive processes were commonly demonstrated through *determination and purpose*. Instead of reacting to racial injustices and becoming immobilised as a consequence, some members expressed a determined, purposeful and forward-looking viewpoint ("You have to keep going. You can't let them win"; "Focus on the positive side and ignore the rest, we are here on a mission."). Beyond that, *humour and sarcasm* were often used to guide coping with racial discrimination ("The standard compliment is my favourite example: 'Oh, you speak German very well.' I often give the compliment back – watching the surprise is simply delightful."). Interestingly, *humour* corresponded with the *acceptance of racism* ("this happens all the time just laugh and keep going"). Although subtle, humour and sarcasm were

strategic and helpful emotion regulation techniques, through which members re-gained control over a situation that was originally out of their control.

In addition to the emotional and cognitive processes, practical behavioural processes also played a major role. Several members highlighted the importance of *knowing one's rights* and standing their ground ("Even my boss can't stand me, because I know my rights"). This stance offers psychological and practical reassurance and a sense of control in a situation that may seem otherwise uncontrollable. Closely related to this, some members shared situations in which *therapeutic and institutional measures* were taken, such as seeking therapy ("[...] seek help from a therapist.") or filing a police report ("But if its racism including bullying u need to seek for help. Report to the police with evidence"; "Reporting and drawing attention to oneself."). These processes reflect a shift from internal coping mechanisms to external mechanisms, whereby perpetrators are held accountable while one's mental health is cared for ("I went to therapy because it was getting too much... and it helped me realise it wasn't all in my head.").

Finally, a common pattern that was shared by several members, was directly *confronting racial injustices*, to decrease the potential impact of it (e.g., "And if the racist people attack you, give it to them those bars").

Spiritual and Psychological Mechanisms. The self-preserving processes were often displayed in the form of spiritual and psychological factors, such as *religious hope* and *self-sufficiency*. The type of *religious hope* within this dataset differed from *anxious hope* ("As a black person in Germany we live by God's grace... because what we face here is unbelievable...I fear for my kids every day... God is with us.") and *resilient hope* ("I asked God to lead me through the day and take me away from all sorts of trouble."). Although *anxious hope* is accompanied by a certain level of anxiety towards future racial discrimination, a hopeful view is still present, implying spiritual and psychological resistance to the mental and emotional impact of racism. Similarly, *self-sufficiency* was a recurring pattern within the data. *Self-sufficiency* describes the independent and self-protecting way of dealing with racism using several resources ("I don't take any nonsense from anyone here in Germany [...]. Well said, that's how I manage my activities with them and it has really been helpful.").

Language as a Mediator

Language was often identified as a form of empowerment and mediator by the TikTok members. There were two ways in which language was used to cope with racial

discrimination, namely as a way to *manage everyday challenges* and as a form of *expressive retaliation*. Regarding the ability to *manage everyday challenges*, one member reported that: "Learning the language is the solution to it all". Another member reiterated that by saying: "learning the German language is essential to your day-to-day life in Germany". Beyond that, *expressive retaliation* was used as a tool to combat racial discrimination through the ability and confidence in speaking German: "She would have felt, you know, hurt. She would have, you know, retaliated. She would have expressed herself". Some members also reported that being able to merely comprehend and understand what is being said, makes a difference regarding coping with racism "if she could speak the German language that her that and that pain would have been less". This is in line with the identified *frustration caused by language barriers*, which leads to a state of Learned Helplessness (see Figure 3). Hence, language barriers, on the one hand, can lead to frustration which subsequently leads to a state of learned helplessness. On the other hand, the ability to speak and comprehend the language has been identified as a resilience factor. Thus, language competencies may be viewed as a mediator.

Community-Oriented Processes

Community-oriented processes encompass the *need for communication, connection and community with similar others*, specifically others who have had similar experiences ("That really surround yourself. For people that look like you, and it will help so much understand that it's your environment"). Interestingly, this theme does not only encompass collective *empowerment through connection and exchange* but also the collection and *sharing of (un)helpful tips* amongst racialised individuals ("You have to be in a community. You have to be around people who look like you or sound like you who listen to you. People who appreciate you and people who can relate to the things that you're going through. That is how You remain strong and resilient in this country"; "Biggest change. I went to my home country, Benin, last year. I spent almost half a year there and people were hyping me up because it's normal. Everyone's black. You know, that was so refreshing"). Finally, the idea of *representation through (social) media* is also an element within this code, which implies a passive connection with similar others through their shared experiences ("That is why representation matters in everything!!"). The presence of representation may strengthen one's ethnic identity, through several factors ("watching movies and tv shows with black women as main characters, tumblr, pinterest etc. was so helpful"; "I just started to watch series and movies with black girls in it to appreciate how beautiful black women are. How beautiful black girls are, you know"). This, in turn, may strengthen one's ability to cope with racism.

