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# Speaking out against racism? Silence, agency and unheard voices among racialised communities in Australia

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## Abstract

Denying the persistence of racism and its impact on racially and culturally marginalised communities remains a key feature of how contemporary racism manifests. This denial is facilitated and reinforced by, among other factors, racialised hierarchies and power imbalances that suppress public expressions of lived experiences with racism, often rendering these voices unheard in the public discourse. This study, combining a survey and 27 focus groups with 862 adults from communities affected by racism in Victoria (Australia), examines how those who face racism are often deterred from speaking out through formal reporting pathways. It identified an interplay between structural, system-inherent reporting barriers and psychological factors of self-silencing. However, silence also emerges as an agentic form of resistance to racism where individuals prioritise community support and wellbeing over official reporting pathways. The findings highlight the inadequacies of formal reporting systems and the need for alternative, community-driven approaches to addressing racism.

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Racism; agency; resistance; silence; underreporting; Australia

## Introduction

Decades of extensive scholarly attention have shed empirical light on racism from various perspectives, confirming the often-untold – or unheard – accounts of those with lived experiences (Miles and Brown 1989; Moran 2023). Despite this elaborate understanding of institutional-systemic and interpersonal forms of discrimination and exclusion, and of their consequences for racialised communities, racism remains a pervasive problem in many societies around the world, deeply woven into countries' histories and evident across all societal domains today (Elias, Mansouri, and Paradies 2021).

Australia, where the research for this paper was conducted, is no exception. Since the onset of British colonialism in 1788, racism has manifested both as settler colonialism (Stewart and Vaughan 2024), characterised by “frontier violence” (Nettelbeck and Ryan 2020), dispossession of Indigenous peoples and their ongoing marginalisation (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Silverstein 2019), and as discrimination, othering and exclusion

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of non-White immigrants and their Australian-born descendants (Hage 2010). Anglo-European dominance and the marginalisation of racialised communities have also been institutionalised by laws and policies. Prominent examples have included the infamous White Australia policy, which strictly limited non-European immigrants from settling in Australia between 1901 and well into the second half of the twentieth century, and, since the 1990s, a highly restrictive approach to refugees and asylum seekers (Mansouri 2023).

The persistence of racism has drawn recognition as a problem from increasing proportions of Australians (O'Donnell 2024), but public debates about historic and contemporary racism have remained limited in their depth, substance and reach. Arguably, they continue to be plagued by what anthropologist W.E.H. Stammer ([1968] 1991; see Dreher and Waller 2021) described as a “cult of forgetfulness”. A substantial denial of racism persists in public discourse (Augoustinos and Every 2007; Dunn and Nelson 2011; Lentin 2018; Nelson 2013). This holds true not only for Australia but many countries across Europe and beyond, as scholars have long argued that “one of the crucial properties of contemporary racism is its denial” (van Dijk 1992).

Denying the persistence of racism is rooted in, and facilitated by, various factors including a common lack of racial literacy and ongoing misrepresentation of racialised groups in positions of socio-political influence. Many of these factors reflect, and cement, racialised hierarchies and power imbalances in shaping public conversations. The public discourse on race and racism taboos certain blatant expressions of racism (Augoustinos and Every 2007), while it effectively restricts expressions of lived experiences with racism, perpetuating “the fundamental injustice [for those with lived experience] of not being heard” (Dreher and Waller 2021, 1677). This silencing undermines “the ability not just to speak about race, but to be heard”, which would be “central to challenging racism” (Abbas 2020, 208).

This article makes an empirical contribution by examining mechanisms that silence those who have experienced racism. Specifically, we analyse how external (structural) barriers within the formal reporting system interact with internal (psychological) factors to prevent racialised communities from voicing their experiences of racism. But their silence sometimes also indicates a more deliberate and empowering refusal to speak through the channels made available by state institutions. Here, silence happens by choice. Behind what may appear as silence can lie a range of alternative responses and acts of resistance. This is powerfully expressed by journalist and author Reni Eddo-Lodge (2017, ix):

I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. Not all white people, just the vast majority who refuse to accept the existence of structural racism and its symptoms. I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience.

This article draws on a mixed-method study, conducted in Victoria (Australia) between 2022 and 2023, to explore questions of silence, unheard voices and agency in response to experiences of racism. Based on a survey among 703 individuals and 27 focus groups with 159 participants, all of them from racially, religiously and culturally marginalised communities, our research was primarily interested in experiences with and perceptions of formal pathways of reporting racism. We argue that the interplay between structural and psychological barriers to speaking out against racism often deters

people from using these formal reporting avenues. However, our research also showed that many did *not* remain silent. While only few have utilised formal reporting pathways, many more have opted for alternative acts of support and resistance that circumvent the established reporting system. While these voices may remain unheard in the broader public discourse on racism, they prioritise community support, personal wellbeing and agency – the individual and collective capacity of “exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed” (Sewell Jr 1992, 20) – instead of merely reacting to external calls to report racism (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a).

Before we discuss our findings, we provide an overview on some key literature exploring manifestations of silence as response to experiences of racism, from underreporting of racism to alternative acts of resistance. This is followed by an outline of the methodology.

### **Silence and resistance in response to racism: a short overview**

This overview focuses on the empirical scholarship related to silence in response to racism, both as a manifestation of inaction and as an element of resistance, for example through deliberate disengagement to mitigate the psychological harm of racist encounters. Whilst acknowledging systemic-institutional racism, studies that empirically address responses to racism predominantly explore how individuals navigate experiences of *inter-personal* racism. This emphasis is also reflected in the following overview.

It is well-established that a majority of those who experience racism do not report through any formal channels. The European EU-MIDIS II survey among almost 26,000 “immigrants and ethnic minorities”, for example, found that of those who had experienced racial discrimination only 12 per cent formally reported it (Fundamental Rights Agency 2017).

