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**Ingroup Favoritism and Outgroup Derogation: Effects of News Valence, Character Race, and  
Recipient Race on Selective News Reading**

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## **Ingroup Favoritism and Outgroup Derogation: Effects of News Valence, Character Race, and Recipient Race on Selective News Reading**

### **Abstract**

This study examined whether the positive or negative valence of a news story, and the race of the character portrayed in the story, would influence Black or White readers' selection of a story. The study employed selective exposure methodology to unobtrusively measure story selections among Black and White readers as they browsed a news site. The results demonstrated Black newsreaders were more likely to select and read positive and negative stories featuring their racial ingroup, and more likely to select and read negative vis-à-vis positive stories about their outgroup. In contrast, Whites' story preference was not affected by story valence or character race. Theoretical assumptions from social identity, social comparison, and social cognitive theories are used to explain the findings.

Keywords: Intergroup, race, identity, news stories, Blacks

## **Ingroup Favoritism and Outgroup Derogation: Effects of News Valence, Character Race, and Recipient Race on Selective News Reading**

Individuals generally gravitate toward people, messages, and activities that promote positive social identity and high self-esteem (see Festinger, 1954; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Scholars find that individual's social identity and self-esteem are impacted by, and intricately woven with, the experiences and perceptions of the group(s) to which the individual belongs (Crocker, 2011). The extent to which ingroup membership reinforces or weakens a person's positive social identity is impacted by both internal (e.g. strength of the individual's identification with the ingroup) and external (e.g. media messages) elements. For example, the media play a key role in producing messages and images that can positively or negatively impact individuals' social identity through the depictions of various groups, including racial ingroups and outgroups. Through intergroup comparisons and selective exposure, this study examines how members of Black and White ingroups manage elements that influence their social identity as they navigate various online news stories.

Communication scholars have given little attention to directly testing assumptions associated with racial ingroup-outgroup comparisons. Previous research has not adequately tested intergroup bias in the context of news story valence, racial composition of audience, and racial composition of news characters. Some analyses of intergroup bias have incorporated race into story valence by using, for example, all White participants to evaluate White and Latino characters in only negative media content (Mastro, 2003) or used both Latino and White participants to evaluate positive and negative news stories featuring only Latino characters (Fujioka, 2005). The current study goes beyond previous work by allowing Black and White participants to choose from both positive and negative news stories that featured either Black or White characters.

Using assumptions from social identity, social comparison, and social cognitive theories, this study outlines the conditions under which intergroup bias is likely to occur. Additionally, unlike previous work, this study assesses ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation among Black and White participants that may manifest in selective exposure to positive stories featuring participants' racial ingroup and negative stories that feature participants' racial outgroup. The term

*selective exposure* refers to a phenomenon by which a user is faced with many options and selects some options more often than others (Hastall & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Sears & Freedman, 1967; Zillmann & Bryant, 1985). For example, if visitors to an online forum with ten topic threads of equal length allotted 10% of their time to reading one of the ten different available discussion threads, they would have spent a proportional amount of time with this article. However, recipients often exhibit a preference for certain parts of a website, which they actively choose to consume.

This phenomenon is usually referred to as selective exposure and operationalized through exposure time (e.g., Hastall & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick, in press), even though use of different terminology exists in the literature (e.g., Graf & Aday, 2008). This study employed selective exposure methodology to unobtrusively measure news story selections among Black and White news readers. Past work assigned participants to read stories that featured either Black characters or White characters (e.g., Appiah, 2003)—a method that may be unnatural and subject to socially desirable responses. In contrast, this study presents viewers with a variety of positive and negative news stories featuring both Black and White characters. This technique gives participants the opportunity to choose a news story irrespective of the racial character featured in the story. By utilizing selective exposure and expanding research parameters to include both social identity and racial ingroup-outgroup preferences, this study builds on previous work by improving ecological validity thus contributing to more definitive conclusions.

### **Ingroup Comparison and the Self-Concept**

Group memberships are important components of members' self-concepts, as individuals' views of themselves are often based on, and influenced by, perceptions of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Positive perceptions of the group can improve members' self-concepts, while negative perceptions of the group can have the opposite effect. In support, social identity theory implies that ingroup members selectively seek positive information about their group in order to maintain or enhance their positive self-concept (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Conversely, people tend to avoid negative, unflattering messages of themselves and their group that could lower their self-concept (Crocker & Major, 1989).

These concepts hold true for mediated messages as well. In keeping with social identity theory, individuals tend to select media messages that feature positive portrayals of ingroup members over unflattering messages that feature ingroup members (Harwood, 1999). However, representations of Blacks in the media can make it challenging for Black ingroup members to find media messages and characters that support or enhance their need for a positive social identity. This is due to a relative absence of Blacks in the media, and disproportionately negative depictions when Blacks do appear.

