Media Exclusion and Superordinate Group Identity

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Abstract

In an image-based society, media images can affect our self-concepts and beliefs about others. However, research regarding the impact of the perceived absence of the viewer’s social group in media, or media exclusion, on identity and self-concepts is limited in the field of psychology. To quantitatively investigate the impact of media exclusion undergraduates viewed a promotional video for their university where actors from their racial group were included or omitted. As predicted, racially excluded participants reported that the public had a lower opinion of their university, but this effect was restricted to individuals who reported that the university was not important to their personal identity. Racial exclusion significantly interacted with gender such that women reported greater self-esteem and greater worth as a university member when racially excluded. Finally, whereas participants from minority groups (i.e., Latino and Asian/Pacific Islander) reported lower worth as members of their university when their racial group was not featured, White participants reported slightly greater worth. Exclusion, discrimination and social status are discussed to develop a better understanding of mainstream media’s effect on diverse communities and individual identification.

Keywords: Media, Exclusion, Rejection, Group Discrimination, Race, Representation, Identity
Media Exclusion and Superordinate Group Identity

Media messages and images can affect our self-concepts and beliefs about others. Much of the research regarding media effects focuses on televisual norms, but the cognitive impact of media exclusion, or the absence of a viewer’s social group in media, is understudied in the field of psychology. Many social groups are consistently excluded across mainstream media, including the elderly, the overweight, and communities of color; and the effects of this real world phenomenon on individual and national identity has been addressed by other disciplines including communication and political science. Inspired by the psychological theories of social exclusion and discrimination, the current research investigates the cognitive impact of media exclusion on self-esteem and identity with the superordinate group; undergraduate students viewed a promotional video for their university where actors from their racial group were either featured or omitted, and responded to measures of personal self-esteem and university identity.

According to an analysis of primetime television characters in 2008, Asian/Pacific Islanders composed 1% of characters (vs. 4% of the national population) and Latino characters composed 5% (vs. 14% of the national population), while the percentage of White (83%) and Black (12%) characters were closer to the national population (Signorelli, 2009). Several disciplines have addressed the impact of group representation, and provide unique insights into this phenomenon. The communication theory of symbolic annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) addresses long-term exclusion from media, which is hypothesized to threaten a viewer’s identity, reduce feelings of belongingness to the national community, and induce a poor self-image (Tuchman, 1978). In political science, the term ‘descriptive representation’ is used to indicate whether political representatives resembles their constituents (Pitkin, 1967), and has been correlated with increased participation among women (Rosenthal, 1995) and underrepresented
racial groups (Griffin & Keane, 2006; Pantoja & Segura, 2003). This work emphasizes the real world experience of media exclusion and its effect on viewer’s national identity.

In the field of social psychology, the theories of interpersonal social exclusion and discrimination offer clues as to how individuals might perceive media exclusion. Interpersonal social exclusion, or the experience of being ostracized or rejected by others, results in increased negative mood and threats to psychosocial needs including self-esteem, belonging, control, and perceptions of a meaningful existence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Reactions to social exclusion can be moderated by a variety of individual differences including gender. Leary (1995) found that women rated themselves as less positive than men when ostracized, regardless of the reasons for exclusion, suggesting that women may be more sensitive to rejection cues. Men also report a greater dislike for the group after being excluded (Dittes 1959). These differences have been attributed to the socialized desires of each gender; women work harder in order to increase their belongingness and group status, while men rejected group members to save their self-esteem (Williams & Sommer, 1997).

The differing effects of exclusion on racial groups has received greater attention in the area of discrimination, which is defined as unequal treatment between groups, or acts intended to harm a specific group. Members of traditionally disadvantaged populations are more likely to suffer from discrimination, are more likely to report greater psychological suffering (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002) and attribute interpersonal exclusion to issues of stigmatization (Major, Quinton, & McCoy. 2002). Alternatively, members of privileged groups may consider the individual instances of discrimination as anomalies (Major & O’Brien, 2005) and even experience a boost in performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Sekaquaptewa & Thompson, 2002) and increased positive mood (Heikes, 1991) when they are the only representative of their group.
Although instances of discrimination are correlated with lower self-esteem and increased negative mood, awareness of discrimination can lessen personal distress (Stroebe, Ellemers, Barreto, & Mummendey, 2009). Combined, this work on social exclusion and discrimination implies that media exclusion will induce negative intrapersonal effects (e.g., self-esteem), and the effects may differ by gender and race.

