



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Experimental Social Psychology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jesp

Dominant groups support digressive victimhood claims to counter accusations of discrimination[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Intergroup relations
Competitive victimhood

ABSTRACT

When dominant groups are accused of discrimination against non-dominant groups, they often seek to portray themselves as the victims of discrimination instead. Sometimes, however, members of dominant groups counter accusations of discrimination by invoking victimhood on a new dimension of harm, changing the topic being discussed. Across three studies ($N = 3081$), we examine two examples of this *digressive victimhood* – Christian Americans responding to accusations of homophobia by claiming threatened religious liberty, and White Americans responding to accusations of racism by claiming threatened free speech. We show that members of dominant groups endorse digressive victimhood claims more strongly than conventional competitive victimhood claims (i.e., ones that claim “reverse discrimination”). Additionally, accounting for the fact that these claims may also stand to benefit a wider range of people and appeal to more abstract principles, we show that this preference is driven by the perception that digressive victimhood claims are more effective at silencing further criticism from the non-dominant group. Underscoring that these claims may be used strategically, we observed that individuals high in outgroup prejudice were willing to express a positive endorsement of the digressive victimhood claims even when they did not fully support the principle they claimed to be defending (e.g., freedom of religion or speech). We discuss implications for real-world intergroup conflicts and the psychology of dominant groups.

Increasingly, non-dominant groups are directly challenging the discrimination they experience at the hands of dominant groups. However, when accused of bias by members of non-dominant groups, members of dominant groups may feel that their dominance and moral standing are threatened (Kahalon, Shnabel, Halabi, & SimanTov-Nachlieli, 2019). In response, they may deny their relative advantage (Knowles, Lowery, Chow, & Unzueta, 2014; SimanTov-Nachlieli & Shnabel, 2014) or dismiss charges of discrimination as illegitimate (Teixeira, Spears, & Yzerbyt, 2020). Alternatively, members of dominant groups may engage in competitive victimhood – portraying themselves as the victims of discrimination at the hands of the non-dominant group (Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; Young & Sullivan, 2016). By claiming victimhood, the dominant group restores their moral standing and licenses themselves to act in their own self-interest (Zitek, Jordan, Monin, & Leach, 2010). However, clear evidence of intergroup inequalities may make competitive victimhood claims untenable. As such, members of dominant groups may see utility in responses that not

only claim victimhood, but also shift the topic of discussion. For example, when faced with charges of discrimination against the LGBTQ community, Christian Americans have often responded by claiming that such charges are infringing upon their religious liberties (e.g., Ennis, 2015; Wilkins et al., 2021; Yurcaba, 2021). Similarly, White Americans have countered accusations of racial discrimination by claiming that their free speech is threatened (e.g., Barringer, 1989; Bauer-Wolf, 2019). In both these examples, the dominant group portrays themselves as the victim, while also shifting the focus from group-based discrimination to a distinct topic of conversation.

In this work, we examine how people react when dominant groups counter accusations of discrimination with claims that simultaneously assert victimhood and change the subject being discussed. We label this phenomenon digressive victimhood because it shifts the main subject of conversation away from the discrimination faced by non-dominant groups to another subject. Like digressions that naturally occur in conversations, the topics that digressive victimhood veer toward do not

[☆] This paper has been recommended for acceptance by Dr Nicholas Rule

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104233>

Received 19 November 2020; Received in revised form 2 October 2021; Accepted 2 October 2021

Available online 19 October 2021

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need to be wholly irrelevant to the initial topic, only distinct enough that the conversation is no longer squarely focused on the original issue of discrimination. Similarly, claiming digressive victimhood does not always need to be deliberate. Nevertheless, we do predict that members of dominant groups may recognize a strategic advantage in these claims and that this perceived strategic advantage will drive a preference for digressive victimhood claims over more conventional competitive victimhood claims (i.e., those in which the groups identified as victim and victimizer are reversed but intergroup discrimination remains the focus).

Across three studies, we test the prediction that members of dominant groups are more likely to endorse digressive victimhood claims relative to conventional competitive victimhood claims. Critically, we explore *why* digressive victimhood claims are preferred, testing whether one reason is the belief that these claims will more effectively forestall future criticism from the non-dominant group. Consistent with this strategic explanation, we also predict that some members of dominant groups who endorse digressive victimhood may do so even if they do not actually agree with the principle they claim to be defending (e.g., endorsing a digressive victimhood response based on free speech despite not personally supporting the right to free speech). In total, this work identifies dominant groups' support of digressive victimhood claims as a hierarchy-preserving strategy (Sidanius, van Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2003) that is evident in the real world and in need of focused scholarly attention. This work also expands the growing literature on competitive victimhood, revealing a unique way in which groups compete for the mantle of victimhood.

1. Digressive versus competitive victimhood

Often drawing upon long-standing conflicts (Branscombe, Warner, Klar, & Fernández, 2015; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013; Shnabel, Kahalon, Ullrich, & Aydin, 2020), existing research on competitive victimhood has highlighted how both dominant and non-dominant groups claim victimhood in order to defend their moral identity and gain power (Kahalon et al., 2019). Competitive victimhood has traditionally been studied by examining people's perceptions of how much their ingroup has suffered relative to the outgroup (e.g., in studying conflicts like those between Israel and Palestine, measuring agreement with statements like, "The ingroup suffered more casualties than the outgroup"; Shnabel et al., 2013).

Here, we extend this work by examining how people evaluate victimhood claims made by members of the dominant group in response to allegations of discrimination from members of the non-dominant group. Translated to this context, a classic conceptualization of competitive victimhood would expect dominant groups accused of harm by the non-dominant group to respond with the same accusation of harm but reversed (e.g., "The non-dominant group claims we are discriminating against them, but really they are discriminating against us"). Researchers have noted numerous examples of dominant groups engaging in this form of competitive victimhood (e.g., White Americans claiming they are more racially oppressed than Black Americans, men claiming they are more oppressed as a group than women; Norton & Sommers, 2011; Phillips & Lowery, 2015; Sullivan, Landau, Branscombe, & Rothschild, 2012). Although such competitive victimhood claims are observed most frequently among members of dominant groups who are high in anti-egalitarian ideologies (Leach, Iyer, & Pedersen, 2007; Oaten, 2014; Unzueta, Everly, & Gutiérrez, 2014), they can be expressed by individuals across the ideological spectrum, as the needs for morality and power addressed by claiming victimhood are fundamental to human psychology (Abele & Wojciszke, 2013; Nadler & Shnabel, 2015; Rotella & Richeson, 2013).

A digressive victimhood response, in contrast, involves the dominant group claiming victimhood on a dimension of victimhood distinct from the original charge of discrimination, thus shifting the conversation to a new topic (e.g., "The non-dominant group claims we are discriminating

against them, but their accusations threaten our free speech"). Although prior theorizing has raised the possibility that dominant groups and non-dominant groups may claim victimhood on distinct dimensions of harm (e.g., one group focusing on physical harm versus the other focusing on the legitimacy of their suffering; Noor et al., 2012), we test the possibility that such an asymmetry in victimhood claiming may serve an added purpose by introducing a digression away from outgroups' initial claims of victimhood.

The key element of digressive victimhood that distinguishes it from standard competitive victimhood is this rhetorical shift away from the accusation of discrimination to which it is responding. However, what the claim introduces as a new topic may vary. In this paper, we explore two examples of digressive victimhood. The first is Christian Americans facing accusations of discrimination from the LGBT community. Here, we contrast people's reactions to claims that the LGBT community's accusations of discrimination are in fact discrimination against Christian Americans (competitive victimhood) with claims that the LGBT community accusations of discrimination threaten religious freedom (digressive victimhood). The second context we examine is White Americans facing accusations of racial prejudice from non-White Americans. Here, we contrast people's reactions to a claim that non-White Americans' accusations of discrimination threaten White Americans' (competitive victimhood) with claims that non-White Americans' accusations of discrimination threaten free speech (digressive victimhood). We focus on these two examples of digressive victimhood claiming because of their relevance to major cultural, legal, and political debates in recent years (e.g., the 2018 *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* Supreme Court Case, Former President Trump's 2019 executive order calling on universities to protect free speech). Beyond these prominent examples, however, one can easily imagine digressive victimhood claims that drift from accusations of discrimination to any number of topics. For example, dominant groups could claim that the accusations against them threaten the economy, distract from other threats like a hostile foreign nation or climate change, or simply overlook some degree of unrelated dominant group suffering. As long as these claims shift the topic of conversation to a different dimension of victimhood than what the non-dominant group is claiming, they could be classified as digressive.

1.1. Perceived advantages of digressive victimhood claims

Given ample anecdotal evidence that digressive victimhood claims are made in the real world, this research focuses on why people endorse these claims once they are made. We predict that members of the dominant groups will more strongly endorse digressive victimhood claims than competitive victimhood claims. We further predict that this preference is rooted in the fact that digressive claims not only accomplish what conventional competitive victimhood claims aim to do (i.e., minimize threats to dominant-group power and moral identity by painting the dominant group as the victim and the non-dominant group as the victimizer), but also stand to forestall further accusations by changing the subject of debate. Instead of a more straightforward conversation about which group is most discriminated against, digressive victimhood claims complicate the conversation and obfuscate moral accountability for the initial charge of discrimination. We, therefore, predict that members of dominant groups will endorse digressive victimhood claims more strongly than competitive victimhood claims because they see them as more effective in suppressing further criticism from non-dominant groups.