News media typically construct news stories filled with White mainstream people and issues while excluding meaningful reports of ethnic minorities (Heider, 2000). Studies indicate Whites are typically over-represented in the news even when they are not central to the news story (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). In contrast, stories about Blacks are often absent from the news media (Heider, 2000) and, when they appear, frequently juxtapose negative issues such as violent crime, drugs, poverty, and welfare with noticeable images of Black characters (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Television news portrayals of Blacks are comparatively negative as well, by over-representing Black perpetrators, under-representing Black victims, and over-representing White victims (Dixon, Azocar & Casas 2003; Dixon & Linz, 2000). News stories frequently blame Blacks for the problems of crime in society (Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998) and follow a racialized script where the prime suspects are generally Black (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000).

Extended exposure to a media environment wrought with unfavorable portrayals of Blacks can negatively impact Blacks' social identity. To combat these forces and maintain a positive social identity, it is expected that Blacks will seek positive stories and avoid negative ones. This discussion leads to the first hypothesis: Black news readers will spend more time reading positive news stories featuring Black characters than they will reading negative stories featuring Blacks.

### **Social Comparison and Stigmatized Groups**

Early works on social comparison theory reveal people tend to measure their self-concept through comparisons with others—typically others with similar opinions, attitudes, abilities and personality characteristics (Festinger, 1954). Similarly, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) suggests people are more likely to selectively attend to and learn from behavioral models who are

similar to themselves (Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008; Weaver, 2011).

Perceived similarity with a source may be greatest among members of lower status, stigmatized groups. Through social comparison, members of these groups recognize their social standing and aim to protect their positive social identity by avoiding comparisons to higher-status outgroups (Bettencourt, et al., 2001). A key strategy used to protect ingroup members' social identity is ingroup preference.

In many ways, members of the Black community comprise and exemplify a perceived lower-status, stigmatized group with signs of ingroup favoritism (Blake, 2007; Twenge & Crocker, 2002). Thus, Blacks are likely to utilize strategies to protect themselves from negative effects of social comparisons to outgroup members, most notably Whites. One example is Crocker and Major's (1989) work that demonstrated Black women were more likely to compare themselves to other Black women than they were to White women.

Another factor which contributes to ingroup favoritism is a social, political, educational, or economic competition or threat from members of an outgroup. Ingroup threat includes perceived or real factors that negatively impact ingroup members' well-being, such as prejudice, discrimination, or connection to society-at-large (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). In addition, work on social identity contingencies demonstrates that numerical underrepresentation can trigger threat to individuals with a minority status in a particular setting (Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittman, & Crosby, 2008; Lee & Park, 2011). The greater the threat or level of competition, the more closely ingroup members associate with the group, and the more apt they are to clearly distinguish themselves from the outgroup (Lewis & Sherman, 2010).

People at risk of being marginalized based on group membership tend to be quite attuned to cues—such as negative depictions in the media—that signal a potential threat (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). Accordingly, members of marginalized groups may be more likely to demonstrate ingroup favoritism. Blacks are members of a stigmatized, lower-status, numerically underrepresented group, which is likely to experience real and perceived social, political and economic threats from Whites. Thus, Blacks should demonstrate ingroup favoritism which manifests itself in selecting more stories featuring positive Blacks and fewer stories featuring Whites. This

leads to the second hypothesis: Black news readers will spend more time reading positive news stories featuring Black characters than they will reading positive stories featuring Whites or negative stories featuring Whites.

### **Bias Against and Derogation of Outgroups**

In addition to ingroup favoritism, the protection and enhancement of ingroup members' social identity includes *outgroup derogation*. Outgroup derogation is defined as making or seeking negative evaluations of groups of which one is not a member, or displaying a preference for messages that negatively characterize outgroups (Jackson, Sullivan, Harnish, & Hodge, 1996). This includes the selection of media messages that negatively depict outgroup members (Mastro, 2003). Although research on outgroup derogation is scarce, the clearest support for it has emerged in studies that have used social categories (e.g., age, race) as target groups (e.g., Lewis & Sherman, 2010). For example, studies indicate young people enhance their self-esteem by favorably comparing themselves against older people (Harwood, 1999), and older people prefer negative news about young people (Knobloch-Westerwick & Hastall, 2010).

Social identity theory supports this notion and finds that ingroup members tend to seek or attend to negative or unfavorable information about the outgroup in an attempt to maintain or enhance ingroup members' social identity (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). The theory also finds that the more strongly members identify with their own group, the less favorable their attitudes will be toward relevant outgroup members (Negy, Shreve, Jensen, & Uddin, 2003).

Research reveals that, compared to members of high-status groups, members of low-status groups are more likely to identify with their ingroup and discriminate against or hold less favorable attitudes toward outgroups (Bettencourt et al., 2001). For example, Shapiro and colleagues (2010) found that Black participants were significantly more likely to derogate and express prejudice toward high-status infrequently stigmatized Whites than they were to low-status, stigmatized groups.

Hence, under conditions where Blacks cannot avoid exposure to White outgroup members, they may engage in outgroup derogation. This self-protection strategy may be utilized to ensure outgroup comparisons promote positive social identity for ingroup members by selecting negative

stories featuring Whites over positive stories featuring Whites. Therefore, hypothesis three states: Black news readers will spend more time reading negative news stories featuring White characters than they will reading positive stories featuring White characters.

