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To cite this article: David Stamps (2020): Media literacy as liberator: Black audiences' adoption of media literacy, news media consumption, and perceptions of self and group members, Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, DOI: [10.1080/17513057.2020.1789692](https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2020.1789692)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2020.1789692>



Published online: 16 Jul 2020.



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# Media literacy as liberator: Black audiences' adoption of media literacy, news media consumption, and perceptions of self and group members

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## ABSTRACT

Robust literature identifies news media's sordid history of presenting disparaging depictions of Black identity and its subsequent influence on non-Black audiences. However, research addressing Black viewers, their varied group identities, and protective factors that minimize this influence, has received limited attention. Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between Black individuals' political identities, news media consumption, critical media literacy skills, and their collective influence on audiences' self and group esteem as well as news media's perceptions of the group. Results posit a favorable relationship between variables, specifically, consumption of news media, increased media literacy, and Black viewers' esteem.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 December 2019

Accepted 23 June 2020

## KEYWORDS

Black Americans; media literacy; media effects; news media; social identity theory

A great deal of media research explicitly addresses race and uncovers an extensive relationship between what audiences see in mass media and personal and social beliefs about themselves (Coleman, 2013). Namely, this research explores the construction and reinforcement of stereotypes related to racial identities across media platforms (e.g., news media). Often, these representations and sometimes misrepresentations, emphasize racially marginalized groups and how these images influence White audiences (see Dixon et al., 2019). Work of this nature is warranted, given the history of interracial conflict and documented vilification of racial minorities in mass media (Mastro, 2016).

Yet, empirical research focused on the misrepresentation of historically disenfranchised minorities in news media, namely, Black individuals, and the influence of those media images on Black audiences is surprisingly underdeveloped (c.f., Tukachinsky et al., 2017). Specifically, race-related media effects research concentrated on Black audiences' consumption of news media, and the role of media literacy in attenuating or exacerbating its influence on esteem and perceptions of the group is limited. To advance our understanding of this relationship, the current survey examines the implications of news media consumption on the individual esteem, group esteem, and group perceptions among a cross-section of self-identified Black individuals.

The goals of this study serve several functions. First, prior research indicates that exposure to negative images of Black individuals in news media adversely impacts

subsequent evaluations among White viewers. Yet, little is known about the relationship of these portrayals to Black audiences and their individual and group-based assessments. Second, within race-related media effects research, scholarship situated solely on underrepresented and often marginalized racial groups, including but not limited to Black people, would address the increasing demand of diversifying the representation of racial identities within communication scholarship (Stamps, 2020a). Finally, understanding Black audiences' news media viewing and relationships aligned with the groups' well-being advances knowledge of the only racial minority group whose representation in mass media is equal to or exceeds their statistical population within the U.S.A. (Mastro & Stamps, 2018).

To this end, the following text discusses U.S. news media depictions of Black individuals, and the role of Black identities, specifically political identity, within this context. This is followed by the theoretical framework(s) that best situate this exploration, social identity theory, and critical media literacy. Last, the methodology for addressing the relationship between news media consumption among Black audiences, esteem, and perceptions of the group are presented, as well as a discussion of results and suggestions for future research.

### **U.S. news portrayals of black individuals**

Decades of quantitative content analytic research documents the longstanding tendency for U.S. news programming to produce and disseminate racist representations of Black people, if Black individuals are represented at all in this content (Dixon, 2008). Within U.S. mainstream news media, Black people are typically characterized as violent, threatening, and in need of restraint. More specifically, Black individuals are commonly overrepresented as criminals in news programming compared with real-world crime reports, whereas White individuals are overrepresented as officers, compared with employment records (Dixon, 2008).

Alongside news media depictions of Black people as caricatures, often portraying the group as dangerous and menacing, research acknowledges that news media tends to align with racist ideas such as portraying Black individuals as exclusive abusers of government programs including welfare and subsidized healthcare (Gilliam, 1999). Equally troubling, analyses reveal that news coverage frames criminality and the use of social services as individual failings among Black people rather than addressing the structural and institutionalized inequities implicated in statistics such as arrest rates (Fryer, 2019). Unsurprisingly then, research supports that news viewing is associated with harmful stereotyping of Black individuals among audiences, including prompting perceptions of Black people as criminal and intimidating (Dixon, 2008). Although attention has been devoted to understanding the implications of news viewing on audiences, mainly White viewers (Ramasubramanian, 2007), empirical investigations examining the impact of news media on Black spectators and its relationship to esteem is scarce.