However, in some instances, digressive victimhood claims may differ from competitive victimhood claims in more ways than the element of digression. For example, the two instances of digressive victimhood we focus on here (Christians responding to accusations of anti-LGBT bias by invoking religious liberty and White Americans responding to accusations of racism by invoking free speech) not only meet the criteria of digressive victimhood (i.e., positioning the dominant group as victims

and shifting the topic of conversation), but also appeal to abstract and collective rights (e.g., religious liberty, freedom of speech). Taken at face value, it could be that dominant groups simply prefer these digressive victimhood claims because they perceive them to benefit a wider range of people than a conventional competitive victimhood claim. Additionally, by focusing on broader topics of universal rights, digressive victimhood claims likely operate at a higher, more abstract construal level than competitive victimhood claims. Because people associate abstract (i.e., high construal level) arguments with power and expertise (Reyt, Wiesenfeld, & Trope, 2016; Wakslak, Smith, & Han, 2014), digressive victimhood claims may have an advantage simply in terms of the mental representations they activate. In this research, however, we focus on testing the prediction that members of dominant groups prefer digressive over competitive victimhood claims because they are seen as more effective in silencing non-dominant groups, even controlling for the potential confounds of perceived differences in who these claims benefit and at which construal level they are operating.

1.2. Bad faith endorsement of digressive victimhood claims

Given that members of dominant groups may register digressive victimhood claims as effective in silencing the grievances of non-dominant groups, the motivation to support these claims may be so strong that some will support these claims in an unprincipled manner. For example, numerous writers in the popular press have pointed to apparent inconsistencies in many White Americans' arguments that non-dominant groups protesting racial discrimination are a threat to free speech (e.g., that those White Americans defend racist speech but harshly criticize speech protesting racist speech; Segalov, 2018; Taylor, 2017). Research by White, Mark, and Crandall (2017) lends support to this idea, demonstrating that arguments about the importance of free speech can often be used as cover for racial prejudice. For example, they find that those high in racial prejudice express stronger support for free speech when used to defend someone speaking negatively against Black Americans than when used to defend someone speaking negatively about the police. Accordingly, we predict that holding a strong belief in the *digressive principle* (i.e., the principle upon which the digressive victimhood claim rests, such as rights to free speech or freedom of religion) will be a strong predictor of support for digressive victimhood claims, but not a necessary precondition for their endorsement. If prejudice against the outgroup is high enough, members of dominant groups are likely to endorse digressive victimhood claims even if they do not fully believe in the underlying digressive principle.

2. Non-dominant groups' perceptions of digressive victimhood claims

Although our focus is on the psychology of dominant groups, it is important to also consider how members of non-dominant groups may react to dominant groups using digressive versus competitive victimhood claims. We predict that members of non-dominant groups will also prefer digressive victimhood claims over competitive victimhood claims, but to a lesser extent and for a different set of reasons than dominant groups. Specifically, we anticipate that non-dominant groups will prefer digressive victimhood claims because they appeal to greater universal benefit and operate at a higher construal level, but not because they believe that digressive victimhood claims are more effective in silencing further criticism from the non-dominant group. As such, we predict that dominant groups are unique in their endorsement of digressive victimhood claims for hierarchy-enhancing motivations.

3. Current research

Across three studies in two distinct contexts (Christian Americans reacting to claims of victimhood from the LGBT community [Study 1] and White Americans reacting to claims of victimhood from racial

minorities [Studies 2 and 3]), we experimentally examine dominant groups' responses to competitive and digressive victimhood claims. In all studies, we predict that members of dominant groups will endorse digressive victimhood claims more than competitive victimhood claims. Regarding our central question about why this preference exists, we also predict that members of dominant groups prefer digressive victimhood claims because they see them as more effective at preempting further accusations, even controlling for perceived benefit to other groups and construal level.

Additionally, we explore whether digressive victimhood claims may be used in bad faith by teasing apart motivations to dismiss the concerns of non-dominant groups (i.e., outgroup prejudice) from actual support for the principle upon which the digressive argument rests (i.e., support for freedom of religion or speech). We predict that belief in this digressive principle will be associated with support for digressive victimhood claims, but that with sufficient outgroup prejudice, a strong belief in this principle is not necessary for the endorsement of digressive victimhood claims. For example, we expect that someone who is highly prejudiced against the non-dominant group may be willing to support the claim that accusations of dominant group bias are wrong because they threaten free speech, even if they themselves do not strongly believe in the principle of free speech.

We also examine how non-dominant groups respond to dominant groups' use of competitive and digressive victimhood claims. Because our theorizing is rooted in the psychology of dominant groups, this investigation is more exploratory. We predict that members of non-dominant groups will also prefer digressive victimhood claims, but only because they speak to a more universal benefit and operate at a higher construal level, not because they regard them as more effective in silencing further criticism. If dominant, but not non-dominant, groups favor digressive victimhood claims for their perceived efficacy in silencing criticism, this would lend additional support for our general prediction that these claims are often deployed to defend the existing hierarchy.

Finally, we conduct all of our analyses controlling for participants' political ideology. Political conservatism is positively correlated with prejudice against both sexual minorities (Poteat & Mereish, 2012) and racial minorities (Chambers, Schlenker, & Collisson, 2013), so we aimed to demonstrate that preference for digressive over competitive victimhood claims is not reducible to individuals' political beliefs. The inclusion of ideology in our models does not drastically change our results, and we do not observe it significantly interacting with our manipulations, but retain it in our models to underscore that we observe support for digressive victimhood claims across the political spectrum.

4. Study 1 – Christian Americans prefer digressive victimhood claims in response to accusations of anti-LGBT discrimination

Study 1 tested whether, in response to accusations of discrimination from the LGBT community, Christian Americans prefer competitive victimhood claims (i.e., that Christian Americans are the victim) or digressive victimhood claims (i.e., that religious freedom is the victim). We report all measures, manipulations, and participant exclusions for all studies in this manuscript. No data analysis was conducted until data collection was concluded.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

We had no previous effects on which to conduct a formal power analysis but given a two condition within-subjects design opted for a minimum of 400 participants. We recruited 559 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Of these participants, 506 provided complete responses to our survey. Religious affiliation was confirmed using both CloudResearch panel demographics (Litman, Robinson, & Abberbock,

Competitive Victimhood Condition

Christians are the true victims in modern America



By Travis Meloy November 2, 2017

LGBT activists repeatedly claim that religious groups—primarily Christians—openly discriminate against them. However, as the LGBT community has achieved huge political and social wins in recent years, they have created a new victim in America – Christians. Countless Christian business owners, doctors, and educators have been discriminated against because of their faith. Unfortunately, people care less about anti-Christian discrimination than they do about anti-LGBT discrimination. In what was once a Christian nation, those who follow the teachings of Jesus now find themselves sinking lower and lower on the totem pole. It's time that Americans started to seriously protect Christians in this country.

Digressive Victimhood Condition

Religious liberty is the true victim in modern America



By Travis Meloy November 2, 2017

LGBT activists repeatedly claim that religious groups—primarily Christians—openly discriminate against them. However, as the LGBT community has achieved huge political and social wins in recent years, they have created a new victim in America – religious freedom. Countless Christian business owners, doctors, and educators have had their right to religious freedom restricted by not being able to practice their beliefs at home and in the workplace. Unfortunately, people care less about the restriction of religious freedom than they do about anti-LGBT discrimination. In what was once a Christian nation, those who follow the teachings of Jesus now find themselves without the freedom to express their own religious beliefs. It's time that Americans started to seriously protect religious liberty in this country.

Fig. 1. Study 1 Manipulation Conditions.

2017) and a forced-choice self-report item embedded at the end of our survey. Thirty-nine participants reported not being Christians on this self-report item. Excluding incompletes and non-Christians provided us with a final sample of 467 participants. Sensitivity analyses run in G*Power ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed, power = 80%, difference between two dependent means) produced a minimum effect size of $d = 0.130$.

One hundred and sixty participants identified as men, 306 identified as women, and one identified as non-binary. Three hundred and forty-nine participants were White Americans, 63 were African American, 21 were Asian American, 19 were Latino/Hispanic, and 14 identified as another ethnicity. The mean age was 43.72 ($SD = 13.54$). Participants were paid \$0.50.

5.2. Procedure

To directly test the relative preference for digressive victimhood over competitive victimhood claims, we employed a within-subject design allowing participants to read and evaluate both claims. Participants were asked to read and evaluate two segments from purported op-ed articles in counterbalanced order. Order did not significantly moderate our results (predicting endorsement, the interaction of condition and order was $F(1, 462) = 0.33$, $p = .565$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$).

Verbatim manipulation conditions are presented in Fig. 1. In the competitive victimhood condition, the op-ed was titled “Christians are the true victims in modern America” and argued that, although “LGBT activists repeatedly claim that religious groups—primarily Christians—openly discriminate against them,” Christians are the “new victim in America.” The op-ed concluded that “It’s time that Americans start to seriously protect Christians in this country.” In the digressive victimhood condition, the article, titled “Religious Liberty is the true victim in modern America,” started with the same point about LGBT activists alleging discrimination by Christians, but concluded that the “new victim in America” is religious freedom and that religious liberty is what should be most protected. Directly below each op-ed, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they endorsed the argument and the extent to which they thought it would be effective against arguments to the contrary. After this, they shared their support for religious freedom and completed the modern homophobia scale before completing a short demographics questionnaire. Some additional measures not directly related to the hypotheses were also included for exploratory purposes. All measures and data are available on the Open Science Framework (anonymized link).

5.3. Measures

5.3.1. Endorsement of victimhood claim

In response to each op-ed, participants indicated their endorsement of the victimhood claim made by expressing the extent to which they

agreed or disagreed with four statements: “I agree with the argument this op-ed makes,” “I think this is an honorable stance to take,” “I am against the argument this op-ed makes” (reverse-coded), and “I would never make the argument that this op-ed makes” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 4.64$, $SD = 1.72$).

5.3.2. Perceived effectiveness of victimhood claim

In response to each op-ed, participants also indicated the extent to which they thought the victimhood claim in the article would be effective in silencing further protest or criticism. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with four statements: “I think it would be hard for any LGBT activists to successfully criticize the arguments made in this op-ed,” “I think the argument made in this op-ed could be used in a debate against LGBT activists and win,” “I think it would be easy for LGBT activists to prove this argument wrong” (reverse-coded), and “In a debate with LGBT activists about who the real victims are in this situation, I don’t think this argument would win” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.90$, $M = 3.99$, $SD = 1.35$).