Thus, the common understanding of shared suffering may connect Black individuals to one another and empower them.

Discussion

The current research aimed to identify the underlying mechanisms within the coping strategies of Black individuals in Germany in response to racism and racial discrimination. For that purpose, the minority stress theory and Seligman's theory of learned helplessness were utilised to guide the analysis process. The current findings affirm that coping with racism is influenced by three mechanisms: learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience. Through the visual representation of the Sankey diagram, it was evident that these dimensions were not mutually exclusive but rather influenced each other in a complex way, whereby the patterns within each dimension were related to the other dimensions. Thus, learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience can be understood as complex and interrelated concepts. In the same way, racism and racial discrimination are complex and multi-level systems and coping with it requires a complex approach.

Learned Helplessness – A Psychosocial Consequence of Racism

The first overarching theme was learned helplessness. The findings illustrate how a lack of perceived agency and control can be a consequence of repeated encounters with racism. In the current study, learned helplessness was conceptualised as a psychological state of powerlessness and subsequent endurance of racism. However, the current study also demonstrates how learned helplessness can arise from the context of systematic marginalisation and everyday racism, demonstrating learned helplessness as a psychosocial consequence of racism.

The state of helplessness or powerlessness was characterised by the normalisation of racism and cognitive and emotional consequences. These characteristics of learned helplessness, as found in the current study, are key components reflected in the learned helplessness theory (Seligman, 1975). These patterns are also in line with the findings by Piwoni (2025). Piwoni (2025) suggests two types of responses to racism: Type 1 respondents critically recognised racism and selectively confronted it, while Type 2 respondents tended to normalise racist incidents, often choosing to tolerate and ignore it as a coping mechanism.

Additionally, by demonstrating how learnt helplessness can serve as a protective adaptation to an environment that appears unchangeable, the current study advances the theory of learnt helplessness. In this case, patterns such as the rationalisation or silent

endurance of racism may be viewed as maladaptive responses to racism. This idea is supported by the Afrozensus report, which argues that while avoiding and rationalising racism may provide short-term emotional safeguarding, it may have long-term psychological effects (Aikins, 2021). According to the Afrozensus report, these psychological effects include negative emotional and mental outcomes, internal distress, and re-traumatisation. Overall, these findings highlight how learned helplessness can be utilised as a self-protective yet maladaptive mechanism that may ultimately have lasting psychological effects.

The conceptualisation of learned helplessness as a psychosocial consequence of racism also includes the systemic and social disconnection of Black individuals. Especially evident was the desire to escape Germany due to its racist realities, which strongly overlapped with the cognitive and emotional consequences of racism. This finding is in line with the study by Marquardt (2022). Here, participants explained how comments and certain interactions with non-racialised individuals reinforced alienation from others and feelings of self-consciousness. Furthermore, Marquardt (2022) found that the feelings of isolation and alienation were accompanied by distress, discomfort and frustration. These findings illustrate how learned helplessness is not only shaped by one's perceptions but also by institutional and systemic exclusion.

Hypervigilance - Anticipation of Harm and Performance Management

The second overarching theme, hypervigilance, describes a learned and protective process in which racialised individuals remain in constant expectation of racism due to repeated encounters with it. In addition to this state of alertness, TikTok members reported performance and identity adaptations – not to assimilate into the German culture but to avoid being targeted. Thus, this theme captures hypervigilance as a twofold mechanism, characterised by the constant state of expecting racism and the behavioural and identity adaptations. On the one hand, the anticipation of racism, identified as a proximal stressor in the minority stress theory, is described as a hyper-awareness of one's surroundings and a constant scanning for of one's environment in the current study. This process is consistent with Godsil and Richardson's (2017) construct of racial anxiety, which proposes that people of colour expect to be racially discriminated against in cross-racial interactions, leading to the selected attention for potential threat cues. On the other hand, identity and performance management was described as an adaptation to behaviour, performance and identity in order to avoid discrimination. This thematic pattern is in line with the concept of code-switching. Code switching describes the act of behaviour and identity adjustments to control how one is

perceived by others. According to Johnson et al. (2021), racialised individuals regularly code switch in interactions with non-racialised individuals to decrease the possibility of racist incidents. Thus, this finding highlights hypervigilance as a dynamic process aimed at managing the perceived risk of harm caused by racism.

