My research investigates how media imagery affects viewer identity, attitudes, and behavior. Grounded in theories of psychology and communication, my research focuses on developing a systematic understanding of how individuals come to define themselves, and their social groups, through media. This question has guided my academic pursuits, and resulted in multiple lines of research that tackle this relationship from different perspectives.

I am currently involved in three major areas of research: (1) psychological effects of demographic group exclusion, or the exclusion of one’s social group (e.g., race, gender) from a novel group, (2) dual identity, or the experience of considering two identities at the same time, and (3) the role of interactive media in changing attitudes and behavior for use in education and health interventions.

**Media Messages and Identification**

*How do media images affect viewers’ identity and perceived place within the larger community? Does exclusion of one’s social groups (e.g., race, gender) from a larger group (e.g., Americans) affect identity with the larger group?*

**Gender Norms and Identity:** Research regarding mainstream media is an inherently interdisciplinary pursuit, sampling from critical studies, communication, psychology, and political science as well as ethnic and gender studies. My qualitative work has focused on the gender norms and audience identification in television programming, discussing the emergent identity of the “Single City Girl” during the women’s movement, the relationships between beauty pageants and national identity, and the use of marital and domestic expectations in advancing celebrity careers (Corsbie-Massay, 2008). Across this work, I have focused on how media simultaneously describes, presents, and represents expectations of women, and how mediated social norms affect individual and cultural identity. However, it does not address the cognitive effects of non-representation, or media exclusion.

**Demographic Group Exclusion and Novel Group Identity:** Employing theories of social cognition and identity, my current research focuses on the effects of demographic group exclusion, or the absence of a viewer’s social group (e.g., race, gender), on self-concepts and identity with a novel community. In other words, if a Latina scientist does not see other Latinas represented in the group “scientists,” how does that affect her identity, attitudes, and behavior? The communication theories of cultivation and symbolic annihilation (Gerbner & Gross, 1976) postulate that, over time, this experience can negatively affect personal and social identity, but this phenomenon remains largely unexplored by psychologists. My research addresses the question: Does the absence of a viewer’s demographic group (e.g., race, gender) affect mood, self-concepts, and identification with the novel community (e.g., occupation, national identity)?

Drawing on my video and media production experience, this work features independently produced videos that manipulate racial and gender composition while controlling all other content. Pilot studies investigating racial exclusion revealed that Asian and Latino students reported lower university identity when racially excluded from a promotional video for their alma mater, but White students reported greater identity after viewing a video that did not feature any White actors (Corsbie-Massay & Read, in progress). Furthermore, excluded White participants were twice as likely to describe diversity negatively in their open-ended responses to the video, attributing exclusion to the university’s desire for diversity.
My dissertation extends this research to investigate the effects of demographic group exclusion from a video that promotes an attractive novel group, for which there is no expectation of inclusion. Results reveal that the interaction between condition and racial subgroups was mediated by racial identity for participants that self-categorized with the novel group; similar to participants of color in the pilot study, viewers high in racial identity reported lower identity with the novel group when their racial group was excluded, whereas viewers low in racial identity reported greater identity with the novel group when excluded, similar to the White participants in the pilot study. Additional studies replicate these effects when excluding gender, indicating that this pattern of responses may be generalized to address several demographic and social groups including age, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation.

These original findings provide important understanding of the cognitive mechanisms linking media, social identity, and viewer psychology. Future research will assess the cognitive effects of group exclusion across additional demographic domains in order to address how the exclusion of different groups affects identity, attitudes, behavior, and persuasion. Furthermore, it is theorized that symbolic annihilation, or long-term exclusion from media, can affect self-concepts and larger collective identities, like national identity (Gerbner & Gross, 1976); additional studies will track participant media habits to assess the relationship between self-concepts and demographic composition in media.

**Dual Identity: Investigating Intersectionality**

*How do individuals experience dual identities? For individuals with conflicting identities, do feelings of conflict affect self-esteem and behavior?*

The aforementioned work regarding demographic group exclusion also touches upon dual identity and intersectionality, which states that various social categories, like race, class, and gender, interact on multiple levels simultaneously and may uniquely predict attitudes and behaviors (Crenshaw, 1991). In order to address these unique issues, I am engaged in several projects that utilize alternative methods to assessing the experience of intersectional identity.

**The Intersection of Ethnic Identity and Gay Identity:** Black and Latino gay men are often hypothesized to suffer from identity conflict. It is thought that the goals and expectations of their ethnicity and their sexuality are incompatible, and that this conflict affects their behavior. However, statistical analyses reveal that the interaction between ethnic identity and gay identity predicted risky sex for Black men only; in general, gay identity was correlated with less risky sex, but this effect was moderated as ethnic identity increased (Corsbie-Massay, et al., under review). The interaction was not significant for Latinos. The large Latino gay community in Los Angeles County may provide a tangible dual identity community, whereas the significantly smaller Black gay community does not easily allow for this integration. These analyses suggest that dual identity may be more than the combination of two singular identities.

