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Student Perceptions of a White University Mascot

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Introduction

In November 2015, Western Washington University (WWU) cancelled classes when a debate over changing the school's White mascot resulted in hate speech and threats toward students of color. Some students held that the mascot could be offensive to non-White students who are unrepresented by the symbol of a White male, others disagreed. This event raises the question of how the university's White mascot impacts its students.

Scholars have recently begun to study views regarding mascots by using Native American imagery, finding:

- Exposure to Native American mascots leads to lower self-esteem and community worth among Native American students (Fryberg et al., 2008).
- Exposure to Native American mascots leads to higher agreement with Native American stereotypes (Burkely et al., 2016).

These results show that mascot imagery has a powerful impact. However, there is an empirical gap concerning how mascots of other identifiable racial/ethnic groups are perceived. As Whites are a non-stigmatized group, White mascot imagery may be impactful through different processes. Like studies looking at perceptions of gendered mascots (Dane, 2012), it may be that Whites feel more connected to White mascots due to their shared race.

Purpose & Hypothesis

This research aims to bring awareness to how racialized mascots may impact students of different racial/ethnic groups by examining perceptions of the White university mascot, Victor E. Viking.

The present study will examine the relationship between students' racial identity and perceptions of the identifiably White mascot, specifically looking at how one's race impacts whether or not they believe the mascot should be changed.

Hypothesis: Non-White students will be more willing to change WWU's mascot.



Method

Information was gathered from 356 students (60.1% White, 63.2% Female) at Western Washington University through an online survey.

Predictor variables:

- Level of campus involvement (1 = *untrue of me*, 5 = *true of me*)
- Attitude (e.g., perception of offensiveness) toward WWU's mascot (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)
- Feeling of connection (e.g., relatability) to WWU's mascot (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*)
- Whites as an ethnic group (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*)

Participants were additionally asked an open-ended question regarding whether or not WWU's mascot should be changed.

Logistic regression was then utilized to predict the log odds of the likelihood of a participant's willingness to change WWU's mascot when considering race. The regression analysis model was utilized to reveal the association between the focal independent and predictor variables (Table 1).

Table 1. Model and Variable Summary of Race and Willingness to Change WWU's Mascot, Including Other Predictor Variables

Model Summary			
Step	-2 Log likelihood	Cox & Snell R Square	Nagelkerke R Square
1	217.049 ^a	.466	.623

a. Estimation terminated at iteration number 6 because parameter estimates changed by less than .001.

Variables in the Equation						
	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)
Step 1 ^a						
white	.931	.366	6.462	1	.011	2.538
involve_TOT	-.560	.273	4.199	1	.040	.571
mascat_TOT	-2.238	.279	64.514	1	.000	.107
mascon_TOT	-.495	.184	7.220	1	.007	.610
we_TOT	.357	.247	2.090	1	.148	1.430
Sports part.	-.573	.639	.802	1	.370	.564
females	.635	.391	2.633	1	.105	1.886
Constant	8.715	2.132	16.708	1	.000	6094.595

a. Variable(s) entered on step 1: white, involve_TOT, mascat_TOT, mascon_TOT, we_TOT, Sports part., females.

Results

In analyzing the results, White and non-White students initially did not differ in their willingness to change WWU's mascot. However, non-White students became less willing to change WWU's mascot in comparison to Whites when other variables (e.g., campus involvement) were added to the analysis.

- The odds of a White-identified student to want to change WWU's mascot is 2.5 times more likely than their non-White counterparts.
- The variable reached statistical significance ($p = .01$) and is contrary to the hypothesis of the study.



Conclusions

The results of the present study demonstrate the nuanced impact of a White university mascot. In addition to Whites being more willing to change the mascot, individual differences also influence whether a student believes WWU's mascot should be changed. As such, student characteristics should be examined holistically when examining responses to the topic of Victor E. Viking.

Despite being a non-stigmatized group, it may be that White students react negatively to a mascot depicting their race. Similar processes to those found by Fryberg et al. (2008) may be in place, suggesting that students exposed to a mascot of the same racial identity experience lowered self-esteem.

Future studies should further explore this topic by comparing views of White university mascots to those of different racial/ethnic groups (e.g., *Florida State University Seminoles*).



Figure 1. Student Ratings by Race