Similarly, in Australia, Doery et al.’s (2020, 22) survey among 376 Victorian multicultural youth found that just around 6 per cent formally reported an experience of ‘discrimination or unfair treatment because of [their] ethnicity, cultural background, religion or immigration status’. Another study among 305 participants from racialised communities in Victoria found that only 16 per cent of those who had experienced racism had ever reported any such incident to an organisation (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a). A 2022 survey among over 2,000 Asian Australians also concluded that they were “overwhelmingly not reporting incidents of racism” (Kamp et al. 2023, 463). Even racist hate crimes are often not reported to police as research from the United States, United Kingdom and Australia has consistently shown that they are significantly underreported compared to other crimes (Myers and Lantz 2020; Sandholtz, Langton, and Planty 2013; Wiedlitzka, Mazerolle, and Fay-Ramirez 2018).

Research has identified various barriers to reporting racism (Fundamental Rights Agency 2017; Kamp et al. 2023). Based on a review of 29 studies, Vergani and Navarro (2020) propose a general typology differentiating between two types of “internal barriers” – “internalisation” and “lack of awareness” – and three types of “external barriers” – “fear of consequences”, “lack of trust in statutory agencies”, and “accessibility”. Building on this scholarship, a recent Australian study (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a) confirmed many of these factors but argued that to understanding someone’s individual “(non-) reporting journey” it is crucial to consider the complex interplay between various barriers.

While non-reporting may appear as silence, several studies have offered alternative perspectives. This emerging scholarship (Vassenden, Handulle, and Orupabo 2025) highlights that what looks like inaction to some, may in fact form part of active expressions of resistance that lie outside the formal reporting system – and therefore often remain unheard in the public debate. The literature on everyday resistance to racism sheds light on a variety of strategies that marginalised groups employ in different contexts to navigate, confront, or mitigate the effects of racism (Aquino 2016; Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022; Lems 2021; Moran 2024). These acts of resistance sit along a continuum from non-confrontational withholding responses (disengagement) to confrontational responses, representing distinct modes of engagement with discriminatory practices and racially exclusionary structures (Vassenden, Handulle, and Orupabo 2025).

Withholding responses through disengagement may not always be by choice but rather a result of unfavourable conditions or processes of self-silencing where a person pre-emptively disregards or minimises the racist encounter. In his study of Eritrean migrants in Melbourne, Jehonathan Ben (2022) identifies several rationales for what he calls “downplaying” racism. These include (1) individuals’ limited recognition of what constituted racism, (2) diminishing racism in Australia by comparing it with pre-migration experiences of more overt racism in other countries, (3) expressions of gratitude toward their “new” host society, (4) adherence to meritocratic values, and (5) resistance to narratives of victimhood.

In contrast to such forms of (self-)silencing, disengagement can also reflect complex forms of agency which appear more passive than they actually are. Lems (2021) qualitative study of Muslim communities in Madrid, for example, highlights how structural constraints shape resistance strategies and how Muslims, despite persistent stigmatisation and discrimination, strategically employ silence as a form of self-preservation through deliberate disengagement. Lems found this is particularly evident among men, who consciously adopt silence to navigate institutional barriers and mitigate potential confrontational outcomes where power dynamics are decidedly unfavourable to them. Young, Spanish-socialised Muslim women, on the other hand, more often choose to actively engage in questioning and refuting racialisation, challenging the authority and assumptions of the perpetrators.

Ellefsen et al.’s (2022, 451) research in Norway examines the actions of racialised (mostly Black) young people in responses to racism, illuminating the agentic nature of resistance to racism “as opposed to withdrawal and passive adaptation”. Their study develops a matrix of “resistance to racism” encompassing five typical reactions to racism: deliberately ignoring the racist incident, sharing with family or peers, reporting to authorities, participating in collective public protests and, lastly, confronting those expressing racism (e.g. using humour, or engaging in conversations). Participants in Ellefsen et al.’s (2022) study choose their response based on their emotional state and contextual circumstances. Similarly, Vassenden, Handulle, and Orupabo (2025, 231) note that the “situational variation is key to understand where, why and how minorities respond to stigmatisation”. Hereby, the choice of response, according to Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg (2022, 443), is often aimed at minimising racism’s negative impact by consciously giving it less attention.

Other studies have also highlighted how experiencing racism can lead to responses of resistance rather than silence. For some, active and confrontational responses to racism

serve as mechanisms to re-assert agency and reject imposed racial stereotypes (Fleming Crystal, Lamont, and Welburn 2012; Ohnmacht and Yildiz 2021). Online spaces too can become sites of resistance as Moran's (2024) Australian study on social media activities of African background youth illustrates. When mainstream media and political figures perpetuated moral panic through racialised "African gangs" narratives (Majavu 2020), young African Australians demonstrated strategic agency in their response. Through the deliberate repurposing of the *#AfricanGangs* hashtag on social media, they engaged in acts of everyday resistance, effectively challenging dominant racist narratives while simultaneously reclaiming control of their collective narrative (Moran 2024).

## Methodology

We conducted a mix-method study (2022–2023) among people aged 18 or older, who lived in Victoria, Australia, and self-identified as a person from a community affected by racism. A descriptive data report was published in 2024 (Peucker et al. 2024b). Conceptually, we drew on the established scholarship that highlights how racism manifests as an interplay between prejudiced "attitude, communicative action, policy, and social structure" (Baldwin 2017, 20) and centred the subjective perspectives of study participants. Some participants shared how institutional-system racism has affected them, but the primary focus of the shared experiences was on interpersonal forms of racism. We note, however, that interpersonal racism is both rooted in, and cements, systemic racism (Williams, Skinta, and Martin-Willett 2021).

The target group included first and second generation (non-Anglo-Saxon) migrant and minority faith communities as well as First Nations people. The main research aim was to examine reporting barriers, reporting experiences and support needs of racially, religiously and culturally marginalised communities in Victoria with the goal to use the empirical insights to further develop, together with communities, (more) adequate reporting pathways and support services.

The research took place on the unceded lands of First Nations peoples across what is now known as Victoria. The four researchers and authors of this article are all settlers: Mario Peucker is of German background and immigrated to Australia in 2010, now living on the lands of the Bunurong people of the Kulin Nation; Franka Vaughan is African and migrated to Australia in 2018; Jo Doley is a White Australian person from a family that includes mostly north-west European heritage; and Tom Clark is also of north-west European heritage and a descendant of clergy in the colony of New South Wales before 1800. Franka, Jo and Tom all live on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation.