5.3.3. Forced-choice of preference for victimhood claim

After reading and evaluating each claim, participants were asked, “The two op-eds you read made different claims about who or what is the true victim in modern America. If you had to pick one version, which would you prefer?” and were given a choice between “The op-ed that argued that Christians are the true victims in modern America” and “The op-ed that argued that religious liberty is the true victim in modern America.”

5.3.4. Outgroup prejudice - modern homophobia scale

To measure anti-LGBT¹ prejudice we adapted measures from the modern anti-homosexuality scale (Raja & Stokes, 1998). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with seven statements: “Many homosexual people use their sexual orientation so that they can obtain special privileges,” “Homosexual people seem to focus on the ways in which they differ from heterosexuals and ignore the ways in which they are the same,” “Homosexual people should stop shoving their lifestyle down other people’s throats,” “Homosexual people should stop complaining about the way they are treated in society and simply get on with their lives,” “Homosexual people have become far too confrontational in their demand for equal rights,” “Homosexual people do not have all the rights they need” (reverse-coded), and “Homosexual people still need to protest for equal rights” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.93$, $M = 4.10$,

¹ As these measures only captured attitudes about “homosexuals” we did not explicitly capture attitudes toward transgender individuals or bisexuals.

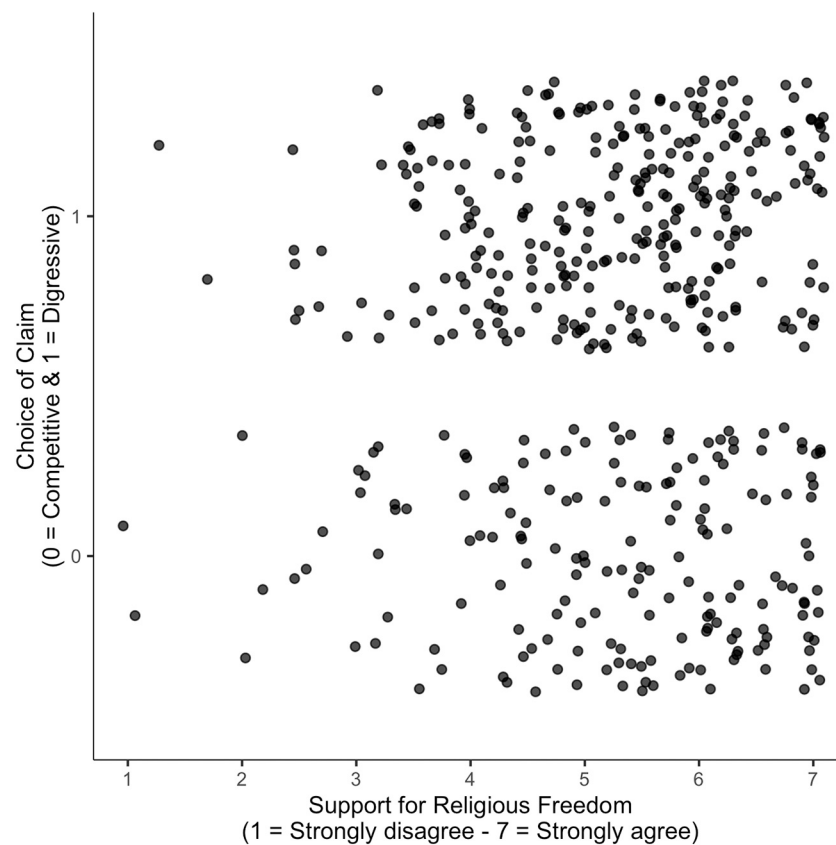


Fig. 2. Study 1 Association Between Support for Religious Freedom and Forced-Choice of Preference for Victimhood Claim.

$SD = 1.61$).

5.3.5. Digressive principle - support for religious freedom

To measure support for religious freedom, we developed a series of face-valid items. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements: “The protection of religious freedom is the most valuable aspect of American society,” “The right to religious freedom in America should never be challenged,” “The government should not place any restrictions on the way people practice their religion,” and “No one should be accused of discrimination just for following the rules of their religion” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.78$, $M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.20$).

5.3.6. Control variable - political ideology

To measure political ideology, we asked participants to place themselves on a seven-point scale (1 = extremely liberal, 4 = moderate; middle of the road, 7 = extremely conservative, $M = 4.14$, $SD = 1.75$). As reported, results were significant whether or not ideology was included as a control. In post-hoc analyses, we also observed no significant interaction between political ideology and our manipulation on either endorsement ($F(1, 462) = 0.83$, $p = .364$, $\eta^2_p = 0.002$) or perceived effectiveness ($F(1, 464) = 0.07$, $p = .796$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$).

6. Results

6.1. Endorsement of digressive versus competitive victimhood claim

We conducted a within-subjects *t*-test to compare the endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim (religious freedom is the victim) relative to the competitive victimhood claim (Christians are the victim). Participants endorsed the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.81$) more than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.80$, $t(462) = -2.22$, $p = .027$, $d = 0.102$). To test the robustness of this

effect and show that this preference holds over and above support for conservative beliefs in general, we also conducted a mixed effects ANOVA where we tested the effect of condition on endorsement with participant-level fixed effects and political ideology as controls. In this model, we showed that over and above the significant effect of political ideology ($F(1, 465) = 246.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.317$), the effect of condition indicating greater endorsement of digressive over competitive victimhood persisted ($F(1, 464) = 4.99$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2_p = 0.009$).

6.2. Perceived effectiveness

We next conducted a within-subjects *t*-test to compare the perceived effectiveness of the digressive victimhood claim relative to the competitive victimhood claim in terms of shutting down further protest or criticism. Participants thought that the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.45$) was more effective than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.44$, $t(465) = -5.40$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.249$). Running this as a mixed effects model, we again find that over and above political ideology ($F(1, 465) = 130.17$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.192$), the effect of condition persisted ($F(1, 466) = 29.12$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.051$).

6.3. Forced-choice

After reading and evaluating both victimhood claims, participants were asked to make a choice between the two which they preferred. Consistent with the results above and our predictions, 62.74% of participants preferred the digressive victimhood claim, a clear majority and significantly different from chance (50%), $\chi^2(1) = 30.90$, $p < .001$.

6.4. Outgroup prejudice and support for digressive victimhood

We next looked at the extent to which outgroup prejudice

Competitive Victimhood Condition

"Last week, nine White students at Strathmore University were suspended indefinitely after being photographed wearing "racially insensitive" costumes at an off-campus themed party. The controversy stirred up by these photos is just the latest in a series of events that claim to be about equal rights but are really about discriminating against White students on college campuses. While student protestors claim to be victims of prejudice, the true victims are the nine White students who are being denied access to education by the university. Discrimination against White students is an increasing problem on college campuses across the country. Strathmore needs to recognize this and start standing up for White students."

Link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-55905372/cv-1/s-kmvoO>

Digressive Victimhood Condition

"Last week, nine White students at Strathmore University were suspended indefinitely after being photographed wearing "racially insensitive" costumes at an off-campus themed party. The controversy stirred up by these photos is just the latest in a series of events that claim to be about equal rights but are really about restricting free speech on college campuses. While student protestors claim to be victims of prejudice, the true victim is the First Amendment and the right to free speech in America. Censorship is an increasing problem on college campuses across the country. Strathmore needs to recognize this and start standing up for free speech."

Link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-55905372/dv-1/s-8rSdP>

Fig. 3. Studies 2 and 3 Manipulation Conditions (Audio Transcript).

(homophobia) and support for the digressive principle (religious freedom) were associated with preference for the digressive victimhood claim over the competitive victimhood claim in our forced-choice measure.² Unsurprisingly, we observed a small negative bivariate correlation with homophobia ($r(462) = -0.20, p < .001$), such that those higher in homophobia were more likely to select the competitive rather than digressive victimhood claim. More relevant to our theorizing, however, was the association between preference for the digressive victimhood claim and support for the digressive principle itself. A reasonable assumption might be that support for religious freedom would be a strong predictor of preference for the digressive victimization argument, which rests on the claim that Christians' religious freedom was threatened. However, we observed no significant association between support for religious freedom and the forced-choice preference for the digressive victimhood claim ($r(462) = -0.02, p = .701$; Fig. 2). As can be seen in the upper left quadrant of Fig. 2, there are numerous participants ($N = 55$) who scored at or below the midpoint on support for religious freedom (suggesting indifference or opposition to this principle), despite favoring the digressive victimhood argument. Because support for the digressive victimhood claim was high on average, this suggests that even those relatively low in support for the digressive principle (support for religious freedom) were still willing to express a preference for a digressive victimhood claim resting upon that very principle.

7. Discussion

In Study 1, Christian Americans expressed a preference for a digressive victimhood claim (that accusations of discrimination from the LGBT community threaten freedom of religion) over a conventional competitive victimhood claim (that accusations of discrimination from the LGBT community threaten Christian Americans). Mirroring this preference, members of this dominant group also thought that the digressive victimhood claim would be more effective in silencing further criticism from LGBT activists than the competitive victimhood claim. Also speaking to the apparent utility of the digressive victimhood claim, we observed an explicit preference for the digressive victimhood claim even among those with a weak belief in freedom of religion, the very principle upon which the claim rested.

8. Study 2 – White Americans prefer digressive victimhood claims in response to accusations of racial discrimination

Although Study 1 offered preliminary support for our primary

² We also conducted an exploratory analysis of the three-way interaction between condition, homophobia, and religious freedom on endorsement. We found no significant effect ($B = -0.03, SE = 0.02, p = .170, \eta^2_p = 0.004$) but hesitate to draw conclusions from this finding given that we are likely underpowered to detect a three-way interaction in this sample.

predictions, one potential limitation of its manipulation was that the competitive victimhood claim (i.e., that Christians face religious discrimination) could be seen as also implicating, or leading to, the digressive victimhood claim (i.e., that religious liberty is threatened). In Study 2, we aimed to address this limitation by examining a new context in which the dimensions of harm invoked in our two victimhood claims are more distinct. Doing this, and attempting to replicate our main findings, we examined White Americans responding to victimhood claims from racial minorities. We predicted again that a digressive victimhood response (i.e., free speech is the victim) would be endorsed more strongly, and regarded as more effective, than a more clearly distinct competitive victimhood response (i.e., White Americans are the victim).