Interestingly, the minority stress theory does not necessarily discuss identity management in the original framework. Instead, identity concealment is a central stressor in the original minority stress theory. However, this concept is not applicable in the same way for Black individuals, given that their identity markers are visually fixed (Celious & Oyserman, 2001). However, the idea behind identity concealment is equivalent to the current theme of identity and performance management; as identity concealment describes hiding or concealing one's sexual orientation to protect the self from rejection, identity management describes a process of controlled self-presentation to reduce the likelihood of experiencing racism (Johnson et al., 2021; McCluney et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2008). Thus, the current study suggests that the racialised equivalent to identity concealment may be identity and performance management.

In the same way, the two processes within hypervigilance can be understood as a sequence. In the current findings, TikTok members often described either the anticipation of racism or changes in performance and behaviour to adapt to social expectations, but not necessarily in relation to each other. The Afrozensus report, however, has made a direct link between both processes. In the report, they found that in dealing with racism and racialisation, Black individuals, who have experienced racism in the past, remain on constant alertness and expect to be racially discriminated in certain environments. As a consequence, they attempt to prevent further discrimination by adapting their identity, appearance and behaviour to perceived social expectations. In the same, McCluney et al. (2021) discuss code switching as a dual process in which racialised individuals adapt their behaviour and modify their speech and language style after extensively scanning their environment. Therefore, code switching, or identity management, may be described as a conditioned response to anticipated racism and subsequent scanning of one's environment.

Nevertheless, Jacob et al. (2022) suggest that strategically planning and preparing for the emotional impact of racial discrimination may overall decrease the impact of it. Thus, consistent with the present finding, there may be an intersection between resilient coping strategies and the anticipation of racism, where the subsequent preparation for the emotional

consequence, accompanied by actively planning how to deal with it, may mitigate the effect of racism on the self.

Resilience: Agency, Community, and Empowerment

The current findings show resilience as an emerging pattern of coping with racism among Black individuals in Germany. Resilience reflected a deliberate attempt to preserve self-worth and agency in the face of everyday racism through various mechanisms e.g., cognitive reframing. The resilience factors identified in the current data were divided into individual-level coping processes and community-level processes.

Individual-level coping processes were described as self-preserving adaptive mechanisms to mitigate the psychological effects of racism and maintain self-worth and agency. The connection between resilient self-preserving processes and the normalisation of racism, as found in the current study, further reiterates the complex interplay between adaptive and maladaptive coping. These outcomes are in line with the *dilemma of reaction* model by the Afrozensus (Aikins, 2021). This model suggests that Black individuals have a collection of adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms and are continuously required to evaluate how to respond to experiences of racism. The two types of coping mechanisms proposed by the model are (1) conflict avoidance and rationalisation and (2) confrontation and Black positioning. In this context, Black positioning is a key aspect of the empowerment of Black individuals and refers to the way Black individuals define and assert themselves as Black in an environment dominated by White individuals. Furthermore, Black positioning describes a process of defining and re-affirming one's racial identity and resisting marginalisation. Through Black positioning, tools and sources of empowerment can be consciously navigated and utilised to deal with incidents of racism.

Another source of empowerment and aspect of Black positioning are German language skills. According to the Afrozensus, being able to effectively communicate in German helps Black Germans re-gain their sense of autonomy and control (Aikins, 2021). This finding is consistent with the current study, showing that language proficiency acts as a psychological buffer and mediator between coping mechanisms and racism experiences. With the current outcomes, where language skills were found to be a mediator and a psychological buffer between the experience of racism and coping abilities. Similarly, Marquardt (2022) discovered that strong German skills could be viewed as a benefit when navigating life in Germany, including dealing with racism. Therefore, language may be a strong tool and a mediator in the relationship between racism and mental health.

On the community-level, coping processes were characterised by collective responses, community-based resources and practices to deal with racism. Indeed, the current findings suggest that social support and a shared identity are crucial resilience factors. Similarly, Marquardt (2022) found how interactions and communications with similar others, specifically focused on shared experiences, benefitted and empowered Black Germans. The Afrozensus report demonstrates community spaces, or *Black spaces*, as a necessity and strong source of empowerment (Aikins, 2021). In their conceptualisation of Black consciousness, Black spaces are described as a form of collective resilience, in which an environment of community and interactions between Black individuals is cultivated for shared identity, solidarity and healing.