### **Salience and Importance of Ingroup Membership**

While theories support the notion that Blacks demonstrate ingroup favoritism and outgroup derogation, empirical work has not provided definitive evidence that Whites demonstrate this same behavioral pattern (Hewstone, et al., 2002; Mastro, 2003). This may be due, in part, to the differences in the salience, and value one attaches to group membership. Research on group identities demonstrates that ingroup-outgroup social comparisons are based on a specific social identity that is both salient to and valued by the ingroup (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The salience of a distinctive trait determines its accessibility and meaningfulness for group members (Elias & Appiah, 2010). The greater the salience of the specific social category such as race (Mastro, 2003), gender (Mastin, Andsager, Choi, & Lee, 2007), and age (Harwood, 1999), the greater one's ingroup identification and favoritism (Appiah, 2004a). Race is the most salient social category among minority members but plays very little role in the development of the self-concept for Whites (Phinney, 1992).

A major reason race is inconsequential to the self-concept of Whites is the numeric composition of their racial group within society at large. That is, a sense of belonging and identification to a group is generally weakened by a group's dominant size in a particular environment (Elias & Appiah, 2010). The larger the group's size the less likely group members are to distinguish themselves from other groups. As an ethnic group becomes numerically more dominant in a social environment, ethnicity becomes progressively less salient in the self-concept of its members (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). In support, majority Whites are less likely than minority Blacks or Hispanics to mention their ethnicity when asked to list their most important characteristics (McGuire et al., 1978; Phinney, 1992).

Whites do not necessarily identify with their racial group because they do not think of themselves as distinctly part of a specific racial group, which results in race playing little importance in defining their self-concept (Phinney, 1992). White majority group members may not



necessarily see race or racial similarity-dissimilarity as an important characteristic worthy of ingroup-outgroup distinction. This has led to findings that show Whites possess no ingroup preference when evaluating equivalent Black and White characters (see Appiah, 2003; Knobloch-Westerwick, Appiah, & Alter, 2008). Although Whites generally demonstrate no racial ingroup favoritism when evaluating comparable White and Black characters, there is evidence that in some cases Whites display an outgroup preference for Blacks (e.g., hip hop, cultural voyeurism, Appiah, 2004b). Given literature that suggests Whites demonstrate no racial ingroup favoritism when evaluating comparable White and Black characters, and evidence that suggests Whites have shown an outgroup preference for Blacks it was not certain whether Whites would display ingroup bias based on the valence or racial emphasis of the news story. As a result, the following research question was posed: Among White news readers, will news story valence and racial composition of the characters featured in the news story significantly influence allocation of reading time?

## **Method**

### **Overview**

Black and White participants perused an online newsmagazine while their hyperlink use was recorded by software to monitor selective exposure. The overview page displayed the news leads, with eight articles varied by valence. Half of these covered a positive incident or topic and the other half featured a negative incident or topic, as established in a pretest. Each of these articles was associated with a portrait photo featuring either a Black or a White individual, with four for each group. This resulted in a 2 (valence) x 2 (character race) x 2 (respondent race) design. A pretest of the images had established that the displayed individuals unambiguously belonged to the one or the other ethnicity. The associations between photos and articles were randomized by software to avoid confounds; the article positioning on the overview page was systematically rotated. After browsing the articles for 4.5 minutes, participants completed a questionnaire for closure and answered questions on socio-demographics.

### **Respondents**

The sample included 66 Black females and 45 Black males and 49 White females and 44 White males, with an average age of 22.6 years. Blacks had significantly higher ethnic identity (*M*

= 6.4) than Whites ( $M = 5$ ;  $F(2, 203) = 32.70$ ,  $p < .001$ ), on a scale (i.e., multi-group ethnic identity measure, Phinney, 1992) from 1 to 7, where “1” [PubMed](#) is low ethnic identification with one’s group and “7” [PubMed](#) is high ethnic identification with ones group. Participants were contacted through introductory communication courses at a large university on the East Coast and at a large Midwestern university. The participants either earned extra course credit or were included in a drawing to win \$250.

## Procedure

The study was conducted in a lab and was fully computerized. An experimenter was present in the background while participants took the session in privacy. After a greeting screen, participants were instructed as follows for the upcoming news browsing: “This is a test version of an online news magazine. We would like you to examine it, browse through it, and read whatever you find interesting. Just keep on searching for the things that interest you just as you would normally do. We will ask you later about your general impressions of the articles. After a while, a questionnaire will be up-loaded automatically.” By clicking a “continue” button, participants accessed the overview screen, which displayed ten news leads and photos, eight experimentally varied articles and photos and two ‘filler’ texts and photos to veil the purpose of the study. The respondents selected articles by clicking on the articles’ hyperlinks, glanced at them as long as they wished, clicked to return to the overview, selected other articles or could return to those they had already viewed, and so forth until the scheduled reading time of 4.5 minutes elapsed. Next, an online questionnaire was provided, which asked participants about their impressions of the articles and collected demographic information.