Literature addressing the influence of news media images on Black audiences is of grave importance, given that the group is overwhelmingly portrayed negatively, and this often shapes self and group perceptions (Dixon et al., 2019; Mastro & Stamps, 2018). As a socio-cultural influencer, news media is a socializing agent for Black audiences in adjusting to, and navigating a society where dominant (i.e., white) ideologies and practices are normalized and expected. In other words, Black people often receive social cues from news media of what is acceptable (e.g., addressing law enforcement using a meek vocal tone)

to stay alive. Likewise, Black individuals gain a greater understanding of interracial relations as well as perceptions of their group based on what is presented in news media.

In addition to news media's influence on Black viewers, intersectional identities among Black people also impact news viewing preferences and perceptions of the group (Appiah et al., 2013). Black individuals view specific types of news media based on political, gender, or class identities. These relationships are underexplored regarding motivation among Black audiences' news viewing tendencies and subsequent influence from that consumption (Greene, 1999). To best understand the role of identities, and the potential for news media consumption to influence the group, tenets from social identity theory, a brief discussion addressing the spectrum of Black identities, and one such example, political identity, is presented.

### **Social identity theory**

Tajfel (1981, p. 255) defines social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership in a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that group membership." Social identity theory (SIT) postulates that an individuals' commitment to their group helps to shape a positive perception of the group, creates favorability towards that group, and is associated with increased esteem toward group members (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Accordingly, an individual's race, specifically for racial minorities, is a salient part of one's social identity and, therefore, functions in the same way as other identities or characteristics (Tajfel, 1978).

Most individuals internalize the values and attributes of their racial group, and as a result, this often impacts how they evaluate mediated messages that depict group members (Fujioka & Neuendorf, 2015). People often strive to possess favoritism towards group members and the viewing of mediated messages (e.g., news media) that question or threaten perceptions have an influence on how members view themselves and the group overall (Pinto et al., 2010). It may be assumed that the responsiveness toward one's group is based upon the notion that the group is cohesive and that group members are interchangeable (Tajfel, 1981). However, there is evidence that variability among group members' identities (e.g., class) can impact intragroup dynamics. For example, some Black individuals view socioeconomic status and socialization practices (i.e., having White friends) as distinctions that separate members of the group regarding typicality, which influences group perception (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013). However, we lack an understanding of Black individuals' particular identities, media consumption, specifically news media, and the potential influence (or lack thereof) on esteem and group perceptions. This study suggests that distinct attributes, including political identity and preference for news media, influence Black audiences' self-esteem and group esteem and that media literacy may be a factor that influences this relationship.

### **Esteem**

The safeguarding of individual and group esteem is one mechanism that individuals associate with upholding a positive social identity (Tajfel, 1978). The process of possessing

a positive group identity emerges as a result of an individuals' ongoing evaluation of esteem. This includes assessments of various media depictions of the group and overall media consumption (Stamps, 2020a). Past research shows that exposure to varying negative media depictions of one's group can lower individual and group esteem, specifically among minority audiences, including Black populations (Ward, 2004) and Mexican Americans (Schmader et al., 2015). Within these examinations, it is proposed that inter-group settings, wherein members are motivated to use comparisons of non-group members to uphold positive group distinctiveness, takes place and may sway esteem (Turner et al., 1987). However, the social identity framework is often extended to account for *intragroup* processes (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Work within this domain addresses intragroup dynamics including categorizing group members, potentially creating hierarchy within the group, or denying individuals a sense of belongingness, via identity denial (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013; Pinto et al., 2010; Turner et al., 1987).

This body of research collectively underscores the need for ongoing investigation regarding Black audiences and their news media viewing. To date, literature addressing intragroup dynamics, concerning Black audiences' news media viewing, favorable framing of specific attributes among the group, and positive outcomes are questionably lacking. This is of concern as the association with examining Black individuals, their media representation, and the effects on the group typically adopt frameworks that position Blackness as inadequate, powerless, or susceptible to deceptive practices (Stamps, 2020a). This body of research, while reasonable, is arguably one-sided. It is essential that research also adopts constructive application and that this effort is performed by populations the work aims to represent. Likewise, the narratives that result from these investigations should be framed from a non-tokenistic point-of-view. The explication of Black identities and favorable features of the group, namely, esteem and media literacy, is one such example that addresses past shortcomings.