The study, which received research ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee (VU-HRE 22-124), combined quantitative data collection methods (survey) with qualitative focus groups; both covered mainly four thematic areas:

- experiences of racism;
- reporting experiences, including barriers and motives
- support services (e.g. what services are needed); and
- suggestions on how to encourage more people to speak out against experiences of racism.

## Survey

The survey used non-probabilistic (non-randomised) sampling to reach as many Victorian adults from culturally, religiously or racially marginalised groups as possible. Recruitment for the survey relied on a range of activities, from social media promotion to sharing project information and invitations to participate among various local and state-wide multicultural and multifaith networks and community organisations, assisted also by state-wide community umbrella organisations, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria and the Islamic Council of Victoria, who were official project partners.

The survey, available in English, Arabic, Vietnamese and Simplified Chinese, was administered online. It comprised of around 40 questions, most of them with multiple choice or Likert scale response options and several open-ended text questions.

Of the 1,298 collected responses we excluded 595 to ensure an in-scope sample that only included people from our target audience, by applying the following criteria for exclusion: respondents from outside of Victoria (excluding  $N = 249$ ), respondents not from affected ethnic or faith-based communities (excluding  $N = 223$ ) and those who completed less than 50 per cent of the survey (excluding  $N = 231$ ).

After applying these criteria, we ended up with 703 valid responses, which formed the basis for the analysis. Due to the purposive, non-randomised sampling designed to reach people from Victorian communities affected by racism, we do not claim that the data are statically representative. Nevertheless, given the large sample size, they allow reasonably robust quantitative insights.

A majority of the 703 respondents were women (70.2 per cent); 26.8 per cent identifying as men, and the remaining 3.0 per cent either preferred not to say or identified differently (e.g. non-binary or transgender woman). Almost two-thirds were aged between 18 and 45; among them 11.4 per cent were between 18 and 25 years old. Almost 30 per cent were between 46 and 65, and 6.0 per cent were over 65 years of age.

Respondents were from various national backgrounds, and the vast majority had migrated to Australia (first generation). Of those, over one-half have lived in Australia for 15 years or more (arrived before 2010), and 27.8 per cent arrived after 2016, including 8.4 per cent who have migrated since 2020. Only 17 per cent of survey respondents were born in Australia.

The most common countries of birth, apart from Australia, were India (10.5 per cent), China (8.1 per cent) and Vietnam (5.5 per cent), followed by Pakistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Syria and Iran. An analysis of the open text question where respondents could describe their ethnic, cultural or religious background showed the diversity of the sample. Of those who used geographical markers to describe their background, for example, 21.3 per cent were Middle Eastern, 19.0 per cent East Asian, 17.7 per cent Indian or Sri Lankan, 14.4 per cent African, and 13.3 per cent South East Asian. A relative majority of those who mentioned their religion, identified as Muslim, but there were also substantial proportions describing themselves as Buddhist, Jewish or Hindu (Peucker et al. 2024b, 15).

Survey data were analysed using SPSS (version 29). Frequencies and explore commands were used to examine descriptive statistics, while chi-squared tests were used to examine inferential statistics. Where data did not meet statistical assumptions for inferential tests, descriptive statistics were used.



## Focus groups

To gain deeper qualitative insights into the perspectives of communities, we conducted 27 focus groups, peer-facilitated by community members with lived experiences. The peer-facilitators became part of the research team; they were trained, remunerated and received a certificate of appreciation. They had a high level of autonomy in how they recruited “their” participants, and how to run the focus group in a way that ensured a maximum degree of cultural safety and comfort among participants. This also affected the composition of each focus group, in terms of gender, age as well as linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious background: Many groups were gender, age and culturally mixed, while others were more homogenous such as Muslim women’s, Filipino or Mandarin speaking groups, youth groups or a university students group and a small group of people with insecure visa status (Peucker et al. 2024b, 15).

A total of 159 community members participated in these focus groups, predominantly held in-person, with some facilitators opting for conducting them virtually. The exact demographics were not always known as the facilitators did not have to confirm with participants; Table 1 offers an overview of the 27 focus groups.

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed. Where the discussion was held in a non-English language, we asked the facilitator to translate during the focus group, or the facilitator prepared a selective transcript of the discussion afterwards based on the recording. The transcripts were then analysed focussing on the four key themes (see above).

**Table 1.** Focus groups and demographics of participants.

#	ID	N	Description
1	G.1	4	Men and women; Nepal, Philippines, Japan, Singapore
2	G.2	2	Iranian man and woman; insecure visa status
3	G.3	5	Filipino (4 women, one man), partially in Tagalog language
4	G.4	7	Gender-mixed university students
5	G.5	4	Gender-mixed, mostly from Asian background
6	G.6	6	Gender-mixed, African background
7	G.7	6	Chinese, gender-mixed
8	MB.1	6	Muslim Arab, Pakistan, India, Catholic Italian, Sikh India
9	MB.2	6	Muslim women; South Asian, Tamil, Urdu and Arabic; 28–45 years.
10	D.1	5	Muslim men and women, different backgrounds
11	D.2	6	Somali women; 25–55 years
12	D.3	5	Sudanese background
13	D.4	5	Indian, Sri Lankan and Chinese, men and women; aged 40–70
14	D.5	5	Somali men and women
15	B.1	6	African Muslim men of Somali background, aged 18–30
16	B.2	5	Somali (Muslim) women aged 20–30
17	B.3	7	Women, Somali-Muslim; aged 30–65 years; partially in Somali
18	B.4	9	Men, Somali background, aged 25–30
19	Y.1	8	Vietnamese, men and women, mostly in Vietnamese language
20	Y.2	10	Muslim women
21	Y.3	5	Muslim women, different African background
22	Y.4	6	Young people, mixed background, mostly African background
23	H.1	6	Middle Eastern, Christian men and women, mostly seniors
24	H.2	7	Young men and women, many recent arrivals
25	H.3	8	Vietnamese, men and women, mostly seniors
26	H.4	5	Muslim women, partially in Arabic language
27	H.5	5	Women from Iraq, Eritrea, Philippines, India, aged 20–40

Note: We organised informal discussion sessions with First Nations community members as part of the project, but a joint decision was made to not record and include these as focus groups for research ethical reasons. The perspectives of First Nations people are therefore only captured in the survey.

