

Perceived offensiveness of moral licensing in scenarios

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Abstract

This study was designed to find differences in perceptions of racial slurs. O'Dea, Miller, Andres, Ray, Till, and Saucier (2015) found that the use of racial slurs between friends was perceived to be less offensive than between strangers and different levels of perceived offensiveness have been found between White and Black participants. Participants read vignettes of perpetrators using racial slurs towards victims and they completed anagram tasks in between each vignette. Results showed that moral licensing did not play a significant role in determining the perceptions of racial slurs between the races of the participants. This study also found that racial slurs were more offensive when used by a White perpetrator than Black.

Introduction

- Racial tensions are heightened in the current American political climate (Horowitz, Brown, & Cox, 2019).
- The use of racial slurs between friends is perceived to be less offensive than between strangers (O'Dea, Miller, Andres, Ray, Till, & Saucier, 2015).
- Different levels of perceived offensiveness have been found between White and Black participants (O'Dea, Miller, Andres, Ray, Till, and Saucier, 2015).
- Stereotyped groups favor majority groups over their own groups for positions that are category neutral (Monin & Miller, 2001).
- People that label themselves as non-prejudiced show a greater willingness to engage in politically incorrect opinions (Monin & Miller, 2001).
- People are less likely to engage in good behavior when they feel that they have done a surplus of moral good and this is referred to as moral licensing (Sachdeva, Iliev, & Medin, 2009).
- Moral licensing occurs when past moral behavior makes people more likely to do potentially immoral things without worrying about feeling or appearing immoral (Khalil & Feltoovich, 2018).
- Research Question
 - Is a racial slur is perceived as more offensive when the race of the person saying the slur (perpetrator) and the race of the person that the slur is intended for (victim) is changed?
 - Also, do participants engage in moral licensing by allowing the races of the friends of the perpetrator in the vignettes influence their perceptions of the racial slur?

Results

- Composite variables were created for the perceptions of the 4 different types of vignettes.
 - Questions 1, 4, 6, and 6 were reversed coded
- Scores for the 20 questions for each pair of vignettes were averaged and assigned to the corresponding composite variable.
 - White perpetrator with a Black victim
 - $\alpha = 0.887$
 - White perpetrator with a White victim
 - $\alpha = 0.863$
 - Black perpetrator with a White victim
 - $\alpha = 0.899$
 - Black perpetrator with a Black victim
 - $\alpha = 0.926$

Materials & Methods

Participants

- A total of 21 students participated for course credit using the Research & Experiment Participation System at LaGrange College.
- Average age = 18.81 (range from 18 – 21)
- 12 males and 9 females
- 15 White and 6 Black (1 participant reported race as Native American; they were dropped from analyses as I was interested in perceptions of Blacks and Whites only)
- 15 first years, 4 second years, 1 third year, and 1 fourth year