### **Black identity**

The conceptualization of Black identity is complicated as there are “many complex and changing identities [among the group]” (Sullivan & Winburn, 2010, p. 361). Scholars acknowledge that Black identity includes multiple dimensions, such as an association with racial consciousness, class status, socialization practices, and proximity to group members (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013; Sullivan & Winburn, 2010). This work insists that the intricate nature of Black identity is impressionable and everchanging, but this does not relegate a single representation that encompasses the entire group (Johnson & Kaiser, 2013). Black individuals share a phenotype and, to some degree, are affected by perceived bias and discrimination based on visual presentation in society and mass media. Yet, an assumption that all Black people are uniform in their social practices and identities is erroneous. Considering this, this study parses out an example of identities aligned with Black individuals, specifically political identification. The conscious choice of investigating political identity is due to (a) a lack of intra-racial examinations of Black populations within race-related media effects literature, and (b) the potential association of political identities aligned with other characteristics such as class. To illustrate the latter, certain Black individuals support social safety nets or perpetuate a “bootstrap” narrative. While these attributes are not explicitly aligned with political identities, each is

often associated with beliefs or characteristics that may influence individual and group perceptions among Black individuals (Broman et al., 1998).

### ***Black individuals and political identity***

Political identity addresses various practices and beliefs across a spectrum, including but not limited to an association to political affiliations (e.g., Democrat, Republican) and ideologies (e.g., conservative, liberal). Collectively, identification with and adherence (or lack thereof) to a political identity addresses the range of potential influences that affect an individual, and these are not solely limited to voting (Niemi & Weisberg, 1993). For example, various policies, support for political candidates, and certain types of news consumption (e.g., conservative versus liberal-leaning) may also impact audiences' perceptions of their racial group (Appiah et al., 2013).

Empirical research is scant addressing Black individuals, their political identities, and each variable's relationship to media viewing. However, there is select literature that addresses the spectrum of political identity among Black individuals, establishing differences among the group (Sullivan et al., 2018). These include variances between Black conservatives and Black liberals concerning public regard (i.e., how the group is perceived in society), perceptions of oppression from systemic institutions and organizations, and the adoption (or rejection) of national (i.e., American) identity (Sullivan & Winburn, 2010).

The dual identity of being Black and liberal represents a significant portion of Black individuals in the U.S., dating back as early as the 1930s and later strengthened when Barry Goldwater aimed to dismantle the New Deal and repeal the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Bolce et al., 1992). Also, existing work suggests that Black people are overwhelmingly liberal due to support for civil rights and a commitment to advancing community interest in educational, economic, and social opportunities (Kidd et al., 2007). However, this is not to say that Black conservatives lack influence.

To date, Black conservatives exercise voting power favoring small government, lower taxes, and strict crime laws, and are represented in prominent places, including the United States Supreme Court (Orey, 2004). Likewise, Black conservatives typically embrace right-leaning ideologies, including adverse social judgments towards women's reproductive rights and LGBTQ equality and support beliefs associated with free markets and individual responsibility (Reuter, 1995). While assumed to be a minority among Black individuals, many Black conservatives hold religious views in high regard, similar to their liberal counterparts. For Black conservatives, individuals often embrace what has been termed "cultural conservatism," or the upholding of traditional values, and a color-blind approach to public policies. In other words, Black conservatives' interests are often in contrast to socially progressive causes related to Black communities, where Black conservatives characteristically view social issues as "human issues" and not as racialized topics tied to systemic oppression (Orey, 2004).

Collectively, the behavioral tendencies of both Black conservatives and liberals, including news media preferences, may influence their outlook on society and feelings regarding their racial group (Kidd et al., 2007). Considering this, political identities and their relationship to news media choices may have a differing impact on Black audiences' esteem and perception of their group. Black identity, aligned with a unique political affiliation, creates variation among the group regarding individual attitudes and beliefs. This

competing difference suggests that race and political identities matter in this context. Yet, little is known if these outcomes impact Black audiences in distinct ways.

### **Media literacy**

The absence of examining political identity among Black news consumers draws attention to the nuanced characteristics that are often underexplored and underrepresented in race-related media research. Also lacking from this conversation are protective factors exercised among audiences that contribute to or lessen the influence of news media viewing (Ward, 2004). To this end, an exploration of media literacy is adopted, seeking to identify it as a tool that potentially mitigates the effects of news media viewing on Black audiences. Notably, this study situates media literacy in general and critical media literacy especially, as a protective factor that should attenuate the potential implications of antagonistic and unfavorable news media viewing among Black audiences. Although media literacy and critical media literacy are used interchangeably within this investigation, and their application is similar, to aid in clarification, Kellner and Share's (2007, p. 4) distinctive definition for critical media literacy is offered:

Critical media literacy expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication and popular culture, as well as deepens the potential of education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, regarding information and power. It involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, to use media intelligently, and to construct alternative media.

When enacted, media literacy encourages viewers to critically assess, evaluate, and analyze media of all types, including news media, and to question characterizations, storylines, and historical accounts as opposed to acting as passive media consumers (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). As audiences watch various forms of media, the media's role in providing content, and the interrogation of that content by audiences, present the opportunity for viewers to strive for a more inclusive viewing experience. Moreover, the ability to critique media practices and representations of social groups, especially of one's group, curtails the influence of exposure to adverse depictions. When viewing media, audiences can rely on personal experiences or previous face-to-face contact to disentangle contradictory representations. Likewise, viewers that demonstrate these skills often possess a heightened awareness of media production and profit-driven models or view content as nonsensical entertainment versus educational or informational material (Fujioka, 2005).