## Experimental Newsmagazine

The online news platform resembled popular online news magazines and even adopted similar typeface, font size, and font colors (see front page screenshot in Figure 1). The home page contained an overview, which listed all available articles by headline and news lead in two columns. A masthead stated “World Wide News, US Edition” as the outlet’s name, alongside a logo. A deactivated navigation bar with typical section headings was shown on the left.

During the session, all participants’ actions were stored in a MySQL database. Thus, all

article selections and reading times for specific articles were observed unobtrusively. The software application was programmed with HTML, PHP, and JavaScript.

The page placement of the news articles was systematically rotated across participants so that each article had an opportunity to be placed in every position. Furthermore, the associations between manipulated articles and photos were randomized. Aside from participants' actions, the software logged the position of the articles, the connection to specific photos, and the gender of the person depicted in the associated photo and described in the article text.

For the positive articles, the headlines were (1) Civilian rescues driver; (2) Student overcomes learning disability; (3) Hospital chain selects new CEO; and (4) eBay quest for cookie jar leads to long-lost sibling. The headlines of the negative articles were (1) High school principal ponders loss of job; (2) West Nile Virus: Bracing cautiously for another season of mosquitoes; (3) Behcets' disease: 'I diagnosed my rare condition'; and (4) Spitzer, SEC charge ex-BoA broker. Each of those articles was associated with a portrait photo, ostensibly showing the main character of the news report. Two additional articles were always linked to photos either of a Disneyland building or a steam machine and featured the headings (1) Mickey drawing leads man on quest and (2) New rail owner has 1-track mind: B&ML's success. Thus, these two distractor articles did not feature a central character in the associated imagery and merely served to veil the purpose of the study. The ten news stories were originally retrieved from online news outlets and were shortened to equalize length to 450 words each. For all manipulated articles, two versions were produced in order to have a female or a male key character, as gender was counterbalanced in the experimental variations.

### **Pretest of Images**

The eight portrait photos showed two Black females, two Black males, two White females, and two White males. Character gender was thus counterbalanced in the stimuli. The employed photos were chosen based on a pretest. Twenty images portraying individuals were retrieved from the World Wide Web. Ten undergraduate students from a small communication seminar at a large Midwestern university categorized the portraits by gender and by race/ethnicity (White, Black,

Hispanic, Arab, Asian, Other) of the displayed target individuals while the images were shown with a LCD projector.

The images were tested for friendliness to avoid confounding influences. Past studies have used pictures of Blacks where the character had looked unfriendly or menacing. Given Blacks have been stereotypically characterized as appearing violent, menacing and unfriendly, the use of an unfriendly Black person could conjure up these stereotypes and bias participants against selecting stories that featured Blacks. For example, Eberhardt and colleagues (2004) found that an image of a Black person can trigger thoughts that the person is violent and criminal. This study wanted to avoid such images. Therefore, it was important to make sure Blacks looked friendly. On a scale from 1 (not friendly) to 7, (very friendly), participants rated Black and White characters as friendly-looking. An ANOVA with repeated measures with the ratings for 'friendly' for the images yielded that the portrayed Blacks were generally rated higher than the portrayed Whites ( $M = 5.70$ ,  $SD = .63$ , vs.  $M = 5.03$ ,  $SD = .78$ ),  $F(1, 9) = 15.58$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .634$ ).

The gender categorizations were highly unanimous with only one deviation out of 200 categorizations. Only images where race was categorized with at least 90% agreement were utilized in the experimental stimulus material.

### **Pretest of Articles**

Furthermore, the 8 articles on individuals were pretested regarding their valence to have four of positive valence and four of negative valence. In a different session, 10 undergraduate students from a small communication seminar at a large Midwestern university rated the valence of the articles (on a 5-point scale ranging from 'negative' to 'positive') and how 'interesting' they were (5-point scale) after briefly glancing at the articles individually. The set of positive articles scored 4.0 ( $SD = .68$ ) on average on the valence scale, the negative articles at 2.3 ( $SD = .52$ ). A paired  $t$ -test showed that this difference was highly significant ( $t(9) = 5.7$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, the two sets were equally 'interesting' ( $M = 3.3$ ,  $SD = .5$ , for both).

### **Dependent Variables**

All participants' hyperlink clicks during the browsing period had been recorded. The data included which articles a participant had selected, how much time they had spent on the text, and

whether the articles had been displayed in connection with an image of either a White or Black individual. These connections varied because the association of photos and news topics had been rotated to prevent confounds from specific image-article valence combinations and from interest for certain news topics. Using reading times to measure selective exposure is advantageous in that the operationalization does not rely on participants' introspection or recall and merely draws on observation of behavior. Intervening variables such as individual reading speed can be assumed to affect experimental groups in parallel ways (in fact, partialling out reading speed in earlier studies have not affected the findings; Zillmann, Knobloch, & Yu, 2001).

