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Effects of Ethnic Identification on Web Browsers’ Attitudes Toward and Navigational Patterns on Race-Targeted Sites

Contrary to research that suggests Blacks can only be reached effectively with Black-oriented media, this research demonstrates that there appears to be a subset of the Black population that can be reached equally well with White-targeted media as they can with Black-targeted media. The study findings confirm expectations that Blacks’ differential responses to race-targeted Web sites are mediated by their level of ethnic identification. Blacks with strong ethnic identities spent more time browsing a site and viewing each story when the site was targeted to Blacks than Whites. Blacks with strong ethnic identities also rated the site and the stories more favorably when browsing the Black-targeted site compared to the White-targeted site. In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in their browsing time on the sites and stories or their rating of the sites and stories based on the racial target of the Internet site.

Keywords: ethnic identification; Internet; Blacks; targeted marketing; segmentation

In the past, marketers directed their media messages toward White audiences with the belief that Black audiences would be reached at the same time. They worked under the assumption that Blacks’ responses to White-targeted media and characters did not differ sufficiently enough from their White counterparts to justify separate and targeted messages (e.g., Orpen, 1975). Thus, any attempts to specifically reach the Black consumer market constituted a waste of time and money (Wall, 1970), because many Blacks could be
just as effectively reached using White-targeted media as Black-targeted media (Askey, 1995; Gadsden, 1985).

Recently, however, marketers have come to recognize the benefits of segmenting consumer markets along demographic lines, such as race (e.g., Rossman, 1994; Tharp, 2001). In an effort to capture a larger share of growing and lucrative ethnic markets, more efforts have been made to reach ethnic minorities with targeted media (Qualls & Moore, 1990). Increasing numbers of marketers and media planners have begun to treat Black and White audiences as separate market segments (see Kern-Foxworth, 1994; Sivulka, 1998), warranting the use of different racially oriented media vehicles to reach each group. These differential targeting efforts are understandable given a growing body of work that shows that Black audiences respond favorably to Black-targeted media messages and characters. For example, Black audiences are more attracted to media with Black characters (Dates, 1980), rate Black characters more positively (Appiah, 2002; Greenberg, 1986; Whittler, 1991), and show an increased likelihood of purchasing products promoted by Black characters (Whittler, 1989). Studies also indicate that Blacks are more likely to identify with Black television characters (Appiah, 2001a; Greenberg & Atkin, 1982), recall more content from Black characters (Appiah, 2002; Whittler, 1991), and are more likely to trust ads and editorial content in Black-targeted media (“Study Reveals Blacks,” 1998).

This primary level of segmentation—grouping consumer segments based on race—has been shown to be a relatively successful method of reaching Blacks. Still, it may prove even more beneficial to dissect Black audiences even further to reveal differences among subgroups. By focusing mainly on a biological attribute such as race, past research has neglected the potential psychological mechanisms that may more effectively mediate responses to racially targeted media. That is, segmenting Blacks based on race is good, but incorporating an additional psychographic segmentation variable may be an even better and more effective method of reaching racial subgroups. Ethnic identity—the degree to which Blacks identify with Black culture—is one subgroup variable worth exploring.

Much of the work examining the effects of racially targeted media on audiences has focused specifically on print and television advertising with little, if any, attention devoted to targeted news information (e.g., newspapers, magazines), particularly from new media channels. This study explores the role ethnic identity may play in Blacks’ responses to targeted news Web sites.
Ethnic Identity

The strength of ethnic identity may have a significant effect on Black consumers’ evaluations of Web sites. Although much of the research on Black consumers has focused on the mediating effects of consumers’ race or ethnicity, the use of “ethnic identification as a means of classification may provide greater discriminating power than more traditionally used measures of ethnicity” (Deshpande, Hoyer, & Donthu, 1986, p. 217). In fact, the scant research has shown ethnic identification to be a contributing cultural variable in consumers’ purchase behavior (Donthu & Cherian, 1992; Hirschman, 1981; Webster, 1994), media use (Deshpande et al., 1986; Donthu & Cherian, 1992), and evaluation of ads (Green, 1999; Whittler, 1989). Researchers believe that media targeting Blacks appeal to them more when race-specific cues are used (Appiah, 2001a; Pitts, Whalen, O’Keefe, & Murray, 1989). This may be particularly true for Blacks with strong ethnic identities.