8.1. Method

Before running this study, we ran a small pilot study ($N = 119$) in order to conduct a power analysis. Moreover, we preregistered our predictions for this study. Details of our power analysis can be found on this project's [OSF page](#).

8.2. Participants

To determine sample size, we used the results from our pilot study and ran a simulation to calculate a minimum sample size of 940 participants to achieve 80% power assuming $\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed. However, because power analyses based upon small pilots may be unreliable (Albers & Lakens, 2018), we deliberately oversampled. We recruited 1412 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Of these participants, 1203 provided a complete response to our survey. Ethnicity was confirmed using both the CloudResearch panel demographics and a forced-choice self-report item embedded at the end of our survey. Thirty-three participants reported not being White on this self-report item. Excluding incompletes and non-Whites provided us with a final sample of 1170 participants. Sensitivity analyses run in G*Power ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed, power = 80%, difference between two independent means) produced a minimum effect size of $d = 0.164$.

Four hundred and ninety participants identified as men, 675 identified as women, two identified as non-binary, one identified as agender, one identified as a transgender woman, and one did not list their gender identity. The mean age was 42.12 ($SD = 13.39$). Participants were paid \$0.50.

8.3. Procedure

To test the robustness of our findings from Study 1, we replaced our within-subject design for a between-subject design, in which participants were asked to respond to and evaluate either a competitive victimhood claim or a digressive victimhood claim. The claims were presented via audio as clips from a purported podcast and were read by

the same White man using a consistent delivery across conditions. Verbatim transcripts and links to the audio are presented in Fig. 3. In both conditions, the audio described protests at a university in response to students wearing “racially insensitive costumes at an off-campus themed party.” According to the report, nine White students had been suspended for their participation in this party. In the competitive victimhood condition, the host argued that, “While student protestors claim to be the victims of prejudice, the true victims are the nine White students who are being denied access to education by the university.” Then, arguing that “discrimination against White students” is a growing problem on college campuses, the podcast host argued that the university should start “standing up for White students.” In the digressive victimhood condition, the “true victim” was “the First Amendment and the right to free speech in America,” concluding that the university needs to start “standing up for free speech.” As in Study 1, participants were asked to indicate the degree to which they endorsed this argument and the extent to which they think it would be effective against arguments to the contrary. After this, they reported their support for free speech and completed a measure of racial resentment before completing a short demographics questionnaire. Some additional measures not directly related to the hypotheses were also included for exploratory purposes. Again, all measures and data are available on this project’s OSF page.

8.4. Measures

8.4.1. Endorsement of victimhood claim

Participants indicated their endorsement of the victimhood claim by expressing the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements: “I agree with the argument this opinion piece makes,” “I think this is an honorable stance to take,” “I am against the argument this opinion piece makes” (reverse-coded), “I would never make the argument that this opinion piece makes” (reverse-coded), and “I endorse this opinion piece” (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 3.80$, $SD = 1.89$).

8.4.2. Perceived effectiveness of victimhood claim

Participants indicated whether they saw the victimhood claim they heard as effective by expressing the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements: “I think it would be hard for any of the student protestors to successfully criticize the argument made in this opinion piece,” “I think the argument made in this opinion piece could be used in a debate against the student protestors and win,” “I think it would be easy for the student protestors to prove this argument wrong” (reverse-coded), and “In a debate with the student protestors about who the real victims are in this situation, I don’t think this argument would win” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.45$).

8.4.3. Outgroup prejudice - racial resentment

To measure racial resentment, we included the widely used six-item scale (Feldman & Huddy, 2005; Kinder & Sanders, 1996). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with six statements: “Irish, Italians, Jewish, and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up, Blacks should do the same, without any special favors,” “It’s really a matter of some people not trying hard

enough; if Blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites,” “Most Blacks who receive money from welfare programs could get along without it if they tried,” “Over the past few years Blacks have gotten less than they deserve” (reverse-coded), “Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for Blacks to work their way out of the lower class” (reverse-coded), and “Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a Black person than from a White person” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.65$).

8.4.4. Digressive principle - support for free speech

To measure support for free speech, we developed a series of face-valid items. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with seven statements: “The protection of free speech is the most valuable aspect of American society,” “The right to free speech in America should never be challenged,” “Everyone in America has the right to say anything they want,” “Protecting free speech is more important than not offending people,” “Sometimes it’s necessary or valuable to say something that others might find offensive,” “It’s never necessary to speak in a way that others might find offensive” (reverse-coded), and “People who say offensive or hurtful things shouldn’t be allowed to speak publicly” (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.82$, $M = 5.11$, $SD = 1.11$).

8.4.5. Control variable - political ideology

To measure political ideology, we asked participants to place themselves on a seven-point scale (1 = extremely liberal, 4 = moderate; middle of the road, 7 = extremely conservative, $M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.78$). Results were significant whether or not ideology was included as a control. In post-hoc analyses, we observed no significant interaction between political ideology and our manipulation on either endorsement ($B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = .195$, $\eta^2_p = 0.001$) or perceived effectiveness ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .652$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$).

9. Results

9.1. Endorsement of victimhood claim

We conducted an independent-subjects t-test to compare the endorsement of the digressive victimhood (free speech is the victim) argument relative to the competitive victimhood claim (Whites are the victim). Participants endorsed the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.86$) more than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.84$, $t(1165) = -6.44$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.377$). Run in a linear regression model controlling for political ideology ($B = 0.54$, $SE = 0.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.263$), the effect of condition on endorsement remained significant ($B = 0.77$, $SE = 0.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.055$).

9.2. Perceived effectiveness of victimhood claim

We next conducted a between-subjects t-test to compare the perceived effectiveness of the digressive victimhood claim relative to the competitive victimhood claim in terms of shutting down further protest or criticism. Consistent with Study 1, participants thought that the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.42$) would be more

Table 1
Study 2 Mediation Model.

Model 1					Model 2				
DV: Perceived Effectiveness	Estimate	SE	p	η^2_p	DV: Endorsement	Estimate	SE	p	η^2_p
Intercept	1.89	0.09	< 0.001		Intercept	-0.17	0.10	0.087	
Condition	0.60	0.07	< 0.001	0.046	Condition	0.23	0.07	0.001	0.003
Ideology	0.36	0.02	< 0.001	0.205	Ideology	0.21	0.02	< 0.001	0.081
					Perceived Effectiveness	0.88	0.03	< 0.001	0.622

Table 2
Study 2 Multiple Regression Analysis.

DV = Endorsement of Victimhood Claim	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>	η^2_p
<i>Intercept</i>	0.28	0.66	0.667	
Condition	-0.84	0.85	0.323	0.067
Racial Resentment	0.44	0.17	0.012	0.454
Support for Free Speech	0.07	0.12	0.582	0.102
Ideology	0.12	0.03	<	0.015
			0.001	
Condition * Racial Resentment	-0.14	0.22	0.546	0.006
Condition * Support for Free Speech	0.47	0.17	0.005	0.027
Racial Resentment * Support for Free Speech	0.04	0.03	0.218	0.002
Condition * Racial Resentment * Support for Free Speech	-0.01	0.04	0.743	<
				0.001

effective than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.42$, $t(1163) = -6.65$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.390$). Run in a linear regression model controlling for political ideology ($B = 0.36$, $SE = 0.02$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.205$), the effect of condition on perceived effectiveness remained significant ($B = 0.60$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.054$).

9.3. Perceived effectiveness as an explanation for endorsement

We next tested a mediation model in which the effect of type of victimhood claim (0 = competitive victimhood, 1 = digressive victimhood) on endorsement was mediated by perceived effectiveness. As reported in Table 1, we observed partial mediation and a significant indirect effect of condition on endorsement through perceived effectiveness ($IE = 0.53$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% Confidence Interval = [0.40, 0.67]).

9.4. Racial resentment, support for free speech, and endorsement of digressive victimhood

Taken at face value, one might expect that whereas support for our competitive victimhood claim would be predicted by outgroup prejudice (i.e., racial resentment), support for our digressive victimhood claim might be purely associated with belief in the digressive principle (i.e., support for free speech). However, given our theory that digressive victimhood claims are endorsed for hierarchy maintenance purposes, we predicted that outgroup prejudice (i.e., racial resentment) would be positively associated with support for both victimhood claims. To test this, we ran a multiple regression analysis predicting claim endorsement from the interaction among condition, racial resentment, and support for free speech, controlling for ideology (see Table 2).

Consistent with our findings from Study 1, we found a significant main effect of racial resentment on endorsement for the victimhood claims. Racial resentment did not interact with our condition variable, suggesting that outgroup prejudice underlies support for both digressive and competitive victimhood claims in this context. There was also no interaction between racial resentment and support for free speech. In other words, those high in prejudice were willing to support both competitive and digressive victimhood claims, independent of how they felt about free speech. We observed no significant main effect of support for free speech, but there was a significant two-way interaction between condition and support for free speech such that support for free speech predicted endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim more strongly than endorsement of the competitive victimhood claim. Contrary to our preregistered predictions, we did not observe a significant three-way interaction.

9.5. Who endorses digressive victimhood claims?

Another way of examining the results of this model is, rather than asking about general associations between variables, asking who positively endorses each victimhood claim. Given that we measured our endorsement measure on a bipolar scale, we can estimate at what

permutations of scores on racial resentment and support for free speech our models would predict participants reporting scores at or above the midpoint for the endorsement of each victimhood claim.