**Measuring Dual Identity:** However this statistical approach to dual identities neglects the distinct experience of the intersection itself; gay men of color who are high on both ethnic identity and gay identity may experience different levels of conflict. I developed and tested the Dual Identity Distress (DID) scale to better examine the intersection of identities. The DID Scale assesses the relationship with dual identity; validation analyses across several iterations including gender/occupation, race/occupation, and race/gender, reveal that identification with the dual identity significantly predicted additional variance in self-esteem after controlling for singular identities and the subsequent statistical interaction. Furthermore, individuals who
identified with their race/occupation dual identity engaged in fewer sensation seeking behaviors (Corsbie-Massay & Keaton, in progress).

This work has been presented at major conferences including the International Communication of Association (ICA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (SPSP). Future research regarding dual identity will feature a more robust version of the DID Scale to develop a model of dual identity integration. This work will focus on historically conflicting groups, including women and communities of color in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), enlisted Americans who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), and student athletes. I hypothesize that identification with a dual identity community will moderate the effect of dual identity distress on psychological well-being and risky behavioral decision-making.

**Developing Effective Media**

*What defines effective traditional (e.g., film, TV) and interactive media? How can interactive interfaces reduce cognitive load? How does participant identity affect interface efficacy?*

All of the aforementioned work comes from a desire to understand and affect change in the real world. A robust understanding of identity, and how identification affects decision making, can be applied to create dynamic content that engages, entertains, and educates viewers.

**Surgical Multimedia Academic, Research, and Training (SMART) Project:** This collaboration between USC’s Institute for Multimedia Literacy (IML) and Keck Medical School focused on developing cognitively efficient multimedia tools; interfaces that simultaneously reduced cognitive load while utilizing interactive teaching strategies. After an exhaustive review of the literature, I developed several guidelines for creating active learners in an interactive environment and developing multimedia learning tools to reduce cognitive load (Grunwald & Corsbie-Massay, 2006a). A randomized control trial revealed that participants retained significantly more information when engaging with an Flash interface that synchronized audio and visual content and reduced redundant information as compared to another Flash interface that replicated a traditional interactive textbook (Grunwald & Corsbie-Massay, 2006b).

**Flash Cyberball:** I have also developed a Flash version of the popular ball-tossing program, Cyberball, which runs in any modern browser and can be delivered online. This program was originally developed in JAVA by Williams, Cheung, and Choi (2000), is popular among scholars investigating social exclusion. My research reveals that Flash Cyberball successfully induces feelings of social exclusion, such as increased negative affect and threats to psychosocial needs (Dissertation Study 1); dozens of scholars are currently using the program in research studies.

**Socially Optimized Learning in Virtual Environments (SOLVE):** This project develops socially tailored interactive health interventions to encourage Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) to incorporate condoms into their sexual scripts. My skill set, which includes interface design and interactive teaching strategies, has contributed to the development, production, data collection and assessment of two related interventions: a racially tailored interactive video (The Virtual Sex Project) and a virtual world (SOLVE). This work emphasizes the psychological effects of new media and the promise of online delivered health interventions (Miller et al., 2009). This work has proven invaluable when researching the ever-changing media environment. Media effects are no longer dependent on mainstream media; our identities are linked to the media we consume, produce, and share. Furthermore, prior models of media effects do not account for the expectation of interactivity and the emergence of media “prosumers” (i.e.,
producers and consumers. Future work will investigate how different dimensions of interactivity (e.g., contributions, comments, feelings of control) affect persuasion and identification. Furthermore, as traditionally non-interactive media (e.g., print, television, film) move into interactive spaces online, does participation moderate media effects and foster media literacy?

Summary

Our relationship with media is increasingly intimate, and our identities are linked to the images and narratives that we consume, produce, and share. Each of these research lines tackles a different aspect of social cognition and media. This research will aid in the understanding of audience identity and media effects in an increasingly interactive transmedia environment. This work is also of value to disciplines outside of communication and psychology including sociology, anthropology, ethnic and gender studies, political science, and health promotion and prevention. I also employ multiple methods across all of these research lines, including online sampling and surveying to ensure a greater understanding of media effects in natural settings. Furthermore, this area of research is often of interest among students eager to understand their complex media environment and, in sharing my own academic passions, can inspire them to realize and pursue their own research interests.

To date, my research and professional development have been funded through the prestigious Provost Fellowship, as well as grants, fellowships, and travel awards from various federal agencies and professional associations. I have been a part of several grant acquisitions through the NIMH and the California HIV/AIDS Research Project (CHRP), as well as multiple outreach initiatives within social science and STEM fields. Due to the diverse applications of this research, multiple agencies may be tapped for funding including the Department of Education, National Institute of Health (NIH), and National Science Foundation (NSF). My research is related to the psychology of media and communication, and has major implications for health and well-being, education, globalization, and diversity.

References