Ethnic identity is defined as a person’s knowledge of his or her membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Phinney, 1992). Strong ethnic identifiers should display attitudes and behaviors that are consistent with the core cultural values (e.g., customs, language, dress, foods, religion, product use, and media use) of their ethnic group, which should thereby lead to a preference for characters and media that depict these cultural values. In contrast, audiences who maintain weak ethnic identities should display attitudes and behaviors that are less consistent with traditional cultural values and closer to those of the dominant culture. Compared to strong ethnic identifiers, weak ethnic identifiers should demonstrate less of a preference for characters and media that depict their cultural values.

Donthu and Cherian (1992) found support for their belief that strong cultural identifiers’ behavior reflects their indigenous culture’s values and attitudes, whereas weak cultural identifiers’ behavior is diluted by the dominant culture. They argued that the stronger the ethnic identity, the more loyal ethnic groups are to their traditional values and the more likely they are to exhibit these values. This is evident in their research, which showed that strong Hispanic identifiers vis-à-vis weak Hispanic identifiers were older, more brand loyal, had more ethnic pride, and used more Spanish-language magazines and newspapers—all characteristics that are consistent with traditional Hispanic values. Moreover, such characteristics exhibited by strong Hispanic identifiers have led them to be more likely to buy brands advertised to their ethnic group (Deshpande et al., 1986) than weak Hispanic ethnic identifiers.
The strength of ethnic identification has been shown to influence Black audiences. This is evidenced by research that shows that Black adolescents (Appiah, 2001b) and Black adults (Green, 1999; Whittler, 1989; Whittler & Spira, 2002) who identified more strongly with Black culture responded more favorably to Black models in advertisements than did Blacks who were weak on cultural identification. Moreover, in some cases, Blacks with weak ethnic identities have been shown to favor White models and White-oriented media over Black models and Black-oriented media (Green, 1999).

Theoretical Framework

Source Similarity and Identification

Studies have shown that high levels of similarity between the viewer and characters in advertisements increase the viewer’s belief that he or she is the intended audience of advertisements, which in turn leads to more positive attitudes about the ad and the product (Aaker, Brumbaugh, & Grier, 2000). For example, Black audiences who identify with Black characters have been found to more likely believe they are the target audience of media with Black characters and evaluate more favorably media with Black characters than they do media with White characters (Aaker et. al., 2000; Appiah, 2001a, 2001b; Whittler, 1989, 1991; Whittler & Spira, 2002).

Some researchers argue that targeted media are most effective when the symbols, characters, and values depicted in the media are drawn from the intended audience’s cultural background (Appiah, 2001a; McGuire, 1984; Pitts et al., 1989), which allows the audience to better identify with the message and the source of the message. Individuals who are more likely to identify with media characters (Huesman, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983) and perceive themselves to be similar to media characters (Brock, 1965; Burnstein, Stotland, & Zander, 1961) are more influenced by media content in which those characters are portrayed.

Identification theory (Kelman, 1961) maintains that during an interaction, people automatically assess their level of similarity with a source and make similarity judgments (Hovland & Weis, 1951; Kelman, 1961). This process drives individuals to choose models to identify with based on perceived similarities between themselves and the model (Basow & Howe, 1980; Kelman, 1961). When individuals perceive that a source possesses a specific characteristic similar to their own, they begin to infer that the source will also share other characteristics, all of which lead to greater identification (Feick & Higie, 1992).
One significant cue of similarity between a viewer and the character in an ad is race. Race of the source is a salient communication characteristic, especially for persons for whom racial identity is central to their concept of self. According to Forehand (2001), ethnic minority characters used in the media as targeting devices will have little influence on an audience member unless that audience member processes the ethnic cues and relate them to his or her self-concept. Unlike weak ethnic identifiers, strong ethnic identifiers may see the race of the source as a positive cue confirming similarity and thereby pay more attention to and show more favorable attitudes toward the source and the media. In other words, the race of the source may be particularly instrumental in inducing Blacks with strong ethnic identities to infer similarity or dissimilarity (Whittler, 1989), whereas the model’s race may not function as a similarity cue for Blacks with weak ethnic identities. For example, studies show that strong Black ethnic identifiers perceive themselves more similar to and identify more strongly with Black characters in media (Appiah, 2001b) and express greater liking for Black characters in ads (Whittler & Spira, 2002) than do Blacks with weak ethnic identities. Blacks with weak ethnic identities may be less mindful of a character’s race and focus on similarities between themselves and the source that are less race-specific (e.g., values, dress, lifestyle, appearance). Given that Blacks with weak ethnic identities tend to show traits and values that deviate from their indigenous culture (see Green, 1999), and do not have a strong affiliation with either Black or White culture, they should respond to Black- and White-targeted media the same. In fact, research examining targeted advertisements shows that Blacks with weak ethnic identities evaluated products and ads similarly irrespective of whether the ads were targeting Whites or Blacks (Whittler & Spira, 2002). In contrast, strong Black identifiers more favorably evaluated products and ads and showed a greater comprehension of message content after seeing a Black-targeted ad vis-à-vis a White-targeted ad (Whittler & Spira, 2002).