Looking at the predicted outcomes from our model (Fig. 4), we see that positive endorsement of the competitive victimhood claim only emerges among those relatively high in racial resentment (i.e., above 4, the midpoint on our scale) with a relatively small moderating effect of support for free speech. In contrast, positive endorsement of digressive victimhood is predicted strongly by both racial resentment and support for free speech. Our model predicts that positive endorsement of digressive victimhood can be found among those low in racial resentment (i.e., at 1 on our 7-point scale), but those participants must also be high in support for free speech (7). This analysis parallels our findings from Study 1 in that there are many whose underlying beliefs do align with the digressive principle they support claiming. That said, racial resentment was a strong driver of support for digressive victimhood across the board. For example, our model predicts that an individual who is generally ambivalent about free speech (e.g., at 4, the midpoint on our scale) but high in racial resentment (7) would be a stronger supporter of a digressive victimhood claim than someone who strongly believes in the digressive principle of free speech (7) but doesn't have the underlying bias (1). This clarifies our finding from Study 1 where support for religious freedom was uncorrelated with preference for digressive victimhood and supports our prediction that a strong belief in the digressive principle is not necessary for the endorsement of digressive victimhood.

10. Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1, showing that members of dominant groups express stronger endorsement for digressive victimhood claims than competitive victimhood claims. Our White American participants also indicated that they thought the digressive victimhood claim would be more effective than the competitive victimhood claim at forestalling any further critiques of their group from non-White Americans. Mediation analysis confirmed our prediction that perceived effectiveness drove expressed endorsement.

Looking at the associations among victimhood claim type, outgroup prejudice, support for the digressive principle, and the outcome of endorsement, we observed a strong main effect of outgroup prejudice (racial resentment) on endorsement of both victimhood claims. The digressive principle (support for free speech) was more specifically related to endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim. However, we found that positive endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim (i.e., mean scores above the midpoint on our bipolar measure) emerged even among those who reported relatively low support for the digressive principle but high outgroup prejudice. That is, highly prejudiced individuals were willing to endorse an argument based on free speech when used to counter claims of racism against their group, even if they did not highly value free speech themselves. This offers further evidence for the notion that digressive victimhood claims may be supported strategically in pursuit of hierarchy maintenance.

11. Study 3 – Examining the drivers of digressive victimhood endorsement between groups

Studies 1 and 2 provided evidence that members of dominant groups prefer digressive victimhood claims over competitive victimhood claims, and do so because they see digressive claims as more effective in preventing further criticism. However, a digressive victimhood claim does more than just shift the topic of conversation. One major confound is that the digressive victimhood claims we examined, by appealing to supposedly universal rights, purport to benefit those beyond the dominant group. Another consequence of this difference is that, by taking a larger scope, our digressive victimhood claims operate at a higher construal level than the competitive victimhood claims. Because people

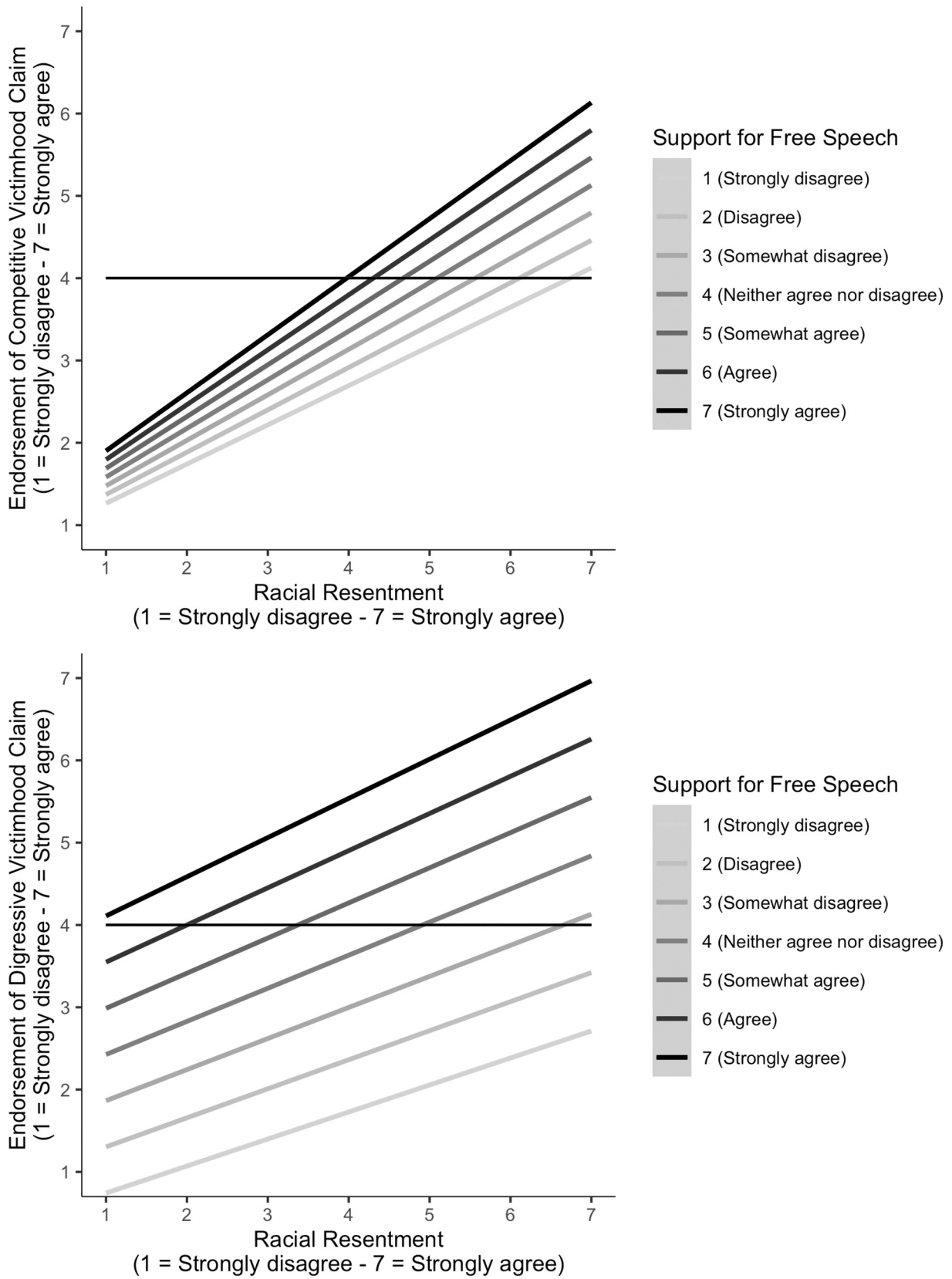


Fig. 4. Study 2 Multiple Regression Interaction Between Racial Resentment and Support for Free Speech on Endorsement of Competitive and Digressive Victimhood Claims.

may associate higher construal messages as coming from sources with greater power and expertise (Reyt et al., 2016; Wakslak et al., 2014), it was important to ensure that dominant groups' preferences for digressive over competitive victimhood claims are not simply driven by beliefs about benefiting more people or operating at a higher construal level.

Another question unaddressed in Studies 1 and 2 is how members of non-dominant groups respond to victimhood claims made by members of the dominant group. Given the same choice between a digressive and competitive victimhood claim, we expect a similar preference for digressive over competitive victimhood claims among members of non-dominant groups. However, we predict that this preference will not be rooted in the perceived effectiveness of silencing members of non-dominant groups, but rather in the other incidental strengths of the digressive victimhood claim (i.e., higher perceived universal benefit and construal level).

12. Method

12.1. Participants

We conducted a simulation-based power analysis based on the results of Study 2 focusing on the main effect of condition on endorsement, controlling for ideology. The results from this analysis suggested that in order to achieve 80% power, we should recruit at least 710 participants. Given the potential for exclusion and restrictions in representation on Mechanical Turk, we aimed for at least 750 White participants and 750 non-White participants.

We recruited 1792 participants from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Of these participants, 1475 provided a complete response to our survey. We again used CloudResearch to set our recruitment targets based on panel demographics. We recruited participants who self-identified as African American, Asian American, Latino/Hispanic American, or White American. Per our preregistration, we confirmed ethnicity with a forced-choice self-report item embedded at the end of our survey and excluded those who did not identify with any of the same ethnic groups used in our panel recruitment (i.e., those who selected "Not listed" instead of one of the four panel categories we prescreened for). Excluding these participants and incomplete responses left us with a final sample of 1444 participants. Eight hundred and four were White and 640 were non-White (219 Asian Americans, 268 Black/African Americans, and 153 Latino/Hispanic Americans).³ Sensitivity analyses run in G*Power ($\alpha = 0.05$, two-tailed, power = 80%, difference between two independent means) produced a minimum effect size of $d = 0.198$ for our White participants and $d = 0.222$ for our non-White participants. Six hundred and twenty-eight identified as men, 814 identified as women, one identified as agender, and one identified as a transgender man. The mean age was 46.94 ($SD = 13.97$). Participants were paid \$0.50.

12.2. Procedure

Study 3 was a direct replication of Study 2 in terms of our experimental manipulation. Two new measures were added, perceived universal benefit and perceived construal level.

12.3. Measures

12.3.1. Endorsement of victimhood claim

Participants indicated their endorsement of the victimhood claim using the same items as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.92$, $M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.71$).

³ Data collection for non-White participants dropped off sharply before our target of 750 was met. When we determined that it was unlikely that we would ever reach our target, we decided to stop data collection after six days of low activity. No analyses were run before data collection was concluded.

12.3.2. Perceived effectiveness of victimhood claim

Participants indicated the extent to which they saw the evaluated victimhood claim as effective in silencing further criticism using the same items as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.75$, $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.32$).

12.3.3. Perceived universal benefit

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the evaluated victimhood claim was benefitting all people, versus a small and specific set of people, by indicating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with five statements: "The argument presented is primarily concerned with protecting the rights of everyone, regardless of group membership," "The argument presented concerns a universal principle," "This argument presented appeals to a broad philosophical principle," "The argument presented is primarily concerned with protecting the rights of a specific group" (reverse-coded), and "This argument presented appeals to a specific category of people" (reverse-coded) (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree; $\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.50$).