Literature indicates that Black audiences' exposure to representations of their group in mass media in general, and news media specifically, can damage or bolster self-esteem, group esteem, and perceptions about one's group in society, depending on the quality of coverage and extent of exposure (Mastro, 2016). Black viewers exposed to large amounts of news media depicting negative portrayals of the group may cultivate a view of society that is increasingly discriminatory. However, research suggests that media literacy skills can protect viewers from such outcomes (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). This suggests that media literacy is a tool that aids Black audiences in navigating news media that misrepresents their group. Research acknowledges the potential for

media literacy to intervene and potentially attenuate the influence of negative media imagery on audiences (Erba et al., 2019; Ramasubramanian, 2007). Considering this, the more knowledgeable Black audiences are in critically engaging with news media and demonstrating media literacy skills, the more they can see increases in esteem and optimistic perceptions of the group.

The role of media literacy in lessening the impact of media imagery is attributed to an understanding among Black audiences of the systemic structure that privileges certain media portrayals of racial groups (i.e., White people) over others in the broader news media landscape. Yet, research explicitly examining the role of media literacy among Black viewers, seeking if favorable outcomes exist, is scarce. The majority of research in this domain employs qualitative methods focusing on elementary school-aged audiences, and the small number of quantitative studies analyze the potential of race-based prejudice reduction solely on White audiences (Erba et al., 2019; Ramasubramanian, 2007).

Currently, literature explicitly defining which media literacy skills Black viewers employ in their news media viewing is limited. Therefore this study assesses previous measures that apply a battery of questions including knowledge of news framing, use of stereotypes, and historical news media practices (e.g., the lack of Black representation in newsrooms) to establish a baseline for understanding the application of this skill set among the group.

## **Black audiences and media effects**

Black audiences consume more media in comparison to other racial groups (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). Likewise, mass media consumption often renders Black viewers vulnerable to the implications of high volumes of unfavorable images, including negative stereotypical messages and stigmatizing narratives (Abrams & Giles, 2007). Although research proposes that exposure to damaging group depictions influence esteem (Martins & Harrison, 2012) and career aspirations (Gordon, 2016) among Black audiences, literature acknowledging favorable outcomes and factors that lessen the influence from such contact is underdeveloped.

Ward (2004) found media exposure among Black audiences to be negatively correlated with self-esteem. However, within this work, characteristics such as religiosity (the degree in which one finds religion to be significant) safeguarded the influence of adverse media portrayals on these same audiences. Also, Jerald et al. (2017) found that Black viewers' media consumption contributed to lowered esteem and negative perceptions of the group. Yet, again, their work illustrates that when racial identity was germane among Black participants, it attenuated the group's adverse judgments. There was an inverse relationship between increased racial identity and negative perceptions of the group considering media consumption. Collectively, this body of work leaves several gaps in understanding (a) if and how news media consumption influences Black audiences' esteem, (b) what, if any, intersecting identities among Black audiences distinguish the impact of media effects among the group, and (c) which additional protective factors have the potential to contribute to these outcomes.

## **This study**

Theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence rooted in social identity theory, media literacy, and media effects research suggest that a uniquely challenging environment exists



concerning Black audiences' viewing of news media. Mainly, little is known regarding the role of media literacy influencing news media's impact on Black individuals' esteem and perceptions of the group, and *if* specific identity-based characteristics such as political identity, play a role in these outcomes. To summarize, based on the aforementioned theoretical framework and previous identity-based literature, questions remain regarding the relationship among relevant individual difference factors (e.g., political identity) and news media consumption. Within this relationship, news media consumption may harm or benefit (a) self-esteem, (b) group esteem, and (c) perceptions of the group among Black audiences, and this depends on the media literacy skills of the consumer. Because of this study's exploratory nature and the integrated perspective of various frameworks, a series of research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Among Black audiences, will consumption of partisan news media interact with the level of media literacy in predicting self-esteem when controlling for overall news media consumption and political affiliation, meaning as media literacy increases among consumers of liberal or conservative media, will individual self-esteem also increase?

RQ2: Among Black audiences, will consumption of partisan news media interact with the level of media literacy in predicting group esteem when controlling for overall news media consumption and political affiliation, meaning as media literacy increases among consumers of liberal or conservative media, will group esteem also increase?

RQ3: Among Black audiences, absent of media literacy, will consumption of partisan news (liberal, conservative) differ (positive, negative) regarding news media perceptions of the group?