Distinctiveness Theory

Another theory used to explain the psychological mechanisms at work when Blacks are exposed to race-targeted Web sites is distinctiveness theory. This theory suggests that a person’s own distinctive traits (e.g., African American, redhead, left-handed) will be more salient to him or her than more prevalent traits (e.g., Caucasian, brunette, right-handed) possessed by other people in his or her environment (McGuire, 1984; McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978). The theory predicts that ethnicity will be more salient for people whose ethnic group is part of a numeric minority in a social environment than it will be for members of an ethnic majority in a particular social
environment. Black people, for instance, are a numeric minority in the United States and in the media. As a result, they should be highly aware and mindful of their race in personal and mediated situations.

How might being a member of a distinctive group or nondistinctive group influence Blacks' responses to targeted media? Studies using distinctiveness theory demonstrate that targeted media would be most effective in contexts in which the target market is a numeric minority (Aaker et al., 2000; Appiah, 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Grier & Deshpande, 2001). Blacks represent a numeric minority group and, compared to Whites, have few media messages targeted specifically at them. Grier and Brumbaugh (1999) argue that unlike Whites, Blacks as ethnic minorities appreciate the acknowledgement associated with being a target market and are more likely to use targeting cues based on their racial distinctive trait in attending and evaluating media than White majority members are to use targeting cues based on their nondistinctive trait. They also mention that due to their increased awareness of the trait that makes them unique, Blacks are more likely to connect with targeted media and make links between the targeted media and themselves. Studies have shown that this leads Blacks to develop more favorable attitudes toward Black-targeted media and its content than toward White-targeted media and content (Aaker et al., 2000; Appiah, 2001a, 2001b, 2002).

However, this notion should be qualified by the degree of ethnic identity maintained by Black audiences. According to Grier and Deshpande (2001), “The effects of numeric group composition cannot be fully understood if they are considered without reference to corresponding belief systems” (p. 217). For instance, Blacks may be a numeric minority yet not feel distinctive because they lack a strong connection to Black culture. Blacks with weak cultural identity may not consider “Blackness” an attribute that defines their self-concept and—like Whites, who are less mindful of a model's race—may use targeting cues based on their nondistinctive traits, focusing instead on similarities between themselves and the source that are less race-specific (e.g., dress, lifestyle, social class). Therefore, despite their numeric minority status within an environment, Blacks' responses to racially targeted Web sites should vary based on the level of Black ethnic identification such that weak ethnic identifiers—vis-à-vis strong ethnic identifiers—should be unaffected by race-specific Web sites.

Among Blacks who maintain strong racial identities, Black characters and media should heighten their awareness of and preference for Black-targeted media vis-à-vis White-targeted media. Blacks with strong ethnic identities—because of their greater connection to their ethnicity and expression of traditional Black values—should exhibit a greater sense of awareness of racially targeted cues and should feel more acknowledged by these efforts,
leading them to respond more favorably to Black-targeted media than to White-targeted media. In contrast, weak Black ethnic identifiers may possess attitudes and behaviors that are not strongly tied to Black culture and may even resemble dominant mainstream culture (see Green, 1999). This may lead them to demonstrate a weaker understanding of and appreciation for Black-targeted media than their strong ethnic identifier counterparts. Weak Black identifiers may be less aware of their ethnicity and minority status and may, therefore, feel less distinctive. Because their Blackness is neither a salient nor meaningful characteristic, weak identifiers should respond no differently to White- or Black-targeted media. This potential response by weak ethnic identifiers would be consistent with responses by White mainstream audiences to racially targeted media. For example, studies have shown that White audiences respond just as favorably to ads and targeted media with Black models as they do to ads and targeted media with White models (Appiah, 2001a, 2002; Brumbaugh, 2002; Whittler, 1991).