While Black community spaces provide an environment of empowerment, support and validation, the current study suggests that TikTok may function as a digital extension of these Black spaces. Indeed, the empowerment acquired through the community was demonstrated across the current findings. Through the sharing of lived experiences and how one chooses to deal with them, through advice-giving and support among Black TikTok users, TikTok offers a digital space for community, and with that, for collective resilience. Thus, TikTok not only emerges as a platform for personal expression but may also function as a psychosocial, community-based resource to counter the impact of racism on the individual.

Overall, the current outcomes show that coping exists on a spectrum and is utilised to manage racism experiences. The complex interplay between learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience reveals how Black individuals possess a diverse collection of coping mechanisms to navigate the racist realities in Germany.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study is a contemporary and nuanced investigation into the underlying mechanisms of coping with racism. This study used publicly available data from social media. TikTok is a popular social media platform in which individuals, predominantly young adults, can communicate with one another, exchange lived experiences, opinions and advice (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Furthermore, using TikTok as a data source represents a novel approach to data collection and analysis. Next to that, by grounding the analysis of the data in psychological theories, this study contributes to the understanding of psychological mechanisms shaping coping with racism. Finally, the integration of RTA and IPA is another strength of the current study. Using these methods together facilitated the analysis process by enabling the systematic meaning-making process and subsequent theme generation,

leading a nuanced understanding of the current data. This combination made the analysis process reflexive and embraced the researcher's position as a strength rather than a limitation.

However, there are several limitations to this study that need to be considered. Firstly, the current study is akin to a pilot study, rather than a comprehensive investigation of the underlying mechanisms of coping strategies. That is because using TikTok as a data source is an approach that has not been done within this research area. Furthermore, the nature of TikTok and the videos posted on this platform may have affected the kind of conversation captured. TikTok videos are often performative, emotional, and specific to a certain situation (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). They may also reflect the views and opinions of individuals who are more active online or are more politically active (Medina Serrano et al., 2020). Because of this, the results may not apply to all Black individuals outside of TikTok and are thus not generalisable. Moreover, as the average length of the TikTok videos was less than one minute, and the comments were naturally short, the current data did not contain a lot of contextual information. This was further exacerbated by the lack of interaction with the TikTok members, which reinforces the importance of reflexivity throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thus, the analysis and interpretation process had to significantly rely on inferences and the researcher's meaning-making which was supported by the IPA process (Smith, 1996). Yet, as mentioned before, my personal and academic background laid a solid foundation for the interpretation of the current data.

Next to that, the semi-automated data extraction technique used here had several limitations. On the one hand, using semi-automated data collection accelerated the extraction of videos and comments. On the other hand, the manual selection of the videos and comments based on the eligibility criteria was time-consuming and thus warrants a more efficient approach. In sum, there are several limitations that need to be considered. Although the current study provides valuable insights, the findings are preliminary and need to be regarded with caution.

Conclusion and Future Research

In conclusion, this study provided preliminary insights into the underlying mechanisms of coping strategies employed by Black individuals in Germany when responding to racism. The minority stress theory and Seligman's learned helplessness theory provided a strong theoretical basis through which the analysis process was guided. The findings supported current understandings of the mechanisms that may alleviate or reinforce the effects of racism on mental health. Furthermore, the findings imply a complex interaction across learned

helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience. This study aimed to take a different route by accessing perspectives and narratives from those directly affected in the spaces where their voices naturally emerge without prompting or guiding them. By engaging with public discourse on TikTok, the intention was to reduce the influence of social desirability or researcher presence and instead observe how individuals express their coping strategies in their own words, on their own terms. Moreover, the focus was on how racialised individuals manage and cope with racism and racial discrimination. This study thus attempts to amplify the voices of those who are often unheard and to highlight what works for them in coping with experiences of racism.

Given the nature of the study and its limitations, future research should conduct a comprehensive investigation of the coping mechanisms employed by Black individuals in Germany. For that, the rich sources of content provided by social media should be utilised to discover what works for Black individuals in Germany. Specifically, the intersections between learned helplessness, hypervigilance and resilience are interesting and may provide insight into the complex mechanisms underlying coping. Next to that, a Germany-specific framework of racial stress and coping is needed, given that most frameworks originate from the United States or the United Kingdom and have to be adapted to the German context without testing the reliability and validity of the adaptations.