Research regarding the effects of exclusion and discrimination on identification with the superordinate group (e.g., national identity) is limited. Studies investigating social exclusion have demonstrated that exclusion leads to lower ratings of (Williams & Sommer, 1997), less desire to engage with (Williams, Govan, Croker, Tynan, Cruickshank, & Lam, 2002), and greater aggression towards the rejector (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). Furthermore, post-exclusion behavior can be moderated by a desire for future interactions with the excluding group; participants ostracized by a desired group, or a group with whom future interaction is expected (e.g., work group, long term-companions), tempered negative reactions towards the rejector (Williams & Sommer, 1997). Research in discrimination reveals that targets of discrimination may avoid contact with the discriminating group (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), and increase their identification with the targeted subgroup as a coping strategy (Crocker & Major, 1989; Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Wohl, Branscombe, & Reysen, 2010), but this effect is only present for disadvantaged groups and does not measure identification with the superordinate identity (Schmitt, Branscombe, Kobrynowicz, & Owen, 2002). This work indicates that exclusion from media, similar to social exclusion and discrimination, will affect perceptions of the superordinate group.

Racial exclusion may also prime feelings of diversity, and prior work reveals that feelings of inclusion, race, and racial identification moderate reactions to racial inequality and
multiculturalism. Whites with a higher need to belong are less likely to endorse multiculturalism, which acknowledges and promotes differences among social groups, due to the implication that it excludes Whites (Plaut, Stevens, Buffardi, & Sanchez-Burks, in press). Research by Devos and colleagues demonstrates that White individuals are implicitly associated with the identity “American” (Devos & Banaji, 2005; Devos, Gavin, Quintana, 2010) and perceptions of racial inequality interact with race to predict national identity; whereas White participants demonstrate an increase in national identity when primed with attitudes of racial inequality, Latinos reported a decrease (Devos, Gavin, Quintana, 2010). Furthermore, individuals high in racial identity, or concern for one’s racial group, rated diversity positively only if the individual’s group served to benefit (Unzeta & Binning, in press). This work suggests that racial identity may moderate responses to media exclusion, which may be perceived as diversity or racial inequality.

**Current Study**

Although, the prior literature regarding social exclusion and discrimination offer potential mechanisms for how viewers may react to exclusion from media, they have not been used to investigate the unique experience of media exclusion. This study quantitatively assesses the psychological effects of media exclusion, or the omission of an individual’s racial group from a video designed to represent a superordinate community. Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander (API), and White undergraduates viewed a promotional video for their university that either featured or excluded their phenotypic racial group; participants then responded to measures assessing mood, self-esteem, and university identity, and provided open-ended responses regarding their impressions of the video. We hypothesize that media exclusion will elicit lower mood, self-esteem, lower identification with the superordinate group (i.e., university) (H1), and these effects will be moderated by baseline identification with the university (H1A); participants who report
that the university is important to their personal identity will temper their negative responses due to the importance of the superordinate group and anticipation of future interactions. Gender will also moderate reactions to media exclusion (H2); racially excluded men will report more negative mood and lower identification with the university whereas the opposite effect will appear for women. Finally, race will interact with media exclusion to predict identification with the superordinate group (H3); White participants will report an increase in identity with the university, while Latino and API participants will report a decrease. However, this finding will be moderated by importance of racial group to participant’s personal identity (H3A); participants who report that their race is important to their personal identity will demonstrate lower identification with the university.

Method

Participants

140 undergraduate students (117 female, 23 male) from the University of Southern California participated for course credit in an introductory psychology class (67.9% White, 15.7% API, 16.4% Latino). Participants’ age ranged from 18 to 26 ($M = 19.75, SD = 1.32$).