This discussion leads to the overall expectation that Blacks with strong ethnic identities will respond more favorably to Black-targeted media and less favorably to White-targeted media, whereas Blacks with weak ethnic identities should respond no differently to media based on the racial target. More specifically:

_Hypothesis 1a:_ Strong Black ethnic identifiers will spend more time overall navigating on a Black-targeted Web site than they will on an equivalent White-targeted Web site.

_Hypothesis 1b:_ Weak Black ethnic identifiers will show no difference in their navigation time based on the racial target of the Web site.

_Hypothesis 2a:_ Strong Black ethnic identifiers will spend more time viewing each story on a Black-targeted Web site than they will on an equivalent White-targeted Web site.

_Hypothesis 2b:_ Weak Black ethnic identifiers will show no difference in their time viewing each story based on the racial target of the site.

_Hypothesis 3a:_ Strong Black ethnic identifiers will rate a Black-targeted Web site more positively than they will an equivalent White-targeted Web site.

_Hypothesis 3b:_ Weak Black ethnic identifiers will show no difference in their rating of a Web site based on the racial target of the site.

_Hypothesis 4a:_ Strong Black ethnic identifiers will rate stories on a Black-targeted Web site more favorably than they will the same stories on an equivalent White-targeted Web site.

_Hypothesis 4b:_ Weak Black ethnic identifiers will show no difference in their rating of a Web site based on the racial target of the site.
Method

Participants and Design

Ninety-seven Black undergraduate and graduate students (ages 18 to 34, median age 20) from a large, public Midwestern university participated in this study. Sixty percent were women and 40% were men. These participants were recruited from courses in the School of Journalism and Communication and voluntarily participated in the study for either extra course credit or to have their name included in a drawing to win $200. Due to the difficulty of selecting only Black students, all ethnic groups were included during data collection. However, only Black participants were included in the study analyses.

The experiment employed a 2 (Black ethnic identity: strong or weak) × 2 (Web site target: Black or White) between-subjects design to test the hypotheses. The four dependent variables were (a) total time (in minutes) spent navigating on a Web site, (b) total time (in minutes) spent viewing each story, (c) overall attitude toward the Web site, and (d) overall attitude toward the stories.

Stimulus Materials

A professional Web designer created two identical Web sites, one site targeted to Black audiences and the second designed for White audiences (see Figures 1 and 2). On entering a Web site, users were greeted with the name of the Web site, which was animated to scroll across the page. “Community in Motion: The Essence of America online 1.1” was the name of the White, general market site, and “Community in Motion: The Essence of Black America online 1.1” was the name of the Black-targeted site. This simple addition of the word Black in the name of the Black-targeted site was done to provide users with a racial cue that would reinforce the racial orientation of the Web site.

Each Web site allowed the user the opportunity to enter into one of five subject areas from the orange-colored home page. The subject areas included (a) entertainment, (b) health, (c) news, (d) sports, and (e) travel. Each of the five subject areas had 4 stories through which users could navigate—a total of 20 stories on each site. For example, when a user clicked on the subject heading “sports,” they were linked to a page that contained a sports story, the titles and links to each of the 4 sports stories, and the links to each of the five
subject areas. The stories were all real stories about real events. Each of the 20 stories was approximately the same length.

The stories were chosen by a group of 30 college students who reviewed various online magazines and selected over a hundred stories using the guidelines that the stories be interesting, not time sensitive, not widely known, and not from the local news. The four stories in each subject category that were deemed most interesting, least time sensitive, and least familiar to the campus student population were selected for the study.

Figure 1. Black-Targeted Web Site Home Page

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Both the Black-targeted and the White-targeted Web sites had identical stories, layout, and banner ads. Other than the title, the only difference between the sites was that Black pictures accompanied the stories on the Black-targeted site and White pictures were used on the White-targeted site (see Figures 3 and 4). Effort was made to use equivalent Black and White pictures alongside each story. For example, for the sports story discussing female athletes’ anterior cruciate ligament injuries, a picture of a Black female doctor was used for the Black-targeted site and a picture of a White
female doctor was used for the general market site. To better ensure that Black and White pictures were equivalent, many of the pictures were digitally manipulated to vary only the race of the characters while holding constant all other visual features of the pictures. Using this technique, any differences in Web users’ responses to Black- or White-targeted sites must be solely attributed to the race of the characters in the site.