Participants could spend some or all of their 4.5 minutes of allocated reading time on the overview page, stimuli stories, and/or the distractor stories. For each stimuli article, the reading time was accumulated so that, if a participant accessed the same article twice, the total time spent on the article was employed as a measure. In the present study, the total time spent on actual stimuli article pages, as opposed to the overview page, ranged from 19 to 229 seconds. Participants generally spent at least half a minute studying the overview page. The two distracter news articles in this study did not include portrait photos but could be viewed by participants during the scheduled browsing period.

For hypothesis testing, the reading times of each participant were condensed in four variables reflecting reading of (a) positive news stories featuring Black characters, (b) negative stories featuring Blacks, (c) positive stories featuring Whites, or (d) negative stories featuring Whites. Although not central to the study, participants' article selections and selective exposure times were highly correlated ( $r = .74, p < .001$  for (a),  $r = .74, p < .001$  for (b),  $r = .77, p < .001$  for (c), and  $r = .78, p < .001$  for (d)). However, no significant interaction emerged among participant race, character race, and story valence for the dependent variable article selection ( $F(1, 203) = .70, p = .40, \eta^2 = .003$ ). This suggests participants displayed no article selection bias. Thus, only the article reading times of the participants were analyzed, in line with the hypotheses.

## Results

To summarize, hypothesis one predicted Black news readers will spend more time reading positive news stories featuring Black characters than they will reading negative stories featuring

Blacks. Hypothesis two predicted Black news readers will spend more time reading positive news stories featuring Black characters than they will reading positive stories featuring Whites or negative stories featuring Whites. Hypothesis three predicted that Black news readers will spend more time reading negative news stories featuring White characters than they will reading positive stories featuring White characters. Finally, given the inconclusive findings for White ingroup bias, a research question asked whether news story valence and racial composition of characters featured in the news story would significantly influence allocation of reading time among Whites.

An analysis of variance was conducted with participant race (Black vs. White) as a between-group factor, and valence of the article (positive vs. negative) and race of the character featured in the story (Black vs. White) as within-group factors. This resulted in four dependent measures: selective exposure (in seconds) to positive articles about Black individuals, selective exposure to negative articles about Black individuals, selective exposure to positive articles about White individuals, and selective exposure to negative articles about White individuals. An impact of the between-group factor emerged,  $F(1, 201) = 4.12, p = .044, \eta^2 = .020$ , indicating Black participants spent more time reading the news articles overall than did Whites ( $M = 126, SD = 37$ , vs.  $M = 111, SD = 50$ ). An impact from the within-group factor related to character's race ( $F(1, 201) = 4.30, p = .039, \eta^2 = .021$ ) indicated that articles featuring Blacks ( $M = 71, SD = 60$ ) were generally more attended to than articles featuring Whites ( $M = 48, SD = 54$ ). Moreover, a three-way interaction emerged among participant race, character race, and story valence  $F(1, 201) = 3.92, p = .049, \eta^2 = .019$ . This interaction will be further discussed (see also Table 1).

To test H1, H2, and H3 specifically, an analysis of variance was conducted with reading times of the four article groups as repeated measures among Black participants only. Hence, valence of the articles and race of the character featured in the story served as within-factors. This analysis yielded a significant character race effect ( $F(1, 111) = 24.0, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$ ), as well as an interaction between the two within-factors ( $F(1, 111) = 4.8, p = .031, \eta^2 = .04$ ). The first effect indicates that Black newsreaders overall preferred news stories about Black individuals; however, this was qualified by a significant news story valence effect (see Figure 2). Subsequent tests were conducted to examine these effects (see Table 1). The results showed no support for H1. Blacks did

not spend significantly more time reading positive news stories featuring Blacks ( $M = 49.84$ ,  $SD = 55.16$ ) compared to negative stories featuring Blacks ( $M = 37.54$ ,  $SD = 49.34$ ;  $p = .066$ ). However, these tests showed that Black newsreaders spent more time reading positive news stories featuring Black characters ( $M = 49.84$ ,  $SD = 55.16$ ) than they did positive stories featuring Whites ( $M = 14.93$ ,  $SD = 30.75$ ;  $p < .001$ ), and negative stories featuring Whites ( $M = 23.81$ ,  $SD = 44.38$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The results provide support for H2. Furthermore, subsequent tests showed that Black news readers spent more time reading negative stories featuring White characters than they did positive stories featuring White characters ( $p = .046$ ). This supports H3.

To address RQ1 specifically, an analysis of variance with reading times of the four article groups were used as repeated measures, but only with White participants. Again, valence of the articles and character race served as within-factors. The results for story valence were not significant ( $F(1, 92) = 3.2$ ,  $p = .076$ ,  $\eta^2 = .034$ ). These results suggest Whites were just as inclined to read stories about Blacks as they were about Whites irrespective of the story valence.

### **Discussion**

This study examined whether the positive or negative valence of a news story and the race of the character portrayed in the news story would influence Black or White news readers' selection of a news story. Unlike previous intergroup comparison studies that assigned specific stories for participants to read, this study utilized selective exposure techniques that allowed respondents the ability to self-select positive or negative stories that featured either Black or White characters. This study also used online tracking software to collect data unobtrusively. This is particularly important given the problem of social desirability that may sometimes influence the validity of self-report measures in studies on race and ethnicity.