12.3.4. Perceived construal level

Participants indicated the extent to which they believed the evaluated victimhood claim was high or low in construal by responding to a series of bipolar questions adapted from Burrus and Roese (2006) to capture perceived construal level. Participants responded to seven items structured around the following question, "How would you rate the argument made in the podcast clip on the following scale from [low construal term] to [high construal term]?" with each term anchored on opposing ends of a seven-point scale. The seven sets of terms were: "small picture / big picture," "focusing on how / focusing on why," "not important / important," "low priority / high priority," "short-term goal / long-term goal," "side issue for my life as a whole / central to my life as a whole," and "influences minor detours in life / influences overall path of life" (1 = first term [low construal], 7 = second term [high construal]; $\alpha = 0.84$, $M = 5.75$, $SD = 2.26$).

12.3.5. Outgroup prejudice - racial resentment

Participants indicated their racial resentment using the same items as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 3.45$, $SD = 1.38$).

12.3.6. Digressive principle - support for free speech

Participants indicated their support for free speech using the same items as in Study 2 ($\alpha = 0.79$, $M = 4.66$, $SD = 1.09$).

12.3.7. Control variable - political ideology

Participants indicated their political ideology using the same item as in Study 2 ($M = 3.61$, $SD = 1.70$). Although not reported in full below (see Appendix B of the supplementary materials for full results), patterns of significance do not change across all our analyses with the exclusion of ideology as a control. In post-hoc analyses, we also observed no significant interaction between political ideology, our manipulation, and participant ethnicity on either endorsement ($B = -0.02$, $SE = 0.10$, $p = .876$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$) or perceived effectiveness ($B = 0.02$, $SE = 0.08$, $p = .804$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$).

13. Results

13.1. Endorsement of victimhood claim

We conducted a 2×2 ANOVA predicting endorsement of the victimhood claim by the interaction between victimhood condition (0 = competitive, 1 = digressive) and participant ethnicity (0 = non-White, 1

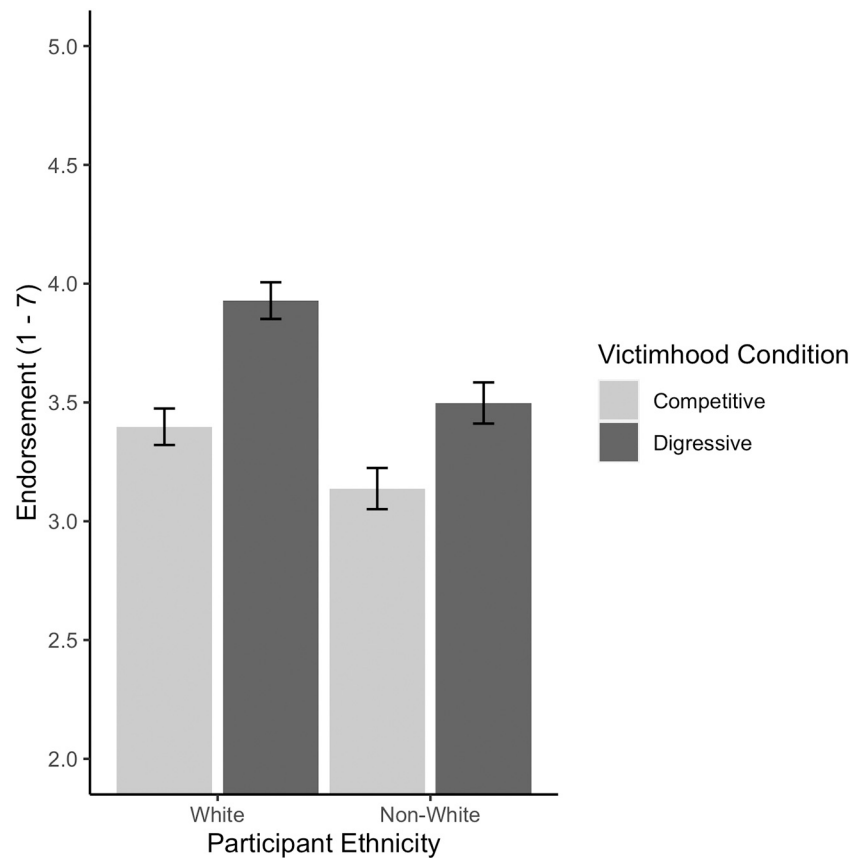


Fig. 5. Study 3 Effect of Victimhood Condition and Participant Ethnicity on Endorsement.

= White),⁴ controlling for ideology. We observed a significant main effect of victimhood condition ($F(1, 1427) = 35.55, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.024$), a significant main effect of participant ethnicity ($F(1, 1427) = 21.55, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.015$), and a non-significant interaction between the two ($F(1, 1427) = 1.08, p = .298, \eta^2_p = 0.001$). Although we did not observe a significant interaction, we ran a series of planned contrasts, using a Tukey correction for multiple comparisons. As seen in Fig. 5, and replicating the results above, White participants endorsed the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 3.93, SE = 0.08$) significantly more than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.40, SE = 0.08, p < .001, d = 0.345$). Non-White participants also endorsed the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 3.50, SE = 0.09$) significantly more than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.14, SE = 0.09, p = .018, d = 0.234$), but to a slightly lesser extent. Non-White participants' endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim was significantly lower than White participants' ($p = .001, d = 0.280$) and comparable to White participants' endorsement of the competitive victimhood claim ($p = .823, d = 0.065$). In sum, both White and non-Whites preferred the digressive victimhood claim over the competitive victimhood claim, but this Whites endorsed the digressive victimhood claim more strongly than non-Whites.

13.2. Perceived effectiveness of victimhood claim

We observed a significant main effect of victimhood condition, $F(1, 1434) = 35.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.024$, no significant main effect of participant ethnicity, $F(1, 1434) < 0.01, p = .980, \eta^2_p < 0.001$, and a

⁴ To maximize our statistical power, we analyze all non-White participants in the aggregate, overlooking important distinctions between these ethnic groups. Disaggregated results, which are consistent with those reported here, are presented in Appendix A of the supplementary materials.

significant interaction between the two, $F(1, 1434) = 4.95, p = .026, \eta^2_p = 0.003$, on perceived effectiveness, controlling for political ideology. As seen in Fig. 6, and replicating the results above, White participants perceived the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 3.65, SE = 0.06$) to be significantly more effective than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.16, SE = 0.06, p < .001, d = 0.401$). Non-White participants also saw the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 3.54, SE = 0.07$) as more effective than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 3.33, SE = 0.07, p = .160, d = 0.165$), but this difference was not significant. In sum, both Whites and non-Whites saw both victimhood claims as somewhat limited in their effectiveness in silencing critique, but Whites saw a significant advantage of the digressive victimhood claim over the competitive victimhood claim, whereas non-Whites did not.

13.3. Perceived universal benefit of victimhood claim

We observed a significant main effect of victimhood condition, $F(1, 1430) = 621.91, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.303$, a significant main effect of participant ethnicity, $F(1, 1430) = 16.24, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.011$, and a significant interaction between the two, $F(1, 1430) = 20.51, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.014$, on perceived universal benefit, controlling for political ideology. As seen in Fig. 7, White participants perceived the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 4.75, SE = 0.06$) to be significantly higher in universal benefit than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 2.89, SE = 0.06, p < .001, d = 1.518$). Non-White participants also perceived the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 4.20, SE = 0.07$) to be significantly higher in universal benefit than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 2.94, SE = 0.07, p < .001, d = 1.036$). In sum, both Whites and non-Whites recognized that the digressive victimhood claim stood to benefit more people than the competitive victimhood claim, and this effect was larger for Whites than non-Whites.

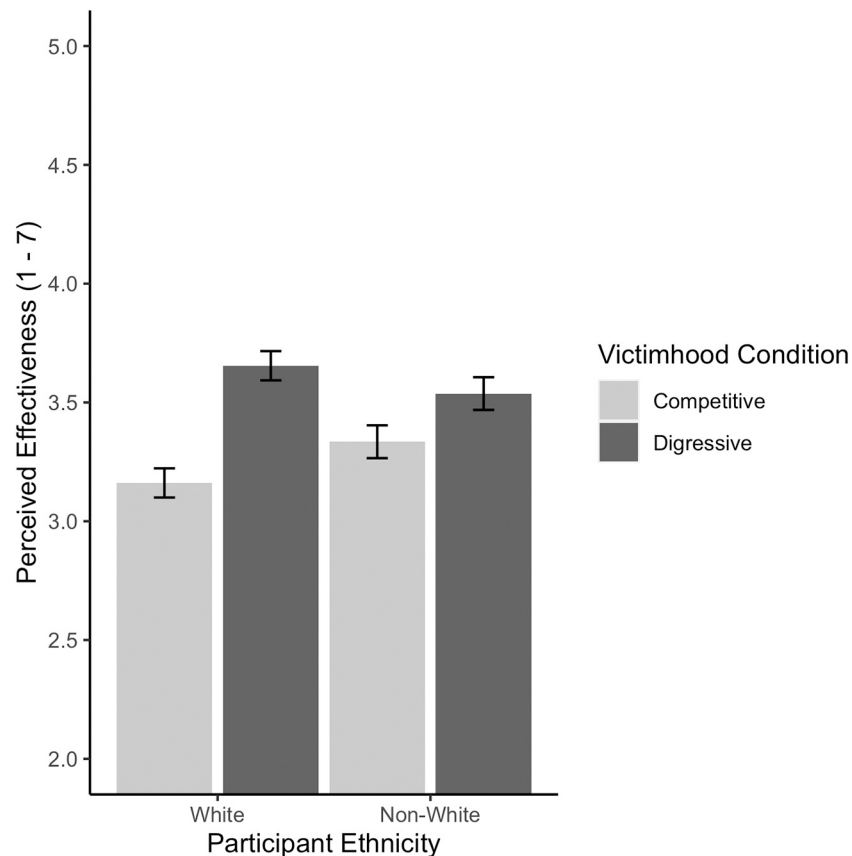


Fig. 6. Study 3 Effect of Victimhood Condition and Participant Ethnicity on Perceived Effectiveness.