Procedure

Each respondent participated individually in a small lab located in the School of Journalism and Communication. Each respondent was seated at a
desktop computer and randomly assigned to navigate through one of the two race-targeted Web sites.

Prior to navigating on a Web site, participants were told that the purpose of the Internet study was to learn more about the types of Web sites they like best, which would enable researchers to improve the look, style, and content of Web sites. They were told that the Web site was a prototype that may soon appear on the World Wide Web and were asked to spend up to 45 minutes navigating through and examining the site. They were told that they would complete a questionnaire pertaining to the Web site once they finished navigating through the site, and they were asked to provide their honest evaluation.
of the site when completing the questionnaire. Participants were guaranteed anonymity.

As part of the instructions, students on the Black-targeted site were told that the Web site they would view was targeted primarily to "African Americans." Students on the White-targeted site were told specifically that the site was targeted primarily to a "general White mainstream audience." This was done to provide users with a racial cue that would reinforce the racial orientation of the Web site. Five percent of the respondents indicated at least some knowledge of the study purpose and were excluded from the overall analysis. The overall sample resulted in 97 Black participants. Any fluctuations in the sample size for each analysis are due to missing data, which were excluded.

**Data Collection and Measurement Instruments**

Two techniques were used to collect data for this study. First, online computer tracking software was used to track and time Black respondents’ movements throughout each Web site. This is an unobtrusive means of collecting data and provides a number of benefits that have been mentioned in previous research (see Ettema, 1985; Eveland & Dunwoody, 1998; Rice & Borgman, 1983). In particular, given the problem of social desirability that may sometimes influence the validity of self-report measures in studies on race and ethnicity (see Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; McConahay, 1986), online tracking software was used to collect data unobtrusively to eliminate the potential problem of socially desirable responses. As the respondent moves throughout the site, the Web server makes a record of the time, the page, and a host of other information from the user. The information from each user is saved on the Web server and can later be analyzed. For this study, this software was used to measure two specific dependent variables: (a) respondents’ overall navigation time on a Web site and (b) their overall time viewing each story on a Web site.

The second method used to collect data was a questionnaire that was given to participants after they finished navigating on the Web site. This questionnaire gathered information on two other dependent variables—users’ overall attitude toward the Web site and their overall attitude toward the stories. An attitude toward the Web site index was created by averaging the mean scores of eleven 7-point semantic differential scales: boring/interesting, bad/good, negative/positive, useless/useful, worthless/valuable, poor/outstanding, not for me/for me, weak/strong, not appealing/appealing, not attractive/attractive, not likable/likable. These scales have been used successfully in other studies and have shown strong evidence of reliability (e.g., Appiah, 2001a, 2001b;
Bush, Hair, & Solomon, 1979; Deshpande & Stayman, 1994; Green, 1999). The coefficient alpha for this index was .95.

An index that measured respondents’ attitude toward the Web stories was developed by averaging the mean scores of nine 7-point semantic differential scales: inaccurate/accurate, not credible/credible, biased/unbiased, unclear/clear, unfair/fair, not informative/informative, unimportant/important, not persuasive/persuasive, poorly written/well written. These scales were modeled after those used by Sundar (2000). The coefficient alpha for this index was .86.

The questionnaire also measured race/ethnicity of each Web user. Respondents were given a list of racial and ethnic groups from which to choose. Respondents who did not designate themselves as being Black or identified with more than one racial or ethnic group were not included in the analysis. Ethnic identity was measured using Phinney’s (1992) Multigroup Measure of Ethnic Identity. Five statements assessing ethnic attachment, feelings about ethnic background, happiness with ethnicity, ethnic pride, and sense of ethnic belonging were used to measure the overall strength of Black respondents’ ethnic identity (see Affirmation & Belonging Scale, Phinney, 1992). Each item was measured using a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An ethnic identity scale was created by averaging the mean scores from each of the five items, which yielded a coefficient alpha of .90. The median Black ethnic identity score was 34. Similar to other studies examining strength of ethnic identity (e.g., Appiah, 2001b), a median split was used whereby high Black ethnic identifiers (39) scored above the median and weak ethnic identifiers (58) scored below the median.

Results

The results of the experiment are presented and discussed according to the hypotheses presented earlier. A series of two-way analyses of variance for all hypotheses are provided below with follow-up analyses conducted to examine significant findings. The same analyses were conducted for all four dependent variables.