The findings provide some support for assumptions surrounding theoretical frameworks associated with social identity theory, social comparison theory, and social cognitive theory. For example, there is evidence that supports social identity theory, in particular the notion of ingroup favoritism, and to some extent the idea that audiences seek positive information that will strengthen their social identity over negative information that may threaten their identity. However, only the findings specific to Black news readers lend support for the above mentioned theories. This was

mostly in accordance with expectations. That is, it was predicted that Blacks vis-à-vis Whites would engage in more intergroup bias given they were more likely to possess the characteristics that would facilitate this behavior (e.g., low-status/stigmatized group, perceived threat or competition from outgroup).

As the literature points out, one's race is significantly more salient and meaningful for Blacks than it is for Whites (Phinney, 1992) in part because Blacks are a numeric minority in society (see McGuire et al., 1978). Moreover, ingroup preference and outgroup derogation are more likely to occur when people highly identify with their ingroup, and the ingroup holds significant importance in defining their self-concept (Lewis & Sherman, 2010; Vanhoomissen & Van Overwalle, 2010). This holds true for Blacks and not for Whites. Blacks generally possess a chronically high level of identification with their racial group vis-à-vis Whites. In this study it was clear that this sample of Blacks identified more with their ethnic group than Whites identified with their ethnic group. Blacks' status as a numeric minority, the salience of race, combined with greater racial ingroup identification may contribute to why Black news readers selected more stories about Blacks than they did stories about Whites. Specifically, Black news readers more frequently selected positive stories that featured Black characters than they did positive stories that featured White characters or negative stories that featured White characters.

Although Black readers displayed a selection bias towards positive news stories featuring their ingroup, they also demonstrated a preference for negative news stories that featured Black characters over stories featuring White characters. There may be alternative explanations for Blacks' preference for Black character stories, particularly stories that negatively portray their own group. Part of the explanation may center on perceived similarity to characters.

By and large, individuals are attracted to and select characters in the media when they observe some commonalities with these characters. Social comparison theory posits that people seek characters who are perceived to be similar to themselves in attitudes, abilities, and personality characteristics (Festinger, 1954). Likewise, social cognitive theory implies that people have a natural tendency to selectively attend to and learn from behavioral models similar to themselves (Bandura, 2001). In fact, Weaver (2011) argued that audiences are motivated to "select content that



features same-race characters either because of a perception that such content will portray the ingroup in a positive way (social identity theory) or because of a simple preference for characters similar to themselves (social cognitive theory)” (p. 371).

Despite the potential threat to their self-concept, Black participants selection of negative stories may also be driven in part by their need for surveillance and the perceived utility of the information. That is, Blacks may have been attracted to the negative stories featuring Blacks to gauge how the dominant group perceives them and to determine whether their group is gaining or losing societal power (see Allen, Thornton, & Watkins, 1992). In support, Ward (2004) argues that for marginalized groups like Blacks, mainstream media offer vital insight into how society at large regards their group, its members, and their societal contributions.

Another explanation as to why Blacks selected negative stories featuring ingroup members is based on the infrequency in which Blacks and Black news stories appear in the media. Stories about Blacks are often absent from the news media (Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003). For example, studies examining network news indicate seventy-five percent of news stories on the networks focused exclusively on Whites, and on those occasions when Blacks were featured on network news, they comprised less than 3% of the stories (Entman & Rojecki, 2000). The dearth of stories about Blacks is even worse online where less than one half of one percent of web sites contain news content that target Blacks (Hoffman, Novak, & Schlosser, 2001). As a result, any mention of Blacks in the news generates Black readers’ interest. This interest inevitably leads them to attend to Black news stories to discover what is being said (good or bad) concerning their community, rather than read stories about Whites that are less relevant.

In contrast, White readers in this study displayed no difference in the stories they selected based on race or story valence. These findings seem to contradict social identity and social cognitive theories, and the underlying assumption some in the news media have that Whites’ perceive news information specifically about their own group as more interesting and valuable than news information about other racial groups (see Heider, 2000).

So how do these findings help our understanding of ingroup members’ possible derogation of outgroup members as implied by social identity theory? Consistent with previous research (e.g.,

Mastro, 2003) there is no support for it among White audiences but unlike earlier studies (e.g., Negy et al., 2003) there is some evidence that Blacks prefer to attend to and select negative information about Whites. For Blacks in this study, the most frequently read stories about Whites were negative. In fact, Blacks were significantly more likely to read negative stories about Whites than they were positive stories about Whites. This evidence implies that Blacks may enhance their self-concept through positively contrasting their ingroup with negative information about the White community. It could be argued that expectancy violation may explain, in part, the attention preference Blacks devoted to negative stories about Whites. For some Blacks, encountering negative information about Whites is unexpected or salient, leading Blacks to attend to more negative than positive information about Whites. Nonetheless, this study may be the first to date to empirically demonstrate that group members exhibit ingroup favoritism as well as outgroup derogation.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