Furthermore, future research should also focus on incorporating and extending the body of existing literature into clinical settings. Racism-aware perspectives and viewpoints should be incorporated into therapeutic practices and interventions by mental health practitioners. Next to that, it is important to recognise coping mechanisms, such as rationalisation of racism and mistrust, as reactions and responses to systematic and structural marginalisation. In order to support Black individuals' adaptive and functional coping mechanisms, therapeutic practices should incorporate culturally sensitive and identity-affirming approaches. Fostering agency and community, in particular, may be a key contribution to the mental health care of Black individuals. The therapeutic value of Black spaces needs to be recognised and fostered in clinical practices. Specifically, digital spaces, such as TikTok, may serve as a space to build community and empower individuals. Clinicians may explore their clients' utilisation of digital platforms to identify sources of strength and empowerment. To implement these recommendations effectively, more critical engagement and reflections on the needs of Black individuals in Germany are necessary.

As mental health professionals, we provide a service to those in need of it; however, if that service does not benefit a proportion of the population, it is about time to re-think current approaches and make radical changes. These changes begin with asking the population in question what they need and what works for them. Through continuous and rigorous research, these needs can be converted to therapeutic techniques and implemented in interventions and therapeutic practices. As French et al. (2019, p. 36) say, it is time to “strive for justice and psychological liberation from oppression and [...] focus on the ways people of colour heal from racial trauma”.

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Appendix A

During the preparation of this work the author (Priscilla Benneh) used ChatGPT in order to brainstorm, check for grammar and spelling (with minor revisions for conciseness) and to receive feedback on the structure and flow of the text. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the work.

Appendix B**Table 1B***Video Description, Type of Racism, Comments, Demographic and Context*

TikTok Video	Type of Racism	Nr. of Comments	Demographic	Context
Video 1 “Two Afro-Germans are interviewed regarding their experiences of racism in Germany and how they cope with it”	Everyday racism, microaggression	8	Afro-German	Work place, healthcare
Video 2 “Creator speaks of a racism experience that shaped the way he copes with it”	Racial Profiling	5	Expat	Police encounter
Video 3 “Creator discusses how to deal with racism”	Everyday racism, microaggressions, racial profiling	9	Expat	Supermarket
Video 4 “Creator asks how to deal with racism”	(Physical) racial abuse, everyday racism	14	Expat	Not specified
Video 5 “Creator discusses the reality of racism in Germany in different life areas and its effect”	Everyday racism, racial discrimination, microaggression	46	Expat	(specifically mentioned in video) school, university, work, sports clubs, holiday

BLACK INDIVIDUALS COPING WITH RACISM IN GERMANY

Video 6 “Creator talks about experience growing up in Germany as a black woman”	Racially motivated bullying, everyday racism	15	Afro-German	School, social outings, social media
Video 7 “two Afro-Germans discuss how they experience everyday racism”	Microaggressions, covert racism	21	Afro-Germans	Everyday situations (not specified)
Video 8 “Creator compares racism experiences between Germany and South Africa”	Microaggressions	7	Expatriate	Drug store, beauty supply store
Video 9 "Creator discusses a method to prove innocence in cases of racial profiling in stores"	Racial profiling	10	Afro-German	Supermarket
Video 10 “Creator discusses how racism in school made confront it directly by retaliating”	Everyday racism, racism in schools	3	Afro-German	School
Video 11 “Creator discusses frustration and emotional exhaustion after being racially profiled.”	Everyday racism, racial profiling	5	Afro-German	Supermarket
Video 12	Microaggression	15	Afro-German	Unknown

BLACK INDIVIDUALS COPING WITH RACISM IN GERMANY

"Creator speaks of a
microaggression
incident where she
responded with
sarcasm"

Video 13	Everyday racism	2	Afro-German	Social Media
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"Creator directly
confronts a comment
regarding their
stereotypical statement"

Video 14	Everyday racism	0	Afro-German	Social Media
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"Creator discusses how
she used to respond to
racism and how she
responds with
confrontation and
retaliation now"

Video 15	Racially	7	Afro-German	Social Media
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"Creator discusses
racism on social media
and how she raises
above it"

motivated cyber
bullying

Video 16	Racism at work	5	Afro-German	Work
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"Creator discusses
racism at work and how
it pains him
emotionally"