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred and fifty-nine self-identified Black participants took part in the study. Two participants were dropped due to incomplete questionnaires, leaving a final sample of 157 participants with an average age of 32 ( $SD = 8.63$ ). Among these, 28% ( $N = 43$ ) self-identified as female, 70% ( $N = 110$ ) self-identified as male, and 2% ( $N = 4$ ) did not identify gender preference. Approximately 32% ( $N = 50$ ) identified their political affiliation as Democrat, 31% ( $N = 48$ ) as Republican, 38% ( $N = 59$ ) reported their political affiliation as Independent or noting another political party (e.g., Green Party). Of the sample, 73% reported having attended some college or more, and 75% identified as religious (e.g., Baptist, Muslim).

### Procedure

Participants were recruited on a voluntary and anonymous basis through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). The crowdsourcing website typically results in a more demographically diverse sample than college students (Litman et al., 2016). Participants responded online to a study entitled "News Viewing Study," agreed to an online consent form, and participation in the study took place solely online. All participants were U.S. residents and were financially compensated for their involvement. Participation in the survey took approximately 20 min.

## Measures

### *Partisan news consumption*

Participants identified how often they read, watched, or listened to 25 news outlets (see Appendix for list) on a 7-point scale from 1 “rarely” to 7 “very often.” Measures of *Liberal News Consumption* and *Conservative News Consumption* were then created using the Pew Research Center (2014) and the Media Bias Chart (Frisby, 2018).

### *Media literacy*

To gauge media literacy skills, including knowledge of news production, news framing, and news media influence on viewers, items from Ashley et al. (2013) news media literacy scale, were used. The fifteen-item measure included statements such as, “If I pay attention to different news sources, I can avoid being misinformed,” and “The owner of a news media company influences the content that is produced.” Responses ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). A composite measure of these items was created ( $\alpha = .90$ ,  $M = 5.71$   $SD = 0.69$ ), with higher scores indicating higher levels of media literacy.

### *Individual self-esteem*

Heatherton and Polivy’s (1991) state self-esteem scale was amended for this study to assess individual self-esteem. The seven-item measure included statements such as, “I feel as smart as other people” and “I feel that I am having trouble understanding things that I read” (R). Responses ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). A composite measure of these items was created ( $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 5.81$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ), with higher scores indicating higher levels of individual self-esteem.

### *Group esteem*

Items from Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992) collective self-esteem scale were modified for this study to assess perceptions of group esteem among participants. The original term “social” in the battery of questions was replaced with “racial.” For example, “I feel good about the social group that I belong to” was amended to read, “I feel good about the racial group that I belong to.” The sixteen-item measure included statements such as, “The racial group that I belong to is admirable.” Responses ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). A composite measure of these items was created ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 5.04$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ), with higher scores indicating higher levels of group esteem.

### *Negative group perceptions*

Three items were amended from Luhtanen and Crocker’s (1992) public self-esteem subscale to assess participants’ perceptions of Black individuals as presented in news media. The measure included statements such as, “The Black community, on average, is presented as more ineffective than other racial groups within news programming” and “Overall, Black individuals are presented as worthy within news media” (R). Items were scored from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (7). A composite measure of these items was created ( $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 5.35$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ), with higher scores indicating higher levels of negative perceptions of Black individuals as presented within news media.

### Control variables

To assess overall *news media consumption*, participants identified the number of hours per day (e.g., 0-1, 2-4, 4-6, 6 or more) in the morning, after work/school, after dinner, and on Saturdays and Sundays that they watched or read news programs. These items were summed to create a measure of overall news consumption. Political affiliation was measured with a single question asking participants to state their political party (e.g., Democrat, Republican).

## Results

### Descriptive and preliminary analyses

Zero-order correlations between the variables of interests are provided in [Table 1](#). News media consumption was associated with increased individual esteem, group esteem, and perceived negative perceptions of the group in news media. Likewise, media literacy skills were correlated to individual esteem, group esteem, and negative perceptions of the group in news media. Also, as expected, individual and group esteem were associated with one another. There was no significant correlation between individual esteem and perceived negative perceptions of the group within news media.

Regression analyses, with mean-centered terms, were conducted to test the theoretically derived interactions between partisan news consumption and media literacy skills in predicting esteem and group perceptions. Simple slope analyses were used to decompose significant interactions.

The first research question asked, among Black audiences, will consumption of partisan news media interact with the level of media literacy in predicting individual self-esteem. Regression results revealed a significant interaction between liberal news consumption and media literacy skills in predicting esteem, controlling for overall news media consumption and political affiliation,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $\Delta F(5, 135) = 4.14$ ,  $B = .18$ ,  $SE B = .09$ ,  $t = 2.03$ ,  $p < .05$ . Decomposing the interaction revealed that increased consumption of liberal media was associated with higher esteem, as media literacy skills rose. No significant effects on individual self-esteem emerged for the consumption of conservative news.