## Findings

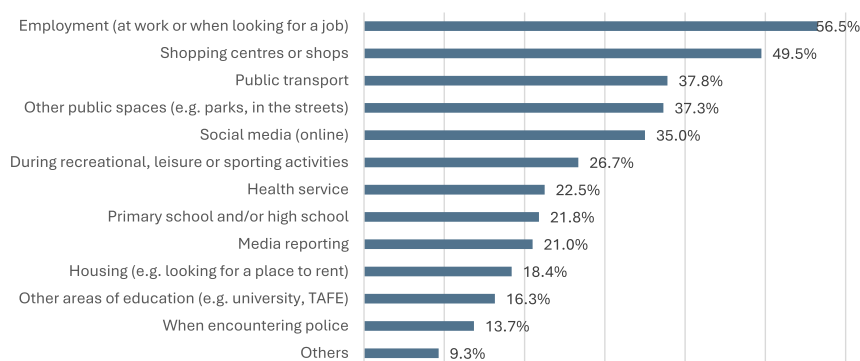
Before discussing the key theme of this paper related to the silencing effects of racism and how some participants have enacted alternative ways to respond, we first present a brief overview on participants' experiences with racism; a more detailed presentation of these descriptive findings is provided in the research data report (Peucker et al. 2024b).

### *Persistence of racism*

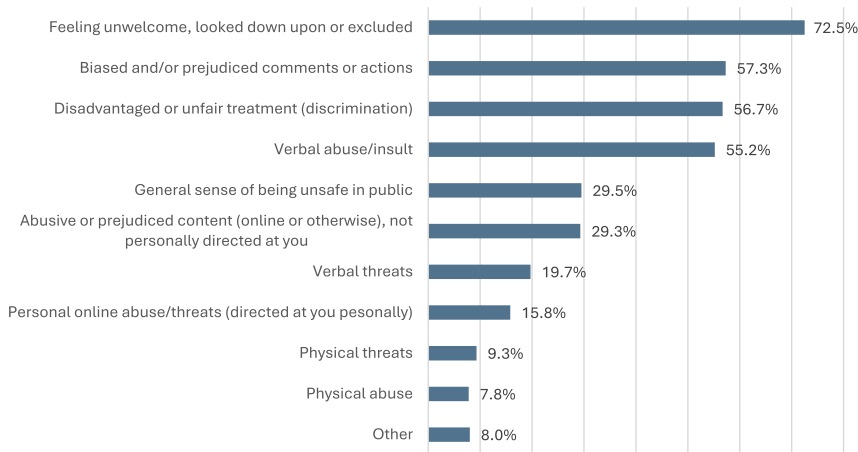
Over 76 per cent of survey respondents stated that they (or someone in their care) had experienced racism in Australia, and further 11 per cent had not experienced but witnessed racism, which left only 13 per cent who had neither witnessed nor experienced racism in Australia. The proportion of those with direct experiences was highest among respondents who, based on their self-identification, were of African background (91.1 per cent) and among those who identified as Muslim (88.1 per cent) or Jewish (84.1 per cent). Our analysis using a chi-squared test found a statistically significant association between respondents' age and experiences of racism ( $N = 699$ ;  $\chi^2(12) = 29.24$ ,  $p = .004$ ), although the association was weak (Cramer's  $V = .15$ ), with younger people being more likely to state they have experienced racism (Peucker et al. 2024b).

Two thirds (65.6 per cent) of those who had ever experienced racism in the country had also been subjected to racism in the previous 12 months. Figures 1 and 2 show in which social contexts respondents had faced racism in the past 12 months and what type of racism. Employment (56.5 per cent of those who had experienced racism the past 12 months) and various public spaces, including shopping centres (49.5 per cent) and public transport (37.8 per cent), were particularly often mentioned as sites where racism occurred (Peucker et al. 2024b). But racism had been experienced across all areas of life, including different education settings, health care, during leisure time and sporting activities, housing, online, in media reporting and when encountering police.

The most common forms of racism fall under what has been described as "everyday racism" (Essed 1991), casual racism or racist microaggression, understood as "'subtle and stunning' daily racial offenses" (Williams, Skinta, and Martin-Willett 2021, 991) that can cause significant harm. A young Sudanese-Australian focus group participants (D.1) stated that for him these frequent but typically more subtle forms of racism are the



**Figure 1.** Overview of typical responses.



**Figure 2.** Areas where racism was encountered in the past 12 months.  $N = 386$ . Participants could select more than one response. Source: Peucker et al. (2024b): 21.

“worst”. Although he had been racially abused and even physically attacked, he said, “I would not even say that’s the worst. I’d say subtle racism is even worse. The deep-rooted, subconscious racism is the worst kind”.

Over 72 per cent of those survey respondents who had faced racism in the previous 12 months experienced situations where they felt unwelcome, looked down upon or excluded, and 57.3 per cent faced biased or prejudiced comments or actions (Figure 2). Almost 57 per cent had experienced disadvantaged or unfair treatment (discrimination), and 55.2 per cent stated they had been verbally abused and/or insulted. Other forms of racist experiences, including verbal or physical threats or even physical abuse, were also experienced.

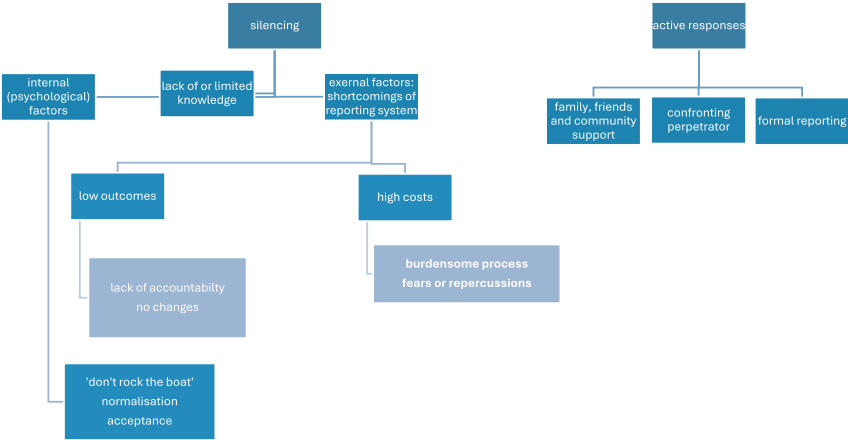
### **Reactions to racism**

As outlined in the literature review section above, racism often goes unreported, at least in a formal sense, i.e. is not reported to an organisation that may record the incident or provide support. Many of those who face racism find no way to speak out publicly, while others respond in ways that sit outside the formal reporting pathways. The following sections present our findings on (non-)reporting as well as alternative reactions to experiences of racism. Figure 3 offers an overview on different types of responses.