13.4. Perceived construal level of victimhood claim

We observed a significant main effect of victimhood condition, $F(1, 1402) = 101.42, p < .001, \eta^2_p = 0.067$, no significant main effect of participant ethnicity, $F(1, 1402) = 0.29, p = .588, \eta^2_p < 0.001$, and no significant interaction between the two, $F(1, 1402) = 0.90, p = .343, \eta^2_p = 0.001$ on perceived construal level, controlling for political ideology. As seen in Fig. 8, White participants perceived the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 6.32, SE = 0.11$) to be significantly higher in construal level than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 5.09, SE = 0.11, p < .001, d = 0.574$). Non-White participants similarly perceived the digressive victimhood claim ($M = 6.31, SE = 0.12$) to be significantly higher in construal level than the competitive victimhood claim ($M = 5.29, SE = 0.12, p < .001, d = 0.472$). In sum, both Whites and non-Whites similarly recognized that the digressive victimhood claim as higher in construal level than the competitive victimhood claim.

13.5. Predictors of endorsement for Whites and Non-Whites

Our results showed that both White and non-White participants endorsed our digressive victimhood claim over our competitive victimhood claim. In explaining this preference, we tested three potential mechanisms: perceived effectiveness, perceived universal benefit, and construal level. We observed that both Whites and non-Whites thought that the digressive victimhood claim was higher in perceived universal benefit and construal level than the competitive victimhood claim, but only Whites perceived the digressive victimhood claim to be significantly more effective in silencing further dissent than the competitive victimhood claim. To test how these mechanisms operate in relation to one another in explaining endorsement for digressive victimhood, we tested the multiple mediation model shown in Fig. 9.

Using the Lavaan package for R (Rosseel, 2012) we ran a multiple mediation model to examine the indirect effect of condition on endorsement through each of our three mechanisms, conditional on participant ethnicity. Consistent with the results above, and as reported in Table 3, we observed significant indirect effects for White participants through all three of our mediators. In contrast, we only observed significant indirect effects for non-White participants through perceived universal benefit and construal. These analyses suggest that the preference for digressive victimhood among both White and non-Whites is rooted in their shared recognition of the digressive victimhood claim to benefit more than a specific group and be higher in construal level. However, White participants see an additional advantage of the digressive victimhood claim in its perceived effectiveness to silence further criticism.

13.6. Who supports digressive victimhood claims?

Paralleling Study 2, we sought to examine when (i.e., at what levels of racial resentment and support for free speech) individuals express explicit agreement with our competitive and digressive victimhood claims. Despite our large sample size, we did not anticipate being sufficiently powered to run the necessary four-way moderation predicting endorsement from the interaction between condition, racial resentment, support for free speech, and participant ethnicity. Although this model produced a marginally significant four-way interaction ($B = -0.16, SE = 0.09, p = .065, \eta^2_p = 0.002$; full regression output is reported in Appendix C the supplementary materials), we are cautious to interpret this significance level. As shown in Fig. 10, and consistent with findings from Study 2, support for the competitive victimhood claim (the two graphs in the top row of Fig. 10) was primarily associated with racial resentment, with little moderation by support for free speech, for Whites and non-Whites alike. However, support for the digressive victimhood claim

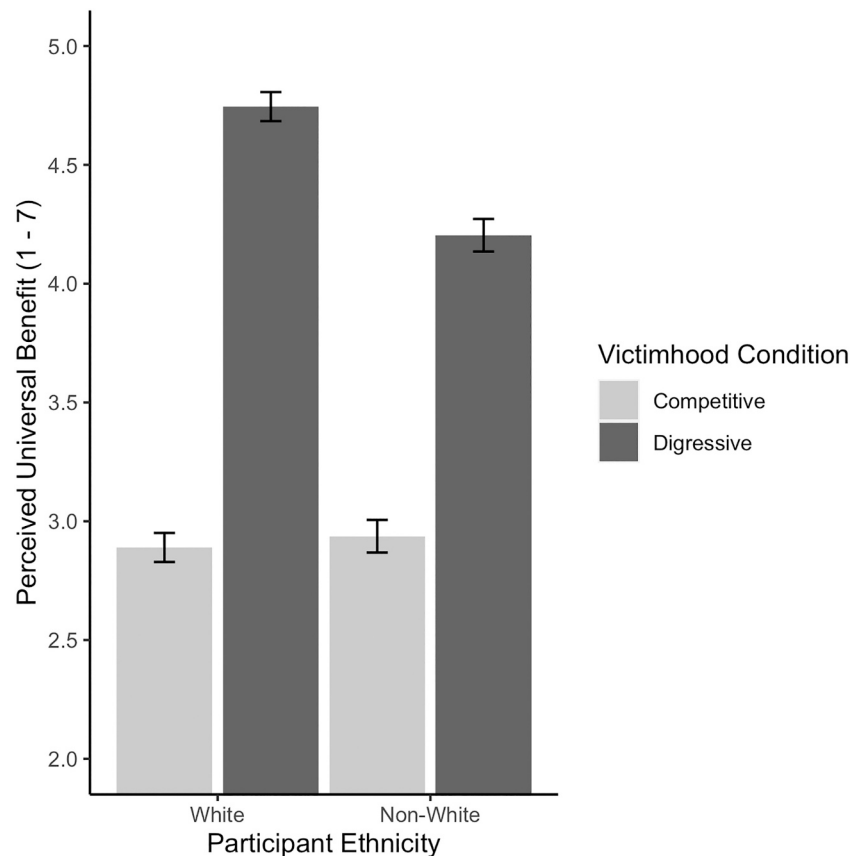


Fig. 7. Study 3 Effect of Victimhood Condition and Participant Ethnicity on Perceived Universal Benefit.

(the two graphs in the bottom row of Fig. 10) was associated with both racial resentment and support for free speech. Paralleling our findings from Study 2, our model suggests that we could anticipate positive endorsement of our digressive victimhood claim (i.e., scores above the midpoint on our bipolar measure) for those low in racial resentment but high in support for free speech. Also consistent with Study 2, however, our model indicates that among Whites, but not necessarily non-Whites, positive endorsement of our digressive victimhood claim (i.e., scores above 4 on the y-axis) could be predicted among those relatively low in support for free speech (at a 3 on our 1 to 7 scale) so long as they were high in racial resentment (at a 7).

14. Discussion

Study 3 replicated our findings from Studies 1 and 2 that members of dominant groups endorse digressive victimhood claims more than conventional competitive victimhood claims. Expanding upon this finding, we show that members of non-dominant groups also endorse digressive victimhood claims more strongly than competitive victimhood claims. However, when we tested a more varied set of potential drivers of support for digressive victimhood claims, we observed an important between-group difference. Whereas both our White and non-White participants' support for the digressive victimhood claim was associated with more perceived universal benefit and higher construal level, only White participants' preferential endorsement of the digressive victimhood claim was associated with the belief that it would be more effective than the competitive victimhood claim in silencing further criticism. This supports our theorizing and findings that members of dominant groups may see support for digressive victimhood claims as a way to shore up their standing in the hierarchy.

Additionally, we replicated our findings from Study 2 looking at the association between endorsement of our victimhood claims, support for

the digressive principle (free speech), and outgroup prejudice (racial resentment). We observed that although being high in support for the digressive principle predicts positive endorsement of digressive victimhood, so does outgroup prejudice. Although we observed similar patterns across ethnic groups, evidence of bad faith endorsement of digressive victimhood was stronger for White participants than non-White participants. This further supports our theorizing about the perceived utility of digressive victimhood claims such that some may endorse them without fully supporting the principle they claim to be defending.

15. General discussion

Across three studies ($N = 3081$) we found evidence that, when responding to accusations of victimhood from the non-dominant group, members of dominant groups prefer digressive over competitive victimhood claims. This effect was driven by the perception that digressive victimhood claims are more effective in silencing future accusations from the non-dominant group, even controlling for the digressive claims' purported benefits to multiple groups and their higher construal level. Members of non-dominant groups similarly expressed greater endorsement for digressive over competitive victimhood claims, but only for non-strategic reasons (perceived universal benefit and construal level). Additionally, our data indicated that members of dominant groups high in prejudice were willing to endorse digressive victimhood claims, even if they did not strongly believe in the principle being defended in the claim.

16. Contributions to theory

This work extends the literature on competitive victimhood by closely examining distinct strategies for claiming victimhood. Our

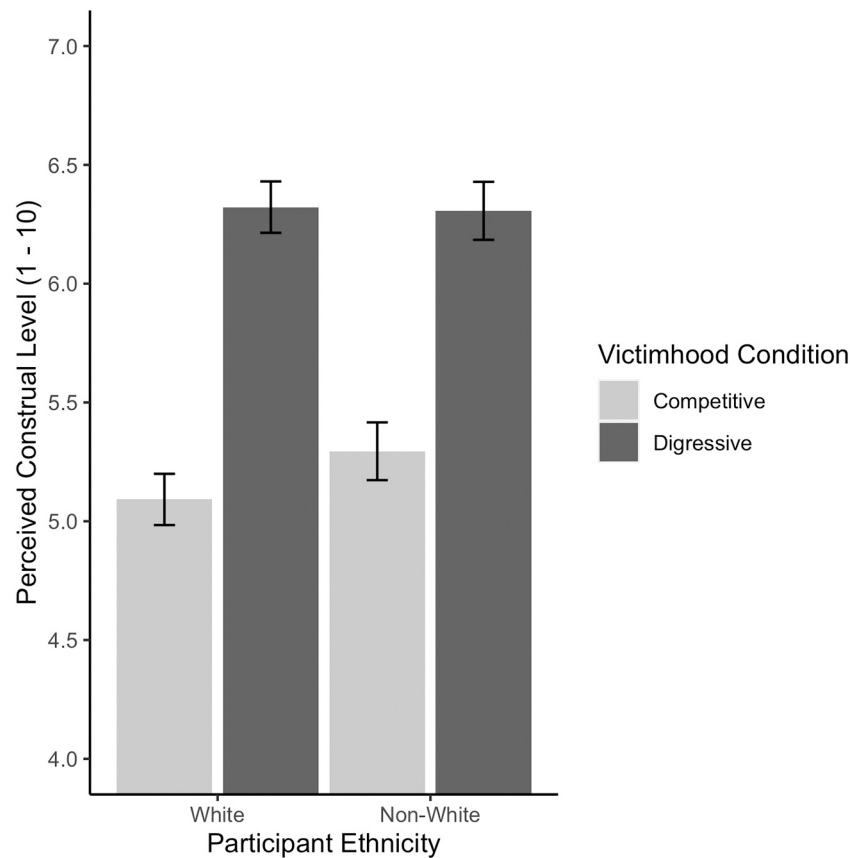


Fig. 8. Study 3 Effect of Victimhood Condition and Participant Ethnicity on Construal Level.