Procedure

Participants completed a screener and baseline survey at the start of each semester; these questions were embedded with those of several other studies. The screener included demographic questions and two sub-scales of the Collective Self-Esteem (CSE) scale assessing ethnic identity and identity with the university (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Participants were considered eligible if they identified as American-born, primary English speakers, and a member of one of the target racial groups (i.e., White, Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander (API)). Racial identification was determined by the participant’s selection (e.g., Caucasian/White,
Hispanic/Latino) combined with their open-ended self-identification (e.g., Irish, Mexican-American). This method focused on race, or physical similarities, over ethnic or cultural upbringing to ensure that subjects exhibited similar phenotypic features to the actors in the promotional videos (e.g., subjects who identified as “Indian” were not considered eligible for API). Invitations were emailed to 656 eligible participants; 260 participants visited the website, 96 dropped out before completing the study, and 24 were discarded due to incomplete data, resulting in a final $N = 140$.

Upon visiting the website, participants viewed a USC promotional video wherein members of their race were either featured ($n = 73$) or omitted ($n = 67$). Participants then completed a series of post-manipulation measures assessing mood as well as personal and collective self-esteem. Participants reported their enjoyment of the video and provided an open-ended response; they were then debriefed in a funneled fashion to determine if, and when, they noticed the exclusion. Data collected during the second year also included self-reported inclusion and exclusion; participants reported their agreement with the statements “How excluded from (included in) the USC community did the video make you feel?”

**Promotional Videos.** We produced four 3-minute USC promotional videos using a script adapted from university admissions brochures, each with a different racial composition. There were three main sections to the video: an opening montage, "student" testimonials, and a closing montage. All three target racial groups were present in the control video, which also included Black actors in the opening and closing montage. The experimental videos replaced testimonials by the target racial group with a Black actress (See Table 1 for racial composition of all four videos).
Measures. Immediately after watching the video, participants completed a word fragment completion scale and the 20-item Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988), the ten-item Rosenberg (1965) self-esteem scale (α = .900), and an adapted version of Luhtanen & Crocker's sixteen-item Collective Self Esteem Scale (CSE, 1992) to assess identification with the university community. The CSE consists of four subscales, each with four items: (1) private assessment of the group, or Private CSE (α = .922), (2) the group’s importance to personal identity, or Identity CSE (α = .825), (3) perceived worth as a member of the group, or Membership CSE (α = .780), and (4) perceived public ratings of the group, or Public CSE (α = .778).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Manipulation Check: Across both years of data collection, almost all participants reported remembering the race of the students featured in the testimonials (94.3%). Explicit manipulation checks of reported inclusion and exclusion were only recorded during the second year of data collection (n = 69). A main effect of condition appeared only for reported inclusion (t(67) = 2.073, p = .042, d = .502); participants who were racially excluded reported less inclusion (M = 2.81, SD = .91) than participants who viewed a video where members of their racial group were featured (M = 3.32, SD = 1.09).

Aggregating Latinos and Asian/Pacific Islanders (APIs): As mentioned above, these socially disadvantaged groups experience a reduced presence in mainstream media compared with their representation in the American population. Latino and API participants were aggregated after a series of ANOVAs revealed no significant differences between Latino and API participants on the baseline measures and all but one follow-up measure.
Primary Analyses

Independent sample t-Tests were conducted to examine H1: the effect of media exclusion on personal self-esteem and identification with the superordinate group (i.e., collective self-esteem). Media exclusion exhibited a significant effect on Public CSE ($t(138) = 2.105, p = .037, d = .356$); racially excluded participants reported that the public had less positive perceptions of the university ($M = 1.45, SD = .327$) compared to participants who viewed a video that featured actors from their racial group ($M = 1.35, SD = .236$).

Regression analyses were conducted to examine H1A: the moderating effect of baseline Identity CSE, or importance of the university to participant’s identity. The interaction between condition and baseline Identity CSE significantly predicted follow-up Public CSE ($\Delta R^2 = .046, p = .009$) (See Figure 2). Media exclusion elicited significantly lower public ratings among participants who reported that the university was of low importance to their personal identity ($t(61) = 3.241, p = .002, d = .83$); the effect of condition was not significant among participants who reported that the university was of high importance to their personal identity.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine H2: the moderating effect of gender. As predicted, participant gender interacted with condition to predict follow-up self-esteem and Membership CSE, or worth as a member of the university. When assessing self-esteem, gender exhibited a significant main effect ($F(1,136) = 7.227, p = .008$) such that men reported significantly higher self-esteem after the video ($M = 3.444, SD = .577$) compared to women ($M = 3.133, SD = .505$). The interaction between gender and condition was also significant ($F(1,136) = 5.188, p = .024, \eta^2 = .037$); racially excluded men reported lower self-esteem compared to men who viewed a video that featured their racial group, whereas racially excluded women reported slightly higher self-esteem compared to racially included women (See Figure 1). However,
planned comparisons (Aiken & West, 1991) revealed that the effect of condition was only marginally significant for women ($t(115) = 1.918, p = .054$). When assessing Membership CSE, there were no main effects of condition or gender, but the interaction was a significant predictor ($F(1, 136) = 4.034, p = .047; \eta^2 = .029$). Again, racially excluded men reported lower worth as a member of the university whereas women reported greater worth; when investigated separately, the effect of condition was not significant for either gender.