Research question 2 asked, among Black audiences, will consumption of partisan news media interact with the level of media literacy in predicting group esteem. A significant interaction between conservative news consumption and media literacy skills emerged for group esteem, controlling for overall news media consumption and political affiliation,  $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $\Delta F(5, 138) = 4.56$ ,  $B = -.31$ ,  $SE B = .14$ ,  $t = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$  such that as media literacy skills rose, so too did group esteem as conservative news consumption increased. A significant interaction between liberal news consumption and media literacy skills also

**Table 1.** Correlations among variables of interests ( $N = 157$ ).

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1. News Consumption	–	.15	.26**	.29**	.27**
2 Media Literacy		–	.34**	.54**	.27**
3. Individual Esteem			–	.49**	-.01
4. Racial Group Esteem				–	.20*
5. Group Perceptions					–

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ .

emerged, such that as media literacy skills rose, so too did group esteem as liberal news consumption increased,  $B = -.86$ ,  $SE B = .14$ ,  $t = 6.33$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Research question 3 asked, among Black audiences, absent of media literacy, will consumption of partisan news differ regarding news media perceptions of the group? A direct effect of consumption of conservative news media on negative perceptions of the group was revealed  $B = .35$ ,  $SE B = .08$ ,  $t = 4.21$ ,  $p < .01$  as well as a direct effect of consumption to liberal news on negative perceptions of the group,  $B = .54$ ,  $SE B = .10$ ,  $t = 5.61$ ,  $p < .01$ . Black audiences' consumption of news media, regardless of partisan news, contributed to increased negative perceptions of the group as presented in news media.

## Discussion

Drawing on tenets from social identity and media literacy, this study examined the implications of news consumption on the individual, group esteem, and group perceptions among Black audiences. This study marks a departure from, and advancement on, conventional approaches to race-related media effects scholarship. This was accomplished by examining media implications from an intragroup perspective, deviating from the long-standing focus of stereotype implications on White audiences. Moreover, this work strengthens the understanding of specific protective factors (i.e., media literacy) related to positive outcomes associated with news media consumption by Black audiences.

Consistent with existing research, results from the present study reveals that a sector of Black audiences are not passively viewing news media but are exercising media literacy as news consumers (Fujioka, 2005; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015). Among this sample of participants, employing media literacy skills act as a catalyst to minimize the negative implications of audiences' news viewing of problematic portrayals of their group. This outcome matters in an era of consistent negative media imagery of Black individuals, including those associated with social justice issues (e.g., Black Lives Matter) that are often disparaged in news media, policy reforms (e.g., criminal justice) that are often attacked, and practices geared towards addressing inequality (e.g., Affirmative Action) that are typically criticized. Exploring protective factors, such as media literacy, demonstrate that Black audiences can stay informed about societal issues via their news media viewing, while also protecting individual and group esteem. Acknowledging the application of media literacy among Black audiences is imperative in understanding how well-being and group favoritism continue to exist despite a history of unfavorable news media content.

### Black audiences and individual esteem

Results from the first research question were somewhat ambiguous. A relationship among Black audiences' liberal news media viewing, media literacy skills, and increases in self-esteem was present, but this was not the case for conservative news media consumption. This outcome is attributed to liberal news media potentially presenting storylines and narratives that are comparably less harsh than conservative news media, as liberal ideologies are documented as supportive of social issues related to Black communities (Kidd et al., 2007). Conservative news often encourages an "us versus them" rhetoric, ostensibly attacking people of color as well as policies and programs associated with those groups

(e.g., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA), and this happens more so in comparison to liberal-leaning news programming (Smiley & Fakunle, 2016). This could address the difference in the relationship between liberal new media (versus conservative) consumption, media literacy, and individual esteem. Research on Black depictions in the news typically does not distinguish between liberal versus conservative media outlets and programming. However, anecdotally, the current polarized political climate and highly politicized news outlets (e.g., FOX), have created unfavorable representations and narratives of Black individuals and issues, supporting these assertions. If consuming conservative news, black viewers may experience lessened individual esteem compared to their liberal counterparts. However, without empirical evidence, this notion is speculative; nonetheless, this should be considered in future exploration.