**Overall time spent on Web sites.** It was predicted that Blacks with strong ethnic identities would spend more time overall browsing a Black-targeted Web site than they would browsing an equivalent White-targeted site, whereas Blacks with weak ethnic identities will show no difference in their time browsing a site based on the racial target of the sites. A marginally significant interaction between Web site target race and Black ethnic identifica-
Further examination of the means (see Figure 5) showed that Blacks with strong ethnic identities spent significantly, $F(1, 30) = 8.24, p < .01$, more time viewing a Black-targeted site ($M = 30.66, SD = 2.55$) than they did a White-targeted site ($M = 19.96, SD = 2.72$). In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in their time browsing a site based on the racial target of the site. These findings support Hypothesis 1.

**Overall time spent on each story.** This hypothesis predicted that strong Black ethnic identifiers would spend more time viewing each story on a Black-targeted site than they would a White-targeted site, whereas Black weak ethnic identifiers’ time on each story would not be affected by the racial target of the sites. A significant interaction between Web site target race and Black ethnic identification, $F(1, 84) = 5.06, p < .05$, was found. Follow-up analyses indicated that Blacks with strong ethnic identities spent significantly, $F(1, 30) = 11.21, p < .001$, more time (in minutes) viewing a story on a Black-targeted site ($M = 1.32, SD = .63$) than they did a White-targeted site ($M = .70, SD = .38$). In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in their time on each story based on the racial target of the site (see Figure 6). These results support Hypothesis 2.

**Attitude toward Web sites.** It was expected that strong Black ethnic identifiers would rate a Black-targeted Web site more positively than they would a
White-targeted Web site, whereas weak Black ethnic identifiers’ rating of Web sites would not be affected by the racial target of the sites. A significant interaction between Web site target race and Black ethnic identification, $F(1, 91) = 5.29, p < .05$, was found. Follow-up analyses indicated that Blacks with strong ethnic identities rated a Black-targeted site more favorably ($M = 5.02, SD = 1.17$) than they did a White-targeted site ($M = 3.86, SD = 1.49$) $F(1, 33) = 6.50, p < .01$. In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in their rating of a Web site based on the racial target of the site (see Figure 7). These results support the hypothesis.

Attitude toward stories. It was hypothesized that Blacks with strong ethnic identities would rate stories on the Black-targeted Web site more positively than they would stories on the White-targeted Web site, whereas Blacks with weak ethnic identities would rate stories no differently based on the racial target of the sites. A significant interaction between Web site target race and Black ethnic identification, $F(1, 88) = 3.57, p < .05$, was found. As shown in Figure 8, the examination of the means indicated that strong Black identifiers rated stories on a Black-targeted site marginally, $F(1, 32) = 2.23, p < .10, \eta^2 = .07$, power = .30, more favorably ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.35$) than they did a White-targeted site ($M = 4.79, SD = 1.22$). In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in their rating of a Web site based on the racial target of the site. These results show marginal support for the hypothesis.
Figure 7. Mean Overall Rating of Targeted Sites by Black Ethnic Identifiers

Figure 8. Mean Overall Rating of Stories on Targeted Sites by Black Ethnic Identifiers
Discussion and Conclusions

Increasingly, marketers and media planners are segmenting Black and White audiences based on race and using different racially oriented media to reach each group. Segmenting consumers based on race and targeting media messages to these audiences based on this trait has been successful. However, the results from this study suggest that it is beneficial to dissect Black audiences even further by using ethnic identity as a key variable.

Previous studies have been useful in understanding and highlighting how Black audiences respond to race-specific media messages and characters from television and print advertising (e.g., Appiah 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Pitts et al., 1989; Whittler, 1991). However, few, if any, empirical studies have examined whether Black participants respond the same to race-specific messages on the Internet as they do to messages from traditional media, particularly when considering the users’ level of ethnic identification. This study explored the role ethnic identity may play in Blacks’ responses to targeted Web sites and outlined the psychological mechanisms that may be at work when Blacks with varying levels of ethnic identity are exposed to race-targeted sites.

In addition to adding to the dearth of literature on the effects of racially targeted new media, this study helps add to the understanding of why some Blacks are unaffected by racially targeted media whereas others prefer and respond more favorably to Black-targeted media. This is particularly important given the debate on racially targeted media placement, where some argue that White-targeted media is just as effective in reaching Blacks as Black-targeted media (e.g., Askey, 1995; Gadsden, 1985) whereas others hold that the best way to reach Blacks is through Black-oriented media (Appiah & Wagner, 2002; Fannin, 1989; Harris, 1981).