### **Non-reporting as silencing**

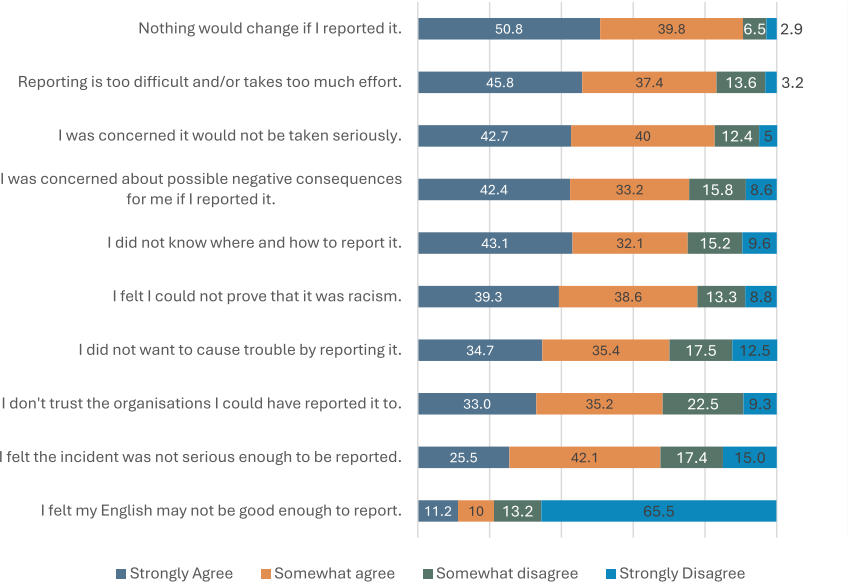
Only 15.5 per cent of those who have faced racism in Australia have ever reported any such incident. Around 63 per cent have “only” ever told their family, friends and/or colleagues, and the remaining 21.1 per cent have never told anyone about any of their experiences with racism. These three types of responses align with three of the five types identified by Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg (2022, 442), namely (1) “‘ignoring’ the incident”, (2) “‘sharing’ with family and peers for social support”, and (3) “reporting”.

For many of our study participants not formally reporting their experience of racism was not a deliberate choice or preference. Instead, it was often the result of an interplay



**Figure 3.** Types of racism experienced in the past 12 months.  $N = 386$ . Participants were able to select more than one response. Source: Peucker et al. (2024b): 22.

of several discouraging factors on their “(non-) reporting journey” (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a). These factors have stopped them from speaking out publicly – and thus, in effect, silenced them. Confirming many of the findings from previous studies (Vergani and Navarro 2020), our research identified a variety of circumstances and perspectives that discourage most people from reporting racism. While Figure 4 below illustrates the prevalence of each of these factors individually, our research confirms Peucker et al.’s (2024a) study, highlighting how these factors interact, mutually reinforcing participants’ reluctance or perceived inability to speak up and report their experiences.



**Figure 4.** Personal reasons for not reporting.  $N = 438\text{--}448$ . Participants were able to select more than one response. Source: Peucker et al. (2024b): 36.

The analysis of our survey data and the focus groups identified two main interconnected sets of reasons for non-reporting. The first is related to limited awareness of reporting and support options. The second revolves around individuals' conviction – sometimes based on previous personal experiences – that reporting is a high-cost and low-reward response. These structural system-inherent barriers are sometimes further reinforced by internal factors that prevent individuals from even considering speaking out publicly against racism – regardless of their awareness of reporting pathways and their views on reporting efficacy, as the following section will discuss.

### ***Not knowing how and where to report***

In the focus groups, participants commonly explained their non-reporting by highlighting they were unfamiliar with the reporting pathways available to them. Many were not aware of any sites they could report racism to. Others stated they only knew about the police as a potential option, but reporting to police was often considered inappropriate unless the racist incident involved physical assault or other serious criminal conduct. One focus group participant (G.1) explained: “I don’t know where to go [to report]. There is no number. I know of only the police, but it just feels too trivial to call the police”. A woman in a Muslim focus group (D.1) similarly stated:

I would not know where to go first. The biggest reason [for not reporting] is probably not knowing. The obvious is the police station, but then, well, many of us already feel that police won't do much. But what else is out there?

The survey data confirm these focus group findings: Asked about their personal reasons for not reporting, 75.2 per cent of survey respondents agreed that they “did not know where and how to report” (Figure 4). While the majority of respondents were aware of how to report to police (55.6 per cent), only very few – less than 20 per cent – knew how to access the support of other key agencies specialised in receiving and recording racism-related complaints such as the statutory human rights commission (i.e. the Victoria Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, VEOHRC). Alternative reporting platforms or specialised community organisations that offer support service, for example for Muslim community members facing Islamophobia, were even less known.

Not knowing how and where to report racism is a major reporting barrier, but according to our survey findings, it was only the fifth most common reason for not reporting a personal experience of racism (Figure 4). The procedures and (expected) outcomes of formally reporting played an even more important role in silencing those affected.

### ***Previous reporting experiences as a deterrent***

Some of those who had reported racism in the past expressed such dissatisfaction with the process and/or outcome that they chose not to report again. In the survey, 42.5 per cent of those who had formally reported racism disagreed with the statement that their previous reporting experience made it more likely for them to report a similar incident again in the future. Focus group participants also raised this issue, often arguing that they had been disappointed and now questioned whether they would report again. In one focus group (D.1), a Muslim woman recalled how she had reported a serious incident of Islamophobic threats to police but hadn't heard back from them:

That's why most people wouldn't report, I'm still waiting four weeks later to hear what happened to this dude [the alleged perpetrator] ... Is he in handcuffs or is he going to come down to my place? I think about it every single day, and I wonder if it happens again, am I going to bother to report it again?