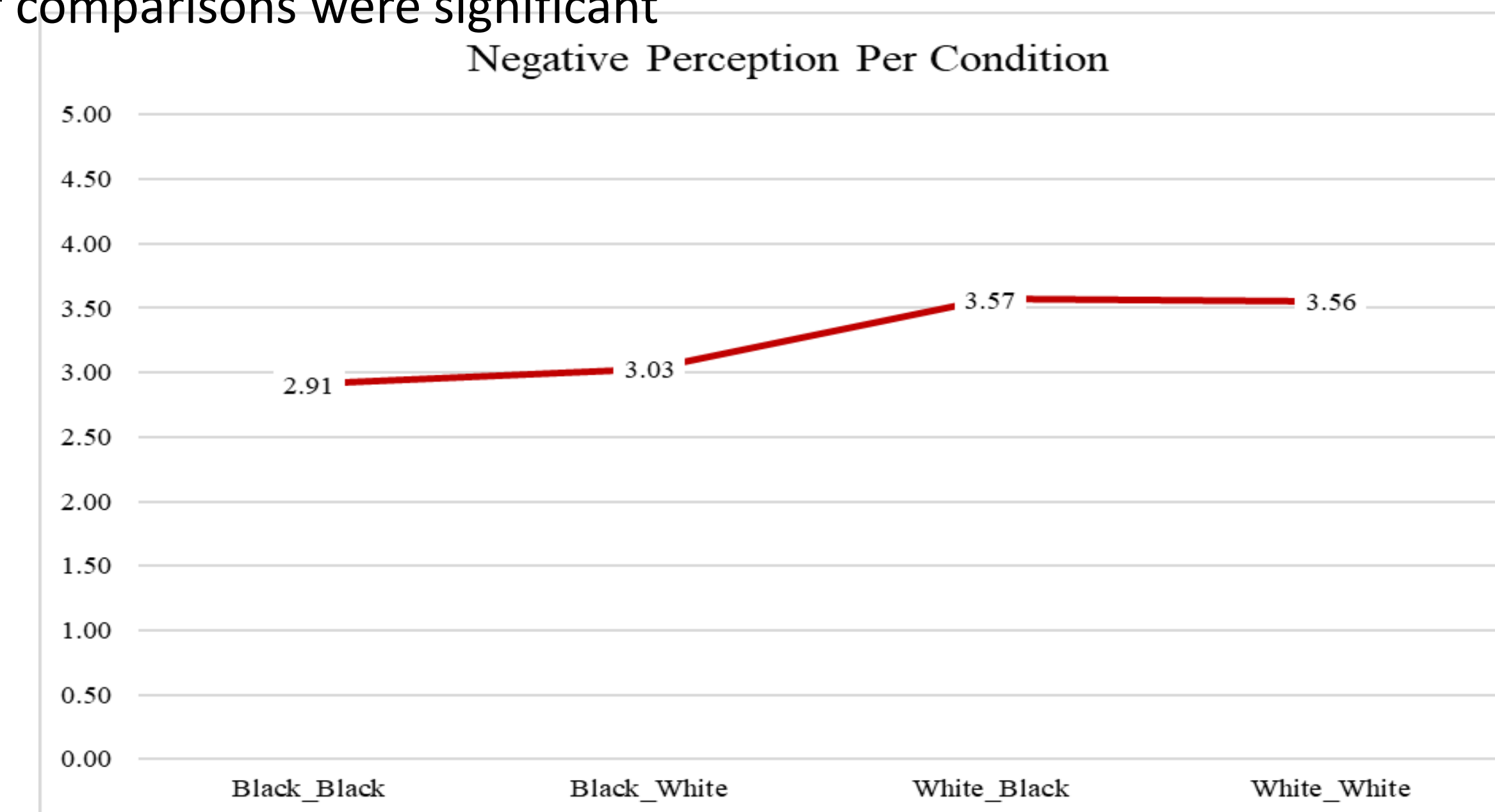
Methods

- Participants were randomly assigned to a randomized form of the survey.
 - Forms consisted of eight vignettes with accompanying questions and a distractor task.
- Participants were asked to read vignettes about racial slurs where the race of the perpetrator (the person saying the racial slur) and the race of the victim (the person to which racial slur was directed) to where altered.
- Participants answered questions based on their own perceptions of the intent of the racial slur in the vignette. Questions were standard for all vignettes.
- To avoid a practice effect, participants completed a distractor task after answering the questions for each vignette.
- Participants completed demographic questions.
- At the conclusion of the study all participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and asked to not discuss their experience with others.

- Moral licensing was not a factor in the perceptions of the usage of a racial slur.
 - The conditions in which a White perpetrator had a majority Black friend group were not significantly different from conditions in which a White perpetrator had a majority White friend group, all $p > .32$
 - The conditions in which a Black perpetrator had a majority Black friend group were not significantly different from conditions in which a Black perpetrator had a majority White friend group, all $p > .95$

A repeated measures ANOVA was performed to find significant differences between the types of vignettes.

- The repeated measures ANOVA was significant, $F(1.51, 30.21) = 14.03$, $p = .0002$, with the vignette explaining 16.3% of the variability in perceptions ($\omega^2 = .163$).
 - Post hoc tests determined that...
 - White_Black was significantly more negative than Black_White, $t(17) = 4.15$, $p = .0006$
 - White_Black was significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 5.05$, $p = .00003$
 - White_White was significantly more negative than Black_White, $t(17) = 4.04$, $p = .0009$
 - White_White was significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 4.93$, $p = .00004$
 - No other comparisons were significant



A repeated measures ANOVA was performed with participant race as a between subjects factor.