It was expected that Blacks with strong ethnic identities would respond more favorably to Black-targeted media and less favorably to White-targeted media, whereas Blacks with weak ethnic identities would respond no differently to online media based on the racial target of the Internet site. The study findings confirm expectations that Blacks’ differential responses to race-targeted Web sites are mediated by their level of ethnic identity. Blacks with strong ethnic identities spent more time browsing a site and viewing each story when the site was targeted to Blacks than Whites. Blacks with strong ethnic identities also rated the site and the stories more favorably when browsing the Black-targeted site compared to the White-targeted site. In contrast, Blacks with weak ethnic identities displayed no difference in...
their browsing time on the site and stories or their rating of the sites and stories based on the racial target of the Internet site.

Identification and distinctiveness theories may provide an explanation as to why strong Black ethnic identifiers were affected by targeted sites whereas weak Black ethnic identifiers were unaffected. As a result of being a distinctive numeric minority, ethnicity is extremely salient for Blacks with strong ethnic identities. Strong Black identifiers—because of their greater connection to their ethnicity and expression of traditional Black values—may be more mindful and appreciative and feel more targeted by Black media than Blacks with weaker ethnic identities. Weak Black ethnic identifiers may possess attitudes and behaviors that are not strongly tied to Black culture and may even resemble dominant mainstream culture (see Green, 1999). This was evident by these findings, which demonstrate that despite their numeric minority status in society and within their college environment (less than 3% of campus population; see Fact Book, 2003), Blacks without strong ethnic identification were not affected by racially targeted media. The findings from weak Black ethnic identifiers mirror those of White majority members as evidenced by studies that show White audiences respond just as favorably to Black-targeted media as they do to White-targeted media (Appiah, 2001a, 2002; Brumbaugh, 2002; Whittler, 1991).

The disparity between strong and weak Black ethnic identifiers found in this study is consistent with identification theory, which suggests that identification often occurs when individuals infer that the model or source possesses characteristics similar to their own. For strong ethnic identifiers vis-à-vis weak ethnic identifiers, the Black cultural cues associated with the Web site (racial cue in the instructions, racial cue in the Web site title, and the racial cue in the pictures) should be salient communication characteristics that better enable them to perceive similarity to and identify with the characters and the issues on the Black-targeted site.

This work demonstrates that Black racially targeted media may work most effectively when Blacks maintain strong ethnic identities, because there is a subset of the Black population that can be reached equally well with White characters and media. Identification and distinctiveness theories help us understand how this process occurs. Unknown still, however, are the conditions under which weak or strong Black ethnic identity might best manifest itself and the social environments that may influence racial salience and degree of ethnic identity for Blacks. Distinctiveness theory could contribute to the understanding of this problem.

Distinctiveness theory implies that Blacks who make up a numeric minority in a social context should respond more favorably to racially targeted media directed at their group than Blacks living in settings where they are
the majority. Thus, the numeric composition of audiences’ social context should influence the importance and salience of their group membership and their response to group-targeted media (Grier & Deshpande, 2001). As a given ethnic group becomes numerically more dominant in a social environment, ethnicity becomes progressively less salient in the self-concept of its members (McGuire et al., 1978). This is evident by research that shows majority Whites are significantly less likely than minority Blacks and Hispanics to mention their ethnicity when asked to define themselves (McGuire et al., 1978; Phinney, 1992). Ethnic identity may fluctuate based on the context or social environment, as evidenced by research that demonstrates that ethnic groups feel varying degrees of ethnicity depending on the situation they encounter and the people with whom they interact (Rosenthal & Hrynevich, 1985). Perhaps Blacks who represent a majority in a particular social context maintain weaker ethnic identities than those Blacks who live in environments where they are the minority. For example, those Blacks living in areas where they are ethnic minorities (e.g., Des Moines, Iowa) may be more conscious of their ethnicity, which may in turn lead them to develop stronger levels of ethnic identity. In contrast, Blacks living in areas where they represent an ethnic majority (e.g., Detroit, Michigan) may be less mindful of their Blackness, which in turn may lead to weaker levels of ethnic identity. If so, this evidence can be used by media planners, news sources, and marketing professionals to either step up or step down their racially targeted media based on evidence of whether Blacks represent an ethnic majority or minority in a social context and whether the Black audience represents mostly strong or mostly weak ethnic identifiers. Future research should examine whether both Black minority and majority status in a specific community affects ethnic identity.