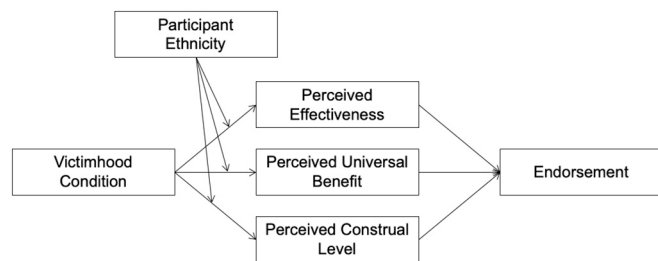


Fig. 9. Study 3 multiple mediation model.

findings reinforce the relatively recent recognition that claiming victimhood is just as much about gaining or preserving power as it is about moral identity (Kahalon et al., 2019). More broadly, this research also contributes to the study of dominant group psychology and the strategies dominant groups use to maintain their place in the hierarchy. Our findings regarding the bad faith endorsement of digressive victimhood claims support the insight from White II & Crandall (2017) that appeals to free speech can be used as cover for prejudice. Finally, this paper relates to thinking on argumentation and rhetoric and hopes to stimulate more research on similar phenomena (e.g., derailing strategies and silencing tactics; Houston & Kramarae, 1991) in intergroup relations.

17. Limitations and future directions

One limitation of the present research is our inability to definitively and causally argue that dominant groups favor digressive over competitive victimhood claims because they see them as more effective. The natural question that arises is whether the reverse may be true, that people see digressive arguments as more effective because they endorse them more. We cannot rule this out and likely these two beliefs are mutually reinforcing. That those high in outgroup prejudice but low in support for the digressive principle generally endorse digressive victimhood claims does, however, suggest that support for these claims can be seen as an effective means to an end.

Another unanswered question is whether there are situations in which the dominant group will actually favor competitive over digressive victimhood claims. For example, research has shown that in the conflict between Israel and Palestine, many Israelis regularly strongly express conventional competitive victimhood, despite belonging to the dominant group in this binary (Shnabel et al., 2013). This may be because some Israelis do not perceive themselves to be the dominant

Table 3

Study 3 Conditional Indirect Effects of Victimhood Condition on Endorsement through Perceived Effectiveness, Perceived Universal Benefit, and Construal Level for White and Non-White Participants.

Conditional Level of Outgroup Assim. Expectations	Indirect Effect	Bootstrapped Standard Error	Bias-Corrected Lower Limit	Bias-Corrected Upper Limit
White Participants				
Effectiveness	0.34	0.06	0.22	0.46
Benefit	0.47	0.07	0.34	0.60
Construal	0.15	0.03	0.10	0.21
Non-White Participants				
Effectiveness	0.13	0.07	-0.00	0.26
Benefit	0.32	0.05	0.23	0.42
Construal	0.12	0.03	0.07	0.18

Note: Significant indirect effects are in bold.

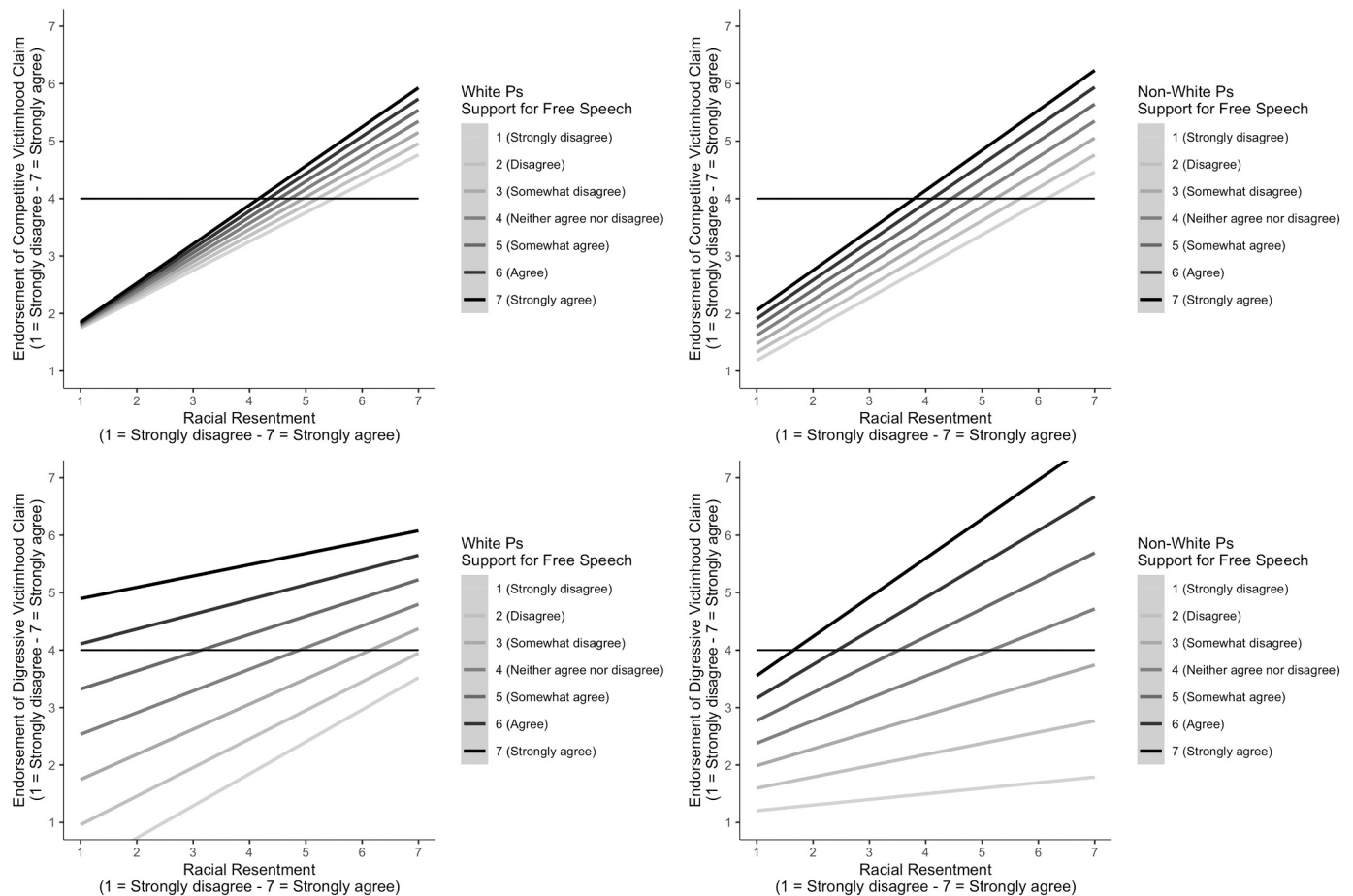


Fig. 10. Study 3 Multiple Regression Interaction Between Participant Ethnicity, Racial Resentment, and Support for Free Speech on Endorsement of Competitive and Digressive Victimhood Claims.

group in the broader regional context, or that due to a long history of persecution they see their dominance as precarious. This speaks to the complexity of identity and history in such contexts and potential boundary conditions to the effects we observed here.

Future research will also benefit from examining other instances of digressive victimhood. For example, we did not test whether members of non-dominant groups engage in digressive victimhood themselves. However, given that non-dominant groups can appeal to their oppressed status to make legitimate competitive victimhood claims, it is unlikely that they would see it as advantageous to shift conversations around intergroup harm using digressive victimhood. Dominant groups, however, may employ digressive victimhood in many contexts beyond those we have observed here. The right to free-market competition in response to accusations of economic exploitation, opposition to “political correctness,” and men’s claims that accommodating women in the workplace destroys existing organizational culture, all represent potential examples of this phenomenon. Interestingly, many of these arguments can also be seen as a conflict between the non-dominant group’s freedom *from* oppression versus the dominant group’s freedom *to* oppress. We do not restrict digressive victimhood to this definition, but it is noteworthy that so many examples of digressive victimhood fit into this framework.

18. Conclusions and implications

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this work helps us understand numerous real-world instances of intergroup conflict. Relevant to our first study, the 2018 *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission* Supreme Court Case pit LGBT discrimination against religious

freedom, and the digressive victimhood argument won. Protests against racial prejudice on college campuses have spurred countless attempts to reframe the issue as not about racism, but about free speech. Here, as well, the digressive victimhood claim has also been effective, resulting in President Trump’s 2019 executive order threatening to withhold federal funds from universities that were identified as challenging free speech, and more recent legislation restricting the teaching of “critical race theory.”

Recent years have seen an increase in activism exposing and confronting society’s many systems of inequality. As these efforts advance, we can expect members of dominant groups, invested in protecting their status, to respond in increasingly creative and strategic ways. As such, we anticipate that digressive victimhood will be a hallmark of intergroup tensions for years to come.

19. Open practices

All data, R code, supplementary materials, and preregistration information are available on this project’s [OSF page](#).

Appendix A. Supplementary materials

Supplementary materials to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2021.104233>.

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