Another participant in the same group explained the collective reluctance to report racism by saying, "especially if you have tried in the past and you have been left ... halfway, and nothing has been done about it, then you will never do anything about it ever again".

### **High cost, low reward**

The latter reason for refraining from speaking out publicly based on previous negative experiences is often tied to the common perception that reporting is not worth the effort. There are two sets of interacting factors: On the one hand, formally reporting racism is considered a high-cost activity, which not only takes a lot of time and effort but is also emotionally burdensome and typically associated with other risks. On the other hand, the prospect of achieving a meaningful, satisfactory outcome by reporting is regarded as minimal as it is seen as rarely resulting in significant consequences for racist conduct and as ineffective in challenging the persistence of racism overall.

The *high-cost argument* was articulated explicitly by 83.2 per cent of survey respondents who agreed that one of the main reasons for not reporting was the sense that reporting "is too difficult and/or takes too much effort". A focus group participant's (G.1) statement captures this sentiment: "I imagine the reporting to be a long process. Do I want to go through the process, especially as a migrant. You ask yourself: is it life and death? If not, let me just get on with my day".

Related to this, 77.9 per cent were discouraged because they felt they "could not prove it was racism", which points to the view that the reporting process, and in particular the burden of proof, is seen as too onerous. Other factors contributed to this assessment, such as widespread concerns about not being taken seriously (75.9 per cent) and fears about possible negative consequences after reporting (72.8 per cent). These latter risks of secondary victimisation in response to speaking out against racism were also frequently raised during the focus group discussions. Some expressed concerns that reporting racism could jeopardise their residence or visa status or may even lead to them being "deported" (MB.2), others were worried racism-related complaints could have negative effects on their career or how they would be treated at work – or their children at school.

A female participant in a multicultural focus group (MB.1) shared an incident of racism at her children's school and that her children had asked her not to take any action, pleading, "mum, don't take this any further, because I'm going to be singled out". A participant of African background (G.6) raised similar concerns in relation to reporting racism at work: "You know you're gonna be a double victim. Let's say at your workplace, if you report racism, straight away ... you become a target". Another participant from a mixed Asian focus groups (G.5) argued that they do not report racism at work "because you don't want to risk a bad performance review". A young Muslim man of Somali background (B.1), who worked as a security guard, shared that those of his colleagues who have reported racism "get less shifts and are less called upon because they complain".

The perceived costs of reporting are disproportionately high in relation to the low expectations to reach any meaningful, satisfactory *outcome*. This is reflected by the

widely held view that “nothing would change if I reported it”. More than nine in ten survey respondents agreed with this statement, which made it the most common reason for not reporting. The qualitative analysis of survey text responses and focus group discussions allow deeper insights into this perception with participants frequently highlighting the lack of accountability for the perpetrators of racism. Referring also to the high “mental and emotional” costs of reporting, a survey participant elaborated, for example:

We need to know that the mental and emotional sacrifice of reporting will be worth it, that it will result in an outcome. Why would I report racism if nothing will be done? There needs to be repercussions and penalties for racist behaviours, and even for microaggressions. Even if it's just launching an investigation into an organisation, something that will actually help. Otherwise, I have no use to report.

While participants differed in what they considered appropriate consequences, many agreed that formally reporting racism would usually not lead to satisfactory outcomes. This sentiment is conveyed in statements such as “there needs to be more than a slap on the wrist” or “there is no immediate accountability, and all the energy and effort you are exerting [when reporting racism], you are not going to get anywhere with it”, as participants in a Muslim focus group argued (D.1).

A young Muslim man of African background recalled an incident from his time at high school, where he had been subjected to repeated, explicit racist abuse:

... and one day, it got physical, and I got one on the chin, literally, four against one, in front of the supervisor's office, I got punched in the face. I reported it but nothing happened. Actually, I got in trouble because I tried to fight back.

A Somali-born mother shared how her daughter was called the “n-word” by her teacher. The daughter then went to the school principal, but “he didn't do anything” (Y.3) The mother explained that:

her [daughter's] friends and younger brother, who also goes to that school, agreed that no one would do anything about this. Always the same ... They have this belief that if they make a complaint, it will not go anywhere ... They all said the same thing: If you go somewhere, no one will care.

Even in cases where the report is followed up and responded to, the consequences are often seen as disappointing or insufficient. A young Somali-Australian man (G.6) stated, for example, “in the workplace, if somebody says something [racist] and you report it, the first reaction is: ‘oh they didn't mean it like that’. They send a quick apology and just explain why they acted that way”.

### ***Pre-emptive self-silencing: choosing not to speak out***

The findings presented so far pinpoint the two main sets of reasons for non-reporting racism: (1) insufficient awareness – or rather insufficient promotion – of existing reporting pathways and support services, and (2) the common perception that reporting is, for a range of reasons, a high-cost response to racism that yields very limited prospect of meaningful outcomes. In addition, our study revealed other, psychological factors that reduce the propensity to report racism but are largely independent of one's level of awareness of reporting options and often precede any cost–benefit considerations. These factors tend

to discourage people from even considering taking any actions that could draw attention to themselves, the incident or the perpetrator (Ben 2022).

For around 70 per cent of survey respondents one of their main reasons for not reporting racism was that they did not want to “cause trouble by reporting it”. This sentiment is similar to the above-described concerns that reporting could result in negative repercussions. The analysis of the focus groups demonstrates, however, that some participants expressed concerns that go beyond the reporting process itself and were instead driven by their sense that their acceptance and belonging in Australia society was provisional and conditional. Speaking out against racism was seen by some as jeopardising their endeavours to gain societal standing and acceptance by the culturally dominant group (“them”).

A Somali-born woman, for example, explained her reasons for not reporting by saying: “We don’t talk bad, [don’t] talk about racism in this country. They might hate you, it’s not my country” (Y.2). For some participants, speaking out against racism was regarded as “causing trouble”, which would undermine their attempts to “blend in” (G.1). In one of the Muslim focus groups, a participant said that people in their community don’t report also because “they don’t want the government to think they are bad and complaining”. Another Muslim woman explained how the reluctance to speak out against racism has been instilled in her community for many years but also noted that this is now starting to change:

No, no, no. We don’t rock the boat. We don’t want them to hate us. And this has been embedded in us as we were growing up here: “Don’t make trouble, keep quiet, it will go away”. But now we are rising up, and we can see that in the younger generation ...