Another potential determinant of strong or weak Black ethnic identification is an audience member’s social standing. There is some evidence that as socioeconomic status increases for Blacks, ethnic identity decreases (Goldsmith, White, & Stith, 1987; Ness & Stith, 1984). Increasingly, Blacks are joining the middle-class ranks, and some believe that middle-class Blacks share a value and belief system more consistent with mainstream Whites than Blacks, which may more often result in relatively weak Black ethnic identification (Hare, 1970). Future research on Black ethnic identity should ascertain whether upper or middle-class Blacks, for example, maintain weaker ethnic identities than working-class Blacks. Moreover, given that there is research that suggests there are differences in the level of socioeconomic status of Blacks that more frequently go online (Hoffman & Novak, 1998; Weiss, 2001), future work in this area should examine the relationship between socioeconomic status, ethnic identity, and Internet use.
Future studies should also examine whether ethnic identification is more specific to a particular gender. Although this study did not uncover any significant differences based on gender, this is a particularly important area given research that shows ethnic minority females are more likely to embrace or assimilate into White majority culture (Nguyen & Williams, 1989; Tang, 1997), whereas men—such as Asian American males whose parents put greater pressure on their sons to conform to their cultural expectations—show evidence of identifying more strongly with their indigenous culture (Ying & Lee, 1999). The study results could also be extended to gender whereby women who maintain strong female identities (e.g., feminist) may be more responsive to gender-specific media and characters than women with weaker female identities. This may be especially important in situations where women make up a numeric minority in a social or mediated context.

Market segmentation has become widely used as marketers attempt to improve their appeal and profitability across various consumer segments. It has become commonplace and quite successful to focus on demographic variables such as race and create separate racially targeted media and characters to reach Black audiences. This study reveals that marketers and media planners may broaden the appeal of their messages by seizing the opportunity to incorporate psychological mechanisms such as cultural identity that may more effectively mediate Blacks’ responses to racially targeted media and allow them to more efficiently “talk to” the diverse Black consumer market.

**Study Limitations**

The most common and appropriate statistical technique used to estimate interaction effects is moderated regression (see Aguinis & Pierce, 1999; Aiken & West, 1991). However, in this study a median split was used to examine the interaction effects of ethnic identification. Some researchers question the use of a median split to artificially create subgroups based on a variable measured using a continuous scale (Aguinis & Pierce, 1999). This procedure may actually combine groups of people who actually differ on an independent variable into a single category, underestimate effect sizes, and it may reduce statistical power. Although employing a median split is typical in research examining ethnic identity (e.g., Appiah, 2001b), there are other considerations that appear to suggest that the use of this technique in this particular case may be reasonable and appropriate. For example, Aquinis and Stone-Romero (1997) have shown that when sample sizes are small, subgroup proportions are unequal or predictor variables suffer from range restriction, moderating effects that actually exist that are likely to go
undetected. This inability to detect moderating effects is particularly evident in studies using variables related to ethnicity or dichotomous moderator variables (see Aquinis & Stone-Romero, 1997, for a review).

In this study, the ethnic identification data were not normally distributed. In fact, there was evidence of a ceiling effect or range restriction whereby the data were heavily skewed toward the high end of the scale. Forty percent of the Black participants’ identification scores fell between 30 and 34, and another 40% of their scores fell at 35. In essence, there appears to be generally two groups—very strong ethnic identifiers in one group and everyone else in the other group. Given that these Black participants were sampled from a university in Iowa where Blacks represent 2.7% of the university population and about 2.6% of the city residents (Fact Book, 2003), it is not surprising that they would be mindful of their ethnicity and Black identity as evidenced by high scores for ethnic identification.

Another limitation of this study was the small sample of Black students. Future research in this area should employ a larger Black sample, particularly given that test statistics are dependent on sample size (see Wimmer & Dominick, 2000).

It should also be noted that weak Black identifiers might have found the stories more relevant had the content of the stories been uniquely specific to the Black community. For example, stories with a direct association to the Black community (e.g., sickle cell anemia, police racial profiling, affirmative action, gospel music, Black slavery reparations) may have yielded favorable responses by weak Black identifiers. Future research in this area should not only manipulate the race of characters, but also vary the content of the stories.

Note

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