### **Black audiences and group esteem**

The results addressing the second research question show that as news consumption increased, regardless of partisan viewing, increases in group esteem among Black participants rose as their media literacy increased. Considering that political leaning conservative news media has historically associated Black people with criminality as a tool to galvanize non-Black communities to support conservative-leaning political candidates and policies (Hurwitz & Peffley, 2005), this was surprising, yet promising. This outcome suggests that Black audiences recognize negative portrayals in news media and, via the adoption of media literacy skills, identify those images to lack accuracy and credibility regarding the group. Black viewers were able to distance themselves from these depictions and benefit in increased group esteem (Fujioka, 2005).

Several areas, while hypothetical, help situate these outcomes. First, an area worth considering is the current racial climate. Political figures continue to disparage communities of color in news media (e.g., outgoing U.S. House Representative Steve King). Yet there is a rise in viral video sharing of police brutality juxtaposed with collective action, exposing the realities of racial injustice and the ignorance of those same political figures. Moreover, varied mass media representations of Black identities (e.g., *Black Panther*, *Selma*) along with a higher degree of scrutiny among Black audiences exist. Furthermore, how non-group members portray Black individuals in media is contested by Black audiences' work asserting their relevance and value in various media outlets (Graham & Smith, 2016; Steele, 2011). These factors suggest that Black viewers, regardless of political identity or politicized news consumption, are culturally and socially aware of their individualities and how media, including news media, realizes, or at times, lack capturing the full spectrum of Blackness.

Second, the social identity framework offers contextualization in understanding such outcomes, specifically, concepts such as social change and social mobility, which are likely to explain these results. Social change is defined as an action taken to improve the group's status. Social change strategies can take different forms. For example, groups can strive for social change by enhancing the group's performance on dimensions that lead to higher social status (Ouwerkerk et al., 2000). To illustrate, acquiring media literacy skills advances notions of knowledge creation, improving performance, elevating status, and likely increasing esteem. Additionally, groups can engage in collective action (i.e., protests) to strive for better outcomes (Simon & Klandermans, 2001). For instance,

viewers can stand up against discriminatory treatment, such as “calling out” intolerant practices in media (e.g., #OscarsSoWhite). This, too, may increase perceptions of the group as a whole.

Along with social change, social creativity is an emotion-focused way of coping that improves group members’ perception without directly improving objective outcomes. In essence, social creativity is a set of cognitive strategies by which group members can downplay threats to their status. Enacting social creativity includes minimizing the group’s comparison to potential risks and increasing evaluations of characteristics among higher status group members (Major et al., 1993). This could explain the mechanisms at play regarding Black conservatives’ consumption of news media and how conservative viewers maintain positive perceptions and increased esteem towards the group, indicating a creative shift in which salient identities (e.g., class, education) these individuals embraced.

Last, and most integral to this examination, is the influence of media literacy as the spark that continues to empower Black audiences in navigating news media, regardless of political news viewing habits. This suggests that certain news outlets or programing, while absent of favorable Black narratives and social issues related to Black communities are not viewed by audiences as representative of Black identities and, therefore is limited in its influence on group esteem. Literature states that existing variations of Black identity (e.g., Black conservatives and Black liberals) influences audiences to attribute or scrutinize media narratives and images in different ways (Adams-Bass et al., 2014). Within this work, Black people, regardless of varying identities, when viewing news media are on guard and collectively challenge unfavorable representation (Martin, 2008). These results should be further scrutinized with consideration of how aspects of identity protection factor into such outcomes.

## **Black audiences and perceptions of the group**

The last research question asked, among Black audiences, absent of media literacy, will consumption of partisan news differ in its influence of negative perceptions about the group as presented in news media. Findings demonstrate that the consumption of news media, absent of partisanship, did influence negative perceptions of the group. This final question clarifies, at least among the sample presented here, that news media, regardless of partisan consumption, continues to portray Black individuals unfavorably. Still, literature suggests that among Black audiences, negative media images, and opinions about the group do not necessarily translate into possessing undesirable feelings or viewpoints about one’s self (Orey, 2004). This hints at the notion that what is seen in news media, indifferent to the kind of political leaning news source, continues to portray the group in a problematic manner influencing group perception, but not necessarily individual or group esteem.

The classification of content, whether seen as unfavorable among viewers, is subject to audience members’ perception. Unfortunately, content analytic research has yet to differentiate if liberal versus conservative news media depict Black individuals differently within its programing and to what extent these partisan depictions are viewed as adverse or favorable among Black audiences. Likewise, little is known about the relationship between perceptions and affect regarding intragroup dynamics; as such, experimental examinations are necessary to indulge these areas of inquiry.

Despite these varied outcomes, previous literature indicates the potential for media literacy skills to intervene and potentially attenuate the influence of negative media imagery on Black audiences (Ramasubramanian, 2007). Moreover, the more knowledgeable Black viewers are regarding news media consumption, the possibility of witnessing increases in esteem, albeit disparaging news portrayals of the group, was present. The outcomes presented here support media literacy as a potential protective factor that has the likelihood to mitigate the negative impact of news media viewing on Black audiences' esteem.