A Chinese-Australian participant (G.7) described the desire to fit in as a fundamental reason for not reporting racism: “We want to, and try to, fit in. And we have come to accept a little bit of tough treatment”.

The second part of their statement points to another psychological barrier: the tendency among some to normalise and accept racism as part of life. In a focus group of university students of colour, a participant stated: “Personally, I feel I have been conditioned to just suck it up, keep quiet and move on” (G.4). A Muslim woman in another group (MB.2) said she had thought she had to accept racism and Islamophobia “because we were in a country that was not Islamic, and this was how it would be”. Another participant added that, after experiencing racism, “we calm down, we accept our difference”. For some this approach of accepting it forms part of their coping strategy as they feel it reduce the pressure on themselves to address and speak up against racism. A participant in a mixed focus group (G.5) explained:

I feel, as a minority, you have to protect yourself ... Protecting yourself is sort of like trying to ... I don’t want to call it normalising, but it does sounds like it when you sort of just accept it and move on because you don’t want to address it.

Acceptance of racism was sometimes also tied to culturally grounded convictions. Several participants explained they did not want to report a racist incident as they would not want to cause trouble for the perpetrator. Despite repeated racist bullying and discriminatory treatment by her supervisor, one participant (MB.1) explained that she had refrained from reporting because “I thought by reporting I would hurt her [the



perpetrator], and in our culture, we should not be hurting another person". A young Australian-Somali man (B.1) also explained he didn't report racism he experienced from colleagues because he was concerned that the perpetrators "could lose their job".

Another factor for not speaking out against racism, raised by several participants, was the belief that God would take care of it; they would "leave it up to God" (H.1). Some noted such arguments in their community but were more critical of it. A Muslim woman in a focus group (D.1), for example, shared that.

My dad would say "no, no, no, we don't want to get in trouble, we let it pass". Even after serious incidents or racism, my parents would sit me down and say: "these things happen, it's okay, God will take care of it in the hereafter".

And another participant affirmatively added that [after experiencing racism] "all we have is our prep-talk: 'get over it, it's fine. Allah will take care of it'. We always have to resort to the God factor".

While our analysis thus far focussed on why those who face racism often refrain from speaking out publicly, our analysis also uncovered a variety of other, more active responses to experiences of racism – from formally reporting or confronting the perpetrator directly to seeking support among family, friends and community.

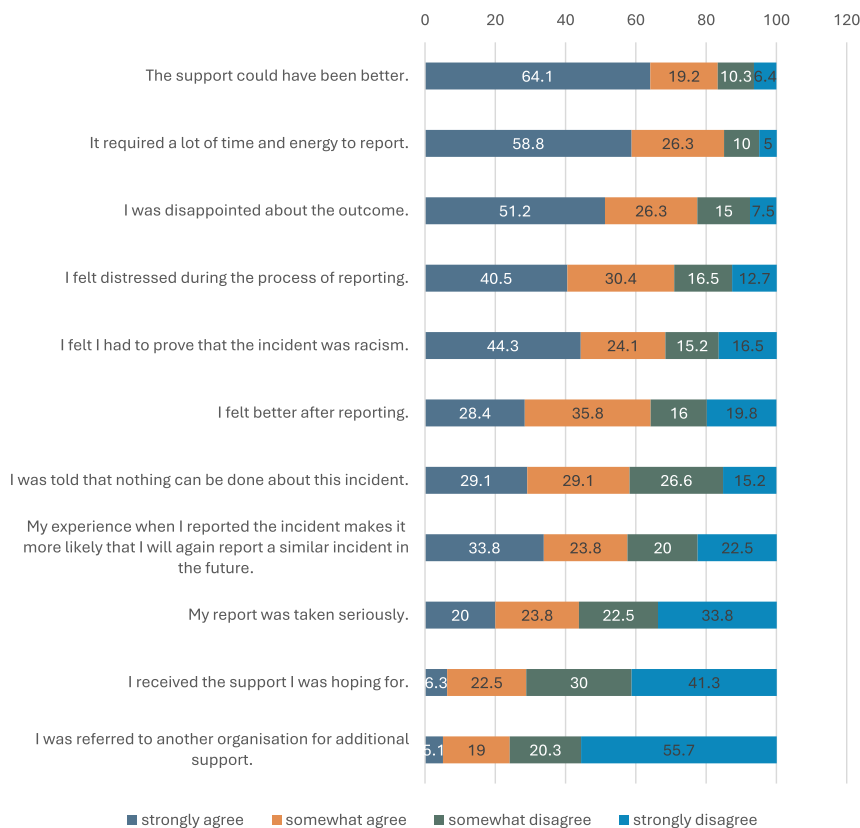
### **Formal reporting**

Overall, 15.5 per cent of survey respondents stated they had reported a personal incident of racism to an organisation. The two most common motivational reasons for formal reporting were to "raise awareness that racism is a problem" (78.2 per cent) and "to hold the perpetrator to account" (66.5 per cent). Of those who had reported an incident of racism in the past ( $N = 83$ ), the majority had tried to report internally within the organisational context where the incident occurred, reporting to their employer or supervisor (39.8 per cent) or within the school or university (31.3 per cent). In addition, 30.1 per cent had reported to police, 19.3 per cent to the specialised statutory human rights commission in the state of Victoria (i.e. VEOHRC), and some stated they had reported to dedicated community-led reporting and anti-racism support services.

Very few focus group participants described their reporting experiences as positive, and the analysis of the survey responses also painted an overall rather negative picture (Figure 5). Only 28.8 per cent of those who had formally reported racism agreed that they "received the support they were hoping for", and a majority was "disappointed about the outcome" (77.5 per cent), felt distressed during the process (70.9 per cent) and thought that it "required a lot of time and energy to report" (85.1 per cent). Despite these overall negative views, almost two-thirds also stated that they had felt better after reporting (64.2 per cent), which may suggest that speaking can help strengthen a sense of agency (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a).