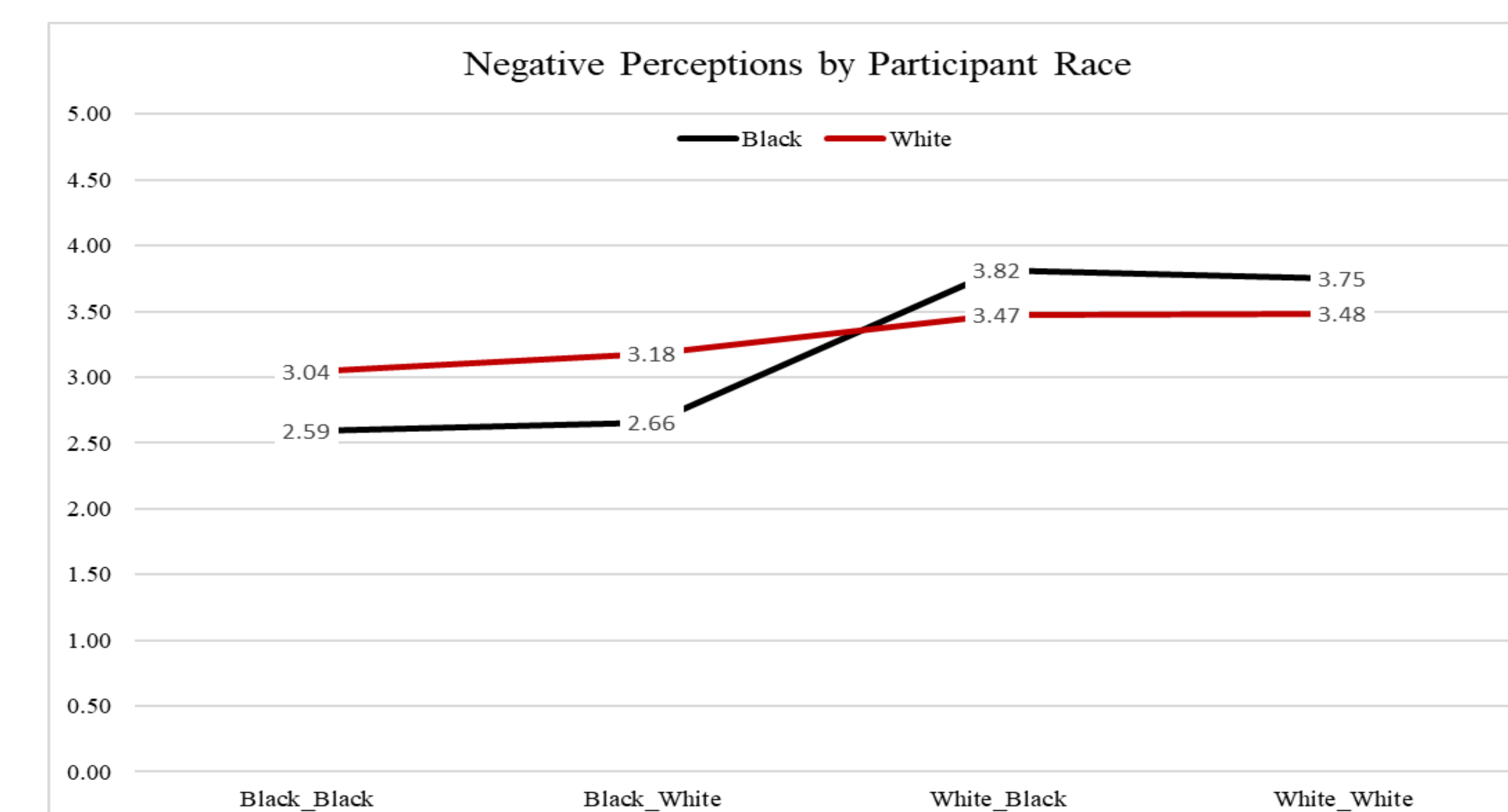
- The interaction between race and vignette was significant, $F(1.73, 32.85) = 6.51$, $p = .006$, with the interaction explaining 6.6% of the variability in perceptions ($\omega^2 = .066$).
- Post hoc tests determined that...

For Black participants

- White_Black was significantly more negative than Black_White, $t(17) = 5.37$, $p = .00004$
- White_Black was significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 5.68$, $p = .00001$
- White_White was significantly more negative than Black_White, $t(17) = 5.06$, $p = .0001$
- White_White was significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 5.37$, $p = .00004$

For White participants

- White_Black was marginally significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 3.15$, $p = .07$
- White_White was marginally significantly more negative than Black_Black, $t(17) = 3.19$, $p = .06$
- No other comparisons were significant



Conclusion

- My hypothesis that moral licensing would play a significant role in determining the perceptions of racial slurs between the races of the participants was not supported.
 - This result could be because the racial slur used is perceived to be very racist today regardless of the type of friends that a perpetrator has.
- I found that vignettes with White perpetrators were perceived to be more offensive than vignettes with Black perpetrators, regardless of the race of the victim.

Limitations

- Small sample size ($n = 21$)
- COVID-19 restricted the amount of time that surveys could be conducted.
- The first two participants took surveys that had a typo in them. The typo was not significant enough to change participant input and the typo was fixed for the remaining surveys.
- The study was conducted at a small liberal arts college in the southern region of the US.

Future Research

- Examine regional differences in perceived offensiveness in racial slurs.
- Examine differences in perceived offensiveness for various racial slurs between participant races.