### Overarching implications

Scholars, including Stamps and Mastro (2019), contend that results related to quantitative paradigms often aid in contextualizing real-world implications. To illustrate, the authors note that news media framing of race extends beyond scholarly literature, and the influence of this content is an ever-present reality outside of academic settings. News media draws attention to the fact that Black people are more likely to experience verbal and physical abuse and are three and a half times more likely to be murdered by law enforcement than their White counterparts (Fryer, 2019). For years, scholars, activists, and political figures call attention to the need for clean water in Flint, Michigan (and other cities), increases in racial minority representation in government, as well as the desire for collective action to counter police brutality and a racist criminal justice system. These truths validate that Black individuals must stay engaged in news media for informative purposes *and* exercise critical media literacy skills when viewing content. Both actions contribute to safeguarding viewers' well-being and allows individuals to express awareness of the continued bias and discrimination often perpetuated by news media.

### Conclusion and limitations

Overall, the findings support assumptions surrounding the theoretical implications associated with SIT and media literacy. In particular, among Black audiences, favorable comparisons of the group were derived from distinct identities, and the process of maintaining a positive social identity via employing protective factors (e.g., media literacy) when exposed to news media was present (Tajfel, 1981). Black participants recognize news media's historical application of negative depictions of the group and, rather than avoid news media, adopt media literacy skills as a mechanism to stay informed while also safeguarding and amassing esteem.

These results collectively contribute to a timely conversation about underrepresented and often marginalized racial groups in society, their news media viewing, and factors that influence well-being. The continued exploration regarding the influence of news media on Black viewers is imperative to understand how marginalized groups survive and often thrive in oppressive spaces (Jerald et al., 2017; Ward, 2004). Previous literature suggests that Black audiences' exposure to representations of their group's negative portrayals in mass media can damage perceptions about the group (Fujioka, 2005; Mastro, 2016). However, this body of literature typically addresses mass media, not solely news media, and previous work consider Black individuals as a homogenous group, potentially erasing varying identities (e.g., class, sexuality). This research aimed to address this

assumption by centering Black audiences' news consumption, considering Black viewers' political identities.

The investigation into Black viewers' consumption of partisan news media and media literacy in attenuating individual and group esteem, is not without limitations. Like many cross-sectional and survey studies, this examination relied on self-report assessments, which may be influenced by participants' inability to report on their current temperament. Also, the use of survey methods does not warrant conclusions regarding causality, demonstrating that within this study, the influence of news media consumption, media literacy skills, and esteem is somewhat ambiguous. Within this research, there is a lack of awareness noting if and when media literacy skills were adopted among viewers or if esteem is impacted specifically by media literacy skills. Experimental designs are necessary to clarify these particular queries. Also, the use of a nonprobability, relatively small sample raises potential questions. Due to scant investigations of Black populations from an intragroup perspective within race-related media effects research, work of this nature is warranted (Stamps, 2020a). However, future research should seek to include more robust sample sizes.

Last, future research should consider additional media genres, including scripted and reality television, as well as documentaries and film. Each platform portrays Black individuals in varied depictions and may have beneficial or detrimental effects, depending on audiences' media literacy skills (Squires, 2009; Stamps, 2020b). Despite the limitations, this study offers preliminary insight highlighting the relationship among Black audiences' news media consumption, their varying political identities, and how media literacy promotes positive esteem.

## Notes on contributors

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## Appendix A. List of News Media Outlets

News Media Outlet	Parent Organization
1. ABC Nightly News	American Broadcasting Company
2. ABC World News Tonight	American Broadcasting Company
2. AOL News	Verizon Media
3. BBC News	British Broadcast Corporation
4. BET News	Viacom
5. Bloomberg News	Bloomberg L.P.
5. Breitbart News	Breitbart News Network, LLC
6. CNBC News	Comcast
7. CNN	Warner Media
9. Daily Beast	InterActiveCorp
10. Drudge Report	None
12. FOX News	FOX Corporation
13. Huffington Post	Verizon Media
14. Info Wars	Free Speech Systems LLC
14. MSNBC	Comcast
15. PBS News Hour	Public Broadcasting Service
16. Politico	Capitol News Company, LLC
17. NPR	National Public Radio, Inc.
19. Slate	The Slate Group
20. The Blaze	Mercury Radio Arts
21. The Daily Caller	The Daily Caller, Inc.
22. USA Today	Gannett Satellite Information Network, Inc.
23. Wall Street Journal	News Corp
24. Washington Post	Nash Holdings
25. Yahoo! News	Verizon Media