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to examine H3: the moderating effect of race. The interaction between video condition and racial group (White vs. Latino/API) was a significant predictor of Membership CSE (transformed for negative moderate skew using the inverse square root). When racially excluded, Latino and API participants reported lower worth as university members compared to Latino and API participants who were racially included, whereas White participants reported greater worth compared to White participants that were racially included (See Table 2); $F(1,136) = 4.639, p = .033, \eta^2 = .033$. Planned comparisons revealed that the effect of condition was marginally significant for Latinos and APIs ($t(1,43) = 1.718, p = .093, d = .519$), and non-significant for White participants. Furthermore, the difference in worth as a university member between Whites and Latino/APIs was only significant in the excluded condition ($t(1,65) = 2.047, p = .046 d = .555$).

Regression analyses were utilized to investigate H3A: the effect of baseline racial identity, which was measured using Identity CSE, or the importance to identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1991). The interaction between racial identity and condition did not significantly predict variance in personal self-esteem, or any of the subscales of the collective self-esteem assessing identification with the university.
There was no significant effect of media exclusion, or subsequent interactions, on follow-up measures of mood, private assessments of the university, or importance of the university to personal identity.

**Discussion**

These findings suggest that media exclusion is salient to viewers and affects multiple dimensions of self-esteem and identity with the superordinate group (i.e., university). Furthermore, these effects are moderated by the baseline importance of the superordinate group to the individuals, as well as by their race, and gender.

In line with H1, racially excluded participants reported that the public had a less positive opinion of their university. The unique effect on this dimension of collective self-esteem may be related to the distinctive processing of media messages; the Third Person Effect describes a phenomenon wherein viewers believe that others are persuaded by media messages, but they themselves are immune (Davison, 1983). In this study, racially excluded participants reported that others rate the university as less positive, but video condition did not affect the participants’ private assessment of the university. This effect was only present for participants who reported that the university was of low importance to their personal identity. Participants who reported that the university was important to their personal identity may be tempering their negative responses to media exclusion in order to maintain positive self-concepts and future interactions with the superordinate group.

Video condition interacted with gender to predict self-esteem and worth as a member of the superordinate group; whereas racially excluded men reported lower self-esteem and lower worth as a member of the university, racially excluded women reported greater self-esteem and greater worth as a member, but the effect of video condition only approached significance when
predicting women’s self-esteem. These interactions suggest that, as is true for social exclusion, men and women perceive media exclusion differently. However, the results regarding women’s self-esteem are counter to prior work regarding traditional social exclusion, which demonstrates that women rate themselves as less positive when ostracized (Leary, 1995). Although there was a significant effect of gender on self-esteem (women reported significantly lower self-esteem compared to men), women reported greater self-esteem after watching a video where their racial group was omitted compared to women whose racial group was featured in the video. These effects imply that exclusion from media may be more similar to exclusion from a work group, where women tend to socially facilitate after being ostracized, and may believe that their contributions to the group are of value.

Video condition interacted with racial group to predict worth as a member of the superordinate group, and planned comparisons revealed a significant difference by race; Latino and API viewers reported significantly lower worth as a university member when racially excluded compared to racially excluded Whites. When the racial groups were investigated separately, Whites demonstrated a slight increase in reported worth as a member of the university. It has been shown that members of high-status and low-status groups maintain different understandings of their group’s position in society (Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002), and media exclusion may prime preexisting racial inequalities, causing participants to respond in line with the position of the targeted subgroup in society.

There was no effect on mood, enjoyment of the video, or private assessments of superordinate group, indicating that the exclusion of White actors in the promotional video did not elicit positive emotions, either in general or towards the university. Furthermore, initial
reviews of open-ended responses to the video reveal that participants were aware of the exclusion and many attributed it to the university’s desire to over represent diversity:

“I felt the student population was not significantly represented. All students interviewed were either Black, Asian, or Mexican. No white students were interviewed or even shown on camera.”