There are a few limitations to the study that need to be mentioned. The present research design cannot determine which of the theories outlined above accounts best for the findings. Future work could, for instance, manipulate the salience of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977) in affecting one's well-being, which should strengthen the demonstrated patterns if processes postulated by social cognitive theory are at work. Self-efficacy is distinctly associated with social cognitive theory. Further, future research should consider measuring levels of perceived threat and group competition among their participants to assess how strongly this concept influences intergroup bias among both Black and White participants, which would speak to the relevance of social identity theory for the demonstrated exposure patterns. Assessing the accessibility of concepts such as group identity, similarity, and self-efficacy would also help to specify the psychological processes that produce the exposure patterns. Along these lines, racial prejudice was not measured in this study. In an effort not to appear racist, Whites may be internally motivated to control their prejudiced reactions. Although self-exposure methodology may reduce socially desirable responses, it may not completely control it. Therefore, future research should test implicit and explicit levels of racial attitudes to determine whether these attitudes impact participants' selection of news stories. Another

limitation is that this study did not have participants evaluate the characters featured in the news stories. This would have demonstrated whether, for example, Blacks' preference for negative stories about Whites was associated with negative evaluations of White story subjects. Additionally, this study is a quasi-experiment, and as such, issues of causality cannot be adequately addressed.

Lastly, as indicated earlier, participants in this study displayed no article selection bias. Although articles on the site were randomized, this finding may have been a result of a tendency for participants to initially select articles that were positioned in a certain location of the web site. Future studies should record the location of the site (e.g., upper left, lower right) where each article was first selected by participants.

The present study should be subject to replication with other ethnic minority groups such as Asians but also for other criteria of social groupings (e.g., Republicans vs. Democrats, women vs. men). As implied earlier, given Whites' dominant status in society economically, politically, educationally, and numerically they may not perceive Blacks as representing any significant threat or competition. Whites' low ingroup salience and identification may lead them to have little desire to compare with Blacks who they may not perceive is a relevant outgroup. This leads Whites to demonstrate no ingroup bias. However, significant ingroup bias may result if Whites are put in a context where social comparison is more likely. As an example, it would be interesting to see if the same pattern of results occurs if higher-status Asians are the outgroup used in the study rather than Blacks. Given Asians are a group that is highly educated, affluent, and successful (Taylor, Landreth, Bang, 2005), Whites may perceive them as competition or a real threat to their social identity. As a result, it may be expected that Whites would more readily elicit ingroup favoritism in situations where their interactions are with Asians vis-à-vis Blacks.

Lastly, the next interesting step in this line of research is to establish what subsequent effects the selective exposure to favorable ingroup members actually has on dimensions such as mood, self-esteem or group membership salience for self-identity.

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**Table 1**

***Selective Exposure (s) to Positive and Negative Articles Featuring Black or White Individuals by Race of News Recipient***

	Black Readers		White Readers	
	M	SD	M	SD
Positive Articles about Blacks	49.84 <sup>A</sup>	55.16	28.91**	45.77
Negative Articles about Blacks	37.54 <sup>A</sup>	49.34	22.70***	38.85
Positive Articles about Whites	14.93 <sup>B</sup>	30.75	35.33*	47.21
Negative Articles about Whites	23.81 <sup>C</sup>	44.38	24.28	42.47

*Note.* Means in a column with different capital letters differ at  $p < .05$  in one-sided  $t$  test, Sidak correction for multiple comparisons. Means in a row with \*\*\* differ at  $p < .001$ , with \*\* at  $p < .01$ , and with \* at  $p < .05$ .