### **Family, peer and community support**

Around 63 per cent have "only" ever told their family, friends and/or colleagues about their experiences with racism. The analysis of the focus groups indicated that, especially against the backdrop of what is seen as insufficient formal reporting and support systems, many turn to trusted friends and community members for emotional support. A female



**Figure 5.** Reporting experiences.  $N = 78-81$ . Participants were able to select more than one response. Source: Peucker et al. (2024b): 42.

focus group participant (MB.1) spoke about racism at her children's school and that formal reporting to the school was not an option due to fears of secondary victimisation:

So, what I normally do when my son tells me he got called a wog or my daughter's Muslim friends get discriminated against, I say "support your friend, keep an eye out and educate yourself and speak to me or a person you trust".

A young Somali-Australian man (B.1) also explained that, given the shortcomings in existing support structures, "the best support is from family. Report only serious physical acts; otherwise deal with it in-house. That's unfortunate, but that's all". Others seek emotional support, recognition and "validation" from their peers within their communities. A Muslim woman said, "it's not that we don't report: we talk to each other in the community", and another participant (G.5) stated that they tend to "seek validation from other people of colour, just to ensure that it [racism] is not just in my head".

A different way to share a personal experience of racism more widely was discussed by a Muslim focus group participant (D.1), who "once took an incident to social media". She recalled: "I reached thousands of people, and it took me days to go through my inbox full of an outpour of support and [other people's] stories with racism ... I felt more supported and more okay".

Some participants also highlighted that trusted community figures and organisations could play a more central role not only in providing a culturally safe space for speaking out and getting emotional peer support but also by assisting people in navigating the current support system. In an Arabic-speaking, mostly Christian focus group (H1), a participant proposed:

Go and report to the priest. We can go to him, and he can, through his connections, pass the report on to others. [There are also] community groups who could do that. ... If there is a problem at school, for example, and they don't want to go to the management, they can come to the case manager at [their community group] who can advocate on their behalf with the school.

Similarly, a participant in a Mandarin-speaking focus group (G.7) suggested that the current official support structures should be “complemented by Chinese grassroots community [groups] that can help people navigate the system and explain where to get support”. A Somali-Australian woman (D.5) also argued:

As a [Somali] community we need a platform where people can come and report, and we can then pass this on to the [human rights commission] ... We often don't talk about these things, people are scared. We should say, ‘listen, you should not be scared’ ... We need to organise within the community, a place where community members, also our women, can go to for help.

### ***Confronting perpetrators***

One of the five types of “resistance to racism” in Ellefsen et al.’s (2022) study refers to confronting the perpetrator directly. Several focus group participants in our study also discussed such an immediate response to racism as a spontaneous act of speaking out, describing it as more effective compared to going through formal reporting processes. A young Somali-Australian man (B.1) said, “Reporting? What are they going to do about it ... ? So, for us migrants, we take matters into our own hands. Talking back to them”. A young man of African background (Y.4) explained a similar approach in an education context:

I rather talk to the person himself instead of going to the coordinator [at school], because I think, from experience, the person doesn't get the appropriate consequences. It keeps on going, so we have to put it into our own hands to resolve the issue instead of reporting it or going to the school or whatever.

A Muslim man (D.1) referred to situations at university. “Lecturers have said something inappropriate, and I just pull them up after class and ask what's going on. I don't report it, no, but I confront them straight away”. Another participant in the same focus group added:

I'm not scared at all [about reporting], I just can't be bothered to do it. I prefer to talk to them and watch them fold in person. If I report, they may not follow up. But if I talk to them straight away, they don't know what to say.

Notably, most of those who spoke about their preference to confront the perpetrator directly were male. A woman in an ethnically mixed focus group (MB.1) challenged a male participant who also expressed his preference for confronting the perpetrator. She described his approach as “a male's perspective”, and added, “as a woman, if it's a man, I would let it go. I would not interact, [but] my husband also speaks back”.

## Concluding discussion

The primary aim of this research was to better understand how people from racially and culturally marginalised communities perceive and experience pathways and barriers to report racism and access support services. What are their motives and reasons for using existing formal channels to complain or speak out against racism, what discourages them from doing so and how do those who have formally reported racism feel about these pathways? Our findings confirmed not only high rates of underreporting and various reporting barriers, but also how the interplay between external (structural) and internal (psychological) factors effectively silences the voices of many of those who experience racism. The current institutionalised options to report, to speak out publicly against racism are insufficiently promoted and hence not widely known in affected communities. They are also regarded by many as inappropriate, too onerous or culturally unsafe. The costs of “going through the system” are considered too high, especially given that the chances of holding the culprit to account or achieving an otherwise meaningful outcome are often low. The reporting system fails many of those who are supposed to be the beneficiaries of these systems. This in itself can be regarded as a facilitator or even a manifestation of institutional racism, as it systematically excludes people from speaking out against racism and, in doing so, allows the ongoing denial of racism.

External expectations and calls from statutory agencies to report experiences of racism (Peucker, Clark, and Claridge 2024a) either do not receive their audience or they are questioned and rejected because of the inherent deficits of the reporting and support systems. This often results in silencing those who experience racism. Their voices remain unheard – at least by those who rely on official complaint statistics – and absent from the wider public debate. However, this does not always mean that community voices are quashed entirely. Many pursue alternative ways to negotiate experiences of racism, often within their own networks and communities. Reflecting their determination to pursue more agency-driven responses outside the formal bureaucratic reporting system, many seek to ensure or restore their emotional wellbeing, whether that means taking “matters in their own hands” by confronting the perpetrator or finding other avenues to speak out (Ellefsen, Banafsheh, and Sandberg 2022; Lems 2021; Moran 2024). These responses constitute acts of resistance, prioritising individuals’ own needs for safety and agency over external expectations to report and navigate an imperfect reporting system that is seen as having little to offer and putting the onus on those who experience racism. While our study makes an empirical contribution to the emerging research on these alternative bottom-up responses to racism, a more systematic exploration of various community and agency-centred responses to racism would be warranted. This could also help shift greater attention towards the recognition of community voices, both in academia and in the public debate around racism and ways to address it more effectively.

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The research received ethics approval from the Victoria University Human Ethics Committee (VU-HRE 22-124).

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