“I liked the video but personally I feel there was a sense of "forced" diversity that is not as prevalent as it is on campus.”

35% of White participants in the racial exclusion condition reported negative reactions to the racial composition of the video, compared to 17% of excluded Latino and API participants. These negative reactions to racial exclusion reveal that excluded White participants did not react positively to onscreen diversity when their racial group was not included.

In addition, there was no effect on importance of the superordinate group to personal identity or private assessments of the group. These dimensions of identity may not be affected by a single instance of media exclusion, but may be related to long-term media exclusion.

**Future Directions**

Media exclusion is an experience that affects many groups, and understanding the cognitive effect of this phenomenon is essential as American society, and media, becomes more diverse. The current research offers a glimpse into how exclusion from images can affect an individual’s personal identity and perceptions of the superordinate group. However, further work must be conducted to better understand these effects among different subgroups and the effect of media exclusion on behaviors related to the superordinate group.

Although the results provide insight into the interaction of media exclusion and gender, the current study suffers from a comparatively low percentage of men. Additional work must
feature an equal balance of men and women to better understand the effect of gender on media exclusion. Future studies must also assess follow-up community oriented behaviors to investigate the effect of self-esteem; women may be eager to engage in behaviors designed to benefit the superordinate group, which may be related to the increase in post-exclusion self-esteem.

In order to better understand the effect of media exclusion on different racial groups, future studies must address the post-manipulation effect on participants’ racial identification. The discrepant effects on identity with the superordinate group may be due to differences in racial identification and coping mechanisms. The Rejection-Identification model states that individuals cope with prejudice by increasing identification with the subgroup targeted for discrimination (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999); however, research regarding this model shows that this effect is only present for disadvantaged groups. Whereas Latino and API participants may increase their identification with their racial group, this same coping mechanism may not be effective for White participants, thus forcing them to identify with the superordinate group. Future studies must include a post-manipulation measure of racial identification to investigate its moderating role in reactions to media exclusion as a discrimination tactic.

Furthermore, this effect may not be generalizable to other disadvantaged social groups, who suffer from other types of discrimination in media including condemnation and trivialization. Although the percentage of Black characters is similar to the national population, they are more likely to be presented negatively (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). Alternatively, Native Americans are trivialized in American media as a distant culture with strange characteristics (Hawkins, 2005), or caricatured for marketing purposes. The experience of these groups requires further quantitative investigation with methodologies designed to assess each unique experience.
America’s ethnic diversity is rapidly increasing, and American media is at a crossroads. Much of the prior research regarding discrimination and media representation has focused on the deleterious effects on disadvantaged populations. Although this study reveals that media exclusion demonstrates a negative affect on perception as a group member among Latino and API viewers, White Americans may experience their racial exclusion as a threat to the group and increase their identification with the superordinate group and may result in a diversity backlash.
References


Plaut, V. C., Stevens, F., Buffardi, L., & Sanchez-Burks, J. (in press). What about me?


Table 1

*Racial Composition of Promotional Videos by Condition; Videos available at http://bit.ly/CPVIDEOS.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Testimonial 1</th>
<th>Testimonial 2</th>
<th>Testimonial 3</th>
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<td>White Female</td>
<td>Latino Female</td>
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<tr>
<td>API Exclusion</td>
<td>White Male</td>
<td>Black Female</td>
<td>Latino Female</td>
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Table 2

Worth as a University Member (i.e., Member CSE) by Racial Group and Condition: Subscripts indicate these cells differ at (a) \( p = .046 \), (b) \( p = .093 \), (c) \( p = .149 \).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Group</th>
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<th>Racial Exclusion Mean (SD)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Latino/API</td>
<td>.584 (.257)\textsubscript{b}</td>
<td>.476 (.165)\textsubscript{a,b}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>.516 (.190)\textsubscript{c}</td>
<td>.582 (.246)\textsubscript{a,c}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Perceived Public Ratings of University (Public CSE) as a function of Video Condition and Baseline Importance of University to Identity (Identity CSE).
Figure 2: Self-Esteem as a function of Video Condition and Gender.