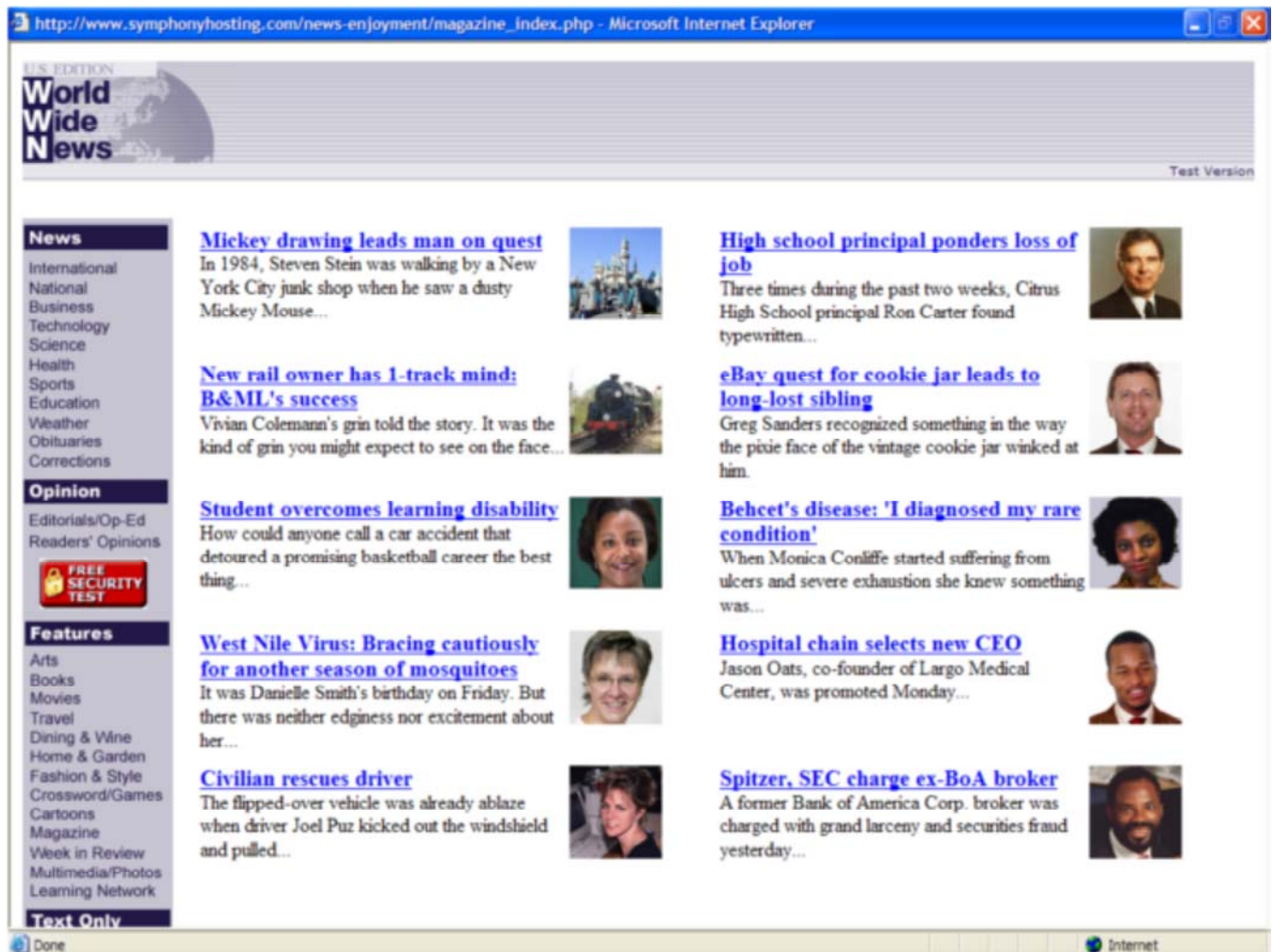


Figure 1: Screenshot of Experimental News Magazine's Front Page

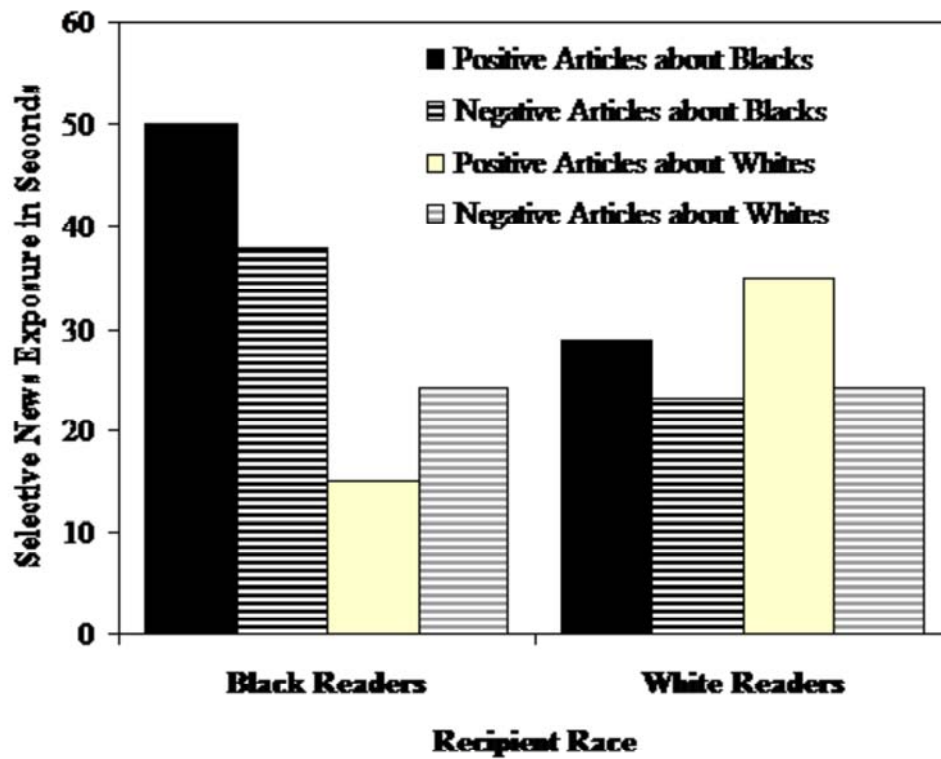


Figure 2: *Selective Exposure to Positive and Negative Articles Featuring Black or White Individuals by Race of News Recipient*